

2019 Report on the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013: An Evaluation of the Operations and Effectiveness of the Program

CONCLUSION: Since program implementation in FY 2014, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) has improved its ability to measure prekindergarten program effectiveness by adding two valid tests to its evaluation. However, MDE's method for evaluating effectiveness fails to adequately measure collaborative or site success. Also, MDE requires collaboratives to use a curriculum that does not have research evidence to support its effectiveness in improving student learning. PEER's independent evaluation of scores on each of MDE's tests more accurately measures program and site effectiveness and provides valuable diagnostic information for MDE and the collaboratives. For example, PEER's evaluation of Brigance III scores found that 25 sites (39%) improved from the pre-test to the post-test in the 2018-19 school year by a statistically significant amount (i.e., to a degree distinguishable from chance). Also, PEER's evaluation of Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) scores for the 2018-19 school year found that collaborative classrooms performed extremely well on the Emotional Support domain when compared nationally, performed close to the national norms on the Classroom Organization domain, and performed worse than the national norms on the Instructional Support domain.

Purpose and Scope:

In its FY 2021 budget request, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) is seeking an additional \$3.2 million for the state's prekindergarten program, bringing the total program funding to \$9.9 million annually. Thus, the Legislature will need information for the 2020 Regular Session to determine whether to expand the program by appropriating the requested additional funds.

This is the second evaluation of the prekindergarten program conducted by PEER, with the first evaluation conducted in 2015.

Background:

In its 2013 Regular Session, the Legislature enacted the "Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013," which directs MDE to implement a voluntary prekindergarten program in the state on a phased-in basis. The prekindergarten program's purpose is to help ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education and development services.

Mississippi's prekindergarten program received legislative appropriations of \$14.5 million from FY 2017-19. This funding assisted fourteen early learning collaboratives (including 62 sites) in implementing prekindergarten programs that served approximately 2,220 students in the 2018-19 school year.

Based on MDE's evaluation of collaboratives and sites for the 2018-19 school year, MDE rated 59 sites successful and placed three sites on probation.

Research evidence suggests that public prekindergarten programs have a positive short-term impact on children's cognitive abilities and their readiness for kindergarten. However, there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that public prekindergarten programs have a positive longer-term impact. Thus, it is essential for the state to develop a research strategy to demonstrate prekindergarten program impacts, and it is incumbent upon MDE to identify the best approaches to use in early learning collaborative classrooms that will lead to positive short and long-term impacts.

Improved Ability to Measure Program Success

In school year 2014-15, MDE used one test to measure program effectiveness—the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment. Since then, MDE improved its ability to measure program effectiveness by adding two additional tests—the Brigance III and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). These tests are used nationwide and are better suited for measuring the success of the program.

Inadequate Method for Scoring Sites and Collaboratives

MDE's method for evaluating collaboratives and sites results in a "rate of readiness" score, which can lead to probation and ineligibility for program funds. This "rate of readiness" calculation fails to adequately measure collaborative and site performance. For example, MDE's scoring method for the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment fails to account for student starting scores; thus, a collaborative might do well or poorly based on the natural abilities of the students and not on the contributions of the collaboratives themselves. Also, this scoring method incorporates several arbitrary values.

Use of Curriculum That is Not Evidence-based or Research-based

Beginning in the 2019-20 school year, MDE now requires that all collaboratives use the Opening the World of Learning (OWL) curriculum. However, this curriculum does not qualify as evidenced-based according to MISS. CODE ANN. Section 27-103-159 (1) (a) (1972), and there is not sufficient research to demonstrate its effectiveness in improving student learning.

PEER's Independent Evaluation of Program Effectiveness

Evaluation of Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Scores

The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) is a literacy test that classifies children into one of four levels. PEER's evaluation of KRA scores found that six collaborative sites (9%) performed significantly better than the comparison group (i.e., non-collaborative prekindergarten students), and two collaborative sites (3%) performed significantly worse. The remaining 57 sites (88%) did not perform significantly better or worse than the comparison group.

See pages 26-27 for more information on the KRA scores.

Evaluation of Brigance III Scores

The Brigance III is a test given to students to measure their growth in various areas (e.g., motor skills, mathematical skills) over the course of a school year. PEER's evaluation of Brigance III scores found that average scores improved for the majority of sites from the pre-test to the post-test in the 2018-19 school year. Twenty-five sites (39%) improved by a statistically significant amount (i.e., to a degree distinguishable from chance). No site experienced a decrease that was statistically significant. A closer look at those sites with statistically significant improvements could provide valuable insight into what factors might be contributing to these positive results.

See pages 28-30 for more information on the Brigance III scores.

PEER found that certain sites with significant results should be investigated by MDE, as these results are highly unlikely. Conversely, two sites exhibited high, but realistic performance on all assessments (i.e., the KRA, the Brigance III, and the CLASS); these sites could be consulted to determine how they are achieving these positive results.

Evaluation of Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Scores

The final test MDE uses in its effectiveness evaluation is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which is divided into three domains:

- *Emotional Support* - Mississippi's collaborative classrooms were highly successful in the Emotional Support domain of the CLASS, with fifty percent of classrooms scoring above the 90th percentile nationally. The Emotional Support domain measures the social and emotional aspects of prekindergarten classrooms, and some research suggests that the provision of a stable daytime environment (such as classrooms scoring high on this domain) is an important benefit of prekindergarten. Although there was widespread success in this domain, nine classrooms scored 5.5 or below on the 7-point scale. MDE should assess these classrooms to determine the reasons for these low scores.
- *Classroom Organization* - Mississippi's collaborative classrooms were close to the national norms on the Classroom Organization domain of the CLASS, which measures the classroom's management of students. MDE should take a closer look at the twenty classrooms that scored on the bottom end of the distribution to determine why their scores are so low in this domain.
- *Instructional Support* - Mississippi's collaborative classrooms performed worse than the national norms on the Instructional Support domain of the CLASS, which measures the extent to which teachers implement the curriculum to effectively promote cognitive and language development. No classrooms performed in the high scoring range for instructional support, and 25 classrooms (20%) performed below the 10th percentile nationally. MDE should focus on assessing the reasons for low performance on the instructional support domain of the CLASS.

See pages 30-34 for more information on the CLASS scores.