

A Systemic Approach to Meeting the Assessment Needs of PreK Children: Nebraska and the use
of Teaching Strategies GOLD™ as a primary tool

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Abstract

Assessment drives instruction in best practice scenarios. However, there are many pieces that are needed to make the overall achievement picture a complete whole. Because of the broadness of PreK systemic assessment, this paper is limited in scope to specific topic areas that add to the completed tapestry of assessment in the Nebraska, PreK setting. Such areas as funding, stakeholder support; as in the Results Matter Task Force, demographic and geographical diversity, educator qualifications, professional development, and components such as the Pyramid Model and Results Matter GOLD™ play key roles in creating an improved environment for Nebraska children and families. Nebraska is not alone in using Results Matter GOLD™ as the framework of choice for assessment. Colorado, Louisiana, and the District of Columbia also use this form of assessment. Many states, including Nebraska, also implement the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) which is a tool that focuses on the content of the environment, materials, and curriculum. They also use the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) which focuses on the interactions between those involved in the early childhood setting. Overall, using reliable and sustainable assessment tools does much to provide the best learning opportunities for PreK children.

Topic

A Systemic Approach to Meeting the Assessment Needs of PreK children across the State of Nebraska: use of Teaching Strategies GOLD™ as a primary tool.

Introduction

Nebraska leaders and educators attempt to bring the various components together in the PreK setting to ensure optimal developmental opportunities for children. This rich attempt involves many components, some of which are addressed in this document. Topics such as: funding, stakeholder support; as in the Results Matter Task Force, demographic and geographical diversity, educator qualifications, professional development and components such as the Pyramid Model and Results Matter GOLD™ . Using reliable and sustainable assessment tools does much to provide the best learning opportunities for PreK children. Because of the broadness of this topic, this paper is limited in scope to specific topic areas that add to the completed tapestry of assessment in the Nebraska, PreK setting.

Summary of Findings

Assessment as an Integral Part of the Larger System

Assessment is an integral part of a larger system of services that work together in providing high quality environments aimed at meeting the needs of children and families. Implementing the data driven approach of practices, services, learning supports and outcomes, improves the quality of the overall program (Krugly, Stein, & Centeno, 2014, p. 11).

Early childhood resources are many times a scarce commodity which aims to be equitability distributed between educational, health, and other community avenues in meeting the needs of children. This integrated approach has been an overriding societal goal for many years but has yet to be attained since the cross walk between the various components is lacking in

many respects. In the past, the various agencies have worked independently with little regard to how the other was functioning. Instead of addressing the needs of the whole child, each focused on fragmented components using the mindset that overall homeostasis would still be obtained. Assessment of the whole child and long term studies have shed light on the weakness of this fragmented strategy. Research clearly demonstrates that high quality programs yield the greatest positive outcomes. This is determined through program evaluation and accountability which addresses the needs of each child (Watkins & McCaw, 2008, p.58).

Currently various groups are refocusing their aim towards families and the needs of the whole child. With this in mind, social and emotional development has become an identified area of need (Carney, 2014). As one component of the larger picture, the state of Nebraska uses a framework, called the Pyramid Model, which provides a curriculum encompassing this area of need with particular attention to gathering data driven outcomes which are analyzed in order to better meet the needs of children in the various program locations. This model is based upon material from the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL). CSEFEL was originally federally funded through a grant which ended a few years back. As a result, various agencies and stakeholders have taken it upon themselves to continue training opportunities. It focused on promoting positive social-emotional development and school readiness of young children birth to age five.

The Pyramid Model framework is implemented through the *Leadership Team for the Nebraska Pyramid Model for Social and Emotional Development in Young Children*. Their focus is on adding the mental health component to community access throughout the entire state. Key stake holders, representing Monroe-Meyers Institute, Nebraska Children and Families Foundations, University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL), Extension, and various other member

representations, have compiled a list of mental health supports across the state of Nebraska. Their main task involves providing support in various geographical locations through onsite coaching provisions, CSEFEL module training, mental health practitioner availability to help with top level problem solving techniques, and telecommunication opportunities using web based, secure exchanges. The overriding goal is to provide mental health services to children and families based upon need and assessing progress toward the point of fidelity (Bray, 2013).

A major stake holder is the state of Nebraska which provides site based training of social emotional mental health and CSEFEL related skills to those sites who apply and meet qualifications. In the first year of implementation, ten sites around the state, in the PreK age group were receiving high quality intervention strategies aimed at children who fall under the umbrella partnership with a local school district (Hemmeter, 2006). Onsite coaching, off site training, and ongoing data gathering support are offered on a monthly or weekly basis. Sustainability is a long-term goal with data driven assessment decisions being the core driving force behind training needs and social-emotional skill improvements. This component also aligns with the social and emotional category of Teaching Strategies GOLD™. They fit together well in addressing the social and emotional needs of PreK children since the Pyramid Model provides the curriculum and Results Matter GOLD™ provides the assessment too.

Teaching Strategies Results Matter GOLD™ in Nebraska, is a child based program, and family outcomes measurement system. Its purpose is to improve programs and supports for all young children birth to age five that are served by districts and their community partners. The program is closely monitored on a state and local level with progress shared biannually at Results Matter Task Force meetings composed of preselected members.

A supplementary mental health outreach program is offered through community access via the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. This organization is working with some targeted communities in providing support through grant funding and human resource provisions. This newest step is at the beginning of conception and is an ongoing work in progress (Brehm, 2014).

The goal of meeting all needs of PreK children and families is a lofty endeavor. One must consider the outcomes (educational, health, etc.) in relation to both economic and local challenges. Nebraska is diverse on multiple levels, including geographically and demographically, which adds much to the complexity of the situation. The influx of immigrants has affected overall populations and specific pockets of communities throughout the state. This has led to some community imbalances as local entities try to meet the diverse needs that have grown more quickly than the financial base has been able to support.

For example, in Fremont, Nebraska, the Hispanic/Mexican population has increased significantly in recent years. According to Fitzsimmons (2014), families were being discouraged from residing within city limits through housing discrimination which banned illegal immigrants from renting homes and through other measures. Reason dictates that this affected the PreK population in a negative manner. Limiting the basic need of shelter would result in mental distress. It might also add to the possible negative perceptions of peers. The harmful effect of negative stressors on the developing brains of young children has been well documented according to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2014). The Educational Service Unit (ESU) that serves the geographical area has provided additional professional development opportunities in staff development outside of what is offered state wide to help compensate for some of the effects of social-emotional distress.

In Crete, Nebraska, the meat packing plant has provided numerous jobs and attracted less skilled workers to meet industrial needs. Many immigrants have relocated there due to job availability that matched with their skill levels. This has resulted in a bilingual student body displaying greater diverse needs than originally planned for (Garbacz, 2008). Although not unique to Crete, and a nationwide challenge; the rural setting and regulated tax base, which the educational entity relies upon, has led community leaders to seek outside solutions. A community agency (such as Nebraska Children and Families) has been working with community members in providing additional support to young children and families.

Selected State Trends Regarding Informed Decision Making

Governor Hickenlooper, of Colorado, shared the news of receiving 29.9 million dollars and a supplemental grant of \$15 million over four years as part of the Race to the Top: Early Learning Challenge grant in 2012. Overall goals of the grant included: creating comprehensive early childhood guidelines tied to the Common Core, which according to him, also allowed the creation of an early childhood department. According to Brantley (2014), Colorado implemented Results Matter GOLD™ into its schools for PreK assessment practices. Emphasis was placed on “school ready” and a system of coordinated support was to be offered to families and children in the areas of early learning, parent engagement, social and emotional development, and health and nutrition. The PreK age group was selected based upon the critical period for brain development and the corresponding poverty levels associated with this age group. Brantley went on to share various statewide statistics where they have witnessed a 136% increase in poverty levels since 2000. Through state-funded preschools, 20,000 children receive high quality intervention practices. Lasting benefits have been observed. According to Brantley, one indicator was a comparison between a matched set of children (those participating in the Results Matter GOLD™

program and those not participating) where children receiving the intervention practices outperformed on state achievement measures into middle school grades. Keeping in mind, the measuring of outcomes to guide instructions, Teaching Strategies, Results Matter GOLD™, was implemented to track outcomes for children with high needs from birth through five years of age. Teaching Strategies, Results Matter GOLD™, is the same assessment program used by Nebraska for the PreK age range.

According to Yoshikawa (2014), in Louisiana, one sees quite a different picture as a result of poverty levels. Two thirds of the 700,000 public school students in Louisiana receive federally subsidized lunches. Thirty-one percent of Louisiana's children live in poverty. The state is working hard to improve outcomes for students as they use assessment tools to indicate success.

In 2013 nearly 4,000 more Louisiana seniors than in 2012 achieved a college-going ACT score. And last year, Louisiana was the fastest growing state in the nation in Advanced Placement participation and test passage. Part of the reason for this progress is Louisiana's creation of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, the "LA4" public school program and the Nonpublic Early Childhood Development Program (NSECD) private school program. (White, 2014, para. 3)

PreK students who participant in the NSECD programs have shown positive gains in the areas of literacy, remaining in school, and less need for Special Education services through 8th grade. Using Teaching Strategies GOLD™ assessment, 69 schools are currently piloting the program with an additional 15 joining this spring of 2014. This program assists in clarifying outcomes in developmental progress. Louisiana also uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring

System (CLASS) to evaluate child-teacher interactions. This allows for comparison of programs with national standards and provides direction toward improved outcomes for all.

Referring to Ewen (2014), The District of Columbia Public Schools, unlike Louisiana, have seen an increase in household income over the past decade. However, 19% of the DC population lives below the Federal Poverty Level (compared to 15% nationally); this segment of the population has the highest rate of single parent families, living in extreme poverty, in the entire nation. The importance of these statistics appears as one considers the risk factors associated with poverty (school failure, maladaptive behaviors, poor health, inability to concentrate, etc.). This contributed to the low outcome of only 60% of students in DC schools graduating from high school on time.

With these statistics in mind, Nebraska leaders undertook a different path to better meet the needs of children and families. Early Childhood classrooms were upgraded to include teachers with at least Bachelor degrees and increased access by PreK children to such classrooms. Only research based curriculums were recommended, and parents could choose the type of program to enroll their child in. Some examples of curriculum types included: Montessori, Reggio-Emilia, Tools of the Mind, and Creative Curriculum. Regardless of the curriculum being used, in Head Start classrooms, the Teaching Strategies Results Matter GOLD™ child assessment system was implemented. Outcomes from this assessment showed that 35% of children entering the program were below national benchmarks. At the end of 2013, 97% of children met or exceeded the benchmarks for their age level. This is an indication that children are functioning on the kindergarten readiness level. As with many other states, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) was chosen in order to compare programs on a national level (Jackson, 2014).

Strategies used in Nebraska to Achieve Optimal Development for all PreK Children

According to Alvin (2012), the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (NAEYC) suggests the implementation of a systematic ongoing assessment tool which would provide data that enabled the teacher to identify strengths and areas needing improvements, plan activities which would build upon existing skill levels, and revise learning goals based upon data outcomes. Although this has been a long standing goal, there are various areas that need consideration when addressing these issues. These include: funding, qualifications of the educator, and professional development opportunities as well as other areas.

One area is adequate funding. According to the State of Nebraska Biennial Budget Report, in 2013, the Nebraska Early Childhood Program received \$3,615,962.00 through state funding opportunities (page 53). The Early Childhood Endowment Grant Program received approximately \$6 million through state, public, and private funding sources. Sixpence, an independent Early Childhood program, which is governed through the Nebraska Endowment Fund, received 40 million from the state and 20 million from private donations. Although this appears to be a great deal of support, it is divided into so many pockets that it never appears to be enough to provide for all of the projects that are needed and would be beneficial to young children.

As one looks at the importance of Best Practices, a consideration is given to the amount of schooling or degrees that an educator has acquired. Generally a fully qualified teacher holds an Initial, Standard, or Professional teaching certificate. When working with PreK children, it is preferred that the person also has earned the appropriate early childhood educational endorsement. Years of experience working in the early childhood field can also be used as an indicator of quality. Last year, Nebraska did well in meeting this requirement with only 2.1% of

Early Childhood Education jobs going unfilled, according to the Nebraska Department of Education Vacancy Report (2014).

PreK teachers in the state of Nebraska have many professional development training opportunities available throughout the year. The Teaching Strategies GOLD™ program offered 12 face-to-face training events during the 2013-2014 school year. One webinar was offered in the spring as a pilot for future presentations. Since the program was adopted, hundreds have received training. Advancing to newer technology supported methods, the upcoming 2014-2015 school year will see webinars being offered so that travel time is reduced and the ability to reach more educators is realized. This approach is already provided in Colorado. They received Race to the Top money (federal funding that states are allowed to apply for) and invested much money into their Teaching Strategies GOLD™ program.

Nebraska holds a biannual Results Matter Task Force meeting. Recently information was presented on April 17, 2014 covering various topic areas. Data is collected during the school year from all schools using the Teaching Strategies (2014) Results Matter GOLD™ program. This involves about 11,500 PreK students across the state. Their teachers submit observational data online. The data is analyzed by Monroe-Meyer Institute and feedback is generated and shared during the Results Matter Task Force meeting and at the 2014 Nebraska Data Conference. It was revealed that 69% of the children were male, while 27% represented minority populations, and 90% of children used English as their primary language. Positive growth in the various areas was shown regardless of demographic effects.

Kristy Feden (representing the Papillion-LaVista School District; Nebraska) shared results from Results Matter GOLD™ pertaining to math achievement and social-emotional development of children in PreK. Both areas showed improvement over the year while using the

Results Matter GOLD™ assessment program. Math had been shown to be a needs-based, local, area for improvement. The social-emotional area was identified on the state level as being a priority (Task Force, page 3).

To continue with positive growth for young children, some future professional development topics will include: Positive Behavior Support with Children showing Challenging Behaviors, Scheduling Time and Attention to Meeting Individual Needs, Information about *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (ECERS-R) and *Classroom Assessment Scoring System*™ (CLASS), as well as, Profession Relationships with Families. Assessment procedures will continue to be used to guide and refine the educational learning environment for young children. Results Matter GOLD™ uses observational assessment, gathered samples of child work, videos, and other inputs to form the basis for outcomes. All such components are best measured through physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive skill assessment gathering techniques (Vendegna, 2013).

To best meet the needs of child development through monitoring of quality in the educational environment; the state of Nebraska recommends these guides and assessment tools: Early Childhood Guidelines (Standards), CLASS, Teaching Strategies/ Results Matter GOLD™, and ECERS-S (Data Conference, 2014). The assessment tools should be aligned with existing curriculum which is left up to the school or educator to choose. Results Matter GOLD™ aligns well with many existing curriculums. According to the Teachstone website; CLASS™ is a tool that focuses on effective teaching, helps teachers recognize and understand the power of their interactions with students, aligns with professional development tools, and works across age levels and subjects. Independent, trained observers visit a specific classroom and observe what is taking place. They rate what is observed and share the outcomes with the educator in order to

help guide the educator toward improvements. ECERS-S is a tool that uses a trained observer to watch and analyze processes involving the various interactions that occur in a classroom between staff and children, staff, parents, and other adults among the children themselves. One observes the interaction that children have with materials and activities in the environment, as well as those features, such as space, schedule and materials that support these interactions.

The components that have been included in this research document support the importance of systemic assessment, using Results Matter Gold™, in the Nebraska PreK arena. One of the target areas of assessment involves social and emotional growth of children which the Pyramid Model focuses on. By providing children the tools to deal with emotional issues at a young age and assessing to monitor growth in this area and others, Nebraskan children will grow up to better reach their fullest potential.

Implications of the Findings and Application to MOEC

The Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC) focuses on public education and unification of area educators in the areas of teaching, research, and service. As such they aim to keep abreast and identify high priority educational issues with the focal point of improvement in the local arena. PreK assessment guides the instruction and learning environment of young children in those programs. Recently the addition of Sam Meisels to the Nebraska University team has made a positive impact statewide. Meisels is a national leading authority focusing on early childhood development who has set a goal of making Nebraska the best place in the world to be a child (Anderson, 2013).

MOEC's Career Advancement and Development of Recruits and Experienced Teachers (CADRE) Project fits well with PreK assessment issues. The CADRE project is a teacher induction model that supports teachers with multi-leveled support as they accumulate to the

rigors of teaching. As PreK teachers expand their knowledge base and increase their networking capabilities, they are provided avenues by which Teaching Strategies Results Matter GOLD™ and the Pyramid Model could be implemented and expanded. The social and emotional aspect of child development has been shown to affect future behaviors of children. Those receiving high quality PreK schooling are less likely to engage in negative behaviors later on in life. This results in less overall expense for tax payers because of lower crime rates, less remedial training, and greater job stability. Results Mater GOLD™ is a reliable assessment tool that assists educators in meeting the needs of each individual child through in-depth feedback which guides instruction. During the CADRE Project, training on PreK assessment tools and the use of the Pyramid Model in providing social-emotional support would help both children and families to lead lives of higher quality.

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