



STEPS TO EXCELLENCE

*IMPROVING KINDERGARTEN
READINESS AND LITERACY SKILLS*

NOTICE FROM THE FRONT

In 2016, the Darr Family Foundation released a Request for Proposals (RFP) in response to red flag issues outlined in the 2015 Springfield Greene County Community Focus Report regarding Early Childhood and Education. These red flags included:

- Kindergarten Readiness
- Achievement and Opportunity Gaps

The Issue

At the time of this RFP, a group of local students, referred to as the “super sub-group,” were falling into an academic achievement gap. These students are typically from low-income families, face racial disparities and/or language barriers, or have a disability. These students are less likely to have attended a quality preschool, be academically ready for kindergarten, or have age-appropriate literacy skills by 3rd grade—which research shows is when children stop learning to read and start reading to learn. In fact, in 2016, 83% of Missouri 4 years olds were not enrolled in a publicly funded preschool program, and 28% of local kindergartners were not academically ready for kindergarten. These risk factors that contribute to these students being three times more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to receive any college education. Long-term, they are more likely to earn less, have poorer health outcomes, or become incarcerated. This unrealized human potential is the economic equivalent of a permanent recession. To view the Community Focus Report, visit <http://springfieldcommunityfocus.org>.

Purpose of Funding

The purpose of this funding was to invite collaboratives of three or more agencies to develop a multi-year comprehensive intervention that effectively improved kindergarten readiness and literacy skills within a population defined as part of the “super subgroup.” This intervention included both evidence-based academic and literacy strategies along with parent engagement strategies. It was determined that successful programs would:

1. Decrease the number of children not ready for kindergarten
2. Increase the number of children with age-appropriate literacy skills upon kindergarten entrance
3. Increase the number of third graders reading at grade level or beyond

STEPS TO EXCELLENCE

Following an application review process, it was determined that Community Partnership of the Ozarks (CPO) would act as the lead applicant on the Steps to Excellence Program. The multifaceted initiative addressed the defined issues systematically through the following interventions:

GOAL 1: Serve 2,300 students Pre-K through college.

Result: Served 12,082 students Pre-K through college.

Steps to Excellence had 57 preschools participate in one or more interventions, provided 272 preschool scholarships, and implemented literacy and social-emotional assessments in 23 Springfield Public Schools locations including Bingham, Bisset, Bowerman, Boyd, McGregor, Truman, Weaver, Weller, Westport, Williams, Carver, Fulbright, Pipkin, York, Fremont, Shady Dell, Campbell, Mallory, Hickory Hills, Sherwood, and Sequiota. In addition, students at Ozarks Technical College, Missouri State University, and Drury University received training in strategies of the program.

GOAL 2: Increase social emotional competencies among teachers and students grades Pre-K through 3rd grade.

Results: In 2018-19, 87% of students were “competent” in social-emotional competencies. In 2021-22, 88% were “competent.”

Steps to Excellence approached this goal with a multi-faceted plan including the implementation of the Conscious Discipline evidence-based social-emotional competency curriculum within participating preschools and Springfield Public Schools within the Central High School feeder pattern. Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) classroom assessments were deployed in 11 participating classrooms. Results were determined using the DECA Social-Emotional Assessment which was deployed in 2018-19, 2020-21, and 2021-22. Assessments in 2019-20 were canceled due to the inability to obtain post-scores during the COVID pandemic. Overall, social-emotional competencies improved incrementally. CLASS instructor assessments showed competency improvement as a goal of an average of 5.25/7 was reached and surpassed when in 2021-22, 5.31/7 was attained.

At the end of 2022, there were classrooms newly implementing Conscious Discipline strategies. Steps to Excellence worked this additional cohort to assist them with necessary skills within classrooms. This new cohort gained competence, if not proficiency with many classroom strategies, as assessed by the CLASS. It continues to be true that many preschools need assistance with the third domain of CLASS, which is Instructional Support. This cohort averaged 4.04/7 overall, with the Instructional Support domain being the lowest in all classrooms. A notable result of social-emotional competency training and implementation was the decrease of suspensions among the five elementary schools participating in the Conscious Discipline cohort. In 2018, there were 33 suspensions, two in 2021, and zero in 2022.

KINDERGARTEN READINESS

GOAL 3: Increase Kindergarten readiness to 85% of program participants.

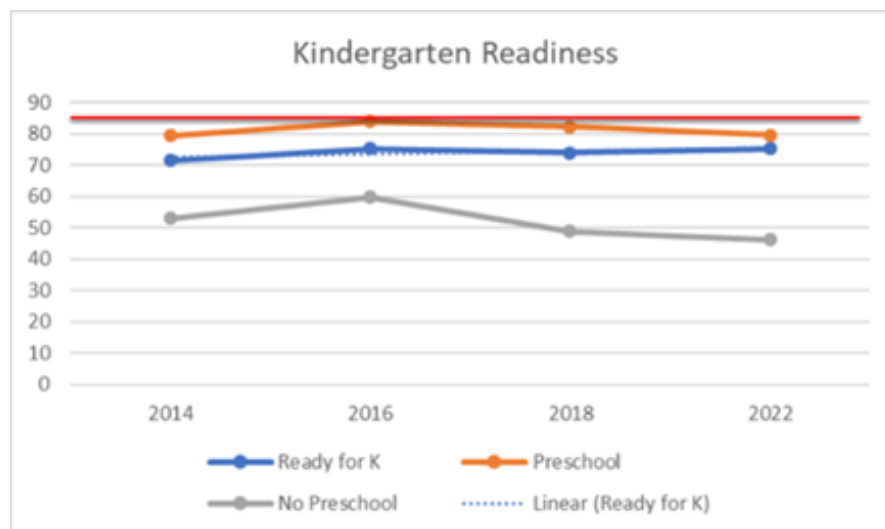
RESULTS: 75.3% of Springfield children are considered ready for Kindergarten.



"I am a single mom, and my son was struggling in his other child care program. When Alyssa suggested I apply, I wasn't sure if I could swing the costs of the preschool, but I'm glad I did. Alex finished preschool and is now in kindergarten and doing well. He was ready and excited to start big school."

Through the Steps to Excellence initiative, work towards this goal included offering preschool scholarships to low-income families. A total of 272 scholarships were provided. Notably, many scholarships were utilized by foster families.

According to the Mayor's Commission for Children report, it was determined that between 2014 and 2023, Kindergarten readiness increased incrementally despite setbacks caused by COVID. At last report, in 2022, 75.3% of Springfield area children were ready for Kindergarten. The end result fell short of the initiative's goal of 85%, but program staff were not able to get into the schools to test during COVID, it was determined that more children are attending preschool than in previous years, and again, a larger deficit was feared due to the pandemic.





EARLY LEARNING LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

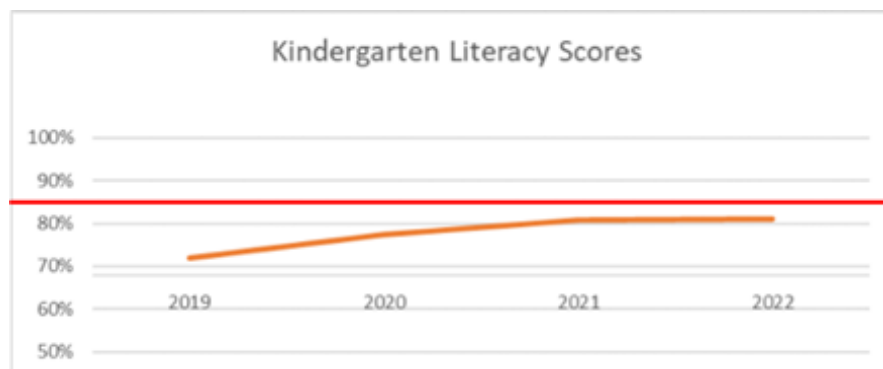
“I appreciate the growth. At times in my position, I don't feel valued. ELLA helps me feel valued. ELLA is positive support, wise advice from others in the field, and allows me to advocate for what I know is right.”

Along with scholarships, preschool directors were supported through the development of the Early Learning Leadership Academy (ELLA), a professional development cohort aimed at increasing the skillset and knowledge of preschool leadership to improve overall quality and move towards accreditation. Through this initiative, an average of 12 preschools participated, 8 were accredited, and 4 were accredited directly as a result of the Steps to Excellence initiative. Participating preschools include Developmental Center of the Ozarks, Lighthouse-Life 360, Wee Wonders, Study Nursery, Kingswood, OTC Child Development Center, Messiah Lighthouse Child and Family Development Center, Small Wonders Preschool, Missouri State University, PeaPod Learning Center, Kerri's Kidsville/Babyville, Cox Learning Center, Mighty Marvels Adventure Academy, Grow to Know Preschool, and Preschool Academy.

KINDERGARTEN LITERACY

GOAL 4: Increase social emotional competencies among teachers and students grades Pre-K through 3rd grade.

RESULTS: Between 2019 and 2022, Kindergarten literacy rose from 72% To 81.1%. While still not at GOAL, progress was made.



Using the Early Literacy Scale and ELORS assessments, program staff assessed 146 children in 2019, 457 in 2020, 606 in 2021 and 615 in 2022. It was determined that there was a correlation between scoring higher on the literacy assessments and on the DECA social-emotional competency assessments. Although literacy and social emotional competency address seemingly different aspects of a young child's development, it makes sense that the early social emotional skills allow children to gain early literacy mastery. Being able to attend to a teacher's instruction facilitates learning the parts of a story and book. Curiosity encourages a child to listen to a story, and consequently be a more eager learner.

THIRD GRADE LITERACY

GOAL 5: Increase the number of third graders reading at grade level.

RESULTS: In 2019, a baseline measurement was taken with a result of 35%. In 2021-22, the assessment showed that 51.4% of third graders are reading at grade level.

This measure proved harder to measure than the plan. It is well documented that children within the preschool cohort moved around, and keeping track of them made it impossible to determine if strategies employed by Steps to Excellence was a factor in the increases. It was reassuring to see scores improve, but how impactful the strategies within the project were remains indeterminate.



OTHER NOTABLE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In addition to the goals the Steps to Excellence project achieved, several accomplishments are worth noting. Prior to 2019, only enlightened early childhood programs in the area were using Conscious Discipline strategies. Today, it is well established in many preschools, elementary classrooms, some middle and high schools, after school programs and parenting education programs across Springfield. Moreover, the state of Missouri has invested more than \$10 million to provide training and supplies to programs across the state. The Darr Family Foundation funding was at the forefront of this wave and has continued to support the work around Conscious Discipline. A survey was conducted of the 1,500+ people who attended a minimum of one full day (6+ hours) of training in Conscious Discipline. Of the 209 responses received, 91% reported using Conscious Discipline in their daily work. Eighty-six percent reported having gained new skills in their Conscious Discipline training. Among the respondents, 41.6% (87) received the training prior to 2021. Eighty-eight percent of those responding participated in a multiple day training. Thirty-one percent who responded were currently teaching in K-8 settings, with two responses coming from high school teachers and 5 from administrators. Teachers reported having a greater understanding of the connection between brain states and behavior, that all behaviors are communication, having a better understanding of how the adult's brain state affects the child, and strategies to address upset children. Pipkin Middle school reports an increase in overall MAP index Math scores from 2019 to 2021. The principal at that school credits their success to the implementation of Conscious Discipline interventions.

An even less well-known strategy was the CLASS observation assessment to determine quality in preschool classrooms. Steps to Excellence has used CLASS to measure programs' quality since the beginning. CLASS is now used across the state as the benchmarking tool to help early childhood programs improve. The Darr Family Foundation funding has led the state in establishing an efficient, effective way to track progress and direct teacher coaching. Springfield's Steps to Excellence was miles ahead of others and was certainly a model to the state's adoption of the CLASS in the Quality Assessment Rating (QAR) project.

Additionally, Steps to Excellence's support of quality early childhood leaders through ELLA has led to it being replicated in other communities in southwest Missouri, as well as the recent launch of a statewide initiative, Missouri Supporting Early Childhood Administrators (MO-SECA). MO-SECA provides administrators with knowledge, skills and coaching to effectively lead quality early childhood programs. The program uses the same Program Administration Scale that ELLA uses. What ELLA incorporates that MO-SECA and other like initiatives do not is the element of camaraderie and connection. This support has been an invaluable piece of the puzzle.

The Darr Family Foundation's support of children's early success is well documented and has been a trailblazer in dealing with the critical issues our community has faced. Support such as this will be necessary as our nation, state and region continue to wrestle with the child care crisis. It is a family issue, and a workforce issue, but most importantly it is a moral imperative to do what will ensure school readiness and strong life-long outcomes for children.