



UNIVERSITY OF  
**SOUTH CAROLINA**



**South Carolina Community Block Grants for Education Pilot Program  
Evaluation of 2015–16 Grant Awards**

**Evaluation Commissioned by  
South Carolina Education Oversight Committee**

**October 2017**

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## **South Carolina Community Block Grants for Education Pilot Program Evaluation Report 2015–2016**

### **Overview**

The South Carolina General Assembly, through provisos 1.78, 1.92, and 1A.80 of the 2015–16 General Appropriation Act, appropriated to the Education Oversight Committee \$2 million to implement the South Carolina Community Block Grants for Education Pilot Program. The Community Block Grants encourage and incentivize evidence-based early childhood strategies that enhance the quality of 4-year old prekindergarten (4K) programs and instruction. Unexpended funds from the full-day 4K program supported the Community Block Grants for Education Pilot Program in Fiscal Year 2015–16.

Per Proviso 1.78, grants awarded to districts and schools in Fiscal Year 2015–16 were to “provide or expand high-quality early childhood programs for a targeted population of at-risk four-year-olds” (South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, 2015). All districts and schools were eligible to submit a proposal for this competitive grant. An independent grants committee reviewed applications and selected the recipients.

Districts were required to meet minimum program requirements for the state-funded, full-day 4K program (CDEP/CERDEP) and provide matching funds between 10% and 21% of the total budget based on the poverty index of schools serving prekindergarten children. Priority was given to applications that involved public-private partnerships between school districts, schools, Head Start, and private child care providers that collaborated to:

- Provide high-quality programs to four-year-olds to maximize return on investment;
- Assist in making the transition to kindergarten;
- Improve early literacy and/or numeracy readiness of children; and
- Engage families in improving their children’s readiness for kindergarten.

Districts awarded grants were required to select an approved teacher-child interaction assessment to implement within all or some of their 4K classrooms. The use of teacher-child interaction assessments allows schools and districts to better understand and improve the quality of instruction and interactions within early childhood classrooms. The measures also provide evaluative information about classroom quality among all funded projects, even though program focus areas differ among the grants.

Researchers have developed standardized teacher-child interaction assessments, including four approved for use through this initiative, which promote collaboration and professional development through a common framework.

Seventeen districts applied for the 2015–16 Community Block Grants. Eight districts were awarded Community Block Grants that ranged from \$194,466 to \$250,000. Table 1 includes the district, award amount, and focus area(s) of the grant.

**Table 1: Community Block Grant Recipients 2015–16**

District	Award Amount	Focus Area(s)
Cherokee	\$250,000	Vocabulary development using Language Environment Analysis (LENA); Targeting 40 students in high poverty schools
Chesterfield	\$250,000	Two 4K classrooms serving 40 new students; book dissemination to encourage reading and sharing among families; partnering with Head Start
Clarendon 2	\$249,086	Families Reading Every Day; weekly rotation of books/learning kits for 4K students use at home; integration of classroom and home practices
Florence 1	\$250,000	Montessori curriculum implementation; Teaching Pyramid Observational Tool (social emotional development); Parents as Teachers home visitation based on screening
Florence 2	\$239,000	Building Blocks curriculum implementation; partnering with Florence 1 related to Teaching Pyramid Observational Tool and Parents as Teachers home visitation based on screening
Jasper	\$250,000	Summer Preschool Academy; monthly professional development for 4K teachers; use of ECERS-3 to inform classroom interactions
Lexington 3	\$216,437	Ready in 3 initiative; Montessori curriculum implementation to expand access to 75 new students; parent/community outreach
Spartanburg 7	\$194,466	Quality Counts initiative working with state-funded 4K classrooms and ZL Madden Head Start to improve quality using CLASS and ECERS-3; targeted professional development; additional 25 days of instruction at one location

## Findings

A summary of findings are presented based on the implementation, impact, and outcomes evaluation.

### Implementation

- All grantees focused on literacy/language development and some focused on additional domains of development such as numeracy and social-emotional.
- Implementation strategies, while focused on student development and outcomes, included teacher-centered approaches, student-centered approaches, and family-centered approaches based on the goals of each district's grant.
- Successes reported by districts included increased teacher commitment/engagement, improved instruction, enhanced family engagement, and higher quality classroom environments.
- Strategies emerged to initiate or enhance community partnerships including Head Start and First Steps partnerships, engage families, and promote school-home links to early childhood curriculum, instruction, and interactions.
- Grantees reported facilitators to grant implementation including supportive staff at the district level, planning time built into the grant, and buy-in from schools, teachers, and families.
- Grantees reported barriers to grant implementation including teacher commitment, turnover at the district or school level, capacity for aspects of implementation based on other commitments and expectations, and allocation of time and resources to implement professional development during school or non-school hours.

### Impacts

- Grantees worked with 160 classrooms within 33 schools, and approximately 3,050 students were impacted.
- Grantees provided more than 300 professional development activities or strategies related to the implementation of the Community Block Grants.

### Outcomes

- Grantees adopted and received training related to a standardized teacher-child interaction assessment aligned to the goals of project.

- Grantees used the teacher-child interaction assessments within approximately 93 classrooms serving 1,855 students. Districts assessed between 4 and 34 classrooms with the teacher-child interaction assessments during grant implementation.
- Prekindergarten classrooms assessed generally demonstrated moderate to high quality teacher-child interactions, particularly in spring 2017.
- Across all districts, prekindergarten classrooms demonstrated improvements from fall 2016 to spring 2017 based on classrooms assessed by district representatives. Improvement on the teacher-child interaction assessment occurred in all but one instance based on independent review. The independent review included one classroom that was assessed in fall 2016 and spring 2017.
- Two grantees, involved in case studies, provided promising student outcomes based on student standardized assessment measures or reduced disciplinary actions. Based on timeline of report, student outcomes were not available for other grantees, but will be explored as available.
- One grantee, involved in the case studies, provided promising parent and child outcomes, showing an increase from pre- to post-intervention in amount of adult words being spoken and the amount of conversational turns between a parent and child within a 24-hour time period.

## Recommendations

### Implementation

The 2015–16 Community Block Grant recipients provided recommendations for future grant recipients.

- Acknowledge the value in learning from existing programs with similar aims.
- Understand the scope of your project, including limitations and capacity.
- Build partnerships to maximize your impact and expand your reach.
- Respect teachers as leaders in their classrooms.
- Know the families that you are working and their experiences.

### Impacts and Outcomes

#### Teacher-Child Interaction Assessment

- Continue to implement teacher-child interaction assessments since initial results showed improvements in the quality of prekindergarten classrooms from fall 2016 to spring 2017.
- Based on variation in number of classrooms that participated in the implementation of a teacher-child interaction assessment, in future funding cycles, require a minimum percentage of classrooms to participate in the implementation of a teacher-child interaction assessment.
- Hold in-person or on-line meetings to share ideas related to specific teacher-child interaction assessments to facilitate district collaboration and problem-solving related to specific questions about or criteria within the interaction assessments.
- Explore additional funding streams to encourage the use of teacher-child interaction assessments across most or all prekindergarten classrooms served through the Community Block Grants, if districts find the assessment valuable.
- Encourage districts that successfully implemented teacher-child interaction assessments to share information with additional districts to improve the quality of 4K classrooms.

#### Promising Practices

- Student-level outcomes often take longer to emerge or gauge based on timing and analysis of assessments; therefore, focus on student outcomes beyond initial year of implementation.
- Work with districts to explore and highlight connections between implementation of grant strategies, teacher-child interaction assessment data, and student outcomes.
- While districts focusing on parent-centered approaches show promising changes resulting from interventions, future grant iterations should work to connect these findings to student outcomes to determine the overall success of home-based interventions.

## Evaluation Plan and Data Collection Methods

The objective of the Community Block Grants for Education Pilot Program is as follows:

The General Assembly finds that the success offered by these initiatives and programs is assured best when vigorous community support is integral to their development and implementation. It is the intent of this proviso to encourage public school and district communities and their entrepreneurial public educators to undertake state-of-the-art initiatives to improve student learning and to share the results of these efforts with the state's public education community. (Proviso 1.78 of the 2015–16 General Appropriation Act)

To determine the effectiveness of the program, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) entered into a contract with researchers from the University of South Carolina and Clemson University to evaluate the implementation and impact within the districts that were awarded a Community Block Grant in 2015–16. University of South Carolina and Clemson University faculty and staff conducted a utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2008), which is an evaluation approach that seeks stakeholder input, develops an understanding of practice-related opportunities and challenges, and encourages evaluation results to be used for project improvement. The evaluation methods were developed in consultation with the staff of the EOC.

### Implementation

To explore implementation, University of South Carolina and Clemson University faculty and staff focused on beginning-of-project and end-of-project perceptions and realities related to three primary areas 1) initiating grant work as proposed in logic model, 2) measuring and improving teacher-child interactions, and 3) providing training and support related to grant goals.

On-site interviews with district-level grant coordinators and grant implementation staff were conducted during the fall of 2016 and the spring of 2017. With representation from each district at both time points, a total of 16 interviews were conducted with key program personnel to better understand their perceptions and current practices related to their EOC grant. Interviews were coded by two independent evaluators to identify themes among the responses. A summary of preliminary themes, based on fall 2016 interviews, was provided to the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee in March 2017.



## Impacts and Outcomes

To determine impact, USC and Clemson faculty and staff 1) collected impact data (e.g., numbers of children, classrooms, and schools impacted) in December 2016 and June 2017, 2) analyzed mean teacher-child interaction assessment scores by district in fall 2016 and spring 2017 based on district-conducted assessments, 3) analyzed teacher-child interaction assessments results of one classroom per district in fall 2016 and spring 2017 conducted by an external independent rater, and 4) conducted case studies of three districts that received Community Block Grants to understand promising practices.

Mid-year and end-of-year online surveys were administered to gain information about the number of schools, classrooms, and students impacted by Community Block Grants. In addition, information was collected about the types and formats of professional development activities, partnerships developed or improved through the initiative, and supports needed to facilitate the goals of projects. The End-of-Year Survey template is provided in Appendix A.

Each district selected an approved teacher-child interaction assessment to use within their 4K classrooms. The districts conducted pre-assessments and post-assessments using the selected interaction assessment. In addition, a trained, independent rater assessed one classroom per district using the selected interaction assessment. The independent raters worked with each district to select one classroom in which to conduct a pre- and post-observation. These observations were scored using the appropriate guide for the assessment. Generally, observations require between three and five hours. Scores from districts and independent raters were used to better understand baseline data and measure progress within districts.

The evaluation team identified three case study sites within the eight funded projects to conduct a deeper analysis of the characteristics that made each of these three projects particularly successful. Although other districts had successful implementation, time and resources necessitated a “deep dive” in three districts to gain more in-depth information.

**Table 2: Data Collection, Source, and Timeframe for Implementation and Impact Evaluation**

	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
<b>Implementation</b>	In-person interviews (8 districts x 2 interviews=16)	Grant Coordinator/ Related Personnel	Oct-Dec 2016 and March-April 2017
<b>Impacts Outcomes</b>	Pre- and Post-Interaction Assessment Scores (district)	District/School Staff	Fall 2016 and Spring 2017
	Pre- and Post-Interaction Assessment Scores (independent)	Independent Reviewer One classroom per district	Fall 2016 and Spring 2017
	Online Surveys	Grant Coordinator	Nov 2016 and June 2017
	Case Studies	Three Districts	April-June 2017

## Implementation

### Project Approach and Strategies

In their grant applications districts described specific activities, **implementation plans**, and logic models. In the majority of districts, these plans were implemented with slight to no variations. Districts that received Community Block Grants reported expansion of literacy-related strategies as well as strategies related to other domains during the interviews. Table 3 highlights the student-centered focus on literacy across all eight grantees as well as additional focus areas such as numeracy and social emotional development, as reported by the grantees during interviews. Seven districts included teacher-centered professional development based on receiving the Community Block Grant, and five districts highlighted parent engagement strategies through their work related to the grants.

**Table 3: Overview of 2015-16 Community Block Grant Recipients’ Key Approaches**

	Student-Centered <i>School Readiness Skills</i>			Teacher-Centered	Parent-Centered
	<i>Literacy</i>	<i>Numeracy</i>	<i>Social Emotional</i>	<i>Professional Development</i>	<i>Engagement</i>
<b>District A</b>	X			X	X
<b>District B</b>	X			X	X
<b>District C</b>	X	X		X	X
<b>District D</b>	X	X	X	X	
<b>District E</b>	X	X		X	
<b>District F</b>	X			X	X
<b>District G</b>	X				X
<b>District H</b>	X		X	X	
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>

As one coordinator explained, “**literacy** is important because of the Read to Succeed Act, and not only because of that but we want to have competent readers as they enter and exit third grade.” This grant coordinator also realized, “one of the things that we have really got to start focusing on now is **numeracy**.” For another district, “learning should happen in a context that supports **social emotional** development of young children. It is insulting to think that [teachers] don't know how to teach. They have [bachelor’s degrees]. But get them a child who is socially and emotionally ready and the sky is the limit.” As one district sums it, “a happy child is a learning child.”

Of the eight districts, seven approached enhancing student readiness through **teacher-centered** approaches that included professional development with the remaining district focusing more heavily on family engagement. In alignment with the purpose of the grant, one district aimed to “improve teacher-child interaction in the classroom and then measure that to see if [they] can make a substantial difference in it by the training that we are doing.” For this district, the “Pyramid [curriculum] is really at the center of what [they] are doing.” The Pyramid model focuses on evidence-based practices in social emotional competence and is aligned with the TPOT teacher-child interaction assessment. Five additional districts cited the importance of improving teacher-child interactions, in which the selected assessment played a role. Additional teacher professional development provided by districts focused on: curriculum (n = 5), classroom environment (n = 3), brain development (n = 2), leadership (n = 1), coaching (n = 1), and cultural awareness (n = 1). Two districts indicated that it was not only necessary to focus on what happens inside of the classroom but to be responsive to the community through poverty training. As one district explains, they need to be able to “come up with strategies to help children who live in poverty overcome deficits that they face.”

Five grant recipients specifically highlighted a **parent-centered** approach to “help parents to understand their role in helping their children become successful readers,” which speaks to developing a culture of literacy in the home. Another district also pointed out “whatever bad experience their parents had in school affects how excited parents are to put kids in 4K.” Thus, it was key to design programs that offered a positive association with the school environment. Strategies included workshops, providing resources, home visits, community outreach, and the use of innovative technology to measure parent-child interaction. Parent engagement was particularly crucial for one district introducing a new curricular approach within their 4K classrooms. They expressed a need to “educate them on the [curriculum] process once their children are in the classroom so that there is little confusion when they are comparing it to traditional classrooms.”

### **Facilitators/Successes**

Districts cited aspects that facilitated grant implementation including receiving **planning time prior to grant implementation** based on approval and funding received in spring 2016, which allowed time during the summer prior to full implementation. In addition, most districts had **administrative support** and **staff stability** that allowed for effective implementation of the grant. Seven of the eight districts maintained their grant coordinator as identified in the proposal throughout the 2016–17 academic year.

Other districts highlighted supportive superintendents who promoted this work, and principals who demonstrated the importance of this initiative. In some instances, principals were trained in the teacher-child interaction assessment or strategies being used through the grant to encourage buy-in and assist staff with implementation. In addition, a **grant administration meeting**, facilitated by EOC staff, early in the 2016–2017 academic year, allowed grant coordinators to collaborate and share ideas related to grant implementation.

Successes most often reported during the interview process focused on teacher commitment and engagement in implementing new and focused strategies for young children. Four grant recipients noticed an **improvement in teaching practices**. They described their teachers as more confident in the classroom because “they are more aware of what they need to do to make 4K children ready for 5K” and “are more likely to understand child development.” They even noticed that “teachers have started thinking about how they impact children’s lives and how they fit into the bigger picture of college and career ready.” Another success mentioned by five districts was **teacher commitment**. As one grant recipient describes, “our teachers have really put forth tremendous effort” and that they are “intrinsically motivated to do a good job.” This is demonstrated by them “seeking improvement and being “open to change.” As a testament to their commitment to professional growth, in one district “teachers requested 4K checklist be revised.”

Along with teachers, parents were also engaged as reported by districts. In fact, “one dad talks about how he learned more from the books than his child.” Improved **parent engagement** was a success reported by four grant recipients. Parent engagement describes the intentional effort to develop a relationship between parents and school personnel. One district explains “sometimes those relationships mean as much as anything else you can provide.”

Three districts shared success related to students. Although “we will truly see the fruits of our labor when our students are older,” **student engagement** is evidenced by students’ positive responses to the programs and their improved literacy. Also, their **behavior** has improved as evidenced by a decrease in student referrals and an observation of the “maturity growth in the children.”

Districts collaborated with several community organizations, such as grocery stores, Rotary Club, Head Start, county-level quality improvement initiatives, Teacher Cadets program, School Foundation,

neighboring districts, Lowes, and libraries, based on these grants. Though three districts were challenged by **partnerships**, two districts experienced success. For them, the partnerships resulted in shared responsibility. For example, one district noted that “if we would have done this alone, it would've been, you know, a lot more.” For another district, the partnerships allowed them to expand their reach because “it expanded our networking capabilities.” With the expanded network comes an opportunity to increase capacity. One district gained relevant “administrative-level support” from someone familiar with their program.

**Figure 1: Successes Highlighted by 2015–16 Community Block Grant Recipients**



*\*The size of the text corresponds to the frequency of mentions*

### **Barriers/Challenges**

Barriers and challenges are organized based on three areas: teacher-centered, parent-centered, student centered, and other. One district reported no challenges because they “have a really good team.” Among the teacher-centered challenges were **teacher commitment/engagement** identified by two districts and **teacher turnover** reported by one district. Innovation was noted as being particularly difficult for some teachers “who say this is the way I've always done it” and are not “as open as newer teachers.” Other issues included difficulty with transitioning from a focus on literacy to language development. Another issue encountered by one district was increasing the involvement of teacher assistants who “sit back and are not involved.” Finally, one district struggled with a teacher who was not on board at the beginning of the process; however, the district reported “it is going much better now. The one teacher is on board. There was just personal stuff going on with that teacher.” Teacher turnover often impacts teacher engagement. As described by one district “change of teachers can be a huge

barrier” to achieving program goals and time has to be spent “winning them over.” Lack of buy-in to the models implemented, due to resistance or lack of capacity, inhibited teacher engagement.

Similarly, **parent-centered challenges** arose within four districts due to language barriers, parents’ reading level, and time commitment. Despite challenges, districts were aware of potential solutions such as a multilingual staff and “more intensity with parent workshops.”

**Student enrollment** continued to pose a problem within the districts, even though it was highlighted more often in fall 2016 than in spring 2017. Districts recruit students through “open houses and giving out book bags” yet many are experiencing “lower than expected enrollment.” In contrast, one district anticipates “having to turn people away” because they will not have as many slots available in the future. Thus, they plan on “encouraging parents to put their kids in traditional 4 and 5K classrooms” and are hoping that “more 4 and 5K teachers will be willing to be trained” so that more students will have access to highly qualified teachers. Developing **partnerships** was another area of concern identified by three districts. Districts reported difficulty with identifying effective partners, establishing partnerships, and managing partnerships. One district expressed frustration because “it takes too much time trying to communicate with everyone.” Another experienced “hurdles” when trying to navigate their partnerships. One district realized that a planned partner business was unable to collaborate based on corporate rules; however, the district was able to partner with other businesses and accomplished their goals of outreach.

Other challenges include **logistics and time**, which were reported by three districts, such as scheduling professional development, working in a large school, and narrowing the focus of program goals. Two districts specifically highlighted barriers related to **summer professional development or additional classroom time** that were planned. Teachers typically do not receive extra compensation beyond the 10-month contract terms, and it proved difficult for these two districts to operate summer programs without funding beyond what was provided. Recruiting teacher and child participation was more difficult than expected in these two districts as well. Two districts intended to conduct teacher-child interaction assessments across more prekindergarten classrooms, but after the training in the interaction assessment, districts realized this was impossible based on **time** necessary to complete pre- and post-assessments at the classroom level. For example, one district built in salary for the time it would take to coordinate the overall project, but did not anticipate the amount of time to conduct

observations across all of the teachers and could not complete them all along with the responsibilities of her district position.

Another district-identified challenge related to training and professional development was the inability to **schedule school-day professional development or coaching** based on need for appropriate substitutes or class coverage. One district had **turnover in district-level staff and the superintendent** during the implementation of the Community Block Grant, which created difficulty in implementing and sustaining the project as the new district lead integrated into the district, worked to understand the project, and attempted to merge the project’s intent into new district goals.

**Figure 2: Challenges Highlighted by 2015–16 Community Block Grant Recipients**



*\*The size of the text corresponds to the frequency of mentions*

**Table 4: Successes and Challenges to 2015–2016 Community Block Grant Recipients**

Aspect	Success	Challenge
Teacher Commitment	5	2
Teaching Practices	4	
Teacher Turnover		1
Parent Engagement	4	4
Student Engagement	3	
Student Behavior	3	
Student Enrollment		3
Program Logistics		3
Community Partnerships	2	3



## Identified Needs

While the previous section explained barriers that were identified by the evaluation team through interview analyses, this section describes the specific needs, often based on the barriers, described by participants. Needs identified by five districts were related to **funding levels for prekindergarten programs** as they seek either external or internal funding. One district wanted to expand the academic year to provide additional instruction and enrichment to prekindergarten children; however, costs of the program and low enrollment became factors. Other districts indicated the need for more materials or supplies within their prekindergarten classrooms. **Recruitment** of prekindergarteners and better methods for **family engagement** were also cited as needs. Some districts indicated that coordinating prekindergarten enrollment based on locations of classrooms and partnerships with Head Start can be a challenge, and they are looking into more effectively collaborating with Head Start and other early education programs. Some districts held community meetings or parent education events, but had limited attendance and are exploring methods to better engage families related to the availability of prekindergarten within public schools. Some districts also indicated that **enrollment challenges**, having too few or too many prekindergarteners, caused anxiety and uncertainty among school staff and families. One district indicated that it often filled 4K school-based programs early, which caused some families to stop seeking prekindergarten within public schools and pursue other alternatives. This presented a challenge when spaces opened during the summer or beginning of the school year.

## Best Practices

Grant recipients chose among four teacher-child interaction assessments: Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3), Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), and the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT) to supplement student assessments or other classroom environment assessments.

Across the eight districts, the use of the suggested assessments is evenly distributed with two per assessment, with the exception of the TPOT, which is used by three districts. One district used two interaction assessments (CLASS and ECERS-3). When considering what is important in assessing a classroom, one district expressed difficulty in “knowing how to choose one over the other,” and is currently using both interaction assessments for that reason. One district selected ELLCO because “the tool worked well for [their] program goals.” If their goals were more “holistic,” they would have “wanted to look at something like ECERS-3 or CLASS.”

All of the districts noted the benefits of using the teacher-child interaction assessments. Many of the teacher-related successes were associated with the training, implementation, or feedback based on the assessments. During the interviews, four student assessments were mentioned: Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), Fountas & Pinnell, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Some districts may be using these assessments, but did not mention them in the interviews. However, PALS was the most commonly referenced student assessment, mentioned by four of the eight districts.

**Figure 3: Standardized Assessments Cited by Community Block Grant Recipients**



Overall, it appears that the introduction of the teacher-child interaction assessments was well-received as a “support tool, not a high stakes evaluation tool.” Though some teachers were resistant, it appears that most were “open” and “willing” to participate. One district trained teachers on the teacher-child interaction assessment to assist with buy-in. With the use of the teacher-child interaction assessments, staff and teachers are described as being more “reflective” about their practices and as using the assessments to improve their classrooms both physically and instructionally. Two districts reported modifying how they used the assessments. One district modified CLASS to focus on language development after discovering that teachers “have a knowledge base about language development,” but that it did not translate to practice. Thus, they developed an abridged rubric that focuses on language development. Another district voiced concern that the ELLCO was “hard to do all of the pieces,” and similarly focused only on three or four sections.

Other than the interaction assessment assessments, districts highlighted successes in forming **partnerships** with other districts and other prekindergarten or early childhood education programs such as Head Start to meet goals. One district also highlighted better understanding of parents and **improved**

**communication between parents and children.** This district also recognized some realities based on poverty that impacted parents and children that could be better addressed by schools or connections with community organizations. Two districts provided specific training on teaching children of poverty.

Two districts indicated that the Community Block Grants allowed them to **meet the unique professional development needs** of prekindergarten teachers. One district indicated that the prekindergarten teachers in the district had never received targeted professional development focused on their students. In prior years, the prekindergarten teachers generally participated in elementary-level professional development, which often addresses the needs of older students.

Two districts experienced successes in implementing a new approach related to **social emotional development**, and this approach is being scaled to other districts through the 2016–2017 Community Block Grant. Another district expanded to include a neighboring district in their work related to coaching and quality improvement based on two teacher-child interaction assessments.

### **Lessons Learned**

Community Block Grant recipients offered lessons learned based on their experiences.

- **Acknowledge the value in learning from existing programs with similar aims**  
Prior to implementation, one district recommended visiting schools with similar programs. Visiting similar schools helped them to gain support as well as contributed to “successful implementation” of the program at their own school.
- **Understand the scope of project, including limitations and capacity**  
Though there is an understanding that “everything is taking longer than we want,” there were unanticipated problems grant recipients were not aware of prior to implementation. In one instance, they did not anticipate the “technology curve” for parents who participated in an initiative that included technology and in another district, they were not aware of other family dynamics that would affect the program, such as language barriers and parental responsibilities. Thus, when designing programs, future grantees are cautioned to be “realistic” recognizing that “sometimes we want to write what sounds good.” As another district warned, “don't go in there thinking you're going to solve all their problems, but know how to connect them to resources

that are appropriate.” Further, it is also important to define the project scope. For example, one district thought of their program as “child-based,” but they realized after implementation that it was a “parent program.” This realization helped them to modify how they measured program outcomes by focusing on parent-centered data. Similarly, another suggestion is to understand your parameters.

- **Build partnerships to maximize impact and expand your reach**

Partnership was a common theme throughout the experiences of the Community Block Grant recipients as there were facilitators and barriers. Partnerships have allowed some grantees to “reach more families with children who need services” and “assist with marketing.” To ensure a fruitful collaboration, one suggestion is to “make sure that partners have a skin in the game,” which can be achieved by delegating responsibilities to partners.

- **Respect teachers as leaders in their classrooms**

In order for the program to be successful, districts needed teachers to have “ownership” and to buy-in to the program. One way to do that was to “honor what teachers think and what they want, it’s their room.” As a result, “teachers responded positively.” Another grantee added that “you don’t want to add more stress on teachers.”

- **Know the families you are working with and their experiences**

Of the eight districts, half mentioned the high levels of poverty among their students during interviews, and two mentioned specific steps to address how to improve instructional efforts towards serving children who may be impacted or at-risk due to poverty through their program. One district implemented “poverty training through teacher action research in their classrooms each month to see if they can come up with strategies to help children who live in poverty overcome deficits that they face.” As a result, “in the area of poverty, teachers have become more sensitive to children’s individual needs and the value of knowing more about their children. And to know that there are ways that they can help children.” Lack of contextual information can hinder participation and recruitment. Following the first year of their program, one district is seeking to understand family dynamics to improve family participation and recruitment. In planning for the upcoming year, they are asking “what are the characteristics that make a family more able to participate in this program successfully, or less able?”

## Sustainability

Financial support, through the district or other sources, was the most commonly noted plan of action for sustaining Community Block Grants. Plans for sustainability reported by districts include **external funding, strategic spending, district funding, and partnerships**. Identifying and seeking external funding was cited by five of the grantees; whereas four grantees highlighted strategic spending strategies that maximized grant funding and allowed for sustainability. Four districts plan to use CERDEP and state-funded full-day 4K funds to sustain current plans or partner with additional districts in a new initiative. Another district plans to use Title I funds to support their initiative. Among those who highlighted strategic spending to sustain the work, these districts purchased “backups,” “sturdier materials,” and extra materials. Another method was to “take more ownership” by building capacity through the “train the trainer model” so that staff can take over the training. Two districts noted the use of district funding to help sustain the project, and one district identified the role of a partnership in sustaining the work with one noting, “needs won’t be extensive so hopefully it won’t cost too much next year.” One district worked hard to establish and maintain a partnership that will be critical in sustaining this work. In reflection, they noted that there is “no doubt, as far as what happened here, that this relationship will continue.”

## Impacts

### Numbers Served

The 2015–16 Community Block Grant recipients reached 160 classrooms within 33 schools and served approximately 3,050 students. The least amounts of classrooms and students affected within a district were 4 and 80, respectively. The largest numbers of classrooms and students affected were 45 and 945, respectively. Table 5 highlights the numbers of students, classrooms, and schools affected.

**Table 5: Approximate Number of Students, Classrooms, and Schools Impacted**

District	Students	Classrooms	Schools
District 1	420	21	11
District 2	945	45	7
District 3	322	18	3
District 4	450	31	6
District 5	80	4	1
District 6	170	9	2
District 7	140	6	1
District 8	520	26	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,047</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>33</b>

As of June 2017, the 2015–16 Community Block Grant recipients had provided almost 300 professional development activities targeted at improving prekindergarten education. Six of the eight districts provided between 5 and 12 professional development sessions or activities; whereas one district provided 30 and one provided 219. These include a summer institute and a training on early learning standards. The predominate types of professional development provided include curriculum and instruction training (literacy, mathematical thinking, social emotional development, science/inquiry), teacher-child interactions, classroom organization and management, parent/family engagement, cultural diversity training, teaching children of poverty, inclusion, and teacher well-being. Professional development formats included large-group sessions, professional learning community meetings/book study groups, and coaching at the classroom or school level, which explains the differing numbers of professional development activities reported. Table 6 highlights the number of professional development sessions and participants within each district.

**Table 6: Number of Professional Development Sessions and Participants by Community Block Grant**

District	PD Sessions	Participants
District 1	12	53
District 2	10	100
District 3	30	25
District 4	6	100
District 5	5	12
District 6	8	18
District 7	8	15
District 8	219	48
<b>Total</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>371</b>

Community Block Grant recipients selected an approved teacher-child interaction assessment to measure teacher-student interactions. Approximately 93 classrooms within 21 schools were assessed using one of the four assessments. More than 1,850 students were in these classes. Table 7 provides the number of classrooms assessed and number of students within those classrooms.

**Table 7: Classrooms Assessed with Interaction Assessment and Number of Students Affected**

District	Classroom Assessed	Number of Students
District 1	5	100
District 2	34	795
District 3	5	80
District 4	22	330
District 5	4	80
District 6	9	170
District 7	6	140
District 8	8	160
<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>1,855</b>

Community Block Grant recipients highlighted partnerships with Head Start (n=6), other school districts (n=3), First Steps (n=3), higher education (n=3), and other community organizations such as United Way and parenting education organizations (n=3). Two districts indicated that the 2015–16 Community Block Grants led to expansion into other districts for 2016–17 Community Block Grants. Another district indicated that the 2015–16 Community Block Grant led to a partnership with First Steps to create a

model early childhood classroom for 3-year olds. In addition, partnerships with higher education institutions led to alignment between pre-service teacher preparation and in-service professional development. Higher education institutions also partnered with some of the Community Block Grant recipients to provide specialized professional development for prekindergarten teachers.

## Outcomes

### Teacher-Child Interaction Assessment

Districts selected one of four approved teacher-child interaction assessments. Among the eight districts, seven had limited or no previous experience with these interaction assessments; therefore, these districts received training in late summer and early fall 2016 related to these interaction assessments. One district used two interaction assessments (CLASS and ECERS-3).

**Table 8: Selected Interaction Assessments**

Interaction Assessment	Acronym	Number of Districts*
Classroom Assessment Scoring System	CLASS	2
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale	ECERS-3	2
Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observational Tool	ELLCO	2
Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool	TPOT	3

*\*one district used CLASS and ECERS-3*

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), developed by University of Virginia researchers, assesses 10 dimensions organized in three domains, and it is scored on a 1 to 7 scale with a “low” score indicated as a 1 or 2, a “mid” score as a 3-5, and a “high” score as a 6 or 7 (Hamre, n.d.). Across two districts using CLASS, approximately 11 classrooms in six schools were assessed by trained district representatives. One classroom per district was also assessed by an independent reviewer trained in the instrument. Table 9 presents the district-reported results as well as the aggregated independent review results.



**Table 9: Pre and Post-CLASS Scores by District Review and Independent Review**

Domain	District A Reported		District B Reported		Independent Review	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre*	Post*
Emotional Support	5.50	5.96	6.50	7.0	4.5	5.0
Classroom Organization	5.13	5.47	6.10	7.0	5.17	5.67
Instructional Support	3.59	4.17	5.13	6.25	3.33	4.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.74</b>	<b>5.20</b>	<b>5.91</b>	<b>6.75</b>	<b>4.33</b>	<b>5.11</b>

*\*average of two classrooms: one in District A and one in District B*

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3), developed by University of North Carolina researchers, assesses six domains and uses a 1 to 7 scale with 1 being Inadequate and 7 being Excellent. Approximately 12 classrooms in two districts were assessed with ECERS-3 by trained district representatives. An independent reviewer, trained in the instrument, scored one classroom in each district. The other district that used ECERS-3 also used CLASS, and CLASS was selected for the independent review in that district. Table 10 presents the district-reported results as well as the aggregated independent review results.

**Table 10: Pre and Post-ECERS-3 Scores by District Review and Independent Review**

Domain	District A Reported		District B Reported		Independent Review*	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Space and Furnishings	2.65	3.41	3.20	4.14	3.57	3.71
Personal Care Routines	2.06	2.16	3.91	4.52	4.25	2.75
Language and Literacy	2.93	4.30	3.80	4.94	4.40	3.80
Learning Activities	2.20	2.99	1.55	3.43	3.09	3.09
Interactions	2.50	3.38	4.00	5.09	5.20	3.40
Program Structure	1.96	3.17	3.38	5.70	3.00	4.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.38</b>	<b>3.23</b>	<b>3.31</b>	<b>4.64</b>	<b>3.90</b>	<b>3.50</b>

*\*one district included in independent review for ECERS-3*

The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation, Pre-K (ELLCO) includes 19 indicators within five sections and two subscales. ELLCO uses a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being “Deficient” and 5 being “Exemplary” (Smith, Brady, & Anastasopoulos, 2008). Within two districts, 11 classrooms within three schools received assessments. The independent reviewer rated one classroom per district in fall 2016 and spring

2017. The same classroom was rated in the fall and the spring. Table 11 presents the district-reported results as well as the aggregated independent review results.

**Table 11: Pre and Post-ELLCO Scores by District Review and Independent Review**

Domain	District A Reported		District B Reported		Independent Review	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre*	Post*
General Classroom Environment	3.32	4.20	3.96	4.71	5.0	5.0
Language and Literacy	3.28	4.25	3.92	4.77	4.91	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.30</b>	<b>4.23</b>	<b>3.94</b>	<b>4.74</b>	<b>4.94</b>	<b>5.0</b>

*\*average of two classrooms: one in District A and one in District B*

The Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool for Preschool Classrooms (TPOT) includes 32 areas within three subscales. TPOT is scored using yes/no criteria and supporting notes (Fox, Hemmeter, & Snyder, 2014). Approximately 32 classrooms in three districts were assessed with TPOT. The independent reviewer scored one classroom per district using TPOT. Based on the number of indicators within the 32 areas (approximately 99), the initial year scoring must be viewed with caution as evaluators recognized some differences in the overall scoring process. Districts generally used indicator or area scores to make improvements, and at times, did not calculate overall scores in the same manner. Table 12 presents the district-reported results as well as the aggregated independent review results. An increase in Key Practices and decreases in Red Flags and Challenging Behaviors observed/identified are considered improvements based on this measure.

**Table 12: Pre and Post-TPOT Scores by District Review and Independent Review**

Domain	District A Reported		District B Reported		District C Reported		Independent Review	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre*	Post*
Key Practices	82%	93%	74%	93%	78%	86%	67%	79%
Red Flags	3%	0.5%	9%	0%	11%	6%	12%	8%
Challenging Behaviors	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0

*\*average of three classrooms: one in District A, one District B, and District C*

All districts showed gains on the teacher-child interaction assessment based on classrooms assessed by district representatives at the beginning and end of the academic year. All districts, except one, showed gains on the interaction assessment based on classrooms assessed by an independent reviewer at the beginning and end of the academic year. The average independent review score and district score were often within an acceptable range of one another (within one point or within 15%). It is also important to note that the independent review included one class per district, and the district review included between three and 13 classrooms per district. In general, districts demonstrated moderate to high quality classroom interactions and improved their interactions over the course of implementing the 2015–16 Community Block Grants based on evidence from the district and independent review.

Most districts used a teacher-child interaction assessment for the first time through the 2015–2016 Community Block Grant program; therefore, there were learning curves and experimentation through the process. Results must be interpreted with caution based on the number of classrooms evaluated and selection of classrooms for independent review. It is recommended that for future years, the evaluation team in collaboration with the EOC staff and participating districts 1) specify a number or percentage of classrooms to be evaluated by district staff with the interaction measure and 2) develop a selection criterion to identify classrooms for independent review. In addition, in-person or on-line meetings to share ideas related to specific interaction assessments may facilitate district collaboration and problem-solving related to specific questions about or criteria within the interaction assessments.

Effective implementation of interaction assessments and use of results to inform professional development are time-consuming and costly for districts and schools. Funding and support, beyond that allocated within the current Community Block Grants, may allow committed districts to fully implement interaction assessments across early childhood classrooms and more deliberately use results to improve quality.

### **Promising Practices**

Following the post-interviews in spring 2017, the evaluation team identified three exemplar districts: Cherokee, Spartanburg 7, and Florence 1. In addition to adhering to overall grant goals, these three projects displayed innovative practices; either through strong community partnerships, implementing a unique model with families, or focusing on a model of instruction that goes beyond cognitive growth; that other districts across the state might benefit from exploring. While the previous sections of this

evaluation report focused on the implementation, outcomes, and impacts across all funded projects, this section provides a more detailed picture of these three projects.

The evaluation team conducted case studies in each of these districts to further understand project development, implementation, and outcomes. The three case studies sought to answer the following research question: **What are the contributing characteristics that made these three projects successful?** This question was explored by going beyond the pre- and post-interviews with key program personnel involved in each grant. Data were gathered through additional interviews with key stakeholders involved in the project (e.g. teachers, school administrators, professional development providers). Further, data were gathered through grant artifacts selected by grant personnel to exemplify how projects met goals. Example artifacts include weekly summary reports of parent/child interactions, agendas for professional development sessions, examples of community outreach advertisements, pictures of classroom environments, and video testimonials from grant participants. The following sections outline the characteristics that made each of these three projects successful.

### Cherokee School District: “Talk to Me”

#### Parent testimonials:

*“I did not know that your child’s learning process starts now, zero to three years, I always thought it started at five once they start school.”*

*“I liked the Talk to Me program, it helped our family a lot. It helped her learn a lot more.”*

*“If you have a four-year-old, it’s a great program, you will love it!”*

The Talk to Me initiative focused on increasing school readiness by supporting parent and child interactions in home environments. The project personnel collaborated with a variety of community partners to ensure project success, including Limestone College, the Institute for Child Success, United Way of Piedmont, and Cherokee County First Steps. The strategic plan of “Talk to Me” included the following guiding principles:

- Parents are the first and most important teachers
- Parent talk is the most valuable resource in our world
- Every child is born with the same potential for success
- The “word gap” is preventable, despite the stressors of poverty
- Preparation for tomorrow’s ever changing workforce begins at birth
- Investing in early learning costs less and yields a better return on investment than paying for future failure
- Building a child’s brain is everyone’s responsibility

With these principles in mind, the project team engaged in a number of community events to promote language development, emphasizing the roles that families can play. The project team also engaged in supporting Cherokee School District 4K environments by purchasing reading material to enhance and diversify reading centers in 4K classrooms and providing ongoing professional development on language development and questioning strategies. In addition, the project team hosted family literacy workshops throughout the year at each elementary school.

The logic model for this grant proposed that a CLASS assessment would be conducted for all of the 4K classrooms involved in the grant. However, after realizing the time commitment necessary to implement this level of ongoing assessment (at least two times during the school year) the project director was only able to implement the CLASS assessment in three of the 4K classrooms at the time of data collection for this case study (May 2017). To address this limitation in the 2017-2018 school year, the project director has proposed a peer to peer approach for the CLASS assessment and will send two veteran teachers who scored highly on the CLASS assessment in prior years to training to become CLASS certified. This process will enable the project director to extend the assessment to all 4K classrooms participating in the grant project without compromising an already overwhelming schedule of implementation. Further, by encouraging peer to peer assessment, this approach will allow for sustainable practice and support the growth of a community of practice among teacher participants.

While these initiatives were substantial, the primary vehicle for increasing language development was an ongoing home intervention for up to 40 families of 4K students in the district. **Family Literacy Coaches** hired through the **Talk to Me program** visited with families on a weekly basis to provide training (lessons) on how parents can best support their child’s language development. For example, the topics in one lesson provided by project personnel to the evaluation team describes three topics for the Family Literacy Coach to cover in a 35-40 minute session. In this lesson, parents reviewed activities they

had done with their children during the previous week, the Family Literacy Coach reviewed techniques for increasing vocabulary and modeled a read aloud with the family (children included), and then the family worked to make a book that they could use during the following week.

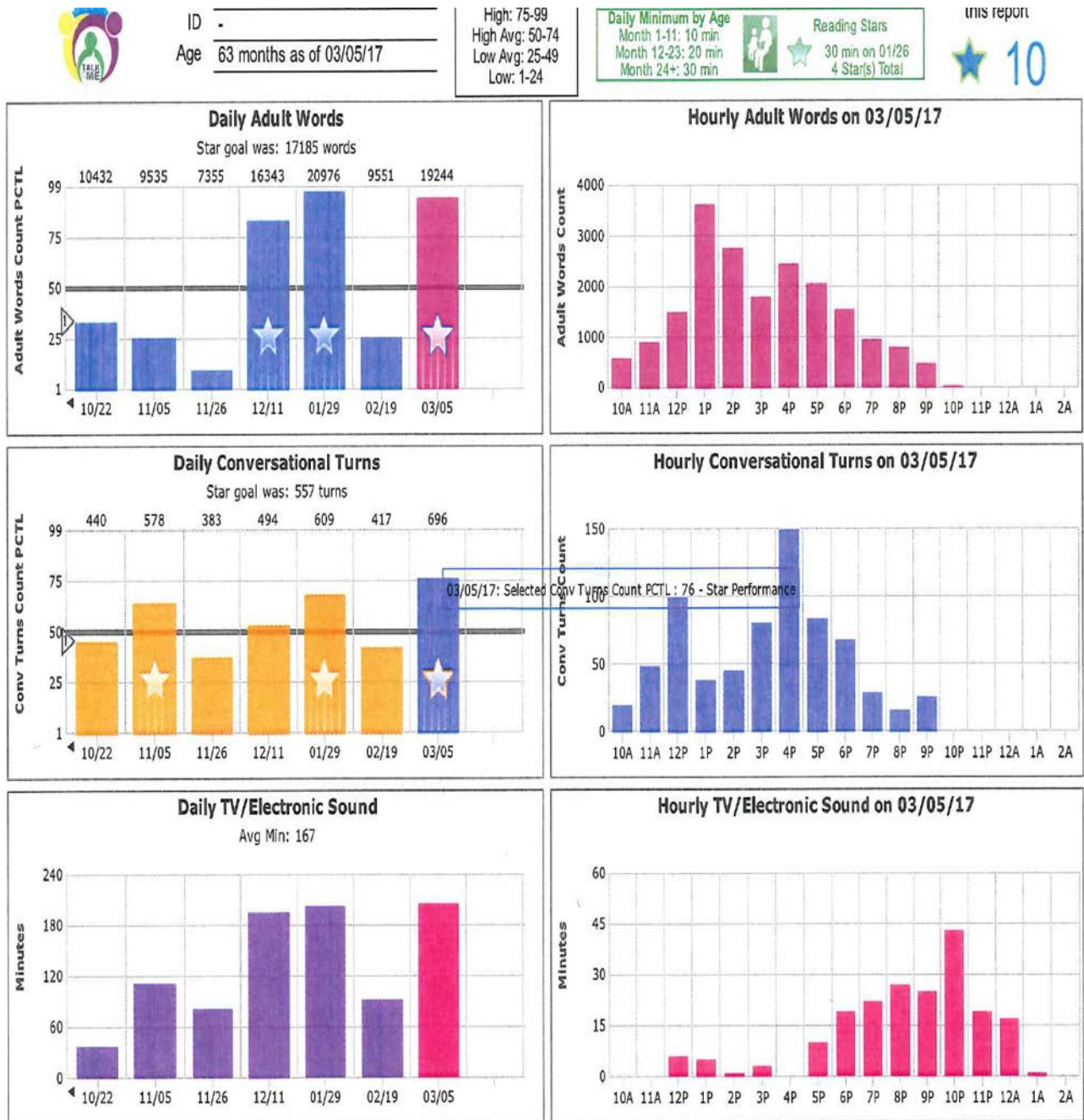
To assess this intervention, participating children wore a **Language Environment Analysis (LENA) device** for an entire day (on Saturdays) to determine the overall number of words and interactions (or conversational turns between parents and children) occurring throughout the day. The Family Literacy Coach would collect this weekly data and use it to inform feedback sessions with the family at a follow-up session. An example LENA report is included below (Figure 4). These reports showed an overall picture of the daily adult words, the amount of times a child and another person in the home had a conversational turn, and the amount of minutes the child was near a TV or other electronic sound. The report also breaks down these areas by the hour to show patterns that can be addressed in weekly visits from the Family Literacy Coaches. The reports also show total results for each day that the child wore the LENA device. The implementation schedule for weekly sessions and data collection using the LENA device was anticipated to occur across a fall to spring duration, however, the project team did experience difficulty in participant retention. They were able to recruit enough participants to meet their stated goal, but had to conduct additional recruitment sessions and extend the LENA intervention for new participants to accommodate for loss of original participants.

The Cherokee School District provided pre/post data from the LENA devices to determine if the intervention was worthwhile and if it should be scaled up to a larger number of participants. This data were gathered through an analysis of LENA reports across participants (n=30 who completed the entire intervention) and from parent-reported data about their perception of the Talk to Me intervention. All parents strongly agreed that home visits were scheduled at convenient times and that their home visitor (family literacy coach) enjoyed working with them and their child. All parent participants also stated that they would recommend this program to their friends. In terms of literacy practices in home environments, over half of participants reported **reading for 30 minutes or more daily** with their children by the end of the program.

When comparing LENA data (using an average from the first two weeks of the Talk to Me intervention for the “pre” score and the average of the last two weeks of the intervention for the “post” score), 67% of parent participants showed **growth in adult word counts and conversational turns** in a 24 hour

period. In addition, of the 67% of participants showing growth, the growth was significant (as reported by the Cherokee School District) in both adult word gain (with an increase in post LENA reports of 23.2% or 4,033 words in a 24 hour period) and in conversational turns (with an average of 156 more conversational turns in post LENA reports in a 24 hour period). These promising results show the potential impact of the Talk to Me program for support family literacy practices.

Figure 4: Example LENA Weekly Report



Interviewing project personnel, including the Family Literacy Coaches, reviewing artifacts on participant retention, LENA scores, and survey results yielded the following list of successes and challenges for this project.

**Table 13: Successes/Challenges and Strategies for Improvement by Grant Strategy**

<b>Grant Strategy</b>	<b>Successes/Challenges</b>	<b>Strategies for Improvement</b>
<b>Recruitment and Retention</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successfully recruited over 40 families to engage in program</li> <li>• Retention issues occurred throughout the year due to a variety of issues (moved/evicted, change in caregiver, DSS intervention, change in parent schedule), total of 30 participants completed the intervention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of recruitment surveys to increase participant contextual information to increase retention</li> <li>• Including Family Literacy Coaches as 4K screenings to increase recruitment</li> <li>• Open recruitment to additional school locations</li> <li>• Formed additional partnerships to increase recruitment</li> </ul>
<b>Implementation of Home Visits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successfully developed full model of home visitation lessons</li> <li>• Successfully implemented and evaluated most lessons with families</li> <li>• Issues with retention (because of issues listed above and because of the year-long approach to the intervention) led to many families not experiencing all lessons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year 1 was considered a pilot year; the project team will continue to evaluate all lessons in Year 2</li> <li>• Lesson schedule will run in 13 week segments (rather than fall to spring) to support retention issues and ensure a higher number of participants</li> <li>• Year 2 will include an option for a group lesson approach at a school site instead of a home visitation approach</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment with LENA devices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After slight technical issues with LENA devices, the project team established protocols for LENA data collection that were successfully implemented throughout the project</li> <li>• Use of LENA devices on a Saturday was a struggle for some families</li> <li>• LENA devices showed overall growth for some families but growth was not consistent across families.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LENA protocols will be continued in Year 2</li> <li>• Will evaluate the use of a 13-week schedule instead of a year-long approach to determine if family concerns related to Saturday implementation can be alleviated</li> <li>• Recruitment and retention strategies along with revised schedule will be evaluated to determine if consistent growth occurs in Year 2.</li> </ul>
<b>Participant Motivation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of parent incentives during weekly visits (e.g., free books,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year 2 budget plans include enough support for parent incentives to continue</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>stickers) increased parent motivation</li> <li>Parents expressed desire to meet with other families during the project for support</li> <li>Some families required other sites for home visits because of instability issues within the home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Year 2 will introduce a second option of a group lesson approach instead of a home visit if desired by participants.</li> </ul>
<b>4K Classroom Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Successfully purchased and implemented 4K classroom libraries</li> <li>Conducted ongoing professional development on language development and the CLASS instrument</li> <li>Struggled to implement CLASS in all 4K classrooms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will continue to evaluate 4K teacher use of classroom library and correlation with student language development</li> <li>Will train additional observers for CLASS to enable increased observation (peer to peer approach recommended)</li> </ul>
<b>Community Initiatives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Successfully implemented family literacy nights at all 4K locations within the district and at various venues in Cherokee County (e.g., Chick-fil-a night)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attendance at these events is being analyzed to determine if they are cost effective enough to continue</li> <li>Examining strategies to increase attendance at these events if continued.</li> </ul>
<b>Program Marketing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Successfully created Talk to Me website and social media pages to promote the project</li> <li>Successfully created and distributed flyers at multiple events and locations</li> <li>Increased community partners and opportunities for disseminating data about the program through community and state-wide presentations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will continue to maintain internet presence and distribute flyers as needed</li> <li>Will continue presentations and local and state-wide events</li> </ul>

It is clear from interviews with a variety of grant stakeholders that the limitations presented above are being addressed in the upcoming year. The Talk to Me project will be extended with an additional \$10,000 in state funding and will increase community partnerships to scale up and sustain the project. Future iterations of the project should identify and implement strategies for connecting the Talk to Me model (using the LENA device) to student outcomes to determine the overall effectiveness of this intervention. Specifically, districts looking to adopt this intervention could benefit from an overall cost analysis to determine if the cost to implement the Talk to Me model is worthwhile in terms of supporting students' learning at the 4k level and as they transition to kindergarten.

**Spartanburg 7 School District:**

**“The Spartanburg Quality Counts Pre-K Coalition Project”**

Teacher Testimonials:

*“We want to continue the professional development we did this year. [Before] we would go and take those DSS [professional development] hours that don’t pertain to us. They pertain to day cares and in a school function, it looks very different. The professional development was germane to what we were trying to accomplish.”*

*“By working with us side by side in the beginning of the year, they freed you up to focus more on things that you would normally slight. So when I started, I was able to work with the kids and see where they were.”*

*“We were expected to step out of our comfort zone in certain areas. Things that we don’t normally specialize in, they pointed out to us in conversation. That could have been a tricky conversation but it wasn’t.”*

The main goal of this project was to create and sustain high-quality learning environments in all publically funded 4K programs in Spartanburg 7 school district. To move towards this vision, the school district partnered with Spartanburg Quality Counts and Spartanburg Academic Movement. Through this partnership, 4K classrooms at Cleveland Academy of Leadership and ZL Madden Head Start in Spartanburg 7 implemented the Spartanburg Quality Counts Quality Improvement and Rating System, an ongoing assessment and professional development model that focuses on improving early childhood learning environments. **Quality Counts Technical Assistant Specialists (TAs)** provided ongoing environmental assessments such as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-3) and CLASS, reflections sessions based on these assessments, and ongoing professional development and personal support for sustaining high-quality practices in 4K environments. This program differs from other funded projects because the focus is on assessment (using a battery of assessments in an ongoing manner throughout the year to make determinations regarding professional development). While other projects also implemented these types of assessments, they were used to evaluate an intervention or initiative. In this case, **the assessments were the intervention**. The biggest perceived challenge from

partners at Spartanburg Quality Counts was entering into a partnership with the school district as it was the first time these entities worked together on a single initiative. Traditionally, Spartanburg Quality Counts implemented this model in private child care settings. “School district and individual 4K teacher needs are different than what they might need in a private child care setting.” To alleviate this concern, the TAs and 4K teachers worked together in the beginning of the year to set up the 4K classrooms in a research-based manner. Through this collaboration and hands-on approach from the TAs, a strong partnership was established and maintained throughout the year. *“They were such great support, they could get something that you need, they were very supportive in trying to find it. They were very good for us.”* What follows are the successes and challenges for this project identified through interviews with multiple stakeholders (4K teachers, instructional coaches, school administrators, and project personnel from Spartanburg Academic Movement and Spartanburg Quality Counts) and through an analysis of the professional development schedule and agendas throughout the year. In particular, one challenge must be noted. The original scope of the project included adding school days for the 4K classrooms into the 2016-2017 school year. Unfortunately, due to low enrollment, this strategy did not work out as anticipated and took a large portion of the budget to sustain. Perceived reasons for the low enrollment (by project directors and school district administration) were a lack of awareness from parents on the processes for enrolling early and the notion that parents weren’t thinking about school options for their four-year-old child because it wasn’t time for kindergarten. The project directors and school administration discussed increased awareness campaigns for families to address low enrollment, however a cost analysis determined that the strategy ultimately should not be used in the upcoming 2017-2018 school year.

**Table 14: Successes/Challenges and Strategies for Improvement by Grant Strategy**

Grant Strategy	Successes/Challenges	Strategies for Improvement
<b>Participant Motivation and Classroom Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successfully established positive relationships between TAs and 4K teachers</li> <li>• TAs worked alongside 4K teachers to establish beginning of the year learning environments</li> <li>• 4K teachers expressed a high level of satisfaction with grant partners in that they were supportive and provided guidance throughout the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration model will be extended in Year 2 to include participants from Spartanburg School District 3</li> <li>• Project personnel have not yet established plans for ongoing technical assistance for current grant participants, sustainability should be reevaluated and the end of Year 2</li> <li>• Budget challenges have been accounted for in Year 2</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Budget challenges occurred when assessments revealed a lack of adequate furnishings and materials for 4K settings</li> </ul>	
<b>Assessment Implementation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Successfully conducted ECERS-3 and CLASS assessments (at least two times) for all grant participants.</li> <li>Successfully implemented training on assessments and research behind their development</li> <li>Time management regarding assessment implementation seemed to be a small concern, more so for implementation on a larger scale in the future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment implementation will continue in Year 2 for Spartanburg 3 with 4K teachers in Spartanburg 7 acting as mentors</li> <li>No specific plan stated for continuing assessments in Spartanburg 7</li> </ul>
<b>Individualized Professional Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project personnel successfully used assessment results to conduct individualized professional development sessions with grant participants</li> <li>Project personnel successfully used assessment results to conduct needs-based professional development sessions with grant participants that were also available to other early childhood educators (e.g. sessions on STEM, Early Childhood Mathematics, and Early Childhood Literacy)</li> <li>Project personnel also expanded professional development offerings to include administrative positions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuation of ongoing individualized professional development based on assessment results</li> <li>Continuation of needs-based professional development offerings to early childhood educators across Spartanburg County.</li> </ul>
<b>School-Based Initiatives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grant included adding additional days to the school year for 4K but struggled with low enrollment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Based on the results from Year 1, adding days to the school calendar is no longer part of the grant goals for Year 2</li> </ul>

In addition to the use of teacher level data to support project activities, the school district also implemented a pre (Fall) and post (Spring) assessment of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) tool to examine student level outcome data. This analysis went beyond the scope of the grant as no grantees were required to examine student outcome data in relation to project goals. Findings from composite scores (sum of the separate PALS domain scores) show significant growth from the Fall of 2016 to the Spring of 2017 (when Quality Counts provided support). These changes are particularly important because the rate of change from pre to post was greatly increased with Quality Counts

provided support as compared to the previous year when support was not provided. These results should be viewed as correlational rather than causal. However, the use of PALS as an indicator of student growth could be a strategy for other districts that are examining outcome data from their project in relation to students.

**Table 15: Spartanburg School District 7 PALS Average Composite Score**

	Cleveland Elementary	Other Schools
Fall 2015	23.37	36.54
Spring 2016	62.53	93.55
<b>Growth</b>	<b>39.16</b>	<b>57.01</b>
Fall 2016	28.78	45.95
Spring 2017	93.67	93.33
<b>Growth</b>	<b>64.89</b>	<b>47.83</b>

The use of assessment as an intervention supports best practices for early childhood education. Formative approaches to assessment guide instruction in the classroom. It is logical to extend this connection to professional development initiatives. Expanding the program to include an additional district in Year 2 will allow grant partners to explore how this model might be implemented on a larger scale. However, it is recommended that project personnel develop plans for assessing Year 1 teachers to determine sustainability of the model over time as TA support is reduced.

**Florence 1 and Florence 2 School Districts**

**Teacher testimonials:**

*“I’m a first year teacher so it has really helped me. I haven’t really had experiences in college on social emotional [development]. In college, we focused on academics. So it’s really helped me understand their needs as four-year-olds.”*

*“The way this program works, children gain so much more independence in their own learning. They take control in their own learning because they have choices.”*

*“We are graduating in May and three of us are going on in June to begin Masters in Montessori. We believe in it enough that we want to pursue that.”*

This project focused on increasing and enhancing teacher and child interactions and on increasing the quality of literacy and numeracy instruction in 4K classrooms across each district. This project was one of the only funded grants that had an intended focus on mathematics in addition to **social/emotional development** and literacy practices. To achieve project goals, districts implemented the Building Blocks curriculum (Florence 1), a research-based program focusing on building conceptual understanding in early childhood mathematics or the Montessori curriculum (Florence 2) to ensure high-quality instruction that is grounded in student-centered practices. In addition, districts implemented the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT) to promote social and emotional wellbeing in addition to cognitive growth by training teachers to engage in effective teacher/child interactions. Project funds supported a two-day training for school leadership teams on the TPOT.

Further, the project provided funding for participants to engage in a three-day Pyramid training, which is a research-based Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) program designed by the Center for Social Emotion Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL) at Vanderbilt University. The research surrounding this program was completed primarily within federally-funded preschool programs and identified strategies that work with preschool aged children. In addition to the three days of formal training, project participants received follow up support through seven monthly sessions that were two hours in duration on the Pyramid approach. Leadership training was also provided for two-hours monthly where facilitators met with school leaders and curriculum coordinators. The project also funded ongoing training on working with children in poverty provided by the SC Center of Excellence to Prepare Teachers of Children of Poverty at Francis Marion University. This ongoing model began with a two-day initial training and monthly follow up sessions where participants planned teacher action research and implemented a single strategy to address challenges of poverty and effects on students’ academic performance. Beyond these curriculum and assessment based interventions, the project also implemented the Parents as Teachers model for home visitation for a portion of 4K students who score in the lower percentile on readiness assessments.

This ambitious plan became somewhat difficult to manage (according to interview data) and the overall priority of the project became centered on the social and emotional wellbeing of children as developed

through the Pyramid curriculum (strategies for enhancing teacher/child interactions) and the TPOT. Florence 2 did implement the Montessori approach as intended. However, Florence 1 implemented the intended curricula for mathematics and literacy but did not have as much focus in professional development as social and emotional development. This change should not be viewed as a limitation, but rather as recognition that *a smaller focus can have a larger impact on young children.*

**Table 16: Successes/Challenges and Strategies for Improvement by Grant Strategy**

Grant Strategy	Successes/Challenges	Strategies for Improvement
<b>Curriculum Implementation (Montessori, Pyramid, and Building Blocks)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All stated curricula were successfully implemented, however less focus was placed on Building Blocks and more focus placed on Pyramid in both districts</li> <li>• Implementation of Montessori approach in Florence 2 classrooms was successful from teacher points of view. Teachers highlighted parent acceptance and student growth as perceived effects of the program.</li> <li>• Teacher voiced struggles related to disconnection between observation tool (TPOT) and curriculum approach (Montessori)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will continue to place a heavy emphasis on the Pyramid curriculum and TPOT assessment in Year 2</li> <li>• Will also place a focus on play in early childhood settings as a secondary goal for Year 2</li> <li>• Montessori program will continue as designed in Florence 2</li> </ul>
<b>Individualized Professional Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successful implementation of monthly meetings between Florence 1 and Florence 2 teachers to form a community of practice for enhancing social/emotional development</li> <li>• Successful completion of Montessori training for Florence 2 teachers</li> <li>• Successful recruitment of experts from the field to conduct professional development sessions</li> <li>• Successful use of budget funds to provide compensation for teacher participation.</li> <li>• Struggle to go beyond TPOT/Pyramid in professional development to focus on cognitive domain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will continue ongoing professional development model with plans to expand community of practice beyond Florence 1 and 2</li> <li>• Project personnel plan to rely on in house approaches to professional development with less support from external experts</li> <li>• Year 2 budget is adequate to cover ongoing costs of professional development</li> </ul>

<b>Partnerships between Districts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successful implementation of professional development model between two school districts</li> <li>• Successful collaboration with external partners such as the Center of Excellence to Prepare Teacher of Children of Poverty (Francis Marion University)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plans to expand collaboration beyond Florence 1 and 2 in Year 2</li> <li>• Plans to continue collaboration with external partners with project personnel maintaining the majority of professional development responsibilities</li> </ul>
<b>Student Growth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project personnel and 4K teachers identify increase positive dispositions for students (including a reduction in overall discipline-based referrals)</li> <li>• Teachers describe a shift in student learning resulting from Montessori approach and on “soft” lessons focusing on topics such as patience or collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project personnel will continue to evaluate student growth in terms of social/emotional development through benchmarks such as number of discipline-based referrals</li> <li>• Project personnel are still exploring connections between student cognitive growth and positive shifts in social/emotional development</li> </ul>

In addition to the data gathered through the evaluation team case study, the Florence 1 School District gathered assessment data to inform ongoing project development and work towards goals. These data include an analysis of TPOT scores and an analysis of interview and survey data regarding the ongoing professional development occurring throughout the grant period. What follows are the findings gathered from the Florence 1 School District.

**Table 17: Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool Data Florence 1 School District**

TPOT Pre and Post Scores (n=19)		
	Pre	Post
<b>Key Practices (in classrooms)</b>	78%	86%
<b>Red Flags</b>	11%	6%

TPOT analysis revealed an **increase** in implementation of Key Practices throughout the 2016–17 school year after attending Pyramid Training and one year of guided implementation. TPOT analysis revealed a **decrease** in “Red Flags” (factors indicating practice which negatively affect children social emotional development) throughout the 2016–2017 school year after attending Pyramid Training and one year of guided implementation. Further, a significant decrease in teacher-reported instances of children



needing additional assistance occurred from pre to post year one grant implementation as described in the table below.

**Table 18: Florence 1 Teacher Report of Child Assistance Needs**

<b>Teachers Needing Assistance with Children Who They Perceived Lacked Social Emotional Skills</b>	
Number of children needing additional assistance during the year before the training	37
Number of children needing additional assistance during the first year of the grant	8*
Difference from pre to post	29

*\* Teachers reported that the need for assistance was only temporary. The majority of the reports for additional help were primarily at the first of the year when children were adjusting to school relationships. All but 1 had been resolved by midyear.*

In addition to assessing teacher outcome data through the TPOT, the district also surveyed and interviewed teacher participants following the implementation of the Pyramid training. Findings show positive reactions to the curriculum model and significant changes in teacher behavior. During interviews, the teachers revealed that they understood the use of Pyramid tools such as visual schedules, behavior charts, social stories and calm down bottles to help children feel safe in the school environment. They also discussed their understanding of their relationships with children and now believe that their relationship affects the children’s learning. Teachers revealed that they must intentionally build relationships with the children and maintain them so that the children learn to trust them. The teachers believe that trust is key to learning. When children trust them, learning takes place more easily. Teachers also said that they learned to look for the causes of behavior rather than assuming that the child was trying to be defiant. They also said that their communication with children improved.

The teachers revealed the following significant changes in their teaching style resulting from Pyramid Training and implementation:

1. Their reactions and actions when children misbehave
2. Use of visuals to communicate with children
3. Their ability to build relationships with children
4. Explicitly teaching social skills
5. Increased use of positive reinforcement
6. Increased patience

When interviewed about their reaction to the training from the Center of Excellence for Teachers of Children in Poverty, the teachers revealed that they understood the factors that impede school success caused by poverty including: stress, breakdown in relationships, meeting basic needs, parents role, environmental impact, family support, and brain function. The teachers reported that they had a change in attitudes toward the children. The report that they are more patient, aware of children's needs, more understanding of parents and families and help to reduce stress. In their classrooms, teachers discussed two main changes in their behavior. First, they work very hard at building relationships with children. Second, they seek to help families understand and help their children. Teachers are very concerned about meeting children's basic needs, and reducing factors of stress in the classroom.

The data presented in the interviews combined with the pre/post TPOT changes reveal that when teachers receive Pyramid Training, the trend is an increase in teaching more social-emotional skills to children and a decrease of incidences that negatively affect children's social-emotional development. TPOT is a useful tool for helping teachers implement Pyramid curriculum as well as indicating if the training is effective for changing teacher behaviors.

**Table 19: Teacher Professional Development Reflections Florence School District 1**

Interview Responses on Pyramid Training	
<p><b>1. Did Pyramid Curriculum help you to reduce the number of behavior incidents in your classroom? (N=15, 14 responded yes, one responded no)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I became more mindful of children’s environments and home-life and the impact on student behavior and achievement at school. I understood problems before they arose.</li> <li>• I learned strategies for teaching social, emotion learning.</li> <li>• I think about the root causes of children’s behavior and their feelings.</li> <li>• I learned to use visual cue cards and schedules.</li> <li>• I felt I already knew this.</li> <li>• I learned to use the visual schedule.</li> <li>• I think about the root causes of behavior.</li> <li>• I think about the root causes of behavior. I learned to get closer to the children’s families and taught them how to care for and relate to their children.</li> <li>• I learned to focus on social skills.</li> <li>• I learned to solve problems calmly.</li> <li>• I learned to use behavior charts and calm down bottles.</li> <li>• I learned to use strategies other than time out. I learned to give positive reinforcement.</li> <li>• I learned to talk to children and communicate with them to help them manage their social skills.</li> <li>• I learned to build relationships with children as a solution to solving social emotional problems. I understand children.</li> <li>• I have more ideas to redirect children when they misbehave. I know that relationships are the basis of good social emotion growth. I learned to give more feedback that is positive.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. What is the biggest change in your teaching practice after Pyramid Training and implementation?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My reactions to children’s behavior changed. My actions toward children changed.</li> <li>• I focused on those children having difficulties socially and emotionally. For example, I realize that crying is the result of separation from parents. I work with those with problems to help them become more independent and successful at school.</li> <li>• I teach children about feelings more.</li> <li>• I have stopped demanding the behaviors I expect but meet children where they are with the expected behavior. I give more choices. Children learn differently.</li> <li>• I now use the visual schedule to help children with language deficits to understand the daily routine and feel safe in the environment.</li> <li>• My responses to children have changed. I allow more space if needed. I have more conversations with children so I can understand the causes of their behavior.</li> <li>• I now know how to set the tone of the class.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I now use a visual schedule. I teach social skills such as kindness.</li> <li>• I teach with a quieter voice and am less abrupt in my responses to children.</li> <li>• I teach social skills. I look at children individually trying to understand them. I use a visual schedule and social stories.</li> <li>• I manage my class with more positive statements. I teach social skills explicitly.</li> <li>• I understand children’s troublesome behaviors.</li> <li>• I learned to simplify my directions so that children could understand. I learned to reinforce positive behavior in specific ways that encouraged healthy social emotional development</li> <li>• I developed more compassion as a teacher.</li> </ul>
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**Interview Responses on Poverty Training**

<b>1. How did the Poverty training benefit you?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I understand the research and reality of stress on children and the effect on their ability to learn. I can take a different viewpoint.</li> <li>• I became more aware of the situations in which children of poverty live.</li> <li>• I understand that children’s defiant behavior comes from the child’s desire to exert some control of his environment.</li> <li>• I learned that I must help parents understand how they can support their children.</li> <li>• I understand that I must meet a child’s basic needs before I can expect them to learn academics. I now focus on the child first and the learning second.</li> <li>• I now look at my students more closely. I watch how they eat, communicate, and how they understand what I say. I notice how they interact with their parents and try to understand their attachment relationships.</li> <li>• I think more about how the child’s home environment may be effecting his behavior.</li> <li>• I do not take parenting information for granted. I know that children’s basic needs come before learning can take place optimally.</li> <li>• I notice stressors in a child’s life and I can tell parents how to help reduce these factors.</li> <li>• My eyes opened about the effects of the environment and my mindfulness.</li> <li>• I understand that stress effects children and I must pay attention to this.</li> <li>• I am no longer aggravated with parents. I have learned methods for helping them.</li> <li>• I understand that children in poverty need to have their basic needs met in order to be successful in school.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know that I must build relationships with children and help reduce stress in their lives to optimize learning.</li> <li>• I understand that poverty affects brain function negatively. I know that children need strong relationships at home and school.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. What is the biggest change in your classroom because of Poverty training?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I conduct action research so that my perspective is changed.</li> <li>• I connect with parents much more and make sure that I encourage them and offer assistance and guidance.</li> <li>• I am more compassionate.</li> <li>• I am more patient with children. I take time to build relationships with children in order to build trust. Trust is the key to academic success.</li> <li>• I no longer put academics first. I put the child first. The children learn better, when I do this.</li> <li>• I try to build relationships. I try not to be distant from the children. The children and I smile a lot more.</li> <li>• I spend time building relationships with children. I am more patient and understand what factors contribute to the child’s academic success.</li> <li>• I understand how children’s background may affect their learning.</li> <li>• I recognize triggers that cause children to behave in certain ways. I look for the underlying causes of learning and behavior. I help close the home/school gap in regards to academic success.</li> <li>• I am more aware of children’s situation. Sometimes, I must adjust my expectations.</li> <li>• I focus on relationships and getting to know my children.</li> <li>• I am more purposeful in building relationships with my children.</li> <li>• I meet children’s needs. I understand their families and communicating with them.</li> <li>• I understand why children do what they do.</li> <li>• I make sure I have a good relationship with children, even the people pleasers.</li> </ul>

The use of ongoing professional development between two school districts (Florence 1 and Florence 2) is an ambitious and innovative goal. Engaging in peer reflection on a monthly basis to work through sensitive issues that can sometimes occur in classroom settings is no easy feat. Districts looking to build sustainable communities of practice can use this project as a model.

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EOC Community Block Grants: End of Year Survey

Thank you for providing information about your district's Community Block Grant in November 2016. Now, we are seeking data related to the full implementation of the Community Block Grants. Please provide this information for the full project period. This information may be shared with legislators and stakeholders (no identifying district information) to evaluate the impact of these grants. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Bunnie Lempesis Ward at 803-734-2803 or Leigh Kale D'Amico at 803-777-8072.

1. Indicate the number of professional development activities you have completed through this initiative since its inception. Professional development activities include training, coaching/technical assistance, teacher teams/professional learning communities.

Number of Completed Professional Development Activities

2. Describe professional development activities that have been completed.

3. Are there any professional development activities that have been planned, but have not been completed yet?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

4. Indicate the number of planned, but not yet completed professional development activities.

Number of Planned  
Professional Development  
Activities

5. Describe any professional development activities that have been planned, but not yet completed.



**6. Indicate the number of people who participated or plan to participate in professional development provided through this initiative (this academic year only). Professional development includes training, coaching/technical assistance, teacher teams/professional learning communities.**

Attended Professional Development

Will Attend Future Professional Development

**7. About how many classrooms, students, and schools have been affected by curriculum changes or innovations through this initiative?**

Number of Classrooms Affected

Number of Students Affected

Number of Schools Affected

**8. Will any additional classrooms, students, and schools be affected by this initiative this academic year?**

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

**9. Approximately how many additional classrooms will be implementing curriculum changes or innovations this academic year and how many additional students and schools will be affected?**

Additional Classrooms that Will be Affected

Additional Students who Will be Affected

Additional Schools that Will be Affected

**10. Indicate the number of classrooms that have been assessed using a classroom/child observational measure and how many children are in these classrooms?**

Number of Classrooms Assessed

Number of Children in Classrooms Assessed

Number of Schools with Classrooms Participating in Assessments

**11. Will any additional classrooms be assessed this academic year?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

**12. Indicate the number of classrooms that will be assessed with a classroom/child observational measure, but have not been assessed yet and how many children are in these classrooms?**

Number of Classrooms Planning to be Assessed

Number of Children in Classrooms Planning to be Assessed

Number of Schools with Classrooms Planning to Participate in Assessments

13. Describe partnerships with other organizations, schools, or districts that have occurred as a result of this initiative.

14. Please provide any suggestions related to the planning and implementation of the Community Block Grants?

15. Name of District