# UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

## CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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


**Executive Summary**

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. 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 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 assessments 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 provides a brief description of the focus area(s) and amount awarded by district.

**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 |

**Implementation**

- All grantees focused on literacy/language development and some focused on additional domains of development such as numeracy and social-emotional development.
- Implementation strategies, while focused on student development and outcomes, included teacher-centered approaches, student-centered approaches, and family-centered approaches.
- 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.
- 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.

**Impacts**

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

**Outcomes: Teacher-Child Interaction Assessment**

- Grantees adopted and received training related to a standardized teacher-child interaction assessment aligned to the goals of project. Overall, the introduction of the teacher-child interaction assessments was well-received as a support tool for teachers and students.
- 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 projects except one based on independent review. The independent review included one classroom assessed in fall 2016 and spring 2017.

**Outcomes: Promising Practices**

- Two grantees, involved in the case studies, provided promising student outcomes based on improved student assessment scores 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**

**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.
- Explore additional funding streams to encourage the use of teacher-child interaction assessments across publicly-funded prekindergarten classrooms in South Carolina.
- Share information about successfully implemented teacher-child interaction assessments with other districts to improve the quality of 4K classrooms.

**Outcomes: Promising Practices**

- Student-level outcomes often take longer to measure due to 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, connections to future student outcomes are important to determine the overall success of home-based interventions.

**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. 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 2: Overview of 2015-16 Community Block Grant Recipients' Key Approaches**

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

## Impacts: Numbers Served

The 2015–16 Community Block Grant recipients reached 160 classrooms within 33 schools and served approximately 3,050 students.

**Table 3: 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 |
| **Total** | **3,047** | **160** | **33** |

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 included 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 4: 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 |
| **Total** | **298** | **371** |

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

| District | Classrooms 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 |
| **Total** | **93** | **1,855** |

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 the interaction assessments.  One district used two interaction assessments.

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.**

## Outcomes: Promising Practices

**Spartanburg 7**

The main goal of this project was to create and sustain high-quality learning environments in all publicly 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

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), reflection sessions based on these assessments, and ongoing professional development and personal support for sustaining high-quality practices in 4K environments.

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. **As seen in Table 6, composite scores (sum of the separate PALS domain scores) show significant growth from fall 2016 to spring 2017 (when Quality Counts provided support).** These changes are particularly important because the rate of change from pre to post was greatly increased when 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 6: Spartanburg School District 7 PALS Average Composite Scores**

|  | Cleveland Elementary | Other Schools |
|---|---|---|
| **Fall 2015** | 23.37 | 36.54 |
| **Spring 2016** | 62.53 | 93.55 |
| **Growth** | **39.16** | **57.01** |
| **Fall 2016** | 28.78 | 45.95 |
| **Spring 2017** | 93.67 | 93.33 |
| **Growth** | **64.89** | **47.83** |

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 technical assistance is reduced.

**Cherokee**

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 turns) occurring throughout the day. **When comparing LENA pre- and post-data, 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).**

**Florence 1 and 2**

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.

**Table 7: Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool Data Florence 1 School District**

| TPOT Pre/Post (n=19) | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Pre** | **Post** |
| **Key Practices (in classrooms)** | 78% | 86% |
| **Red Flags** | 11% | 6% |

Table 7 shows 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. Table 8 documents a significant decrease in teacher-reported instances of children needing additional assistance occurred from pre to post grant implementation.

**Table 8: Florence 1 Teacher Report of Child Assistance Needs**

| Teachers Needing Assistance with Children Who They Perceived Lacked Social Emotional Skills | |
|---|---|
| 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 temporary. The majority of the reports for additional help were primarily in beginning of year when children were adjusting to school relationships. All but one 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. The teachers revealed the following significant changes in their teaching style resulting from Pyramid Training and implementation:

- Their reactions and actions when children misbehave;
- Use of visuals to communicate with children;
- Their ability to build relationships with children;
- Explicitly teaching social skills;
- Increased use of positive reinforcement; and
- Increased patience.