

Do We Know if Wisconsin's Four-Year-Old Kindergarten Positively Impacts Children's Development?

As enrollment in Wisconsin's four-year-old kindergarten (4K) initiative grows, interest in measuring 4K's impact on child development has also increased. Presently, Wisconsin does not have the data to correlate student performance on statewide tests with past 4K participation. We can, however, explore the impact of 4K participation in this state by reviewing data from one national study that included Wisconsin (Note: the state's data collection system has been redesigned to offer a better look at the impact of 4K as soon as recent 4K participants are old enough to take statewide academic tests). Key findings of the national study are summarized below:

The National Center for Early Development and Learning study of State-Wide Early Education Programs (SWEEP) conducted a study that examined variations among prekindergarten programs in five states (Massachusetts, New Jersey, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). The study also related program variations to child outcomes at the end of prekindergarten and in kindergarten. In Wisconsin, one classroom in each of 100 4K sites was randomly selected to participate in the study during the fall of 2003. Within each classroom, four children (two boys and two girls) were randomly selected, pending parental consent, resulting in a sample of 400 Wisconsin 4K students. Data collection, including direct assessment of children's early academic skills, took place in fall 2003 and spring 2004. Key findings related to children's progress are summarized below:

- In the spring of the 4K year, Wisconsin 4K students were above the national average on three of the four academic skills assessments having standardized national averages of 100, and scored particularly high on a letter-word identification subtest.
- Wisconsin students showed growth on all ten academic skills assessments between the pre-test and the post-test administrations. Gains were particularly noteworthy in students' ability to write their names and identify letters.
- Academic assessment information categorized by students' economic status showed that the performance of both poor and non-poor students improved between the fall 2003 pre-test and

the spring 2004 post-test on all measures, but at both points, the scores of poor children were below their non-poor peers.

- Wisconsin 4K students improved on all nine dimensions in language and literacy. Pre-test ratings on the 1-5 scale ranged from a low of 1.53 to a high of 2.90, and post-test ratings ranged from a low of 2.22 to a high of 3.75.
- All four dimensions of children's social skills (assertiveness, frustration tolerance, task orientation, peer social skills) improved, while two of the three dimensions of children's behavior problems (conduct problems, internalizing problems, learning problems) showed slight decreases.
- Neither poor nor non-poor students showed any change in behavior problems, while non-poor students improved more than poor students in their social skills

Citation

Early, D., Barbarin, O., Bryant, D., Burchinal, M., Chang, F., Clifford, R., ... & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2005). Pre-kindergarten in eleven states: NCEdL's multi-state study of pre-kindergarten and study of state-wide early education programs (SWEEP). *Preliminary Descriptive Report. NCEdL Working Paper. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.*