

Minnesota Principals Academy- Action Learning Project

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Prioritizing Essential Language, Literacy and Communication Standards to Strengthen Early Childhood Instruction

Abstract

This action learning project sought to increase the percentage of preschool students who enter kindergarten on track to meet proficiency targets in early reading foundational skills. Utilizing a professional learning community framework, early childhood educators engaged in a systematic analysis of the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs), applying the R.E.A.L. criteria, developed by Larry Ainsworth, to identify essential standards for instruction in four- and five-year-old preschool classrooms. The identified standards were subsequently aligned within a curriculum map, accompanied by the development of a common curriculum based measure designed to monitor student growth on essential literacy standards.

Vision

All four/five year old preschool students who meet or exceed *Widely Held Expectations* on literacy objectives, as measured by *Teaching Strategies GOLD* in the spring of their four- or five-year-old preschool year, will not fall into the "High Risk" or "Moderate Risk" categories on the *Early Reading FastBridge* assessment in the fall of kindergarten.

Background and Context

Located within the Sartell-St. Stephen School District, Oak Ridge Early Learning Center offers a distinctive early childhood educational model, serving approximately 1185 preschool students and 225 kindergarten students. For the 2025-2026 school year, 120 four- and five-year-old preschool students will transition from the early childhood program into the kindergarten program at ORELC. Oak Ridge Early Learning Center's core mission is to provide a safe, respectful and engaging educational environment providing developmentally appropriate instruction focusing on the needs of the whole child. In preschool, we aim to establish learning environments and implement instructional practices that prepare and support every learner for a successful transition into Kindergarten,

To support this mission and monitor student progress, early childhood educators at ORELC utilize two key tools for planning and assessment: Minnesota's Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) and Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold). The ECIPs are aligned with kindergarten academic standards, providing a foundation for understanding how children's development and learning progress over time. Minnesota's ECIPs also emphasize that young children are building the basic skills and knowledge necessary for more advanced learning in English Language Arts during the elementary years.

Teaching Strategies GOLD is a research-based, observation-driven assessment system designed to evaluate the developmental progress of children from birth through kindergarten. It aligns with the Minnesota ECIPS, encompassing multiple developmental domains, including language and literacy (Heroman, Burts, Berke, &

Bickart, 2010). Through ongoing, authentic assessment, this tool supports educators in monitoring individual growth, informing instructional decisions, and promoting developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

A review of data from the 2024-2025 Kindergarten class at ORELC revealed a gap in literacy outcome reporting between early childhood and kindergarten assessment tools. Specifically, while 95% of students were identified as meeting or exceeding "Widely Held Expectations" in literacy objectives and domains at the end of preschool according to *TS Gold*, only 60% of the same cohort screened in the proficient range on the *FastBridge Early Reading* assessment in the fall of their kindergarten year. One can hypothesize that this gap in proficiency reporting is related to the lack of alignment of essential standards, which ensure that curriculum and instruction are focused on necessary student outcomes for reading proficiency targets reported in Kindergarten.

Rationale for Change

The rationale for change at Oak Ridge Early Learning Center (ORELC) emerged from the growing emphasis on the Science of Reading at both state and national levels, as well as the implementation of Minnesota's READ Act, which collectively increased scrutiny on how preschool programming prepares students for future reading success. In response to these shifts, the early childhood team recognized the need for a more intentional and systematic approach to curriculum and assessment to best prepare four/five year old learners to meet proficiency targets in early reading foundational skills in the fall of Kindergarten.

What We Did

Timeline Fall 2023-Spring 2025

Step One: Implementation of Professional Learning Communities

In order for the team to work cohesively together to reflect on teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes, early childhood preschool teachers and early childhood special education teachers met together once weekly, and once a month with the Early Childhood Special Education teachers in professional learning communities (PLC). The professional learning communities structured their meeting time using the framework established by DuFour (2004). This framework guided teams to reflect on four essential questions: (1) What do we want students to learn? (2) How will we know if they have learned it? (3) How will we respond when students do not learn it? and (4) How will we extend the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency? Utilizing this model, the early childhood education team prioritized collaborative time specifically around the first essential question: *What do we want students to learn?*

Step Two: Analysis of Early Literacy Standards Using R.E.A.L. Criteria

In order to fully engage in indepth reflection on Defour's *What do we want students to learn?*, the early childhood team systematically analyzed the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). The goal of these sessions was to identify the essential literacy standards most critical for early reading development. This process was guided by the R.E.A.L. criteria developed by Larry Ainsworth (2013), which provided a structured framework for prioritizing standards. The R.E.A.L. acronym stands for:

- **Readiness:** Skills that are foundational and prepare students for future learning.
- **Endurance:** Skills that have long-term value beyond a single test, unit, or academic year.
- **Assessed:** Skills that are likely to appear on state or district assessments.
- **Leverage:** Skills that are transferable and applicable across multiple content areas.

Teachers read each literary, language and communication standard within the ECIPS, read the corresponding TS GOLD learning progressions that corresponded to the standard, and assigned point values to each. Those standards with the highest point values were then discussed amongst the team, taking into account additional criteria to identify the relative importance of the standard. Once agreement was reached, the team separated the ECIPs into two lists, delineating essential standards from supporting nice-to-know standards. The essential standards became the focus for curriculum alignment, learning targets and unit planning.

Step Three: Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum

The early childhood education team grounded its rationale for identifying essential literacy standards in Marzano's concept of a guaranteed and viable curriculum. According to Marzano (2003), a *guaranteed curriculum* ensures that all students, regardless of teacher or classroom, have access to the same essential content, while a *viable curriculum* refers to the realistic amount of content that can be taught and mastered in the time available. When a curriculum is guaranteed and viable, educators commit to teaching a clearly defined set of prioritized standards deemed essential for academic success. The early childhood PLC worked to label their essential standards in their curriculum map, marking them as 'Need to Know.' Other standards were coded as 'Nice to Know.' This coding system provided opportunity for team reflection in what was currently being taught, and what revision should be made to improve alignment to the essential priority standards (Buffum et al., p. 57).

Step Four: Creation of a Common Curriculum Based Measure

Recognizing that *Teaching Strategies GOLD* (TS GOLD) is an observational assessment rather than a standardized measure, the early childhood team developed a common curriculum based measure aligned to the essential *ECIP objective 15: Phonological Awareness; dimensions a-c*. This tool was intentionally designed to gather student growth data in the areas of rhyming, alliteration, and units of sound. Additionally, the curriculum based measure targeted specific phonological awareness skills assessed by the *FastBridge Early Reading* screener, which is administered to kindergarten students in the fall, winter, and spring. The team aimed to generate more actionable and predictive data to guide instruction and support students' progress toward key benchmarks in early reading proficiency.

What We Found Out:

The Fall to Spring TS Gold data revealed promising results, suggesting that the alignment process undertaken by the early childhood teaching team to identify essential language, literacy, and communication standards effectively strengthened early childhood instruction. The TS GOLD SUM reports revealed the following growth results:

TS Gold Objective	Fall	Spring
Conversation and Communication Skills	69% Proficient	86% Proficient
Listens to/Understands complex Language by Grade	74% Proficient	93% Proficient
Writing Skills by Grade	88% Proficient	93% Proficient
Knowledge of Alphabet	70% Proficient	88% Proficient

The common curriculum based measure provided specific growth data for individual students in *ECIP Objective 15: Phonological Awareness*.

Dimension	Fall	Winter	Spring
Rhyme	39.1% Proficient	64.5% Proficient	84.9% Proficient
Alliteration	50% Proficient	51.9% Proficient	68.2% Proficient
Units of Sound	61.2% Proficient	85% Proficient	97% Proficient

Additionally, TS Gold data revealed that 85% of students *Met or Exceeded Widely Held Expectations on Objective 15; Dimensions a-c*.

Implications of Practices

The summative data suggests that determining essential standards using the R.E.A.L criteria and aligning the standards within a common curriculum map is an effective strategy to improve early childhood instruction. Furthermore, the creation of specific curriculum based measures aligned to essential standards provided a definitive tool to use to measure student growth overtime. The combined efforts of these action steps has improved literacy outcomes for ORELC four/five year old preschool students. However, the vision of this project will not be fully realized until this cohort of preschool students complete their fall *Early Reading Fastbridge* screeners. The goal continues to be ensuring that all ORELC preschool students reach proficiency targets in early reading foundational skills in the fall of Kindergarten, ensuring they are ontrack for future reading success.

References

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