

The Early Years Count Education Initiative
Final report for funding cycle July 2014 – June 2016

As this funding cycle closes and a new one begins, it is good to have the opportunity to pause and reflect on the work of the Community Foundation’s Early Years Count Education Initiative. Stepping back from our immersion in the day-to-day efforts of moving quality—teacher by teacher, program by program, school by school—we are heartened to see the progress that has been made over the past three years. We’ve also taken the time to look at this work through the lens of children who struggle, confirming our belief that the approaches we are bringing to this community through EYC are absolutely on target to make a positive difference in their lives.

Moving quality into primary classrooms

A key aim of this funding cycle was to expand our successful professional development model into South Bend Community School Corporation primary centers. Responsive Classroom (RC), a research-based approach to K-8 teaching that focuses on the strong link between academic success and social-emotional learning, was selected because of its close alignment with the HighScope curriculum used in our infant-toddler and preschool programs as well as its national recognition as a proven approach to impacting children’s school success.

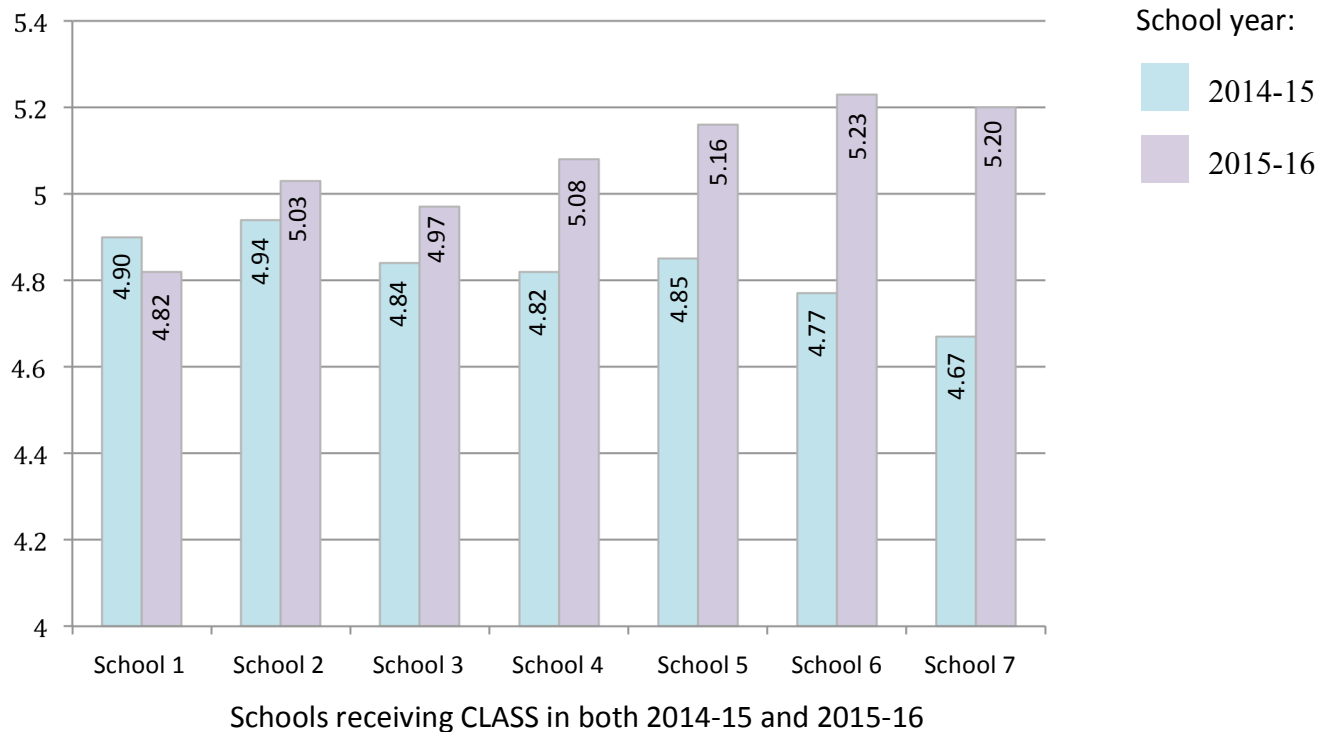
A pilot was launched in five schools during the academic year 2013-2014. Over the next two years the pilot grew to include nine primary centers (Coquillard, Harrison, Hay, Madison, McKinley, Monroe, Muessel, Perley, and Warren). As a result of this expansion, the number of participating teachers jumped from 42 at the start to 139 this past school year.

Responsive Classroom is not a curriculum. Rather than addressing “what” is taught, RC concentrates on the “how” of teaching. It is based on respecting children, building their autonomy, and fostering community within the classroom. This approach impacts not only social/emotional growth, but also academic achievement.

As elsewhere in the United States, some students in South Bend schools do well academically, but too many flounder. Among those over-represented at low achievement levels are African Americans, children who live in poverty, and those who have experienced trauma. Responsive Classroom is capable of making a difference for many of these children.

According to a study on the achievement gap between white and black students, “The leading explanation for the worse trajectory of black students in our sample is that they attend lower-quality schools” (Fryer, 2004). Implementation of RC has been shown to increase teaching quality, as measured by CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System). To track improvement, a small army of Family Connection assessors conduct CLASS (and give teacher feedback) every year in participating schools. We are gratified to see the upward trend in CLASS scores, indicating a gradual improvement in quality in these schools.

Change in overall CLASS scores by school

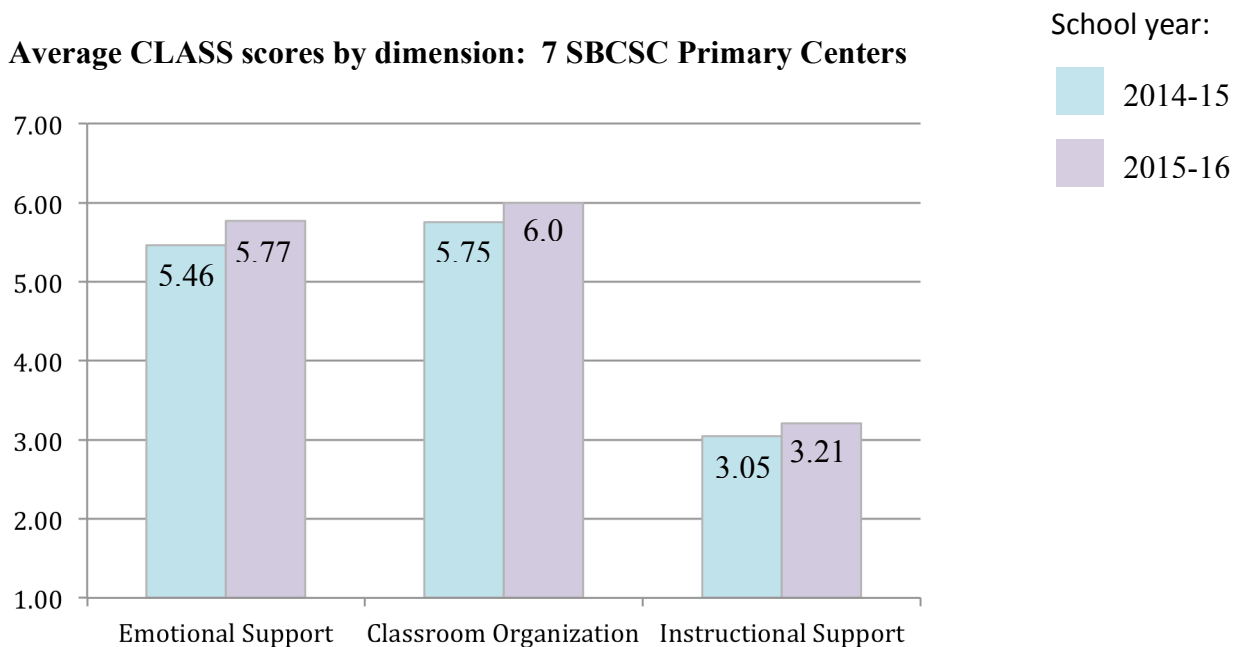


According to Dr. Sara Rimm-Kaufman at the University of Virginia, “Emotionally and instructionally supportive school experiences appear to be particularly important for children from poor families,” many of whom lag behind in school achievement. Dr. Rimm-Kaufman’s research has shown that “schools in which teachers adhered more closely to the (RC) approach had significantly higher math scores, especially for students who had had low math scores in 2nd grade (2014).

Growing attention nationwide is being brought to bear on the negative effects of trauma, with one in four school children estimated to have experienced trauma. Exposure to trauma, which includes not just major events but also the slow drip of neglect, poverty and emotional abuse, strongly impacts children’s ability to learn. The push to establish “trauma-sensitive schools” is intensifying, since many disciplinary methods, such as shaming and suspension, are considered to add further trauma to struggling children. Responsive Classroom strategies are completely in line with recommended approaches that can ameliorate some of the effects of trauma, such as building relationships with teachers and peers; strengthening the ability to self-regulate behaviors, emotions and attention; and facilitating success in academic and non-academic areas. RC also teaches alternative disciplinary measures.

Selecting a promising approach to teaching and training teachers is fairly easy. The real challenge is implementation. Over the past ten years working with preschool teachers, we have seen that it takes about five years before a teacher is reliably skilled in a new approach. The same is true for Responsive Classroom. “Adopting interventions such as the RC approach involves a long process of teacher change ranging from 3 to 5 years” according to Sara Rimm-Kaufman. For this reason, each year we have increased the amount of coaching and individualized professional development available for teachers. A Responsive Classroom consultant will be

available for thirty full days during the 2016-2017 school year. In addition, two of our trainers are working on their certification to teach Making the Most of Classroom Interactions, a CLASS-specific training for teachers. While the focus is Pre-K, we believe there will be relevant areas that can easily cross over to support early elementary teachers as well. A critical target to address is the Instructional Support section of CLASS, an area where teachers here (and throughout the country) score the lowest.



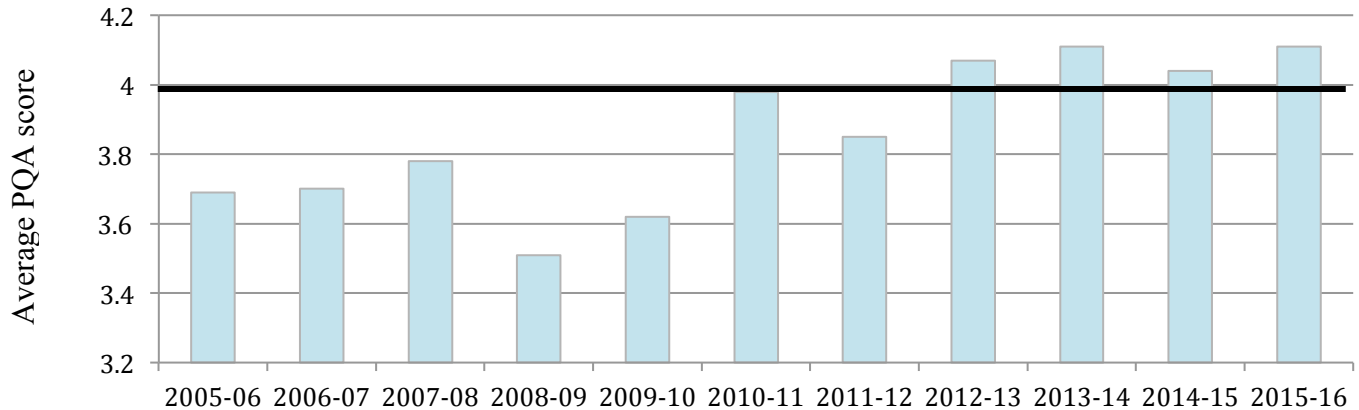
The introduction and beginning implementation of RC over the past three years has created a strong foundation. We have watched and rejoiced as the passion for RC has ignited and spread among teachers and principals. At focus groups last spring, teachers talked about the impact of morning meeting on community building, the power of logical consequences and interactive modeling, their successes in engaging students through academic choice and more. As schools begin to see the positive effects of RC strategies, their commitment grows even stronger. Over 100 teachers will give up their last days of summer vacation to attend RC training before the start of school this year. They’re excited and we are excited too.

Maintaining—and continuing to grow—community quality

Another focus of this funding cycle was to strengthen and broaden the foundations of quality in our pre-kindergarten programs. We wanted to ensure that the HighScope curriculum continues to be implemented with fidelity, move teachers towards excellence through HighScope certification, and empower directors to become educational leaders not only in their programs, but in our community and our state.

At the very end of our last funding cycle, for the first time, Program Quality Assessment (PQA) scores averaged higher than 4.0 on a 5 point scale—high enough to tell us that quality in these infant, toddler and preschool classrooms is very good. We’re thrilled to see average scores for teachers consistently remain above that 4.0 goal.

Average PQA scores in St. Joseph County:



Maintaining the high bar, however, is an ongoing challenge. Of the 110 PQAs conducted during the 2015-16 school year, 91 percent were on teachers who have been in programs for *less than five years* and over half (56 percent) were on teachers receiving their very first assessment. Only nine percent of PQAs were conducted on teachers who had been in programs for five years or more.

One of our consistent findings over the years has been that new teachers in programs that have been involved in our Early Childhood Assessment Project score on average higher than teachers in programs that are new to our project. When programs are well-grounded in HighScope, the expectations, resources and support their new teachers receive helps move them more quickly on the path to high quality. We see this play out in the difference between average Program Quality Assessment scores for new and returning teachers over the past three years.

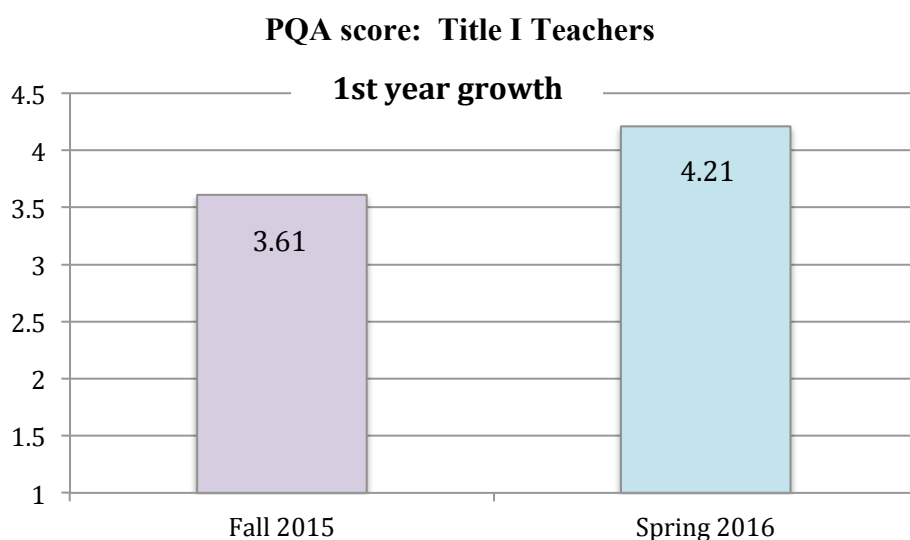
| | 2012 - 2013 | 2015 - 2016 |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| New teachers: | 3.67 | 3.86 |
| Returning teachers: | 3.89 | 4.31 |

Quality is also evident in the increased number of HighScope certified teachers, from 18 in 2013 to 29 today, with several others working on their certification. Certified teachers are now in multiple programs spread throughout the community.

There is also growing community recognition of the work of this initiative. Three programs under the Early Years Count umbrella—Apple Tree Learning Center, St. Joseph Preschool, and Harrison Primary Center’s Title I—were designated for site visits this spring when ECPNI (the local affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children) showcased exemplary early childhood programs in our community at their annual meeting. At the Indiana Association for the Education for Young Children, The Family Connection received the Corporate Award for Early Childhood Excellence for its work with Early Year’s Count. Directors with whom we have worked are now in leadership positions within ECPNI, the Early Childhood Coalition of St. Joseph County, and at the state level as well.

Assuring quality for Title I Pre-K

The addition of 10 Title I Pre-K classrooms to five South Bend Community School Corporation primary centers was not even on the radar screen at the start of this funding cycle. It happened quickly in the fall of 2015 with the full force of instant change—a get-up-and-running-while-still-learning effort that left the whole Family Connection team breathless. Yet, despite teachers being hired with no time for advance training in the HighScope curriculum (and some coming on board even after school had begun) and despite at least seven of the 20 teachers and assistants having had no prior preschool teacher experience, the year ended on a high note. Support was intense, including weekly half-day HighScope trainings; multiple assessments, feedback, and coaching; and regular meetings with teaching teams. This level of support turned out to be a fast-track to quality: a .6 jump in lead teacher Program Quality Assessment scores between late fall and mid spring and overall teacher/assistant teacher scores averaging over 4.0 in their very first year.



(Scores reflect the 9 Title I teachers who received fall and spring assessments; one teacher was hired after fall assessments completed)

As the trend to place pre-k in elementary school settings grows, ensuring quality for these preschools is critical. Findings from the Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) show that early childhood content is rarely a required element of principal preparation or professional development. Yet, “principal leadership is second only to teaching in terms of impact on child outcomes.” The Title I Pre-K classrooms provide an opportunity for principals (and elementary teachers) to see developmentally appropriate curriculum in action. The Program Quality Assessment (PQA), Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), and CLASS assessments demonstrate the expectations we would want for all public school preschool programs.

Early childhood incorporates the years from birth through age 8, and the Early Years Count Education Initiative has now extended its reach to include all those years. While the array of classrooms where young children are served is varied, we remain, as always, focused like a laser on quality.