

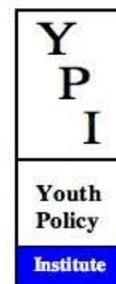
# **Helping Emergent Literacy Progress (HELP): An Early Reading First Project**

## **Year 3 Implementation Report**

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## Introduction

The Early Reading First (ERF) program was formed after the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 as a response to a growing recognition that many children in the United States were starting kindergarten without a strong foundation in early literacy skills. The goals of this federally-funded initiative are to establish early childhood “centers of excellence” nationwide to help preschool children obtain the linguistic and cognitive skills they need to develop age-appropriate abilities to read and write and, in general, to promote their academic development in kindergarten and beyond.

Early Reading First supports a research-based approach to early literacy for children from low-income families. It is designed to foster the implementation of ongoing professional development for teachers using scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) principles, promoting the development of high-quality, skill-based instruction for children in early childhood settings.

ERF’s focus on early literacy skills is critical. The National Assessment of Educational Progress recently calculated that 37% of U.S. fourth graders have not achieved a basic skill level in reading, noting that the problem is particularly acute among low-income and minority children.<sup>1</sup> These gaps in reading skills emerge as early as kindergarten and first grade, creating a critical need for initiatives that successfully promote the development of pre-school literacy skills.<sup>2</sup>

In its meta-analysis of research in the field, the National Early Literacy Panel identified core pre-literacy skills that are predictive of normative development of school age literacy, regardless of differences in family background or income. These pre-literacy skills include:

- Alphabetic knowledge (ability to recognize letter names and sounds);
- Phonological awareness (ability to distinguish word segments and syllables);
- Rapid autonomic naming (ability to quickly name random letters and pictures);
- Writing and name writing (ability to write letters or name when prompted); and
- Phonological memory (ability to comprehend and remember spoken information).<sup>3</sup>

Each of these five skills must be integrated into each ERF project’s design. In addition, the projects must foster among its young participants a growing awareness and knowledge of concepts of print, skills that have also been linked to later literacy achievement. By addressing these key early literacy areas in preschool and pre-kindergarten classrooms, Early Reading First projects have the potential to significantly improve the opportunities for young students in high-need districts to develop strong and lasting literacy skills in kindergarten and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress and National Center for Education Statistics (2007). *The nation’s report card: Reading 2007*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> West, J., Denton, K., & Germino-Hausken, E. (2000). *America’s Kindergartners: Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99*, Fall 1998. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

<sup>3</sup> *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel. A Scientific Synthesis of Early Literacy Development and Implications for Intervention*. National Institute for Literacy. Jessup, MD: 2008.

## Project History and Context

### Project Design

The Helping Emergent Literacy Progress (HELP) Early Reading First Project was initiated in 2009 with a \$2.65 million grant from the federal Early Reading First program. The grant was awarded to a partnership between two District of Columbia centers serving young children: Septima Clark Public Charter School (the lead applicant) and the Sunshine Early Learning Center. Both sites are based in Southeast DC, and together they serve approximately 150 preschool (PS) and pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) students. **Table 1**, below, outlines key characteristics of the two centers. Educational Solutions, LLC, of Arlington, VA, coordinates project activities, provides the project with Literacy Mentors, and offers a wide range of professional development supports.

	<i>Septima Clark PCS</i> (Est. 2006)			<i>Sunshine Early Learning Center</i> (Est. 2000)		
	<i>Year 1</i> 2009-10	<i>Year 2</i> 2010-11	<i>Year 3</i> 2011-12	<i>Year 1</i> 2009-10	<i>Year 2</i> 2010-11	<i>Year 3</i> 2011-12
% Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	85%	89%	87%	100%	100%	100%
PS/Pre-K Teachers	2	4	4	6	6	6
PS/Pre-K Students	40	78	69	84	69	79
Other Grades Served	K-3	K-5	K-5	None	None	None

Three full-time *Literacy Mentors*, overseen by the Professional Development Coordinator from Educational Solutions, provided teachers with direct, classroom-based support for curriculum and program implementation. The project also included two part-time staff: a *Family Support Specialist*, who assisted in the development of ongoing literacy links between the classroom and home; and a *Transition Coordinator*, who supported students, parents, and teachers in the transition to kindergarten. Both of these part-time staff members were supported and supervised by Educational Solutions. A full-time *Project Director* based at Septima Clark PCS oversaw the day-to-day operations of HELP ERF.

Each center selected a research-based literacy curriculum to support emergent literacy. Septima Clark PCS implemented Pearson’s Opening the World of Learning (OWL) program. In the first year of the project, Sunshine Early Learning Center chose the Blueprint for Early Literacy program (Children’s Literacy Initiative); in the second year of the project, Sunshine elected to use The Creative Curriculum of Teaching Strategies, Inc.

Teachers at both campuses also received Instructional Supplements, a complementary resource guide aligned with their literacy curriculum. This guide provides emergent literacy research and concrete instructional strategies including small group activities as well as planning, reflection, and other pedagogical materials. The Instructional Supplements were developed and piloted by Educational Solutions through a prior Early Reading First project. The HELP ERF *Professional Development Coordinator*, who works under the auspices of Educational Solutions, worked with the Literacy Mentors to ensure alignment of these materials with the literacy curriculum at each campus.

## ***Project Context***

Both of the HELP ERF Project early childhood programs – Septima Clark Public Charter School and Sunshine Early Learning Center – are located in the District of Columbia’s Ward 8 (94% African-American). This area of southeast DC has exceptionally elevated risk factors across multiple domains: 48% of children live under the federal poverty level; 53% of residents above age 16 are unemployed; 21% of adults do not have a high school diploma; 74% of families with children are mother-only; and the violent crime rate is 20 per 1,000, compared to 13 per 1,000 in the rest of DC (2010 U.S. Census). These are significant risk factors for the target population of young children and their families; poverty, for example, is one of the highest predictors of low literacy achievement.<sup>4</sup>

Septima Clark is a District of Columbia Public Charter School, which has a structure, culture, and approach to governance that is highly distinct from DC Public Schools. Like other charter schools in DC, it operates as an independent Local Education Agency with its own Board of Trustees, and is responsible for its own recruitment, professional development programs, selection and adoption of curricula, reporting, and other core educational functions. Like many DC public charter schools, it has been operating for less than 10 years and has a unique mission and school design – in this case, single-sex (male-only) education.

In contrast, Sunshine Early Learning Center is a full-service child care center established in 2000 through the Southeast Children’s Fund, Inc., and accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The Center serves infants, toddlers, and preschool children, ages six months to five years, and promotes early development of children’s language, literacy, cognitive, social/emotional, and physical skills. The Center provides after-school care for children up to age 12.

## ***Evaluation Structure and Methodology***

### *Overview*

The Youth Policy Institute (YPI), a not-for-profit research and evaluation organization, conducted the external evaluation of the HELP ERF project. YPI’s evaluation plan included both a *process* evaluation, which probes the factors that either enhance or impede successful implementation (such as school and organizational characteristics, curriculum structure, project staffing, and training and support), and an *outcome* evaluation, which examines the impact of the project on student pre-literacy skills and measures progress toward stated project objectives. The YPI evaluation is a research-based approach that systematically explores the context, inputs, and outcomes of the project.<sup>5</sup> The conceptual framework for the evaluation is outlined in **Table 2**, below.

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<sup>4</sup> Chandler, K. Functional Illiteracy. *The Advisor*. 26 (3). November 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Stufflebeam, D.L. (1983). The CIPP Model for Program Evaluation. In G.F. Madaus, M. Scriven, and D.L. Stufflebeam (Eds.), *Evaluation Models: Viewpoints on Educational and Human Services Evaluation*. Boston: Kluwer Nijhof.

<b>Table 2: Conceptual Framework for Evaluating HELP ERF</b>	
<b>Program Context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ School Culture and Ongoing Curricula</li> <li>▪ Administrative Support</li> <li>▪ Staff Qualifications</li> </ul>
<b>Instructional Staff Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Education and Certification</li> <li>▪ Background Knowledge</li> <li>▪ Teaching Experience</li> <li>▪ Classroom Environment (ELLCO Pre-K and CLASS)</li> </ul>
<b>Student Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ethnic and Cultural Background</li> <li>▪ Performance on PPVT-4</li> <li>▪ Performance on PALS Pre-K Subtasks</li> </ul>
<b>Program Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teacher Curriculum Training</li> <li>▪ Fidelity of Curriculum Implementation</li> <li>▪ Literacy Mentoring and Technical Assistance</li> <li>▪ Ongoing Staff Development</li> <li>▪ Parent Outreach</li> </ul>
<b>Core Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gains in Pre-Literacy Skills (PPVT-4 and PALS Pre-K)</li> <li>▪ Improvement in Classroom Environment and Early Childhood Instruction (ELLCO Pre-K and CLASS)</li> </ul>

Data for this evaluation are drawn from a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative sources:

- Beginning and end-of-year scores from administrations of the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-4* (PPVT-4);
- Beginning and end-of-year scores on the *Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening* (PALS) Pre-K Uppercase Alphabet Knowledge, Lowercase Alphabet Knowledge, Letter Sounds, Print and Word Awareness, and Rhyme Awareness subtasks;
- Classroom scores from the *Early Language & Literacy Classroom Observation* (ELLCO) Pre-K Tool and the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS);
- An annual survey of HELP ERF instructional staff (teachers and assistants);
- An annual survey of parents of HELP ERF students;
- Focus groups and interviews with HELP ERF teachers and assistants;
- Focus groups with parents of HELP ERF students;
- Interviews with project Literacy Mentors, Family Support Specialist, and Transition Coordinator;
- Conversations with HELP ERF center directors;
- Tri-weekly updates with Project Director and core staff;
- Review of literacy curricula (*The Creative Curriculum* and *Opening the World of Learning*); and
- Review of project documents.

In Years 1 and 2, the project collected *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) scores from Septima Clark kindergarten students before project implementation and after one and two years of the project. These data were not available for Year 3 and are not included in this report.

### *Assessing Pre-Literacy Skills*

To assess pre-literacy skill acquisition, the HELP ERF Project used two validated assessment tools required by the Early Reading First program. All students were administered the PPVT-4, which assesses receptive vocabulary skills. All students were also administered subtasks from the PALS Pre-K tool, which has been validated for students aged 4 years and older and widely used with students under age 3. **Table 3** indicates the selected literacy assessments and their uses.

<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Focus</i>
PPVT-4	Receptive Vocabulary
PALS Pre-K Uppercase Alphabet Knowledge Subtask	Letter Knowledge
PALS Pre-K Lowercase Alphabet Knowledge Subtask	Letter Knowledge
PALS Pre-K Letter Sounds Subtask	Phonological Awareness
PALS Pre-K Print and Word Awareness Subtask	Concepts of Print
PALS Pre-K Rhyme Awareness Subtask	Phonological Awareness

### *Assessment Rates*

Each Fall and Spring, HELP ERF staff members administered the PPVT-4 and PALS Pre-K assessments to all eligible students. They did not assess students who were too young or who had special needs and could not be assessed. Between 98 and 100% of all students were assessed in each assessment period.

### *ELLCO Pre-K and CLASS*

In addition to the required literacy assessments listed above, the HELP ERF project also administered two multi-dimensional observation tools to assess the quality of classroom environments and instruction: the Early Language & Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Pre-K Tool and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Both are research-based instruments.

- The ELLCO Pre-K Tool gauges the extent to which the structure and operation of the preschool classroom provides optimal support for language and literacy development. Its 19 items address five key literacy elements: classroom structure; curriculum; language environment; books and book reading opportunities; and print and early writing supports.
- CLASS focuses on interactions affecting student learning. A structured observational instrument, it facilitates the systematic evaluation of ten classroom dimensions including: classroom climate; teacher responsiveness; student expression and autonomy; behavior management; classroom productivity; effective instruction; and language use.

## Project Implementation Findings

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### ***Project Staffing and Communication***

#### *Project Staff*

Successful projects are characterized by a sufficient number of qualified and committed staff, effective processes for staff input and timely decision-making, and clear management and communication structures. Staffing expertise, experience, and continuity are critical predictors of successful implementations of professional development and curricular reforms.

The project was fully staffed during both its first and second years with a Project Director, three Literacy Mentors, a Family Support Specialist, and a Transition Coordinator. There was no staff turnover until Year 3, when both the Family Support Specialist and Transition Coordinator were replaced by new staff mid-year. Interviews with project and school staff indicate that these transitions were managed successfully, with no disruptions in service.

- *Experienced Director and Professional Development Coordinator.* The Project Director, who has overseen the project all three years, has extensive experience with early literacy and educational programs, and was previously the director of a successful Early Reading First project based in DC public charter schools. The Professional Development Coordinator also has expertise in emergent literacy and education, and worked with the Project Director on the prior Early Reading First project.
- *Experienced Literacy Mentors and Coordinators.* All three Literacy Mentors have over a decade of experience teaching and coaching in early childhood, and extensive experience working with early literacy. The current Transition Coordinator has a background in literacy and extensive experience coaching teachers and working with families. The current Family Support Specialist likewise has extensive experience working with schools and families.
- *Collaborative Decision-Making.* Ensuring success for a complex educational project involving multiple (and distinct) sites requires that project staff have ready access to all instructors and building administrators and that they develop the capacity to work collaboratively with these individuals to improve the classroom environments and pedagogical skills. This requires careful planning and regular oversight of project activities; toward those ends, project staff held meetings on a weekly basis. During all three years of the initiative, HELP ERF project staff reported that decisions regarding program implementation and professional development were made in a collegial manner, with all stakeholders contributing to shared decision-making and remaining committed to achieving project goals.
- *Clear Communication Structure.* Interviews with school directors, teachers, and project staff reveal that the HELP project developed and maintained clear lines of communication. The Project Director and the Professional Development Coordinator conveyed project decisions and information pertinent to all teachers directly to the heads of the schools and to preschool directors. Literacy Mentors provided project reminders and teacher-specific information directly to the teachers with whom they worked, and also regularly discussed project plans and activities with their designated school staff members. Routine information about the HELP project was provided to parents through school newsletters and with the assistance of classroom teachers.

**Key Finding: The HELP ERF project had an experienced, highly qualified staff in place from the outset and managed staff turnover successfully. It consistently used clear and collaborative communication and decision-making structures.**

### *Classroom Instructional Staff*

Although there was no change in the core HELP ERF project staff until Year 3 of the initiative, there were frequent staffing changes at the two project schools. Each project year, there were changes in lead teacher assignments at Sunshine Early Learning Center. In Year 2 of the project, Septima Clark added two classrooms and experienced the turnover of all early childhood instructional staff; during the following year, there was substantial turnover among both lead teachers and assistants.

This degree of flux in core educational staff posed particular challenges to the HELP project. Each year brought new educators with relatively little experience in teaching and early childhood instruction. These new staff members required intensive training and other support from school administrators and project implementers to ensure the continued trajectory of project achievements.

What occurred at the two HELP ERF schools is by no means unusual. Early childhood programs, in charter schools or other settings, are often characterized by high rates of staff turnover. Nationally, annual teacher attrition rates in early childhood programs are estimated to be between 15% and 30%, while the rate of annual teacher turnover in charter schools is 20-25%, compared to 11% turnover in public schools.<sup>6,7</sup>

	Septima Clark		Sunshine		Project	
	Year 1	Year 3	Year 1	Year 3	Year 1	Year 3
<i>Number of Instructional Staff</i>						
Number of Classroom Teachers	2	4	6	6	8	10
Number of Classroom Assistants	2	4	6	6	8	10
<i>Average Length of Experience</i>						
Average years teaching preschool	2.8	1.2	3.3	2.8	3.1	2.1
Average years teaching preschool at this school	0.5	0.4	1.4	2.1	1.1	1.4
<i>Highest Educational Degree</i>						
High School Diploma	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	1 (13%)	3 (19%)	1 (8%)
Associate's Degree	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	2 (17%)	1 (13%)	3 (19%)	1 (8%)
Bachelor's Degree	2 (50%)	4 (80%)	3 (25%)	2 (25%)	5 (31%)	6 (46%)
Master's Degree or Above	1 (35%)	1 (20%)	4 (33%)	4 (50%)	5 (31%)	5 (38%)

- **Educational Qualifications.** As seen in **Table 4**, six in ten school staff had at least a Bachelor's degree in Year 1 and eight in ten in Year 3. By the end of the project, nearly four in ten had a Master's degree or higher.
- **Teaching Experience.** While they have strong educational qualifications, both staff and assistants in this project were relatively new both to the field of early childhood education and to their respective schools, with an average in Year 3 of just over two years' experience teaching preschool and an average tenure of little more than one year at their school.
  - At Septima Clark, which experienced consistent staff turnover, the average number of years teaching preschool has dropped by over 50% from Year 1 to 3.

<sup>6</sup> Whitebook, M. & Sakai, L. (2003). Turnover begets turnover: an examination of job and occupational instability among child care center staff. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 18, 273-293.

<sup>7</sup> Miron, Gary, and Applegate, Brooks (May 2007). "Teacher Attrition in Charter Schools." Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University. Available online at: <http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPSSL-0705-234-EPRU.pdf>

- Cultural and Linguistic Challenges.** The majority of Sunshine Early Learning Center’s classroom teachers were trained and gained their prior teaching experience in another country. This has posed additional challenges to which the project responded with additional training in such areas as culturally appropriate behavior management techniques and literacy instruction. It is noteworthy that the HELP ERF project effectively addressed those challenges and promoted a high level of early literacy acquisition in these classrooms.

**Key Finding: Frequent instructional staff turnover each year brought challenges to the HELP ERF project, which had to address staff with limited teacher training, early childhood experience, and knowledge of the curriculum.**

### **Administrative Support**

The success of school-based projects is strongly dependent on administrative support. Principals and school directors can help ensure the effective implementation of early literacy programs by: educating themselves about early literacy and early childhood development; promoting the key goals and features of the program and the early literacy curriculum; and providing a supportive environment for teachers, students, and staff.

- Supportive Administration.** The instructional staff working in the project classrooms at both centers was surveyed in the Spring of each project year. Each year, the majority reported that their administrators were generally supportive of the preschool program and the goals of the HELP ERF project. However, it is evident that instructional staff believed there was room for increased administrative involvement in both HELP ERF activities and day-to-day management of the preschool programs (**Table 5**, below).
- From Year 1 to Year 3, there was a notable increase in the percentage of staff who disapproved of their administration’s day-to-day management of their preschool, and who did not find their school to be a “good place to work.” However, this discontent was limited to instructional staff from a single campus, and interviews with teachers and their assistants revealed that negative perceptions of administrative support at their campus did not lead to dissatisfaction with the HELP ERF program.

**Table 5: Instructional Staff Perceptions of Administrative Support, Years 1 (N=15) and 3 (N=13)**

<b>% of instructional staff agreeing with the following statements:</b>		<b>Not at All</b>	<b>Small Extent</b>	<b>Moderate Extent</b>	<b>Great Extent</b>
Administrators’ behavior toward staff is supportive and encouraging.	<i>Year 1</i>	0%	25%	38%	38%
	<i>Year 3</i>	0%	23%	23%	54%
The administration provides leadership that clearly addresses program goals.	<i>Year 1</i>	6%	6%	50%	38%
	<i>Year 3</i>	15%	23%	23%	38%
The administration effectively manages the day-to-day affairs of the preschool program.	<i>Year 1</i>	6%	13%	44%	38%
	<i>Year 3</i>	23%	15%	31%	31%
This preschool is a good place to work.	<i>Year 1</i>	0%	13%	56%	31%
	<i>Year 3</i>	23%	8%	31%	38%

- Implementation Conflicts.** In Year 1, teachers, school administrators, and project staff noted that there were tensions between the policies and educational practices of the HELP initiative and

those already established in the schools. These tensions varied by school and classroom and focused on such issues as the replacement of curricula and the re-design of classrooms. As schools accommodated changes intrinsic to the HELP ERF initiative, addressing those areas of tension was a key focus during the first project year, and remained so in the second and third years of implementation.

## ***Training and Professional Development***

### *Curriculum Training and Support*

The HELP ERF project provided trainings in Year 1 to support the implementation of the featured curriculum at each campus. Trainers from the respective curricula provided a thorough background in OWL and Blueprint for Early Literacy to both teachers and project staff. With the change in curriculum in Year 2 at Sunshine Early Learning Center, those staff and teachers were also trained in The Creative Curriculum. The project also provided training in the two curricula to new staff at each campus in Year 3. In addition to these trainings, the HELP ERF team (Project Director, Professional Development Coordinator, Literacy Mentors, Transition Coordinator, and Family Support Specialist) held literacy workshops for the teachers and assistants in the project. Trainings were provided quarterly at Sunshine; fewer were held at Septima Clark due to scheduling constraints.

**Table 6: HELP ERF Teachers Rating Professional Development as Good or Excellent, Years 1 and 3**

<i>Quality of professional development received this year in the following areas (% of teachers):</i>	<i>Year 1</i>		<i>Year 3</i>	
	<b>Good</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
Provision of research-based early literacy strategies and practices	13%	87%	15%	77%
Organization and sequencing of workshop topics	13%	87%	54%	46%
Opportunities for hands-on learning	33%	60%	23%	77%
Responsiveness to staff needs and questions	20%	73%	8%	85%
Usefulness of handouts and print materials	13%	87%	38%	62%
Relevance to early literacy needs of my students	7%	93%	23%	69%

- *High-Quality Training.* In Year 1, a great majority of teachers and assistants surveyed rated all aspects of project training and professional development as “excellent,” with only a small minority (7%) reporting that organization of topics and opportunities for hands-on learning could be improved. By Year 3, all but one of the teachers and assistants surveyed rated all training aspects as either “good” or “excellent” (**Table 6**).
- *Relevant Strategies.* In interviews, teachers and assistants at both campuses highlighted the staff trainings they received in Year 3 as useful and relevant. The trainings they found most useful included social/emotional development, classroom and time management, and supporting child writing and child conversations. Assistants at both schools found the Read Aloud trainings to be particularly helpful.

*“We are now connecting better with the language of the home... and connecting their culture to what we are teaching.”*

*“I was shy, and have learned to be more interactive with the kids.”*

*“I am a more reflective professional and habitual learner.”*

*“I have many more ideas – and [I am] learning from the great teachers.”*

*- HELP ERF Teachers*

## Literacy Mentoring

As noted above, HELP ERF began the project with its three Literacy Mentors already on staff, and all three continued in their positions into Year 3. The Literacy Mentors were assigned to specific classrooms; two Mentors each worked with three teachers and their assistants, and one Mentor worked with four teachers and their assistants. The Mentors spent one full day per week with each teacher in his or her classroom. On the remaining days each week they attended meetings, conducted research, developed targeted pedagogical materials to address specific needs in each classroom, prepared special projects, and provided general support to the classrooms and the preschool programs.

**Key Finding: In Year 3, teachers and assistants gave exceptionally high ratings to all aspects of HELP ERF training in early literacy curricula and strategies.**

- *Consistently Structured Activities.* The structure of each Literacy Mentor’s working relationship with his or her assigned teacher was consistent for all three Mentors. A typical day of mentoring and coaching included time for observation, modeling, planning, discussion, interactions with students, and small group activities. This level of consistent supports across classroom sites contributed, to a large extent, to the positive outcomes achieved by the HELP ERF project.
- *Targeted Mentoring.* When surveyed in Year 3, teachers and assistants ranked the performance of the Literacy Mentors very highly, with an average rating of “excellent” in each area listed (Table 7). They unanimously rated as superb the Mentors’ availability and responsiveness, and their observations and suggestions regarding literacy instruction.

**Table 7: HELP ERF Teachers Rating Literacy Mentor Support as Good or Excellent, Years 1 and 3**

Quality of the Literacy Mentor’s support in the following areas (% of instructional staff):	Year 1		Year 3	
	Good	Excellent	Good	Excellent
Availability and responsiveness	0%	100%	0%	100%
Lesson planning	25%	75%	31%	69%
Selecting and using instructional materials	6%	94%	15%	85%
Modeling research-based literacy strategies	19%	81%	8%	85%
Observing classroom implementation of literacy instruction and providing feedback	13%	88%	0%	100%

- *Time-Intensive Support.* On average, instructional staff reported in Year 3 that their HELP Literacy Mentors supported them in their classroom approximately three days a week, above and beyond the one scheduled day of mentoring. Interviews revealed that this was largely due to Mentors being based at their assigned campuses, and to their exceptional dedication to supporting the teachers and their students.

*“Nothing is impossible for ERF. Whenever we need something... bang... it’s there.”  
“I have grown a whole lot. I didn’t have a clue about what I was to do in class. Now I can do it with the teacher or without.”*

*- HELP ERF Teacher and Assistant*

**Key Finding: In Year 3, as in previous years, HELP ERF Literacy Mentors provided instructional staff with structured, intensive, and need-based mentoring and coaching that staff considered timely and helpful.**

## Teacher Skills

As part of YPI’s annual Instructional Staff Survey, HELP ERF teachers and assistants completed a self-assessment of their mastery of teaching strategies that support the acquisition of early literacy skills. In Year 3, HELP ERF Literacy Mentors also completed assessments of each teacher in the same areas.

**Table 8** shows the five early literacy skill areas in Year 3 in which teachers and their assistants felt they had the highest level of mastery, and the four areas in which they reported the lowest level of mastery.

- *Areas of Mastery.* Among early literacy strategies, nearly 4 in 10 instructional staff feel they have mastered building skills in letter knowledge and identification. They also report a high degree of confidence in their abilities to create a print-rich environment and engage children in multiple ways during stories and book reading. These are all areas in which HELP ERF provided targeted training and support throughout the project.

	<i>Not Using Skill (1) or Beginning to Use Skill (2)</i>		<i>Using Skill (3) or Using Skill Regularly, Consistently, and Confidently (4)</i>		<i>Mastered Skill, Using Regularly, and Teaching to Others (5)</i>	
	Teachers	Mentors	Teachers	Mentors	Teachers	Mentors
<i>Instructional Staff Areas With the Highest Levels of Mastery</i>						
Building letter knowledge and identification skills using letter names and sounds.	0%	0%	62%	60%	38%	40%
Linking letter identification and knowledge to current and recent themes.	0%	0%	62%	100%	38%	0%
Creating a print rich environment that uses messages, labels, daily schedules, and job charts.	0%	10%	69%	60%	31%	30%
Engaging children during book readings with my voice, expression, questions, and enjoyment of books.	0%	0%	69%	60%	31%	40%
Connecting stories to current themes and helping children draw parallels to their own experiences.	0%	0%	69%	70%	31%	30%
<i>Instructional Staff Areas With the Lowest Levels of Mastery</i>						
Providing kindergarten transition supports when needed.	23%	29%	62%	43%	15%	29%
Sending practice activities home for parents to do with their child.	8%	20%	92%	40%	0%	40%
Collaborating with instructional staff to provide additional support for struggling readers.	15%	10%	85%	70%	0%	20%
Planning and implementing activities that reinforce current themes and support student choice.	8%	0%	84%	90%	8%	10%

- *Areas In Need of Support.* Instructional staff consistently reported less confidence in their ability to support parents in helping their children practice skills at home and transition to kindergarten. Few teachers felt they had mastered those skills, or the skills of supporting struggling readers and facilitating student choices.
- *Literacy Mentor Perceptions of Skill Level.* In general, Literacy Mentor ratings of instructional staff’s early literacy skills paralleled the staff’s self-assessments. Where ratings differed, Mentors generally indicated a higher level of skill mastery than the teachers reported themselves, including higher ratings in the following areas: engaging students during book readings; supporting parents through practice activities; and collaborating to support struggling readers.

## ***Implementation of Literacy Curricula***

### *Overview of Curricula*

As noted earlier in the Evaluation Report, the two HELP ERF preschool centers use different research-based early literacy curricula – Opening the World of Learning (OWL) and The Creative Curriculum. The curricula share common features. They both incorporate scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) principles to inform daily activities and themes. Both interweave small group, whole group, and individual learning, as well as child-selected and teacher-directed activities. They also have in common a focus on Center Play, including up to ten distinct centers or interest areas addressing art, blocks, dramatic play, mathematics and manipulatives, music and listening, science, reading, and writing. Finally, both OWL and The Creative Curriculum divide the school year into thematic units, within which multiple subjects, skills, and concepts are covered. The curricula differ in the topics of their thematic units and in their emphases on developmental research and early learning standards.

### *Opening the World of Learning (OWL) Preschool Program (Pearson)*

The Opening the World of Learning (OWL) curriculum, used by Septima Clark PCS, comprehensively addresses the key domains of early learning. A set daily routine focused around Center Time provides the structure for developing language and literacy skills through content-rich thematic units (**Table 9**).

<b>Table 9: OWL Daily Activities</b>	
<i>Key OWL Activity</i>	<i>Early Literacy Skills</i>
Morning Meeting	Oral Language, Phonological Awareness, Alphabet Knowledge, Social Skills, Content Knowledge, Vocabulary
Center Time (Book Area, Writing, Art, Sand and Water, Blocks, Dramatic Play, Puzzles and Manipulatives)	Oral Language, Phonological Awareness, Print Awareness, Alphabet Knowledge, Emergent Writing, Social Skills, Content Knowledge, Vocabulary
Story Time	Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary, Print Awareness, Oral Language, Social Skills
Songs, Word Play, Letters	Alphabet Knowledge, Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary, Oral Language, Social Skills
Let's Find Out About It or Let's Talk About It	Oral Language, Vocabulary, Content Knowledge
Small Groups	Oral Language, Phonological Awareness, Print Awareness, Emergent Writing, Social Skills, Content Knowledge, Vocabulary
Conversations with Children (mealtimes and transitions)	Oral Language, Social Skills, Content Knowledge

### *The Creative Curriculum (Teaching Strategies, Inc.)*

In Year 1, Sunshine Early Learning Center used Blueprint for Early Literacy as its primary literacy curriculum, supplemented by concepts from The Creative Curriculum. In Year 2, Sunshine administrators elevated The Creative Curriculum to the preschool's primary literacy curriculum. This required additional training and a shift in support strategies for the HELP ERF staff.

The Creative Curriculum is a developmentally-appropriate program that promotes learning and the social-emotional development of children in four core areas: literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies. The curriculum includes “studies,” in-depth investigations of discrete concepts, which promote exploration across different subject areas over a period of multiple weeks. The key daily activities are outlined below in **Table 10**.

<b>Table 10: Creative Curriculum Daily Activities</b>	
<i>Key Creative Curriculum Activity</i>	<i>Early Literacy Skills</i>
Mighty Minutes	Alphabet Knowledge, Oral Language, Phonological Awareness, Print Awareness, Emergent Writing, Vocabulary, Social Skills, Content Knowledge
Interest Areas (Blocks, Dramatic Play, Toys & Games, Art, Library, Discovery, Sand & Water, Music & Movement, Cooking, Computers)	Alphabet Knowledge, Oral Language, Phonological Awareness, Print Awareness, Emergent Writing, Vocabulary, Social Skills, Content Knowledge
Read-Aloud	Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary, Print Awareness, Oral Language, Social Skills
Small Group Instruction	Alphabet Knowledge, Oral Language, Phonological Awareness, Print Awareness, Emergent Writing, Vocabulary, Social Skills, Content Knowledge

### *Instructional Supplements*

As discussed in previous reports, HELP ERF augments the two literacy curricula with Instructional Supplements. Developed by Educational Solutions, the Instructional Supplement manuals are aligned with the core literacy curriculum for that campus, and include:

- Information on early literacy research;
- General strategies for curriculum implementation;
- Resources and rubrics to support teacher self-assessment and self-reflection;
- Supplemental resources for monthly curricular themes, including suggested vocabulary, recommended books, and interactive reading activities;
- Specific ideas for small group activities for children in need of support in alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print awareness, oral language, and emergent writing; and
- Suggestions for materials and props to supplement the learning environment and the literacy centers.

### *Curriculum Use and Implementation*

An ongoing and central activity for an Early Reading First project is the implementation of the literacy curriculum. In Year 3, as in prior years, HELP ERF placed a priority on curriculum trainings, holding them in each school for new instructional staff.

- *Curriculum Design.* Compared to Year 2, teachers surveyed in Year 3 had a much more positive perception of their school’s literacy curriculum. As seen below in **Table 11**, the majority of teachers in Year 3 believed that their curriculum did either a “good” or “excellent” job of supporting the development of early literacy skills.
  - The one exception was support for special needs students. Over half of teachers in Year 3 did not think that the curriculum at their school was sufficiently well-articulated to support the development of students of different abilities and special needs.
  - Both in Years 2 and 3, and in both sites, over one-quarter of staff found that the curriculum design posed significant implementation problems, which required the assistance of HELP project staff. In addition, at least 4 in 10 respondents each year reported the design posed minor challenges to them (**Table 11**, below).

- In interviews, instructional staff reported each year that they modified curriculum activities so that the curriculum would not be too challenging for their younger students. They also modified activities for their older students, for whom the curriculum and books could be repetitive. Teachers and assistants at each campus reported that some units of study were too long and repetitive; they also found that center activities provided too few variations to maintain the attention of their students.

**Table 11: HELP ERF Instructional Staff Ratings of Their Literacy Curriculum, Years 2 and 3**

<i>Teacher Perception of Quality of Literacy Curriculum</i>		<i>Poor/Fair</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>
Supports the development of fundamental literacy skills leading to higher order skills.	<i>Year 2</i>	47%	7%	47%
	<i>Year 3</i>	7%	46%	46%
Sequences emergent literacy skills and strategies in a logical, coherent manner.	<i>Year 2</i>	40%	33%	27%
	<i>Year 3</i>	15%	46%	38%
Appropriate for students of all abilities.	<i>Year 2</i>	40%	27%	33%
	<i>Year 3</i>	23%	46%	31%
Provides specific suggestions for learners with special needs.	<i>Year 2</i>	44%	31%	25%
	<i>Year 3</i>	53%	15%	31%
<i>Teacher Perception of Quality of Curriculum Design as Challenge for Implementation</i>		<i>Not a Challenge</i>	<i>Minor Challenge</i>	<i>Significant Challenge</i>
	<i>Year 2</i>	20%	53%	27%
	<i>Year 3</i>	33%	42%	25%

- *Fidelity to the Curricula.* In general, both teachers and Literacy Mentors reported a high level of fidelity to certain core activities of their curriculum, including Morning Meetings, Story Time and Read Alouds, use of small groups, and use of Centers. There were some differences in implementation between the two schools, as teachers and Mentors based at one school reported a somewhat higher level of fidelity to their literacy curriculum than at the other school. However, these differences in implementation were relatively minor, and were not sufficient to impact student achievement at either campus.

**Key Finding: Despite turnover in instructional staff, HELP ERF made progress promoting curriculum use and fidelity at both schools.**

## ***Classroom Environments***

### *Environmental Assessment*

As noted above in the discussion of Evaluation Structure and Methodology, the HELP ERF project uses the ELLCO Pre-K Tool and the CLASS to assess the quality of the literacy environment and teacher instructional practices. Research indicates that these are critical factors affecting language and literacy acquisition.<sup>8</sup>

*ELLCO Pre-K.* In Year 1, the ELLCO Pre-K was administered by both HELP ERF Literacy Mentors and a team of observers from Howard University, who together shared responsibility for assessing seven project classrooms. During Years 2 and 3, ELLCO Pre-K was administered exclusively by HELP ERF project staff, who observed classrooms in which they did not regularly work. During the scheduled observation, the ELLCO raters scored each of the instrument's 19 items using a scale ranging from 1 (Deficient) to 5 (Exemplary).

<sup>8</sup> Early, D. M., Maxwell, K. L., Burchinal, M., Alva, S., Bender, R., Bryant, D., Cai, K., Clifford, R., Ebanks, C., Griffin, J., Henry, G., Howes, C., Iriondo-Perez, J., Jeon, H. J., Mashburn, A., Peisner-Feinberg, E., Pianta, R., Vandergrift, N., Zill, N., (2007). Teachers' education, classroom quality, and young children's academic skills: Results from seven studies of preschool programs. *Child Development*, 78 (2), 558-580.

In this evaluation report, YPI will only compare the ELLCO Pre-K results for Years 2 and 3. A YPI analysis of Year 1 ELLCO data, which was collected in a different manner than in Years 2 and 3, revealed a noticeable disparity in scoring among different observers.

The average Spring classroom scores in Years 2 and 3 are provided in **Table 12** for each of the five areas of literacy environment and instruction that comprise the ELLCO Pre-K.

- *Average Scores Improved.* Average classroom scores for every section in Year 3 were 1 to 2 points higher than Year 2 scores. On average, HELP ERF teachers' ELLCO scores were 84% of the maximum in Year 3, compared to 76% in Year 2.
  - The average score for the General Classroom Environment (GCE) subscale in Year 3 was 4.3, and the average score for the Language and Literacy (L&L) subscale was 4.1, reflecting a strong mastery of skills for each teacher.
  - This improvement in scores is notable given the turnover of staff at both campuses and the variation in experience among new staff.

**Table 12: HELP ERF Average Spring ELLCO Pre-K Scores by Section, Years 2 and 3 (N=10)**

	Year 2		Year 3		Maximum Possible Score
	Project Average	% Max. Score	Project Average	% Max. Score	
<b>Section I: Classroom Structure</b>	16	90%	18	90%	20
<b>Section II: Curriculum</b>	11	73%	12	80%	15
<i>General Classroom Environment (GCE) Subscale (Sections I + II)</i>	27	77%	30	86%	35
<i>Average GCE Subscale Score</i>	3.9	78%	4.3	86%	5.0
<b>Section III: The Language Environment</b>	15	75%	17	85%	20
<b>Section IV: Books and Book Reading</b>	19	76%	21	84%	25
<b>Section V: Print and Early Writing</b>	11	73%	12	80%	15
<i>Language and Literacy (L&amp;L) Subscale (Sections III – V)</i>	45	75%	50	83%	60
<i>Average L&amp;L Subscale Score</i>	3.8	76%	4.1	82%	5.0
<i>Total ELLCO Pre-K Score</i>	72	76%	80	84%	95

- *Highest ELLCO Scores.* The highest average ELLCO scores each year were in Section I, Classroom Structure, which includes classroom organization and management, classroom contents, and classroom personnel. To a significant degree, this is attributable to the hands-on support HELP ERF mentors and staff provided to teachers to improve their classroom environments.
- *Lowest ELLCO Scores.* In Year 2, the lowest average ELLCO scores were in Section II, Curriculum, which examines the use of the curriculum and opportunities for child choice and expression, and in Section V, Print and Early Writing, which assesses available materials, use of print in the classroom environment, and supports provided for child writing. Both areas continued to have the lowest average scores in Year 3, reflecting continued challenges in maintaining fidelity to research-based practices in these areas.
- *Limitations of the Assessment Instrument.* The ELLCO Pre-K tool relies on a trained rater to make numerous judgments about staff competence and student behavior over a three- to four-hour period. These judgments may vary depending on the rater's knowledge of child development, experience with school environments, cultural awareness, and expertise in early literacy. As a result, even though the instrument's scales are research-based and finely articulated, different observers can report substantially different scores for similar classroom environments.

*CLASS*. In Year 1, the *CLASS* was administered in two project classrooms by an experienced *CLASS* trainer and in four project classrooms by a team of observers from Howard University. In Years 2 and 3, the experienced *CLASS* trainer conducted all *CLASS* observations at both campuses. For each of the tool's 10 dimensions that are indicators of effective teaching, the observer assigns a range of scores: low (1-2), middle (3-5), or high (6-7). A high score indicates successful implementation of that dimension. The 10 assessed dimensions are grouped into three domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. Spring *CLASS* observations were conducted only in those classrooms where the teacher was the same as in the Fall term.

As with the ELLCO Pre-K, there were substantial and statistically significant differences noted between the scores of different observers in the Year 1 administration of *CLASS*, likely the result of variations in training for the two groups of raters. Accordingly, YPI will only examine *CLASS* scores from Years 2 and 3 of the HELP project.

- *Project Average Scores Increased in One Domain and were Stable in Two Others.* From Year 2 to 3 *CLASS* scores did not vary in the Classroom Organization and Instructional Support domains, while the average score for the Emotional Support domain increased significantly.
  - *CLASS Dimensions.* Project average scores improved for 4 of the 10 *CLASS* dimensions and were exactly the same for 6 dimensions. The fact that the scores were identical in 60% of dimensions does indicate that there may be significant limitations to the instrument. The greatest improvement was in the area of Positive Climate, which looks at classroom respect and positive communications.
  - On average, Year 3 HELP ERF teachers were scored at 61% of the maximum *CLASS* score, compared to 57% in Year 2 (**Table 13**, below). Given the turnover in staff at each campus, this overall increase is attributable to the training and technical support services provided by HELP project staff.
- *Highest Scores in Emotional Support.* In each year of the project, the *CLASS* domain with the highest average score was Emotional Support, which encompasses classroom climate and teacher sensitivity to student needs. HELP ERF teachers on average scored in the middle- to high-range for this domain both years.
- *Lowest Scores in Instructional Support.* Each year, the *CLASS* domain with the lowest average scores was Instructional Support. For each dimension in this domain, teachers had average Spring scores of “low” in Year 3. Again, this is most likely due to the relative inexperience of newer staff members in literacy instruction.

**Key Finding: Improvements in average ELLCO Pre-K scores and in total *CLASS* scores show growth in teacher skills in the HELP Project.**

**Table 13: HELP ERF Average CLASS Scores by Section, Years 2 and 3**

	Year 2 (N=6)		Year 3 (N=10)	
	Project Average	% of Max Score (7)	Project Average	% of Max Score (7)
<b>Positive Climate</b> (Relationships, Positive Affect, Positive Communication, Respect)	5.1	73%	6.3	90%
<b>Negative Climate</b> (Negative Affect, Punitive Control, Sarcasm/Disrespect, Severe Negativity)	1.2 <sup>9</sup>	83%	1.1	84%
<b>Teacher Sensitivity</b> (Awareness, Responsiveness, Addresses Problems, Students Comfort Level)	4.5	64%	5.5	79%
<b>Regard for Student Perspective</b> (Flexibility and Student Focus, Support for Autonomy and Leadership, Student Expression, Lack of Restriction on Movement)	4.2	60%	5.0	71%
<b>Emotional Support Domain</b>	5.2	74%	5.9	84%
<b>Behavior Management</b> (Clear Behavior Expectations, Proactive Management, Redirection of Misbehavior, Student Behavior Compliance)	4.6	66%	4.6	66%
<b>Productivity</b> (Maximizing Learning Time, Routines, Transitions, Preparation)	4.3	61%	4.3	61%
<b>Instructional Learning Format</b> (Effective Facilitation, Variety of Modalities and Materials, Student Interest Level, Clarity of Learning Objectives)	4.5	64%	4.5	64%
<b>Classroom Organization Domain</b>	4.5	64%	4.5	64%
<b>Concept Development</b> (Analysis and Reasoning, Creating, Integration, Connections to the Real World)	1.9	27%	1.9	27%
<b>Quality of Feedback</b> (Scaffolding, Feedback Loops, Prompting Thought Processes, Providing Information, Encouragement and Affirmation)	1.8	26%	1.8	26%
<b>Language Modeling</b> (Frequent Conversations, Open-Ended Questions, Repetition and Extension, Self and Parallel Talk, Advanced Language)	2.2	31%	2.2	31%
<b>Instructional Support Domain</b>	1.9	27%	1.9	27%
<b>Total Score (Max Score 70)</b>	<b>39.9</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>43.0</b>	<b>61%</b>

## Family Literacy

Parents and caregivers are a key source of support for a child’s early literacy growth and development. The HELP ERF project includes a Family Support Specialist (0.5 FTE), whose focus is to strengthen the links between families and the early literacy program in the HELP schools. Turnover in the position mid-year in Year 3 was mitigated by a transition that was well-orchestrated by project leadership and supported with timely and effective training.

- *Parent/Caregiver Trainings.* In Year 3, the HELP ERF project continued to strengthen its relationship with the DC Public Libraries (DCPL) by continuing the “Books and Breakfast” program to train primary caregivers to be readers with their children. For each school, the Family Support Specialist arranged a partnership with a local public library to provide this 6-week reading training program.

<sup>9</sup> Negative Climate is scored inversely: the lower the score, the more positive the classroom climate.

- Project staff reported that the training program was well-received by participants. In addition to receiving training in how to read with their children, participating parents and caregivers also received books to add to their home library.
- *Lending Libraries.* In Years 1 and 2, with support from HELP ERF staff, the Family Support Specialist designed and developed a Lending Library program for each school. This involved selecting books, developing activity cards and materials about book handling and library usage, and establishing the Lending Library process. In Year 3, the project continued to build the program, organizing each classroom library by theme, adding Learning Games, and troubleshooting obstacles to sustainability (such as missing activity cards).
  - Interviews and focus groups revealed that the Lending Libraries were enthusiastically supported by administrators and teachers and very well-received by parents and caregivers.
  - In their Year 3 survey responses, 87% of primary caregivers reported that they regularly read books sent home by the school to their child, up from 51% in Year 1.
- *Challenges to Parental Involvement.* Parents of preschoolers in general, and from southeast DC in particular, face numerous challenges to being involved in their child’s school. These challenges range from balancing the demands of multiple jobs and multiple children to allocating limited free time to attending events or trainings.
  - These challenges notwithstanding, in Year 3, over 80% of parents and caregivers at both campuses reported that they attended at least some meetings or school events (**Table 14**).
  - In focus groups, staff noted that there were some highly-motivated primary caregivers who regularly attended scheduled trainings, but that attendance and turnout were not always consistent. It proved to be a challenge to involve other parents from the school community in scheduled parent events.

**Table 14: Parent/Caregiver Ratings of Preschool Program, Year 1 (N=53) and Year 3 (N=47)**

<i>Quality of the preschool program in the following areas (% of parents):</i>		<i>Strongly Disagree/Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
Offers parent workshops on a wide variety of topics that are useful.	<i>Year 1</i>	16%	60%	24%
	<i>Year 3</i>	13%	57%	30%
Holds workshops for parents and family members at convenient times and locations.	<i>Year 1</i>	16%	65%	18%
	<i>Year 3</i>	15%	59%	26%
Regularly sends home books.	<i>Year 1</i>	28%	41%	31%
	<i>Year 3</i>	2%	57%	41%
Provides helpful information to me about reading to my child.	<i>Year 1</i>	12%	57%	31%
	<i>Year 3</i>	2%	36%	62%

- *Parent and Caregiver Satisfaction With Workshops.* Parents at both campuses were surveyed in the Spring of each year. **Table 15**, below, shows that from Year 1 to Year 3, parent respondents were increasingly satisfied with the topics and timing of parent workshops.
  - There was a striking shift from Year 1 to Year 3 in the percentage of parents who believed that the program did an exceptional job providing books and reading information. By the end of Year 3, 98% of parents were satisfied with the project’s performance in this area (**Table 14**). It is clear from interviews that the implementation of the Lending Library and the Books and Breakfast program were primarily responsible for the dramatic increase in parent satisfaction with these aspects of the program.

**Key Finding: The HELP ERF project has continued to successfully promote the involvement of primary caregivers in child reading through the Lending Library, parent trainings, and local library partnerships.**

### ***Supporting the Transition to Kindergarten***

Helping students continue to build literacy skills and progress academically in kindergarten is a key aim of the HELP ERF project. Toward this end, the HELP ERF team includes a Transition Coordinator (0.5 FTE), whose job is to strengthen connections between the preschool literacy programs and available kindergarten and elementary programs, and to support parents and caregivers whose children are transitioning to kindergarten. This position also saw turnover in the middle of Year 3, but the transition was well-supported by project staff and did not result in any discontinuity of services.

- *Supporting Transition through Preschool and Kindergarten Connections.* In Years 1 and 3, the area in which the instructional staff expressed the least mastery was providing transition supports to their students entering kindergarten. Although in Year 1 the project was able to arrange for Pre-K and kindergarten teachers at Septima Clark to visit each other's classrooms, the school's relocation in Year 2 resulted in a new configuration of classrooms that posed a challenge to visits between different grade levels in Years 2 and 3.
- *Creating Connections between Preschool and Elementary Classes.* In Year 1, the project launched a "Reading Buddies" program at Septima Clark, where elementary students at the school visited preschool classrooms to read to the younger students. The purpose of the program was to create links between the preschool and elementary classrooms and to further develop literacy skills among older and younger students. The Reading Buddies program continued in Year 2, with two elementary classes participating. In Year 3, the project was able to establish a similar program between Sunshine Early Learning Center and a local elementary school, where honors elementary students visited Sunshine to read to preschool students. The Transition Coordinator also arranged kindergarten visits for Sunshine students transitioning to that school.
- *Supporting Parents and Caregivers through the Kindergarten Transition.* While most preschoolers at Septima Clark PCS remain at that school for kindergarten, preschoolers at Sunshine move on to other area schools. In Years 2 and 3, the Transition Coordinator and Family Support Specialist helped interested parents and caregivers conduct research and complete applications for public, private, and public charter kindergarten programs in their neighborhoods.
- *Supporting Transitions from Pre-K3 to Pre-K4.* At Sunshine Early Learning Center, the Transition Coordinator helped administrators create a Transition Profile for each Pre-K3 student, using assessment information from the literacy curriculum and from Spring and Fall project assessments. These profiles were shared with students' new teachers.

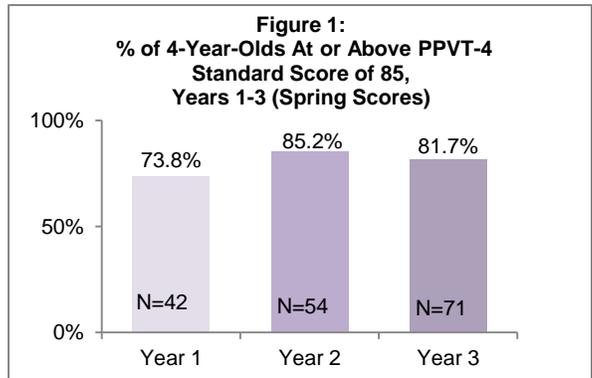
**Key Finding: The HELP ERF project has continued to expand support for transitions in Year 3.**

## Student Literacy Skills

### Performance on GPRA Measures

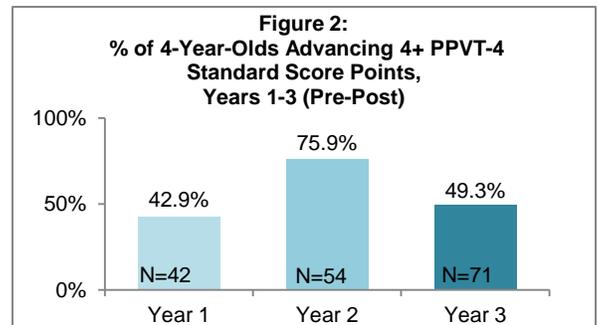
The federal Early Reading First Program has established three Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) measures to assess the impact of the program. These GPRA measures are reported each year.

**GPRA 1.** The number of 4-year-old students (age-eligible for kindergarten the following year) who scored above a Standard Score of 85 on the PPVT-4. As discussed earlier, the PPVT-4 assesses the receptive (hearing) language abilities of people aged 2 years, 6 months and above. Children are asked to look at four pictures on a page and identify the picture that corresponds to the word given orally by the assessor. The raw score on this assessment of comprehension and vocabulary is converted into a Standard Score.



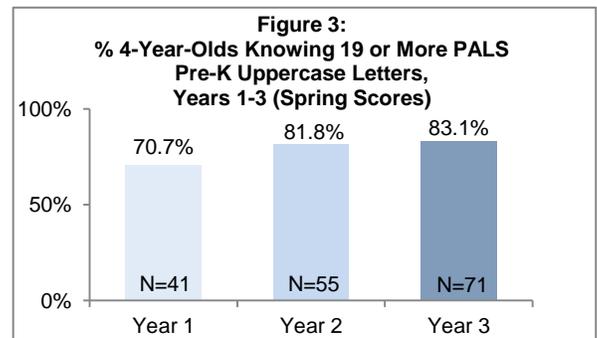
- **High Levels of PPVT-4 Performance.** As indicated in **Figure 1**, at the end of Year 3, 81.7% of 4-year-olds scored above the target standard score on the PPVT-4, up from 73.8% in Year 1, but lower than Year 2.

**GPRA 2.** The percentage of 4-year-old students who advanced 4 or more Standard Score points on the PPVT-4 from pre-test to post-test. The federal Early Reading First program has identified an increase of 4 or more Standard Score points on the PPVT-4 as the threshold amount to establish that a student's receptive vocabulary has advanced over the course of a year.



- **Significant Annual Variation in Receptive Vocabulary Growth.** In Year 1, 42.9% of HELP ERF 4-year-olds advanced 4 or more PPVT-4 Standard Score points during the school year (**Figure 2**). In Year 2, this increased sharply to 75.9% of this age group, but in Year 3, the percentage of 4-year-olds achieving significant gains on this level declined to 49.3%, a dramatic decline from Year 2 but still significantly higher than Year 1.

**GPRA 3.** The percentage of HELP ERF 4-year-olds that can name 19 or more uppercase letters on the PALS Pre-K Alphabet Knowledge Task.



- **Annual Improvement in Uppercase Letter Recognition.** As seen in **Figure 3**, the percentage of HELP ERF 4-year-olds who recognized 19 or more uppercase letters rose from 70.7% in Year 1 to 83.1% in Year 3, an 18% increase.

**Key Finding:** From Year 1 to 3, performance by 4-year-olds on key federal project measures improved. However, while uppercase letter knowledge increased each year, achievements in receptive vocabulary declined from Year 2 to 3.

*Performance on Project Assessments*

The HELP ERF project has established year-end targets for each age group (Table 15), based on expected development of pre-literacy skills.

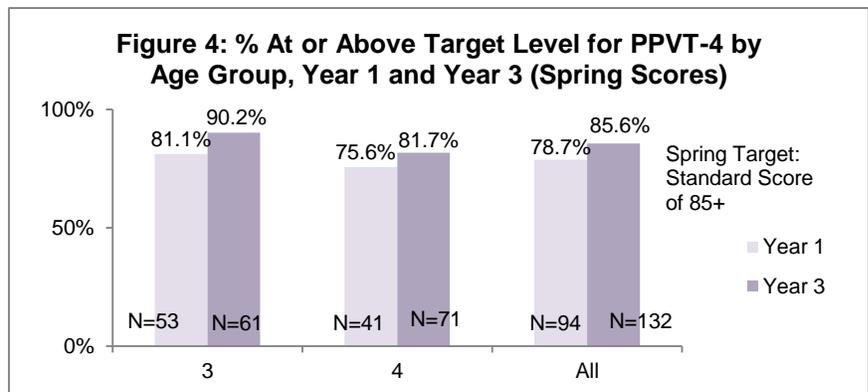
Table 15: HELP ERF Assessment Targets by Age Group		
Assessment	Year-End Targets	
	3-Year-Olds	4-Year-Olds
PPVT-4 (Standard Score)	85+	85+
PALS Pre-K Uppercase Letters	9 Letters	16 Letters
PALS Pre-K Lowercase Letters	6 Letters	13 Letters
PALS Pre-K Letter Sounds	6 Letters	7 Letters
PALS Pre-K Print and Word Awareness	4 Items	8 Items
PALS Pre-K Rhyme Awareness	4 Items	6 Items

*Performance on PPVT-4.* The PPVT-4 provides a validated, reliable measure of a child’s exposure to different English words, and the breadth and precision of his/her vocabulary. Vocabulary can be a predictor of reading comprehension, and the ability to retain and reproduce spoken words and information is a key pre-literacy skill.

Table 16: HELP ERF Average Spring Performance on PPVT-4 by Age Group, Year 1 and Year 3						
PPVT-4	3-Year-Olds		4-Year-Olds		All Students	
	Year 1 N=53	Year 3 N=61	Year 1 N=41	Year 3 N=71	Year 1 N=94	Year 3 N=132
Average Standard Score (Spring Goal: 85)	94.70	98.15	93.02	94.07	93.97	95.95
Average Percentile Ranking (Spring Goal: 50.00)	39.02	45.52	33.63	41.17	36.67	43.18

- *Average Standard Score Increased.* The target PPVT-4 year-end score for each age group is a Standard Score of 85 or higher. In Year 1, the average score for each age group exceeded the target score, and those average scores improved from Year 1 to Year 3 (Table 16).

- **Figure 4** shows the percentage of children for each age group who were above the target level of 85 standard score points each year. 85.6% of all HELP ERF students met the Spring target in Year 3, a substantial increase over Year 1.



- *Percentile Ranking Increased.* The average percentile ranking for each age group, and for all children combined, rose significantly from Year 1 to Year 3 (Table 16).

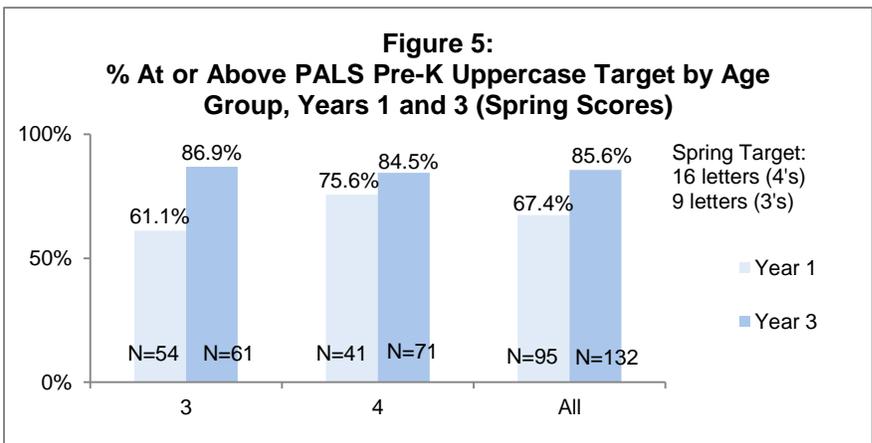
**Key Finding: Average scores on all PPVT-4 and PALS Pre-K assessments increased between Year 1 and Year 3, except for 3-year-olds in Letter Sounds.**

*Performance on PALS Pre-K.* The PALS Pre-K subtasks, taken together, measure a spectrum of pre-literacy skills, including letter recognition, sound recognition, awareness of conventions of print, word use, and rhyming skills.

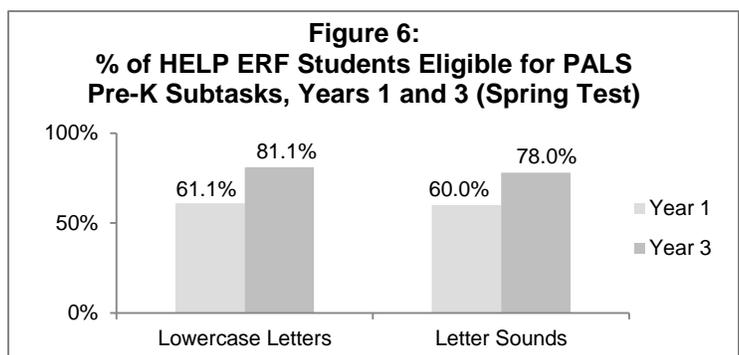
PALS Subtask	Max Score	3-Year-Olds		4-Year-Olds		All Students	
		Year 1 N=54	Year 3 N=61	Year 1 N=41	Year 3 N=71	Year 1 N=95	Year 3 N=132
<b>Average Correct Letters/Sounds</b>							
Uppercase Letters	26	13.96	19.39	20.22	22.48	16.66	21.05
Lowercase Letters	26	19.44	19.40	21.00	23.35	20.28	21.62
Letter Sounds	26	8.22	12.77	10.70	17.33	9.53	15.43
<b>Average Correct Items</b>							
Print and Word Awareness	10	5.44	5.92	6.78	8.21	6.02	7.15
Rhyme Awareness	10	4.93	5.82	7.66	7.61	6.11	6.78

- *Uppercase Letter Knowledge Increased.* Average Uppercase Letter Knowledge, as measured by the PALS Pre-K, increased 2-5 letters for each age group, and over 4 letters for the overall project. By the end of Year 3, the average number of uppercase letters recognized exceeded both federal and project targets (**Table 17**).

- **Figure 5** shows the percentage of students that scored above the target level in Uppercase Letter Knowledge for their age group each year. Overall, more than 85% of HELP ERF students met or exceeded the project target in Year 3, a significant increase from Year 1.

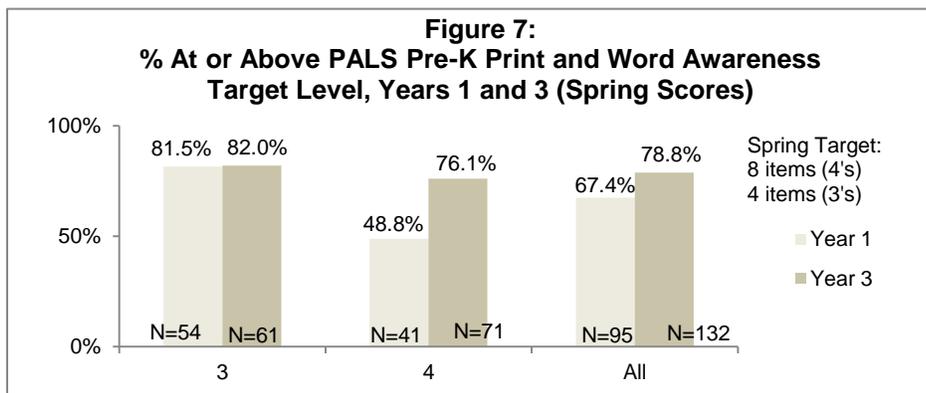


- *Lowercase Letters and Letter Sounds Eligibility Increased.* The PALS Pre-K letter tests are structured so that a child must meet the given threshold (16 uppercase letters or 9 lowercase letters) to continue to the next letter test. Consequently, the average scores for the Lowercase Letters and Letter Sounds subtasks (**Table 17**) include only the students who were eligible to take the test. It is important, therefore, to measure the percentage of students who were eligible to take each test.



- The percentage of HELP ERF students eligible to take the Lowercase Letters and Letter Sounds test increased significantly from 6 in 10 students in Year 1 to nearly 8 in 10 in Year 3, another sign of the significant and positive impact of the project (**Figure 6**, above).

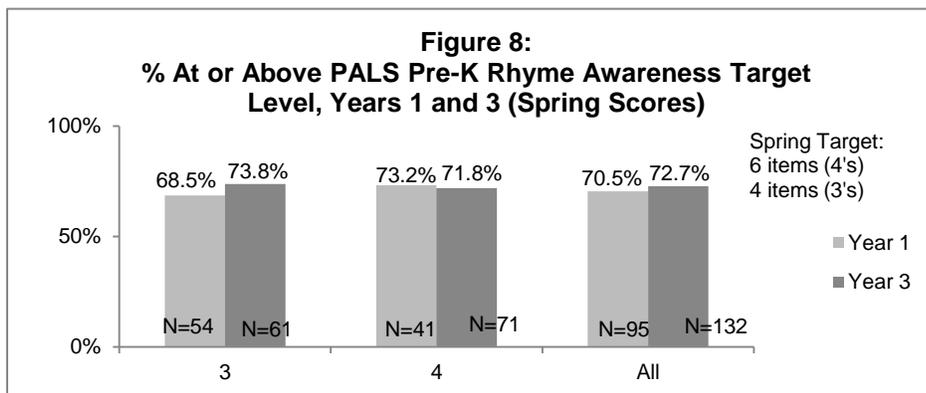
- *Print and Word Awareness Scores Increased Overall.* As **Table 17** above shows, average scores for the PALS Pre-K Print and Word Awareness subtask increased for all age groups from Year 1 to 3. Nearly 80% of students overall scored at or above the target level for knowledge of concepts of print in Year 3, a significant increase from Year 1 (**Figure 7**).



- This increase is almost entirely due to improvements in performance among 4-year-olds; achievement among 3-year-old students was steady.

- *Rhyme Awareness Increased for 3-Year-Olds and Overall.* Over 70% of all students in Years 1 and 3 scored at or above the Spring target score for Rhyme Awareness, and the percentage of 3-year-olds who met the target increased from Year 1 to 3 (**Figure 8**).

- However, among 4-year-olds, average scores for this test declined slightly from Year 1 to Year 3 (**Table 17**, above), as did the percentage of 4-year-olds who scored at least the targeted 6 points or more on the Spring test (**Figure 8**).



## ***Reports from School Staff and Parents/Caregivers in Year 3***

### Reports from Instructional Staff

- Staff at both schools reported that their students were drawn to the writing area and to dramatic play, while many students enjoyed the blocks.
- During Year 3, teachers at both schools indicated that their students were asking more questions, although they found younger children struggled with the distinction between statements and questions. They also reported great improvements in the areas of rhyming and letter knowledge.

## Reports from Parents and Caregivers

- At both schools, parents and caregivers noted that their preschoolers were beginning to spell and write their names and to identify letters and numbers. They reported that counting had improved and that their children were also identifying shapes and colors. They also noted a heightened level of questions and interest in learning in their children since the school year began.
- When asked about areas in which their child had improved most during the third year of this project, the top four areas parents and caregivers listed in their survey responses were identical to the first two years of the project and included:
  - Knowledge of letters (75% of parents);
  - Interest in music (70%);
  - Interest in reading (65%); and
  - Interest in learning about new things (61%).

## Performance of Returning Students

Of the 71 4-year-old students who participated in the HELP ERF project in Year 3, 44 students were returning to their preschool program for a second year. YPI compared the performance of Pre-K 4-year-old students who had received two full years of ERF with classmates who had received only one year of program services, and it compared both Year 3 groups to the performance of 4-year-olds in Year 1 of the project (**Table 18**).

<b>Table 18: HELP ERF Average Fall and Spring Performance on PPVT-4 and PALS Pre-K: New and Returning 4-Year-Old Students in Year 3 Compared with Year 1 4-Year-Olds</b>						
Assessment	Year 1 New 4-Year-Olds N=42		Year 3 New 4-Year-Olds N=27		Year 3 Returning 4-Year-Olds N=44	
	Fall 2009	Spring 2010	Fall 2011	Spring 2012	Fall 2011	Spring 2012
PPVT-4 (Avg. Standard Score)	92.19	90.81	88.44	91.22	93.41	95.82
PALS Uppercase Letters (Avg. Letters)	11.93	20.22	8.70	18.63	21.36	24.84
PALS Print and Word (Avg. Items)	4.59	6.78	4.85	7.70	7.02	8.52
PALS Rhyme Awareness (Avg. Items)	4.54	7.66	4.33	5.78	6.45	8.73

- *Returning Students Began Year 3 with a Higher Level of Literacy Skills.* Fall assessment scores for returning 4-year-old students who had already received one year of the program were considerably higher than scores of students just entering. This is especially true in the area of uppercase letter knowledge, where incoming 4-year-old students knew an average of less than 9 letters, compared to returning students who knew more than 21 letters.
  - In Year 3, both new and returning students ended the year with higher average scores. It is an indication of the effectiveness of the HELP ERF project that new students made greater gains than returning 4-year-olds.
- *New Student Growth in Key Literacy Skills Was Stronger in Year 3 than Year 1.* As evidence that HELP ERF has grown more effective over the course of the program, new 4-year-olds acquired skills in receptive vocabulary and uppercase letter knowledge at a greater pace during Year 3 than new students in Year 1. For example, average pre-post gain in uppercase letter knowledge was 8 letters in Year 1 and nearly 10 letters in Year 3 (**Table 18**).

- *Both New and Returning Students Ended Year 3 Ready for Kindergarten.* Both new and returning students in Year 3 had average end-of-year scores in receptive vocabulary and letter knowledge that were developmentally appropriate for students preparing to enter kindergarten. For new students, average scores were slightly below targets for print and word awareness (7.7 instead of 8 items) and rhyme awareness (5.78 instead of 6 items).

**Key Finding: The HELP ERF project increased its effectiveness with new students, and students in their second year of the program continued to improve their early literacy skills.**

### ***What Factors Affect Emergent Literacy Outcomes?***

Each year, YPI explored the reasons why some students might have benefited more than others from the HELP ERF project. Five variables were analyzed that could affect student improvement in early literacy skills as measured by the PALS Pre-K and PPVT-4 assessments.

1. *Age.* A child's age during the school year did not consistently affect growth in literacy skills. In Years 1 and 2, there was no significant correlation between age and performance. In Year 3, however, older students were more likely than younger students to advance in their mastery of Uppercase Letter Knowledge and Print and Word Awareness.
2. *Initial Level of Emergent Literacy.* YPI examined whether students' initial level of literacy skills affected their growth in skills during the school year. Students who began the year with relatively low assessment scores showed greater gains during the school year, while students who began with high scores, particularly in Print and Word Awareness, were likely to end the year with high scores as well. As noted above, with most effective educational programs, the students who gain the most during a school year are those with the lowest pre-test scores.
3. *Classes (Teacher Effect).* YPI examined whether the class in which a child was placed had any effect on end-of-year literacy skills. In Years 1 and 2, there was significant variation by classroom in gains on all the key assessments, and this variation was substantial enough that average Spring scores in some rooms did not meet target levels. By the final year of the project, this variation had diminished considerably; with few exceptions, all classrooms met age-appropriate target levels in the Spring of Year 3. This is a good indication that the HELP ERF project has effectively addressed differences in teacher literacy skills and classroom approaches.
  - YPI also examined the effect of the classroom climate and the pedagogical skill level of the teacher on student early literacy skills, as measured by a teacher's total score on the ELLCO Pre-K tool. Teacher ELLCO scores were not substantially correlated with achievement on assessments for any of the project years. This may be because, as noted earlier in this report, ELLCO Pre-K ratings can be readily affected by variations in the training and background of the observer.

4. *Gender*. To examine gender-related differences in early literacy skills, YPI explored variation in assessment performance between male and female students served by the same school (Sunshine) and between the male students served at both schools (Septima Clark serves only male students).

*Male and Female Students in a Co-Educational Environment*. At Sunshine Early Learning Center, where boys and girls are served in co-educational classrooms, female students marginally outperformed their male counterparts in Year 1 and Year 3 in PPVT-4 performance in Uppercase Letter Knowledge, and Print and Word Awareness (**Table 19**). However, male students at Sunshine had a higher average performance in Rhyme Awareness than females for Year 3.

Assessment	Septima Clark (Male)		Sunshine (Male)		Sunshine (Female)	
	Year 1 (N=38)	Year 3 (N=65)	Year 1 (N=25)	Year 3 (N=38)	Year 1 (N=42)	Year 3 (N=29)
PPVT-4 (Avg. Standard Score)	98.12	98.80	91.57	91.74	91.80	95.10
PALS Uppercase Letters (Avg. Letters)	21.71	23.37	13.00	18.26	14.33	19.52
PALS Print and Word (Avg. Items)	7.15	7.34	4.73	6.74	5.77	7.28
PALS Rhyme Awareness (Avg. Items)	6.59	7.74	4.95	6.03	6.33	5.62

*Male Students in Different Environments*. As seen in **Table 19**, male students at Septima Clark (an all-male school) had higher PPVT-4 and PALS Pre-K scores on average each year compared to males at the Sunshine Early Learning Center (co-educational). Average scores for Septima Clark males were also higher than scores for Sunshine female students, a clear difference in achievement by campus.

*Gender Differences*. These data indicate that male students at Sunshine Early Learning Center in Year 3 benefited differently from the program than female students at their own school and male students at Septima Clark. Male students in general also outperformed female students in the area of Rhyme Awareness, and this result was statistically significant. This disparity in performance by gender is an area in which teachers and schools could explore obstacles to achievement to better benefit all students.

**Key Finding: HELP ERF effectively mitigated differences between teachers, schools, and student age and skill level to promote literacy achievement. However, differences in achievement by gender persisted in Year 3.**

5. *School*. The schools in the HELP ERF project differed from each other in nearly every key characteristic: type of school, mission and culture, staff experience and turnover, student and parent population, administrative involvement in the project, literacy curriculum, and instructional approach. Furthermore, Septima Clark is a single-sex school, serving only male students and Sunshine is co-educational. Despite these substantial differences between the schools, an analysis of student performance on literacy skills assessments in Years 2 and 3 yielded no statistically significant differences in achievement, with one exception: a significant difference in achievement in Rhyme Awareness in Year 3.

- Quantitative and qualitative data from all three project years indicate that HELP ERF staff played an essential role in supporting and improving early literacy offerings at both sites. Teachers and students at both sites benefited immensely from the on-site, regular presence of HELP ERF staff and Literacy Mentors in the classrooms and throughout the preschool programs, providing services including, but not limited to, the following:
  - Training and professional development.
  - Teacher observation and feedback.
  - Modeling of instructional strategies.
  - Behavioral support and problem-solving.
  - Procurement or creation of instructional materials.
  - Support for curriculum implementation.
  - Targeted intervention and skill-building for at-risk students.
  - Administration of assessments and support for data interpretation.
  - Support for parent involvement in child reading.
  - Support for students transitioning to Pre-K4 and kindergarten.

The level of expertise, commitment, availability, and continuity among this staff has been noted elsewhere in this report, but bears repeating. It is YPI's belief that gains in early literacy skills across the project sites in HELP's third year are due primarily to the efforts of the project staff.

***Key Finding:* The HELP ERF team has been a key factor in literacy skill gains throughout the project.**

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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In its third year, the HELP ERF project continued to build on the positive progress made in its first two years. Notable achievements from the final year of the project included:

- Retaining the majority of its highly-qualified and exceptionally dedicated staff through all three years, including an experienced Project Director and Professional Development Coordinator, and three exceptionally qualified Literacy Mentors;
- Handling transitions in the part-time staff positions of Transition Coach and Family Support Specialist efficiently and effectively;
- Continuing to use a collaborative decision-making process and a clear structure for communication between staff and schools;
- Continuing to build on a structured, time-intensive and need-based mentoring system that is highly praised by teachers and allows for mentor autonomy;
- Continuing to enhance parental involvement in the early literacy of preschoolers by increasing the extent to which parents report reading to their children;
- Continuing to refine and improve the highly-regarded Lending Library program;
- Establishing new activities to support transitions at both campuses;
- Improving student performance levels in the federal project measure for Uppercase Letter Knowledge (GPRA);
- Improving average scores on all project assessment measures compared to Year 1, including Uppercase Alphabet Knowledge, Print and Word Awareness, Rhyme Awareness, and receptive vocabulary knowledge; and
- Continuing to reduce differences in literacy skill acquisition among schools and classrooms.

In three years, the HELP ERF project has made great strides toward transforming the partner schools into centers of excellence in early literacy, and greatly improving literacy skills for students in both schools. As the partner schools and their teachers look to sustain this progress, YPI has several recommendations for consideration.

- *Rhyme Awareness.* The PALS Pre-K assessments revealed more modest growth in Rhyme Awareness each year than in other pre-literacy skill areas. To encourage growth in this critical area, YPI recommends that HELP ERF schools explore resources for building teacher capacity to support student phonological awareness skills and augment current services with additional materials and teacher mentoring.
- *Gender Differences.* An analysis of patterns in achievement by gender revealed variations in achievement for boys and girls and for boys in different educational environments. This difference is particularly notable in Rhyme Awareness, and YPI recommends that schools examine and address barriers to early literacy acquisition for both genders.
- *Sustainability.* As the project concludes its third year, the HELP ERF schools, in conjunction with the HELP ERF team, should assess ways in which the team's support and knowledge could be transferred to other school staff members to ensure continued growth in early literacy instruction and student skill acquisition.