



Total Enrollment (2003-2004): 14,987

Kindergarten Enrollment: 1,005

Student Demographics:

- Eligible for Free/Reduced Price Lunch: 38.2%
- Minority: 27.1%

National Percentile Rank, 3rd Grade Basic Skills Test:

- Reading: 61; Math: 67
- Composite Reading/Math: 64

READY! for Kindergarten

READY! for Kindergarten is a family-based program that provides parents with the information and tools they need to prepare their children for kindergarten. The classes are designed for parents (or primary caregivers) of children birth to age five and focus on the development of age-appropriate early reading, math and social skills.

The program was developed by the National Children’s Reading Foundation and the Kennewick School District. (The connection between the Reading Foundation and the School District is described below.) The program model is based on research documenting the benefits of family-based programs and the importance of adult-child shared book reading.

Program Origin

The story of READY! for Kindergarten’s development begins in 1995 when the Kennewick School Board set the goal that “90% of our students will read at or above grade level by the end of third grade”.¹ This goal led to a series of K-3 program changes, including curriculum revisions, teacher training, building-based evaluation, and increased time spent on direct reading instruction, supported by funding from a community levy in 1996.

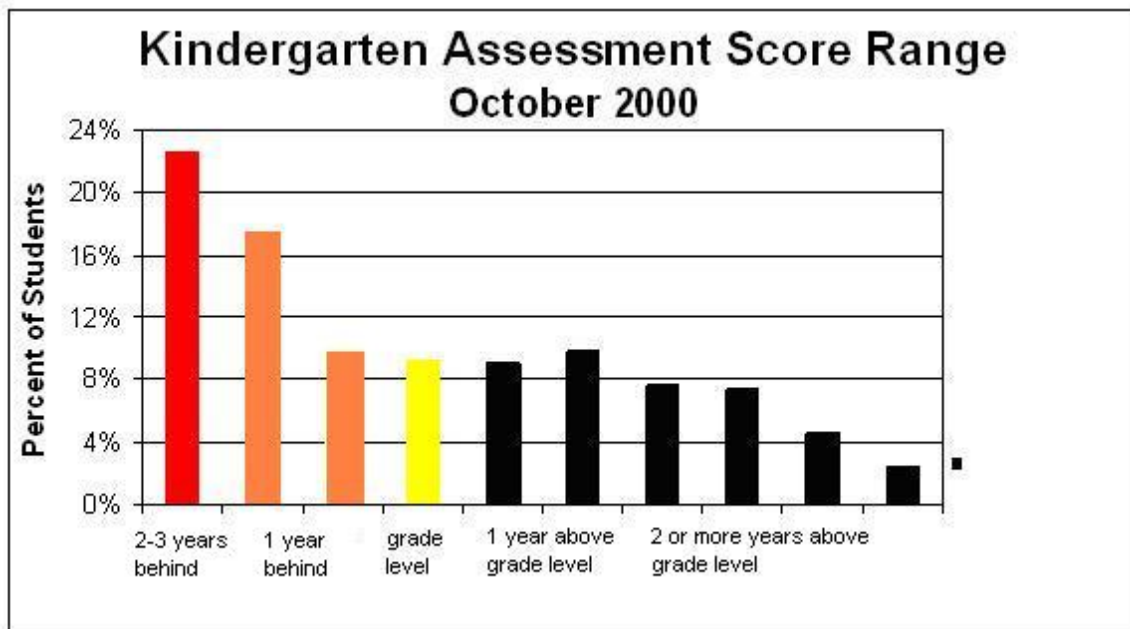
At the same time, the District recognized the importance of engaging parents (particularly parents of preschoolers) and community members in the effort to meet the 90% reading goal. Since the District did not want to be in the position of “telling parents what to do”, and Kennewick is part of a larger eleven district community, it was also recognized that the “reading message” would best be delivered by a non-profit organization that could reach out to the broader community. In February 1996, a separate entity – the Reading Foundation – was formed.² The mission of the Reading Foundation is to assure that students read

¹ The establishment of this goal, and creating accountability for achieving it, are described in The 90% Reading Goal by Lynn Fielding, Nancy Kerr, and Paul Rosier (Kennewick: The New Foundation Press, 1998).

² Since then, the foundation has evolved into two organizations: the Mid-Columbia Reading Foundation comprised of the original eleven districts, and the National Children’s Reading Foundation, which is based in Kennewick and has ten affiliated foundations in four states serving about 700,000 students in 126 districts.

at grade level by the end of third grade, with an initial focus on encouraging parents to read with their children 20 minutes a day so they enter kindergarten with grade level skills.³

In 1999, as part of its systematic efforts to measure and report student outcomes, the Kennewick School District standardized the assessment of entering kindergartners. (Previously, it had varied from building to building.) The results of the district-wide standardized assessment were sobering: Only 50% of entering kindergartners in Fall 2000 scored at an age-appropriate level in language and literacy skills correlated with reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade. Or, as the following graph shows, half of the District’s entering kindergartners were already two to three years behind “average” kindergarten children on the first day of school.



The standardized assessment turned out to be “the most important thing we did in terms of student learning” since it showed that “we didn’t create the achievement gap; kids came with it”.⁴

Analysis of data for other grade levels documented the persistence of the achievement gap. These data showed that Kennewick was doing a good job in helping children make annual growth once they were in school, but the gap shown among entering kindergartners remained in later grades. Even as remediation efforts helped the lowest performing students increase their skills,

³ Activities in support of the “20 minutes a day reading campaign” include ongoing media efforts, distribution of books, and development of other literacy materials.

⁴ Nancy Kerr, Phone Interview, February 14, 2005.

the highest performing students also increased their skills, maintaining the achievement gap.⁵

With these realizations came a new commitment to reach out to parents and families before their children entered school and the decision to invest in early intervention as an alternative to later remediation. The District therefore asked the Reading Foundation to design a program that would supplement their “read with your child” campaign and help close the achievement gap among entering kindergartners.

In researching possible models, the Reading Foundation was guided by two essential criteria: (1) the primary focus should be literacy skills, and (2) it should be a family-based program. The second criteria was driven by research documenting the benefits of family literacy experiences⁶ as well as the practical consideration that it would be the most cost-effective way to reach Kennewick’s 5,000 children who are birth to five years old. (About 300 of the District’s three- and four-year olds are served through District-operated ECEAP and special needs preschool programs. The challenge was finding a way to reach the remaining 4,700 children, half of whom could be expected to enter kindergarten already behind if they did not have the benefit of early intervention.) A family-based program had the additional advantage of recognizing parents as their children’s first and primary teacher. READY! for Kindergarten acknowledges that role by providing parents with the targets, tools and training they need to help their children be successful in school.

READY! for Kindergarten was launched in Winter 2003, following a pilot class in May 2001.

Program Description

READY! for Kindergarten provides hands-on training and research-based information for parents of children birth to five years old. The program consists of fifteen lessons, with parents attending three sessions a year (fall, winter, and spring), separated into one of five classes depending on their child’s age: birth-age 1, age 1-2, age 2-3, age 3-4, age 4-5. In other words, parents of a newborn would attend the three sessions designed for families with children birth to age 1. The following year they would attend the three sessions for families with children age 1-2, and so on, until they had completed a total of fifteen lessons.⁷

⁵ These findings are consistent with national data for both reading and math. See Delivering on the Promise by Lynn Fielding, Nancy Kerr, and Paul Rosier (Kennewick: The New Foundation Press, 2004), pp. 160 and 162.

⁶ National Research Council. Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. Edited by Catherine E. Snow, Susan Burns and Peg Griffin, Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998.

⁷ While the District would like parents to begin with the program when their children are infants and continue to participate as their children get older, parents tend to move in and out of the program. Currently, about two-thirds continue participating from one year to the next. At the same time, previously non-participating parents join the program at different age levels.

Since its inception, nearly 6,500 parents have participated in READY!, with approximately 1,000 parents attending each fall, winter and spring session. The largest percentage of participants (about 25%) is parents of four-year-olds; the smallest percentage is parents of infants (about 15%). The remaining participants are fairly equally divided among the other three age groups (about 20% each).

All READY! for Kindergarten classes are held concurrently at a Kennewick elementary school during the evening or on Saturday mornings. Classes are taught in both English and Spanish, with 15-20 parents per class.⁸ (Accommodating the 1,000 parents who participate in each session requires thirty instructors and five to seven evenings/Saturday mornings of classes per session.)

Curriculum and Parent Materials:

The READY! curriculum is built on a series of targets (or measurable skills) in each of three areas: letters and sounds, math, and social. All targets are research-based and age-appropriate. In selecting targets, the program designers focused on the skills for a five-year-old child that are the greatest predictors of eventual success in reading. These skills were then ramped backwards at each age level to birth.⁹ Great effort was made to write the targets in family-friendly terms.

The targets for a school-ready five-year old are:

Letters and Sounds: enjoys being read to and can retell a story; recognizes and names 10-15 alphabet letters and their sounds; repeats beginning and ending sounds in words; speaks in complete sentences; and prints his or her first name.

Math: counts in order from 1 to 20; recognizes numbers and quantities to 5; names and sorts items by colors, shape and size; understands concepts such as more, less, same, above, below, big and small.

Social: settles into new groups or situations; can concentrate on a task for 5 minutes; follows simple directions; shows kindness and concern for others.

⁸ The Spanish language classes are divided into two age groups: birth-age 3 and age 4-5. These classes also include more of a social aspect, with parents staying after class to visit with one another.

⁹ For an in-depth discussion of the age-level targets developed for READY! for Kindergarten, see Chapter 23 of Delivering on the Promise (op cit).

Participating parents receive a learning kit that is updated each session with age-appropriate interactive learning aids or tools for them to use while playing with their child at home. (Tools include floor puzzles, colorful wooden shapes, blocks, magnetic letters and numbers, child’s tape player, and listening tapes). In addition, a new book from the Dolly Parton Imagination Library is mailed directly to the child’s home each month. All tools and books can be used to teach all of the targets.

The bulk of class time is spent on teaching parents how to use the tools while playing with their child at home. Appropriate parent-child interaction is emphasized and encouraged. The remaining time is devoted to providing research-based information on child development and to showing parents how the learning kit activities tie to specific age-level targets. State-of-the-art presentation technology not only helps assure consistency across classes but it also allows live video clips from child development experts to be inserted into the curriculum.

The READY! curriculum and parent materials are continuously updated to incorporate new research and keep the materials fresh.

Staffing:

Classes for parents of four-year olds are taught by District kindergarten teachers. This provides parents an opportunity to hear first-hand what teachers expect their children to know and be able to do when they enter kindergarten. Other age-level classes are taught by instructors with various experiences. All instructors participate in a training class before each session.

Training Community Early Learning Providers

In partnership with Benton Franklin Child Care Resource and Referral and ESD 123, READY! for Kindergarten classes are being offered to community early learning providers (child care centers and family homes) in the Kennewick area. Classes are taught in both English and Spanish, with 20 providers in each group. Program participants receive STARS credit as well as an abbreviated set of READY! learning aids. (Most participants already have many of the tools prior to the training.) In addition to creating a different pathway for reaching children, the training for community providers offers them a much appreciated opportunity to develop their professional skills and network with one another.

Program Cost and Funding

The National Children’s Reading Foundation (the evolution of the original Reading Foundation) developed the age-level targets and the initial set of fifteen lessons used by READY! for Kindergarten. Implementation of the program was then funded by the Kennewick School District, which allocates \$210,000 of its I-728 funds to READY! annually. This allocation covers the on-going costs of program management, curriculum maintenance, class instructors, parent

materials, program promotion, and networking with child care providers and community agencies.

In terms of doing a cost/benefit analysis of the District's investment, it is important to note that the age-level targets and curriculum developed for READY! have many uses beyond the parent classes. For example, the targets are used as part of broader Reading Foundation and Kennewick School District parent education efforts and, as noted above, the curriculum is being used to train community child care providers. In addition, the local Early Head Start contractor is exploring how to use many of the concepts in their program and the District-operated ECEAP program uses the READY! tools during home visits.

Administration

READY! for Kindergarten is administered by the National Children's Reading Foundation on behalf of the Kennewick School District. A program director manages READY! logistics (scheduling classes, hiring staff, registering parents, etc.) for the District, while curriculum updates are done by the Reading Foundation.

The Reading Foundation has recently hired a Marketing Director to put the READY! program together as a comprehensive package that other districts can easily use. Currently, the Reading Foundation has licensing agreements with several of its branches, including the Columbia School District in Walla Walla County.

Pre-K/K-3 Alignment

The READY! targets are the skills identified by research as having the highest correlation to success in school, specifically learning to read and do math early and well. As such, they are totally aligned with the Kennewick School District's third grade reading and math goals.

Program Evaluation

The Reading Foundation is currently working with Washington State University to design a comprehensive evaluation of READY! for Kindergarten. In the meantime, initial data on student outcomes, teacher and parent perceptions and cost savings all suggest that the program is being very successful.

Student Outcomes:

Since implementation of READY!, the percent of Kennewick kindergartners entering school with age-appropriate language and literacy skills has increased from 50% to 55%. Equally important, the number of most at-risk children (those entering kindergarten two-three years behind) has declined. The scores for this fall's entering kindergartners will tell whether READY is being successful in not only reducing the number of lowest scoring children but also increasing the number of children entering kindergarten with age-appropriate skills.

Teacher and Parent Perceptions:

Kennewick elementary school teachers generally agree that READY! has been an important addition to the Reading Foundation's and the District's strategies for increasing students' reading skills. Kindergarten teachers who are also READY! instructors note the improvement in entering kindergartners' scores and applaud the effort to reach out to parents as their children's first teacher. As one educator said, "Teachers have wanted a program like this for a long time to help parents in their role in the educational process."

Pre-and post-session surveys of participating parents are overwhelmingly positive. Typical parent comments are: "All of the learning material is wonderful – and very much appreciated"; "Instruction was excellent"; "I am going to change how I read to my child"; "I am going to play more with my child"; "Keep teaching parents – We need reassurance". Comments made by random samples of participants at summer focus groups suggest that READY! has not only increased parents' knowledge but also changed their perception of parenting and how members of their family relate to one another.

These comments support what many community members are observing: The Reading Foundation's and District's focus on reading is changing the culture of the community. Reading is part of the day – and making reading part of the day is good parenting – in Kennewick.

Cost Savings:

In terms of a cost-benefit analysis of READY!, the key question for the Kennewick School District is how many children need remediation to read at grade level of the end of third grade. What savings can be realized by investing in early intervention as opposed to later remediation? The Reading Foundation and the District are currently examining this issue and will have data available shortly.

Keys to Success

- Strong district leadership. Kennewick's superintendent and school board have been relentless in their commitment to the District's third reading goal and in holding themselves accountable for achieving the goal.
- Data-driven, research-based program. READY! for Kindergarten was developed in response to the documented gap in achievement among Kennewick's entering kindergartners and the program's targets and curriculum are research-based. The curriculum is continuously updated as new research becomes available, and on-going collection of student outcomes data will allow the District to modify the program as appropriate.
- Clear focus on reading. When possible models were first being explored, the District made the decision to focus on reading rather than broader parenting skills. In addition to not duplicating other resources that are available in the

community, this decision made it possible to develop a very tight program whose purpose is very easy for people to understand and embrace.

- Emphasis on birth to age 5 (not just four-year olds). READY! recognizes that children are born learning, and that if learning begins at birth, then school readiness begins at birth as well. The birth to age 5 framework is also consistent with the concept of life-long learning.
- Empowerment of parents. READY! not only acknowledges and honors parents' role as their children's primary teachers but it also provides them the tools to fulfill that role successfully. This is particularly appreciated by parents who have been intimidated by the school system or felt unable to give their children what they needed.

Future Plans

Future plans focus on making READY! for Kindergarten more accessible to a wider audience. Ready! now offers school districts a continuing license which either allows them to use the targets and curriculum or provides for full, turnkey implementation for any size program. The license, scaled to the needs of the district, costs far less than developing an equivalent parent training program.

The Reading Foundation is also working on certificate program for family home child care providers, with persons completing the program receiving a plaque that they could use for marketing purposes. The idea of giving child care providers READY! materials for them to pass on to parents is also being considered.

Another exciting idea is using website-based support to increase the program's reach. Parent registration can already be done online; what's being explored is making READY! materials available online (so that parents and child care providers can download activities) as well as the possibility of doing the actual training via distance learning.

For more information, please contact:

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Or, visit the READY! for Kindergarten website: www.readyforkindergarten.org

Also, read the two books describing the establishment of Kennewick's reading goal and strategies for achieving reading and math goals:

Lynn Fielding, Nancy Kerr, and Paul Rosier. The 90% Reading Goal.
Kennewick: The New Foundation Press, 1998.

Lynn Fielding, Nancy Kerr, and Paul Rosier. Delivering on the Promise.
Kennewick: The New Foundation Press, 2004.
www.deliveringonthepromisebook.com