

Teachers Make the *Difference*

Neuhaus Education Center's *Teachers Make the Difference* study focuses on how professional development for pre-K teachers impacts teachers, classrooms, and students.

In 2013, the Neuhaus Education Center contracted with Education Northwest to determine whether the Neuhaus professional development program for early childhood teachers improves teacher knowledge and classroom practices and ultimately leads to better results for students.

The program, *Teachers make the Difference* (TMTD), is for pre-kindergarten teachers who work with disadvantaged students in traditionally lower-performing schools in the Houston Independent School District. The evaluation involved 184 pre-K educators in the year-long TMTD program designed to improve teachers' skills and student outcomes in four areas of early literacy: oral language, letter recognition, concepts of print, and phonological awareness (how students understand and use oral language).

Throughout the 2013-14 school year, the TMTD program offered six workshops and coaching services. Teachers were divided into two groups: "High Intensity" teachers, whose group received weekly coaching, and "Low Intensity" teachers who received monthly coaching. (For comparison purposes, a third group of teachers who took part in the TMTD workshops but received no coaching were included in the evaluation.)

The Education Northwest evaluation was intended to answer a number of questions about the effectiveness of the TMTD program. For example, was the TMTD program implemented as intended? Did the teachers use what they had learned through TMTD? To what degree did the TMTD teachers increase their knowledge of early childhood literacy? And were student outcomes different for students of TMTD teachers and comparison teachers?



Among the study's findings:

- ✓ In the fall of the year, students of the comparison teachers performed better than students in TMTD teachers' classrooms in all areas of the Early Literacy Quick Assessment (ELQA) except "picture naming." The ELQA is an online assessment and grouping program developed by the University of Oklahoma. In the spring, the fall trends were reversed: TMTD teachers' students performed better than students in classrooms of comparison teachers.
- ✓ The knowledge of TMTD teachers, as measured by the Teacher Knowledge Survey created by Neuhaus, increased significantly from fall to spring (from 18 correct answers in the fall to 21 in the spring).
- ✓ Teachers from both High and Low intensity groups used TMTD materials in their classrooms with similar frequency, most often with their most struggling students.
- ✓ Teachers reported that the TMTD coaching made a difference in how they instructed students, with at least two-thirds of the teachers indicating that demonstration lessons and side-by-side and shadow coaching "substantially" impacted their instruction.
- ✓ Almost all teachers believed that parents are capable of improving the early language and literacy skills of their children. Most teachers communicated with parents at least once a month, and had a variety of strategies to share with parents. There were no differences in these reports between TMTD and comparison teachers.
- ✓ TMTD teachers were significantly more likely than comparison teachers to report having more ways to help all students. In other areas of classroom instruction, there were no reported differences between TMTD and comparison teachers.

Neuhaus was largely successful in its efforts, according to the evaluation, and teachers reported that the time spent on a variety of early literacy topics was "just right." As the improved scores on the Neuhaus Teacher Knowledge Survey indicated, between the fall and spring teachers gained knowledge of early literacy concepts. And teachers reported that they used the TMTD materials in their classrooms.

Yet there were few reported differences between TMTD and the comparison teachers regarding classroom instruction (although students of TMTD teachers improved their skills at a faster rate than did students of the comparison) and survey results suggested both the TMTD and comparison teachers engaged similarly in family literacy activities and communication. The report suggests further study of the impact of coaching would be useful.

The Education Northwest evaluation offered several recommendations to Neuhaus for the future: examine the reliability and validity of the ELQA used to measure student growth; select a consistent coaching level for all teachers in the TMTD program; add more training in the five areas identified by teachers as being insufficiently covered and in the areas identified by teachers as positively impacting their instruction; and continue to evaluate TMTD using more objective measures.