



Program prepping preschoolers for success

Leaping Ahead

A project developed in the early 1990s to help prepare under-privileged Dallas children for elementary school has become a model for schools across Texas and the nation.

Since 1994, children at the Margaret H. Cone Head Start Center, a preschool in one of Dallas' most economically depressed neighborhoods, have participated in the Language Enrichment Activities Program (LEAP). The program was created by Nell Carvell, director of LEAP and of the Head Start Initiative at Southern Methodist University (SMU), with assistance from the Texas Instruments Foundation, a charitable foundation of Dallas-based Texas Instruments (TI). LEAP focuses on developing preschoolers' vocabulary and listening and motor skills.

Carvell said she designed the program to enhance the Head Start curriculum at the Cone center. Head Start is a federally funded program that provides services to preschool children of low-income families.

When the Cone center opened in 1990, its families had an average annual income of about \$7,000, according to the TI Foundation. Single parents headed 90 percent of the area's households, and just 39 percent of Cone parents were high school graduates.

"Those children were not developmentally at a language level commensurate with their age," Carvell said. "They were 4-year-olds performing more at a 3-year-old level. It's not a learning disability, it's an environmental disability."

Carvell's program focuses on "phonological awareness," and exposing children to the printed word in the classroom and in their surroundings. For example, LEAP teaches children that the "golden arches" from McDonald's signs make an "M."

"What I try to do is put into the Head Start classroom things that many children who are not disadvantaged automatically get at home--an awareness of the alphabet, playing with letters and sounds and language and rhyming games and alliteration," Carvell said. "I wanted to get that into their everyday lives so when they went to kindergarten, they weren't behind."

In a LEAP classroom, children do not sit at desks. Instead, students visit different areas around the classroom, including a block center, a "science and discovery table" and other settings.

Showing results

Cone teachers began using LEAP in 1994 and quickly saw results. Prior to LEAP, children who took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) after completing a year at Cone averaged scores in the 20th to 30th percentile. After LEAP, Cone children's average scores on the ITBS increased to the 60th to 70th percentile.

Academic gains from LEAP stay with children through elementary school. In spring 2001, 85 percent of the third graders who participated in LEAP at Cone and attended the local elementary school, Julia C. Frazier Elementary, could read at or above grade level on the Stanford 9, a national achievement test.

In 2002, 90 percent of Frazier third-graders who had attended Cone were reading at or above grade level, compared with 74 percent of Frazier students who had not attended Cone.

On the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), students who attended Cone score an average 15 points more than peers at Frazier who did not attend Cone. Before LEAP, 42 percent of Frazier third-graders passed the TAAS; by 2001, 98 percent did. As a result, in 2002 the Texas Education Agency (TEA) rated Frazier "Exemplary," the highest ranking TEA awards schools.

Frazier's principal, Rachel George, said she and Frazier's teachers work hard to maintain the gains students make through LEAP and to create a safe environment for students. The school is located near Frazier Courts, a housing project in an area plagued by domestic violence, burglaries, gang activity and vandalism.

If a student does not show up for class, George or a teacher will go to that student's home to bring them to school.

"On cloudy days, when the sun is not shining through their windows, our students have a difficult time waking up," George said. "So we go to their apartments and wake up everyone and wait until the child awakens and gets ready for school."

Frazier also provides clothing, shoes and school supplies for its students through donations from the Omicron Mu chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, the Bagley Foundation and the TI Foundation, George said. Frazier teachers have been known to take home students' dirty clothing on the weekends, wash the clothes and bring them back on Mondays.

"We have got to make sure that we do everything possible to equalize the playing field for the students to have a chance," George said.

Nationwide leaps

Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs throughout Dallas and the U.S. are modeling programs after LEAP.

As of August 2002, at least 16,000 children in various states had participated in LEAP. Head Start of Greater Dallas implemented the program in all 27 of its locations. Dallas Independent School District (DISD) incorporated it in 240 preschool classrooms during the 2002-03 school year.

"The Language Enrichment Activities Program was selected by the Dallas Independent School District because it is a developmentally appropriate and research-based program," said Dr. Mike Moses, superintendent of DISD.

Several other Texas cities use LEAP in their schools and Head Start programs, Carvell said. Houston's Gulf Coast Head Start offers LEAP in 100 classrooms, and school districts in Abilene, Mount Pleasant, Irving, Kilgore, Longview and Jacksonville use the program.

Challenging start

The Cone center initially wasn't the success its founders had envisioned. In 1988, the TI Foundation wanted to invest in the Dallas community and commissioned a study by the University of Texas at Arlington to determine whether a model preschool program could prepare disadvantaged children for elementary school. The foundation teamed with Head Start of Greater Dallas to open the Cone center.

Head Start of Greater Dallas funded the center's basic programs, and the TI Foundation initially invested \$149,000 to pay for services beyond those usually available at a Head Start center, said Ann Minnis, director and grants administrator of the TI Foundation. Extras included a full-time nurse practitioner, two graduate social workers, a parent employment program and increased staff salaries and benefits.

But after two years, former Cone students who had completed kindergarten still scored at the 20th to 30th percentile on the ITBS.

Seeking to improve the program, the TI Foundation asked SMU to develop a pre-reading curriculum and linked with Carvell.

"LEAP is like the missing piece," said Rob Massonneau, director of external affairs for Head Start of Greater Dallas. "You have to have the whole pie."

Giving back

To expand LEAP's success, in 2002 a group of Dallas businesses, civic organizations, education providers and others created the Dallas Early Childhood Reading Initiative Working Group (DECRI). The group aims to provide a language-rich, pre-literacy curriculum to children of low-income families.

Partners in DECRI include Head Start of Greater Dallas; DISD; The Child Care Group/Child Care Management Services; SMU; the National Center for Educational Accountability; and the TI Foundation.

Since 1988, the TI Foundation has invested about \$3 million in the Cone center and for research to develop LEAP.

The TI Foundation initially chose to invest in Dallas' Head Start programs to improve the educational levels of economically deprived children, Minnis said.

Tom Luce, chairman of the National Center for Educational Accountability, said LEAP is a proven program that is replicable in preschools across the country.

"LEAP has produced outstanding results for children from poverty," Luce said. "Children in Dallas, across Texas, and now in numerous other states--from Alabama to California--experience the benefits of this language-rich curriculum."

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