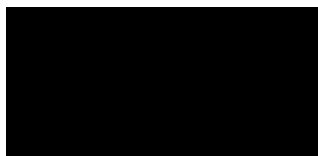


KinderCamp Evaluation 2009:

School
Readiness
Outcomes



Flagstaff Unified School District



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Introduction

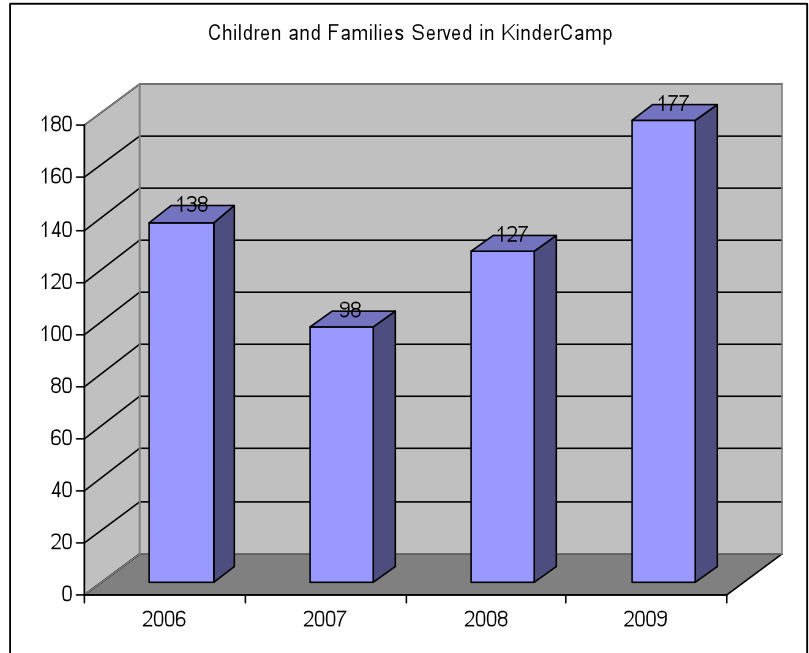
In July of 2009, KinderCamp served more children and families in the Flagstaff area than any previous year in the program's history. In 2008, the program reached 127 children at three different KinderCamp sites. This year, KinderCamp helped 177 children and families prepare to enter school at four sites within the Flagstaff community - Puente de Hozo, Kinsey, Christensen, and South Beaver elementary schools. The total number of children and families served over the course of the KinderCamp program (2005-2009) is 584.

This year, children attended KinderCamp for 19 days and a total of instructional 95 hours. This is an increase in the length of the program from 2008 when children attended KinderCamp for only 15 days and 60 total instructional hours.

Entering school is an important milestone in the lives of young children and quality learning opportunities

at an early age prepare children to succeed throughout their entire academic experience. KinderCamp is specifically designed to provide opportunities for children with "high needs" in the Flagstaff community to develop social-emotional and academic literacy skills needed to enter kindergarten and thrive in years to come. Children with high needs are identified as having less than six months of pre-school experience, children of parents with no post-high school education, children from non-English speaking homes, and children born prematurely as they are more susceptible to developmental health risks.

The success of KinderCamp is due to the collaborative efforts the Flagstaff Unified School District, Head Start, and the Alliance for Children's Early Success (ACES) - a community initiative council of United Way of Northern Arizona. ACES is comprised of several affiliate private and public organizations, agencies, groups, families, and individuals within the Flagstaff community, providing a diversity of knowledge and experience in early childhood development to inform and stimulate the creation of strategic programs such as KinderCamp. Together these partners have worked to provide the expertise and resources needed to make KinderCamp effective in increasing school readiness.



The following KinderCamp evaluation includes a synthesis of qualitative data gathered from KinderCamp parents and teachers, and analysis of quantitative data including literacy assessment scores of KinderCamp children. Overall, KinderCamp and the partners involved in putting this program together aim to increase the number of children in the Flagstaff community who are ready to enter school and stay on track for success in later stages of education. Based on evaluation findings, KinderCamp is helping the community to meet this goal, and the program is impacting the lives of many children and families as they take their first big steps into education.

**A Mother's Experience:
Academic and Social-Emotional Readiness Provided by KinderCamp**

Linda Denham is the mother of two adopted children who attended KinderCamp before entering kindergarten at Kinsey Elementary School in the fall of 2009. Linda and her husband witnessed several improvements in their children's academic and social-emotional skills as they proceed through the KinderCamp program. The following section is a summary of Linda's story about her family's experience with KinderCamp 2009.

“When we were preparing for the transition to kindergarten the kids were nervous, especially my daughter because she was a little more reserved and didn't like new groups or new surroundings. They wanted their old pre-school teacher and they were worried about being in a big school with the big kids.

At KinderCamp the pace was much more relaxed than it was during the first week of kindergarten, and the teachers were able to help the kids with each of their individual fears and needs.

It was interesting to see that now my daughter has overcome her fears within new social settings and become a leader in her classroom. We told her that she could show the other kindergarteners where the bathrooms are because she already has that knowledge. So she is making friends and she isn't afraid to go to school.

For my son it was more of an issue of academic readiness. He didn't know his letters and we had been working with him at home and in pre-school, but, with the learning structure of KinderCamp, it was only *one month* and he learned to recognize *every single letter*.

I feel much better as a parent, now that my son is going into kindergarten knowing his letters. I didn't want him to feel overwhelmed right away and end up getting discouraged. Knowing his letters before starting kindergarten helped take

the pressure off and he feels happy and confident about being in school. Something that is so important for me is that my kids *enjoy* learning.

Both of our kids really feel like Kinsey is *their* school now. They know how to get around, they know the structure of the school day, they are used to the longer days away from home, and they are comfortable. I think that teachers have a lot to cover in the first few months of school and it can be overwhelming when kids are working to become oriented, but my kids are already adjusted and ready to listen and learn.

The Joy of Learning

According to one KinderCamp mother, the greatest success of the program can be found in the joy of learning that her children experienced during and after KinderCamp. Her son became more prepared for kindergarten academically and her daughter made improvements socially. Now both of her children are ready and excited to begin school.

My kids really did enjoy KinderCamp. There wasn't a day that they didn't want to go, and the teachers were phenomenal. I think that is the biggest success - that the KinderCamp teachers really helped my kids get excited for school and establish that *joy of learning*. It was like night and day, seeing the improvements during KinderCamp, for my son academically and for my daughter socially. My children are really ready for the structure and responsibility of kindergarten and they already seem to enjoy it."

Learning to Read: KinderCamp Literacy Assessment Scores

Through a contract with Northland-Rural Therapy Associates, LLC, 151 KinderCamp children participated in pre and post Phonological Awareness Literacy Screenings (PALS). PALS is a comprehensive assessment of age appropriate fundamental skills for literacy. By testing skills in the areas of rhyme awareness, beginning sounds, lowercase alphabet recognition, and letter sounds, PALS assessment scores are proven to indicate future reading success. Results of the 2009 PALS assessment are provided in the following section.

The four skills measured in the PALS assessment are considered fundamentals of literacy, forming a foundation for the process of learning to read. Awareness of rhyme and beginning sounds are signs of overall phonological understanding, a prerequisite for children to begin learning letter sounds and matching speech to printed words. The remaining portions of this assessment, knowledge of the lowercase alphabet and individual letter sounds, measure a child's abilities in the next essential phase of becoming literate by challenging children to identify and differentiate between letters and words. According to 2009 PALS results, children entered KinderCamp with the lowest level of skill in letter sound awareness. This

is to be expected as demonstrating awareness of letter sounds is the most challenging literacy skill assessed. However, post-test outcomes revealed that

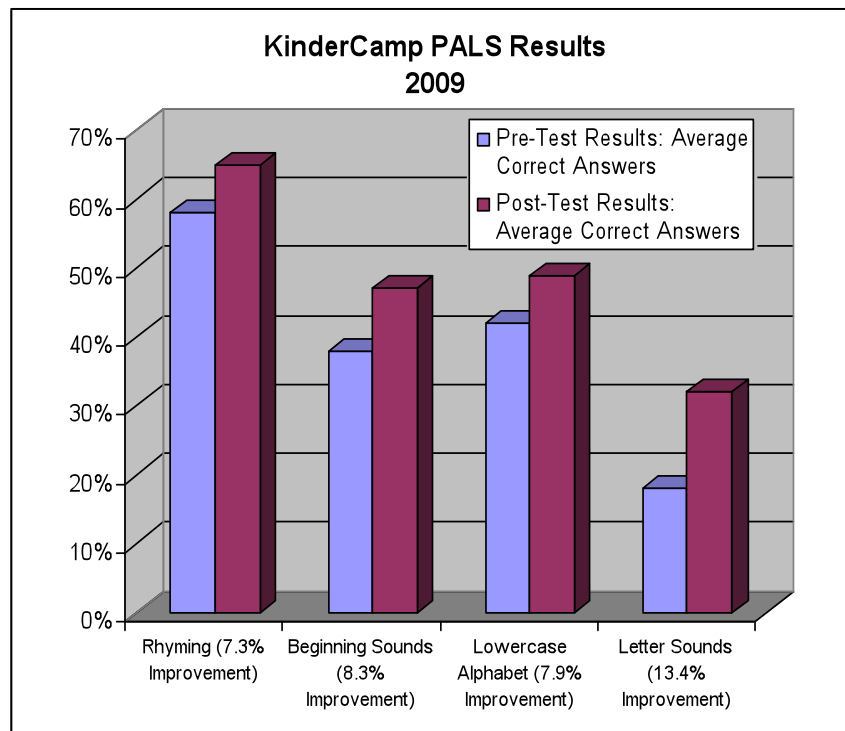
children also made the most profound improvements in this area during KinderCamp 2009, indicating that KinderCamp impacted children in the area that development was most needed.

Advancing Literacy Skills

The strongest improvement in literacy skills revealed by the PALS test results are in the area of recognizing letter sounds, which is a fundamental step in learning to read. This is also the skill area in which children showed the greatest need for advancement upon entering KinderCamp. By the end of the program, KinderCamp children nearly doubled their scores in recognizing letter sounds, demonstrating the programs success in meeting children’s primary literacy needs.

The 2009 KinderCamp PALS results show what a difference four short weeks can make in advancing

fundamental literacy skills of KinderCamp children. This year, **123 students (81% of students tested)** showed gains in literacy skills during KinderCamp; 28 showed flat or negative gains. The chart below shows the improvements of KinderCamp children in each of the four testing areas.



After conducting the first set of PALS assessments, the professional team from Northland-Rural Therapy Associates identified 47 children from two of the 2009 KinderCamp locations (Christensen and Kinsey) who showed the highest level of need in the development of literacy skills. Through a partnership with Northern

Arizona University’s Communication Sciences and Disorders program, certified Speech and Language Pathologists worked with university students to provide individualized literacy assistance to these high needs students three days a week throughout KinderCamp. Additionally, working with these individual KinderCamp children provided opportunities for professional development to the university students involved. According to a representative from Northland-Rural Therapy Associates, Northern Arizona University students gained the, “Unique experience of actually going into a community and working with children.”

Building Bridges between Family and School: Family Member Evaluation of KinderCamp Home Visits

Home visits are one component of KinderCamp that took place throughout the month of July, giving parents and teachers opportunities to meet and discuss school readiness. Teachers visited the homes of KinderCamp families to address the specific progress for each child, and provide early childhood development information and materials to family members. The following section synthesizes the general themes to arise in feedback provided by family members regarding home visits.

The primary benefit of home visits, reported by KinderCamp parents, were the opportunities for parents to learn about what their children are doing during KinderCamp. Some parents commented that having a greater knowledge of what the children are learning not only helped them understand the benefits of the program, but also allowed parents to reinforce and continue similar lessons at home. Parents also gained a better understanding of specific learning and developmental needs for their children as perceived by the teacher, and parents shared suggestions with teachers based on their own observations and knowledge of their child.

Parental Involvement in Learning to Succeed

“It was important for me to learn how my child was doing academically and socially, and what his strengths and weaknesses are so that we can help him improve before he even starts school.”

Making Connections

“After the home visit we started using the activities packet from the teacher and our son really become motivated to practice writing his letters at home. It seemed like he started to feel more of a connection between his home and school life.”

Getting to know the teachers was also a great benefit and parents felt that their questions and concerns for their children were appropriately addressed during home visits. Furthermore, parents commented that teachers provided knowledge of community resources for families, and many parents reported using information materials distributed

during home visits.

Many parents appreciated seeing the interest of KinderCamp teachers in the success of their child and one parent commented that they felt the teacher would “not allow their child to fall behind.” The home visits eased the fears of parents about sending their children to school and many parents reported that their child was excited and proud to have their teacher in their own home. One parent noted that she felt like she was “building a friendship” with the teacher due to the less formal setting.

Several parents reported that children were more excited to attend school after the home visits and children began to talk more about their experiences at KinderCamp due to the established link between home and school. One family stated that their child became more motivated to practice writing at home and the child felt an increased “connection between his home and school life.” Another parent stated that, “Our son seemed to be able to feel more comfortable in the classroom and he felt more assured that his teacher would take care of him when Mom and/or Dad were not there.” Some parents also reported improvements in their child’s behavior as children realized that parents and teachers have contact with each other.

Some parents discussed the issue of separating from their child in the morning before school, but they each noted that the home visits helped their family overcome this issue as represented in the comment below.

Overcoming Fears

“Originally we experienced some separation anxiety. Thanks to the patience and the visit from Mrs. Campbell we worked it out. Now my son feels safe and comfortable at school. Thank you KinderCamp for providing the practice!” (Below this statement the child wrote “I love school.”)

Some parents felt uncomfortable with the idea of having the teachers in their homes or unable to do so and preferred to have a one-on-one conference at the school. Others experienced difficulty with scheduling the visit and reported time-constraints as a challenge. Some parents also would have liked to have a better idea of what to expect during the home visit in order to prepare questions for teachers before the visit.

Overall, parents were happy to have the opportunity to participate in the home visits. They reported improvements in their child’s confidence, excitement about school, and learning skills. One family living on a Native Reservation near Flagstaff wrote:

“I would like to thank you for giving us an opportunity to know how the Flagstaff schools teach. We do not have summer classes on the Reservation for kindergarteners, so it was a whole different experience for our son.”

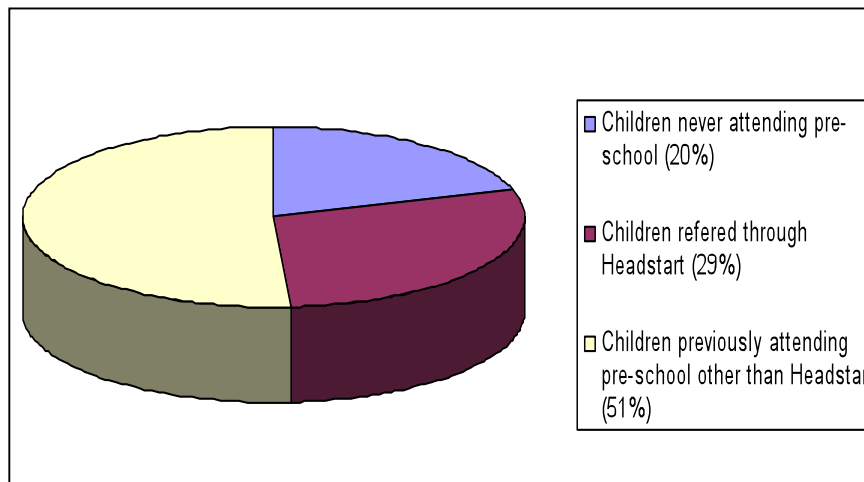
Another parent wrote:

“I am so, so happy there was this program available to us. I work two jobs and my husband works a grave-yard job, so it makes it difficult to really focus. Ms. Hayes gave me the wonderful idea of flash cards - a quick and fun idea to start with my son. Thank you so much. I loved KinderCamp and I hope it continues and grows in the future!”

Family Perspectives of Program Effectiveness: KinderCamp 2009 Family Survey Results

Brief surveys were distributed to all families attending the KinderCamp 2009 Bridging Ceremonies to celebrate their child’s completion of the KinderCamp program. Surveys focused on family opinions of KinderCamp, the involvement of family members in early learning, and their suggestions for program improvement. The following section provides an analysis and summary of survey findings.

A total on 135 families, out of 177, completed the KinderCamp 2009 Family Survey. Of the families participating in the survey, 27 children (20%) had never



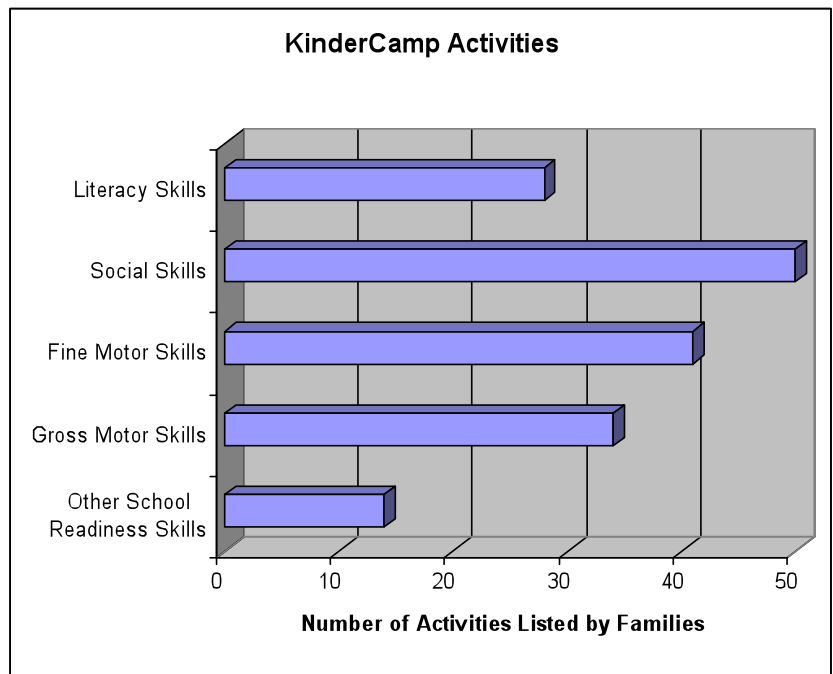
attended any type of formalized schooling previous to KinderCamp, 39 children (29%) were referred to KinderCamp by Head Start, and 69 children (51%) had previously attended a pre-school other than Head Start for an undisclosed period of time. Head Start

referred children to KinderCamp based on assessment information indicating that a child has not reached mastery of school readiness skills measured during their time at Head Start, or based on the fact that a child is an English language learner.

Listed below are results of various questions from the Family Survey.

- ✚ 119 families (88%) participating in survey reported “always” reading childhood development information and materials provided through KinderCamp.
- ✚ 30 families (22%) reported volunteering in their child’s classroom “always” or “often,” while 39 (29%) volunteer “sometimes.” However, 37 (27%) have “never” volunteered.
- ✚ At home, most families reported that children “often” or “always” participate in activities that improve the quality of early learning, such as cooking, laundry, or gardening, and most parents report “always” doing fun activities as a family.
- ✚ The most commonly reported amount of time that families spend reading to their child was “daily” for all survey participants, however, participants whose children never attended pre-school primarily reported reading to their child “2 to 3 times a week.”
- ✚ 99% of all families participating in the survey reported that their child “enjoyed” KinderCamp.
- ✚ 102 families (76%) reported “absolutely” believing that KinderCamp helped their child prepare for kindergarten.
- ✚ 101 families (75%) rated the overall KinderCamp program as “excellent.”

Additionally, families were asked to list their child’s favorite activities during KinderCamp, providing insight into the types of activities that impacted children and families most throughout the program. The most commonly listed activities were related to developing social-emotional skills such as “making friends.” Secondly,



families listed activities related to developing fine motor skills such as “cutting” and “drawing”. “Recess” or “playing outside” were the third most commonly listed, which relate to gross motor skills. Activities aiding in the development of literacy skills were forth, including “reading”, “writing names”, “counting”, and “singing the alphabet song.” Finally, the fifth most common category of favorite activities can be described as structural school readiness skills such as “riding the bus” or “participating in meal times.” Of course many of these activities overlap several skill areas; however, this survey along with interviews with various parents, revealed that families perceived KinderCamp as primarily valuable in helping their children adjust socially and develop the skills to interact with other children and teachers in a school environment

Some themes arising in family suggestions for the improvement of KinderCamp include:

- ✚ Improving bus scheduling and information for families regarding bus procedures.
- ✚ Improving organization, communication, and supervision such as providing a sign in sheet when children arrive at school, sending out information for family volunteer opportunities, weekly agendas of class activities, and reminders before home visits.
- ✚ Providing before and after school care for families with longer work schedules.

Below are some additional comments provided by families through the survey:

“Our daughter has been to child care for three months when she was three and I thought she would be disinterested or afraid to go to kindergarten, but now I’m confident she will be doing great when she does start.”

“My son loved KinderCamp so much, it was never difficult to get up in the morning to get ready for school. He never rode a school bus before, but because school was so awesome, he was brave everyday. He would share with me everything he learned in class that day and looked forward to the next day. Thank you for helping my son to love school.”

Teaching School Readiness: Improvements Experienced by KinderCamp Teachers

As KinderCamp 2009 came to a close, KinderCamp teachers from all four locations gathered together for a focus group to discuss their experiences over the course

of the program. The focus group consisted of questions regarding primary needs of young children upon entering KinderCamp this year, benefits witnessed and changes perceived by teachers as children completed the program, and ways in which KinderCamp influenced the teachers themselves. The following section is a summary of conversations surfacing during the KinderCamp 2009 teacher focus group.

KinderCamp teachers discussed several key school readiness needs apparent in KinderCamp students in early July when the program began. The needs perceived by teachers primarily revolved around social-emotional or behavioral skills, and secondarily related to fine motor and literacy skills.

Several teachers commented on basic fine motor skills, such as holding a pencil, as a needed foundation for learning in kindergarten. Many children entered KinderCamp unfamiliar with how to handle academic tools. One teacher provided the statement that, “Many kids never had pre-school or any kind of formal time away from their families so little things that we see as important as educators may not be done in the home, like developing motor skills needed for learning their names.” Furthermore, learning to read and write their own names is one of the important literacy activities that KinderCamp teachers focus on throughout the program. Another teacher followed up on the previous comment saying:

“Learning their names is a big process. It involves writing but also coming into the classroom and knowing what their name looks like - differentiating their own name from their friend’s names. So first, learning names is about identifying their name. The next stages are picking out the letters in their name, learning how to copy their name, and then moving to the stage where they don’t have a model but they just know their name. At KinderCamp we really help the children through that process and I’m amazed at how they are able to learn it all in four weeks.”

Similar to themes provided in parent feedback, social behaviors that support a learning environment were the most commonly discussed needs perceived by KinderCamp teachers. Several teachers also discussed behaviors or “school etiquette” during mealtimes, in the bathroom, and when interacting with fellow classmates or teachers. One teacher commented that, “The kids didn’t really know how to talk to teachers, they would just yell and interrupt but they learned how to control that and act appropriately.” Another teacher discussed classmate interaction saying:

Learning Classroom Behavior

“The type of behavior that is appropriate at school is important for the kids to get used to right away, such as sitting in the circle, raising your hand, making a line, staying quite in the hallway... These behaviors make it possible for children to succeed academically.”

“The kids had to learn how to interact and play because some of them have never played with other kids before in a school environment. They learn social problem solving like telling other kids if they don’t like something instead of running to a grown up. They learn to advocate for themselves and know that they have the power to make things happen on their own.”

Like KinderCamp family members, teachers also noted that some children and families experience anxieties when entering school for the first time. Teachers discussed specific needs in this area and how KinderCamp helped children to establish the social-emotional skills and communication to overcome these needs. Separation from parents is one example and as a teacher noted that, “For parents, KinderCamp is preparing them for the time away from their child and, for the child, coming to KinderCamp and learning to let their parents go in the morning helps give the child the courage to go back to school everyday.” Other teachers provided specific instances in which KinderCamp provided the opportunities for children and families to resolve unexpected issues before entering school, such as the following story:

“We had a child who was scared when her mother left in the morning and we found out that it really had nothing to do with the separation issues most children have. This girl was actually scared that the bus driver would drop her off at the wrong stop after school. She had real fears but coming to school was not the problem, it was going home on the bus. So we were able to help her communicate with her mom and they made a compromise that she would ride the bus to school and her mom would pick her up after school. Now she actually rides the bus home too. She just needed to overcome her fear and the parents and teacher were able to communicate and help her with that so that she can start school without having to worry about anything.”

One teacher provided further input, relating the behavior, interaction and communication skills discussed above to a child’s ability to stay on track and succeed academically:

“All of the social behaviors like sitting and listening, controlling their bodies, and feeling comfortable about being at school - all of those behaviors and attitudes need to be there or you lose the academic preparedness. If a kid can’t sit and listen or they are talking to a friend, they miss what the teacher is saying and that will affect them academically. It sounds like something simple but it is so important for kids to learn in order to be ready. Even if a kid is doing well academically, if we do not address behavioral

issues right from the beginning, their academic progress will decline.”

Finally, KinderCamp teachers realized that many children needed to get ready for kindergarten by becoming excited about school and the learning possibilities to come. One teacher described the importance of learning excitement in the statement below.

Attitudes Toward Learning

“We need to get them excited about school and learning new things. Sometime in KinderCamp the children refuse to do thing and they have to get used to the schedule. When they do get used to it they are fine and they begin to get excited. They just need to learn to open their minds to having a good time doing things other than their favorite activities, like painting instead of always playing with trucks. They realize that there are other exciting things and it’s really just a change of attitude. That openness and excitement for learning new things is really crucial for kids to be successful in school and KinderCamp is an opportunity to begin establishing that excitement for learning.”

Just as the primary school readiness needs identified by KinderCamp teachers involved social-emotional skills and behaviors, the greatest benefits of the program from a teacher perspective involved learning to function within the social and physical setting of elementary school. Teachers witnessed foundational improvements through opportunities for children to learn to navigate within the school, follow school rules, and work as a part of a social network within the classroom. One teacher provided the statement that:

“We always talk about learning to do math, or learning to do reading and writing - at KinderCamp children learn how to do school. There is a whole routine to learn and it is much different from at home or even in pre-school.”

According to several teachers, KinderCamp was also a great benefit to themselves as early childhood educators. Many teachers commented on the new and innovative approaches and materials introduced during KinderCamp. One teacher

Building the Teacher/Family Team

“KinderCamp really refreshed my enthusiasm for building relationships with, not only my students, but also their families. It takes a little more effort but the payout is great.”

represented this benefit stating that, “I learned more different ways of teaching, got more ideas to take back to my own school this year, and I got to know so many other talented educators in the community.”

Health as a Component of Preparing to Learn: KinderCamp Hearing and Oral Health Screening

Additional benefits of attending KinderCamp for children and families include preparation for entering kindergarten with good health. Oral health is a crucial component to maintaining overall health and being prepared to learn. A visit from the tooth fairy during KinderCamp gave children opportunities to learn how to care for their own teeth and mouths. Additionally, nearly every child received a dental screening for oral health care needs upon parental consent, and 67 children received a professional dental check-up. Of these children, 12 were identified as having decay and 15 children were in need of dental sealants. Dental inspection sheets and recommendations for follow-up treatment were provided to KinderCamp parents after screenings took place. While some family members did identify the “tooth fairy activity” as one of their child’s favorite activities during KinderCamp, oral health care did not surface within any interviews or focus groups with families and teachers following the program. Furthermore, according to a health department representative, no families contacted the Coconino County Health Department for follow-up treatment as was recommended on inspection sheets. Of course families may seek care through other providers, but no significant outcomes due to the oral health care and learning opportunities provided by KinderCamp 2009 are known at this time.

Health is a Prerequisite to Learning

“Screening for hearing is a way of ruling out one issue that children may face. We can’t really look at how they are doing in language development when we don’t know if they are hearing or not.”

- Northland-Rural Therapy
Associates Representative

Hearing screening was another health service provided by KinderCamp. Professionals from Northland-Rural Therapy Associates conducting the PALS assessment, discussed in a previous section of this report, tested the hearing of KinderCamp children before administering PALS. Good hearing is a prerequisite for testing literacy and language skills. The hearing

screenings were similar to that which children receive when starting kindergarten; however, receiving the screening prior to entering school gave children and families the opportunity to address any hearing issues in advance. One KinderCamp child was identified during the screening as needing immediate treatment, and the family was referred to the Coconino County Health Department.

Conclusion

Learning begins at birth and quality early learning experiences prepare children for future learning success. For this reason, United Way of Northern Arizona is leading initiatives to improve the quality of child care, family support, early intervention, and public awareness activities to equip communities to make the best choices for young children. School readiness skills indicate that children are developmentally on track in areas of literacy and social-emotional skills. Without these skills, young children enter school already at a disadvantage. By increasing the percentage of children entering kindergarten with high levels of school readiness skills, KinderCamp works to provide children with a better opportunity to succeed in the years to come.

As revealed in the evaluation of KinderCamp 2009, academic and social skills were intertwined and dually significant forms of school readiness for children and families as they prepared to enter kindergarten this fall. Many parents and teachers recognized the particular need for social-emotional readiness in their children. Through the social component proved by KinderCamp, teachers and family members observed children advancing greatly in their abilities to function within the social and physical setting of elementary school.

The improvement of social-emotional skills witnessed throughout the program served as an important pre-requisite in the development of academic success, such as the literacy skills tested by the PALS assessment. Children who are prepared to interact appropriately within a kindergarten classroom and who possess a sense of excitement for learning have a greater ability to grasp academic concepts, and after four weeks in KinderCamp, children showed significant improvements in the fundamental skills of literacy. Furthermore, KinderCamp parents became informed and involved in their child's first educational experience, strengthening the link between family and school.

This set of foundational skills is the resource that KinderCamp provided to young children and families in July of 2009. By promoting academic and social success from the beginning of a child's academic career, KinderCamp provided the foundational confidence and abilities children need to succeed in future endeavors to learn. Upcoming academic and social-emotional testing through the Flagstaff Unified School District will reveal literacy and behavioral levels of children entering kindergarten in 2009 and provide further information regarding the value of KinderCamp.

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