

## Professional Development at Its Best

### North Carolina's Pre-K and Kindergarten Demonstration Program

**Sharon Ritchie, Eva C. Phillips, and Carla Gravitte Garrett**

**A**lthough there are multiple opportunities to hear about best practice, research, and quality environments for children in early childhood education settings, what is often missing is the occasion to see best practice in action and have meaningful opportunities for reflection and discussion. Addressing this challenge, the North Carolina Office of

Early Learning designed and implemented the Pre-K and Kindergarten Demonstration Program to support educators across the state in developing as early childhood teacher leaders.

The demonstration program was created in 2001 as a best practice model for teaching emergent

literacy to preschool children of different abilities and backgrounds, including children with significant disabilities. Over the years, the program expanded to encompass learning and development in five domains: approaches to play and learning, emotional and social development, health and physical development, language development and communication, and cognitive development.

To smooth the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten, the program expanded to include kindergarten teachers. The aim was to provide kindergarten settings where teachers demonstrate the ability to balance the “what” (standards, curriculum, and assessment) and the “how” (instructional and assessment practices) in classrooms designed to meet the developmental and academic needs of kindergartners.

There are 14 demonstration classrooms representing a variety of geographically and economically diverse communities. A visit to these classrooms is available to anyone in the state who is interested in scheduling a guided observation.

## Seeing is believing: Why demonstration classrooms are important

Many pre-K and kindergarten teachers in our state—and across the nation—feel pulled in conflicting directions by policies and mandates, some of which promote play, choice, and collaboration and others of which insist on prescribed curriculum and isolated skill building. Supporting teachers in balancing knowledge about how young children learn and develop with the numerous curricula, assessments, and growing performance expectations—for teachers and for children—is one of the most important aspects of the demonstration program.

Professional development is not an event but a process. Research suggests that teachers need intensive, sustained, and content-focused professional development to facilitate change in beliefs and actions (Wayne et al. 2008; Avalos 2011; Hargreaves 2014). When teachers have opportunities to see lessons or practices demonstrated, the experiences can have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction

and teacher performance (Luft & Pizzini 1998; Luft 1999). Demonstration teachers offer authentic opportunities to observe best practice in action, engage in meaningful dialogue about practice, and participate in follow-up visits. (For a brief description of a visit to a demonstration classroom, see “A Kindergarten Guided Observation.”)

Demonstration teachers and their administrators effect change through authentic actions—consistently modeling, sharing, promoting, and articulating practices in their own classrooms and schools. The primary goals for the program include

- › Improving statewide teacher effectiveness and classroom practices
- › Promoting practices that address the needs of the whole child
- › Ensuring smooth, efficient, and seamless transitions between pre-K and kindergarten and between kindergarten and first grade
- › Promoting collaboration across the pre-K–K community

### A Kindergarten Guided Observation

We urge observers to watch for instructional practices that promote development and learning in areas that predict positive outcomes for children—for example, in oral language and vocabulary, collaboration, small and gross motor coordination, dramatic play, and higher-order thinking. Development in these areas takes place throughout the day—during morning meetings, circle time, center time, outside time, and small group instruction.

Visitors are encouraged to see how children transition, engage with materials, and interact with peers. Center time in our classroom is long and uninterrupted, giving students opportunities to collaborate, negotiate, and practice self-regulation. Visitors who come multiple times will see how student autonomy develops over time.

Rest time is a good opportunity for visitor debriefing, and administrators make themselves available to participate. The desired teacher outcomes of these experiences are collaboration, future networking, and implementation of effective teaching practices. Thus, one goal of the demonstration program is to develop ongoing relationships among intentional educators, who constantly ask, “Is this what is best for young children?”

*This description was provided by Marylee Sease, Demonstration Program Kindergarten Teacher at Hazelwood Elementary School in Waynesville.*

## Reflections From NC Demonstration Program Participants

As a demonstration program teacher, I have the validation to continue integrating foundational skills and knowledge development throughout the curriculum, enhancing brain development and rejecting inappropriate practices. My role allows me to continue to learn and share what I know with others, helping ensure that children have a high-quality preschool experience.

**Shari Funkhouser, Demonstration Program Pre-K teacher**

Teachers who visit my classroom see that I face the same challenges that all teachers face. But they also see that these challenges do not have to dictate an inappropriate climate for children. Over the years I have let go of control and shifted toward building community and fostering independence, which has led to children who are more successful, both socially and academically. One of my favorite reflective questions is, “If I believe \_\_\_ then why am I still doing \_\_\_?” It forces me to look at what research tells me is best for young children and align what I do each day in my classroom accordingly.

**Amy Blessing, Demonstration Program Kindergarten teacher**

We are so fortunate to have a kindergarten demonstration classroom in our district. That special blend of providing a rigorous kindergarten program while using developmentally appropriate practices is a difficult concept to explain without the context of a live classroom.

**Steve Oates, Assistant Superintendent**

## Reassessing the program and inviting multiple perspectives

Several years into the project some problems emerged. A number of efforts were made to regain footing but didn't take hold until a steering committee was formed. In addition to pre-K and kindergarten teachers and administrators, this group of leaders in the field included representatives from Frank Porter Graham's FirstSchool, North Carolina's Early Learning Network, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, higher education, and district-level early learning specialists. The steering committee was—and continues to be—tasked with ensuring the quality of the project and making recommendations about funding, personnel, and program goals. This diverse group gathers regularly to plan and evaluate professional development for demonstration program teachers and administrators and to think of ways to improve, expand, and disseminate information from the project to wider audiences.

## Maintaining demonstration classroom quality

Emphasis is placed on using individual classroom data to guide and inform practice in the demonstration program. All pre-K demonstration classrooms have a North Carolina five-star rated license (out of a possible one to five stars) and an Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer 2005) score that demonstrates high quality across all aspects of the program. The rated license process and ECERS assessment occur periodically, as required by the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre 2008), an observation measure designed to rate 10 dimensions of quality for teacher-child interactions across three domains (emotional climate, classroom organization, and instructional support), was administered in each pre-K and kindergarten demonstration classroom in the spring of 2014. The data revealed high quality across all demonstration classrooms. The data were shared with demonstration program teachers and administrators to help them identify their strengths and their challenges and to guide their professional growth.

EduSnap (Ritchie et al. 2014) data were collected in full-day classroom observations in the demo classrooms in the fall of 2015. EduSnap is a time-sampling observation instrument that describes children's experiences throughout the school day within activity settings, learning contexts, and teaching approaches. The greatest strengths of the data lie in guiding professional development and change efforts and in promoting important conversations about constructs of quality in classroom practice. These data are being used to inform individual teacher goals as well as project professional development.

## Supporting demonstration site teachers and administrators

The teachers and administrators who participate in this project give of themselves regularly. They open their classrooms to visitors, support their demonstration program colleagues, bolster staff at their own school and at schools throughout their district, provide



support for formative assessment efforts, author articles and books, and present at local, state, and national conferences. They connect and contribute to the broader mission of North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction's statewide, tiered system of support by influencing the development—and the piloting—of the new North Carolina Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) tool (NC Department of Public Instruction 2016); providing expertise for the revision and implementation of, and professional development for, the statewide early learning standards; and implementing the Social-Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (SEFEL) framework.

Educators who give so much deserve reciprocation. In return for their service, and to maintain quality, each year the North Carolina Office of Early Learning hosts two 2-day professional development sessions for demonstration teachers and administrators. During these convenings, program participants are kept current on the latest research and are updated on the direction and goals of the state legislature and the Department of Public Instruction. Most important, the participating educators have time to share with one another, ask questions, and seek support when navigating situations that require balancing demands with their beliefs about best practice.

Participating demonstration teachers receive annual funding for professional development opportunities, supplies and materials for classrooms and outdoor spaces, and resources for visitors. In some cases, funding is used to contract with an early childhood professional to coordinate and lead guided classroom observations. The 2015–2016 school year came with a much deserved teacher supplement that will

continue in the future. The supplement is intended to recognize, in a small way, the countless hours demonstration teachers spend supporting the work of the program. The steering committee makes funding recommendations to leadership each year. Funding amounts vary, based on available resources.

Essential to the success of this project is administrator leadership, participation, knowledge, and support for implementing and advocating for developmentally appropriate practices in the early grades. Administrators at the building or central office level who are linked to demonstration program teachers are considered full participants in the program. Their concerns are different from those of teachers, and it is important that all perspectives be aired and respected. The two-day joint demonstration program professional development sessions are a forum for exchanging ideas and perspectives. We continue to hear that demonstration teachers and administrators

### **Developing and Implementing a Demonstration Program: What You Need to Know**

The following suggestions are based on what North Carolina has lived and learned in order to have a successful demonstration program.

- Know and understand developmentally appropriate practice.
- Find funding. This program was funded by state department leadership through Exceptional Children, Title I, and state appropriations.
- Select a diverse group of early childhood leaders to guide the process.
- Develop an application and selection process for demonstration teachers that includes observations and in-depth conversations.
- Select demonstration teachers/administrators who are knowledgeable, reflective, and committed to the project.
- Ensure that Memoranda of Understanding are signed at all levels.
- Use data to inform professional development.
- Be sure that early childhood guiding leaders and teachers and administrators meet regularly.
- Make certain that the program evolves by collecting and reviewing data to ensure that it meets the needs of all participants.

## A Preschool Guided Observation

Our demonstration classroom allows interested observers to see how we provide children with developmentally appropriate learning experiences, hear about the research and data that support our practices, and receive guidance about their best next steps. Visitors can observe arrival time, center time, large and small group activities, transitions, and time outdoors. They can explore the classroom to look at our organizational systems, materials, and project work documentation.

The focus of the observation, however, is interactions between adults and children and between children and children, and how intentionality and planning ensure that choice and play support children's learning in significant ways. Demonstration teachers spend a lot of a guided observation pointing out examples of relationship- and community-building efforts and discussing why interactions are handled in specific and intentional ways.

Following an observation, there is a debriefing session during which we further explain our classroom practices and visitors can ask questions. Because it is difficult to institute real change based on a single visit, follow-up support is offered and recommended to visitors. On several occasions, follow-up sessions have led to long-term relationships between two programs.

*This description was provided by Debbie Lewallen, Retired Demonstration Program Coordinator and preschool exceptional children's teacher at the Mary Frances Wall Center in Concord.*

value this time to share and learn from each other. Administrators are helpful in guiding the program's work, sharing their knowledge with their peers, and facilitating better understanding among those administrators who do not have formal training in the early childhood field.

## Supporting demonstration program visitors

The primary purpose of the project is to enable visiting teachers and administrators to see high-quality early childhood education practice in action. Visits, which typically last a full day, consist of classroom observation and dialogue with demonstration program teachers. Visitors are also provided with resource material, such as guided observation folders that include appropriate practice information and copies of North Carolina's early learning standards. Educators

are encouraged to schedule follow-up visits. Requests may also be made for demonstration program teachers to come to schools of visiting educators who seek further support in their efforts to improve their practice (see "A Preschool Guided Observation").

## Conclusion

In the spirit of "seeing is believing," North Carolina's demonstration program provides opportunities for pre-K and kindergarten teachers across the state to become well versed in developmentally appropriate practice and for administrators to increase their knowledge and ability to effectively support teachers of the youngest learners to see, hear, discuss, and implement best practice. Intentionality, a desire for continuous improvement, and the opportunity for regular collaboration with talented colleagues drive the participants of this project.

For more information about the North Carolina Pre-K and Kindergarten Demonstration Program, please visit [www.dpi.state.nc.us/earlylearning/demo/](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/earlylearning/demo/).

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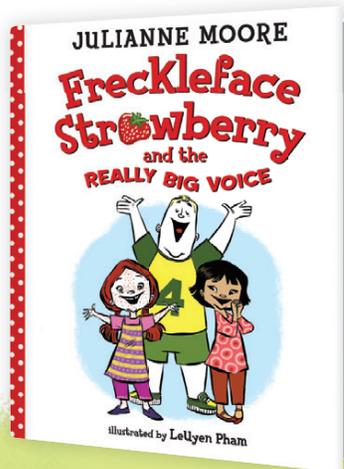
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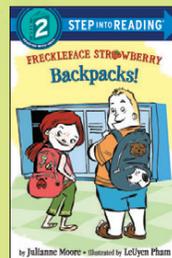
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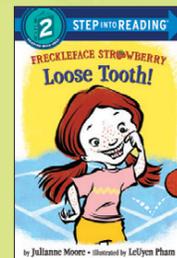
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