

BRIGHT SPOTS

Summer Learning



New Mexico K–3 Plus, Albuquerque, NM

As a state legislator, Mimi Stewart knew that helping low-income children do better in school was the greatest service she could provide the residents of New Mexico. Early academic success would create the foundation for these children to have the same range of options in adult life as their more advantaged peers. Her long career as an educator had repeatedly brought her face to face with the devastating links between poverty, achievement in school and life chances.

In 2003, Stewart first convinced her fellow legislators to fund a “Kindergarten-Plus” program that extended the school year for kindergarteners in four high-poverty districts. The legislature approved a second Stewart-sponsored bill in 2007 to expand the model statewide to serve economically disadvantaged students from kindergarten through third grade. A six-year pilot program added 25 days at the start of the 180-day year in schools where at least 85 percent of students receive free or reduced-price meals.

Now, a \$15.28 million Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education is funding a validation study to see whether New Mexico K–3 Plus helps close the achievement gap.

Testing the extended school year

“No one in the United States has tested the value of extending the school year in a big way until now,” says Linda Goetze, senior researcher at Utah State University’s Start Smart New Mexico K–3 Plus Project, the name for the i3 validation study. “What we discover will have an impact far beyond this state.”

The study, set to conclude in 2016, will compare the reading, math and social skills development of two groups of 570 students, from kindergarten through third grade. In year two, a second cohort of 1,140 will be added to ensure sufficient statistical power in the face of expected high attrition and mobility.

WHO THEY ARE

In 2008–09, New Mexico K–3 Plus served:

- **6,996 students.**
- **92 of 112 eligible elementary schools, where at least 85% of students receive Free and Reduced-Price Meals.**
- **25 of 36 districts with eligible schools.**

Average cost per student in 2008–09: \$1,544.

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

Previous evaluations, using DIBELS testing, indicated dramatic improvements but have since been declared inconclusive by the current evaluation team.

The new i3 evaluation, conducted by Utah State University researchers, will study 2,280 students in four school districts.

CONTACT

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Extra time to get ahead

New Mexico K–3 Plus covers all subjects but puts reading first. Participating teachers, who are compensated at their normal salaries and receive a variety of professional development activities, implement scientifically based, data-driven literacy instruction that dovetails with the school’s core curriculum.

“Unless we focus on improving how we teach reading, we simply won’t see the needed gains,” says Stewart. “K–3 Plus is an effective platform because it already allows for many factors that are essential to early success in reading, such as smaller class sizes and 90 minutes of uninterrupted instruction time.”

Focus is one of the features teachers point to when talking about what characterizes the program. “There are so many disruptions in a classroom during the normal school year,” Stewart explains. “These classrooms look very different. A principal walked into a K–3 Plus classroom and was just floored because that classroom was happy, content and working on task.”

The school districts that benefit from New Mexico K–3 Plus reflect the state’s demographic diversity — from Gallup-McKinley, a rural Navaho district, to Albuquerque to Gadsden, which borders Mexico. They serve many English-language learners in regular and dual-language classrooms.

Stewart views the challenge of serving ELL students as an opportunity to prove the worth of the program’s design. “Studies have shown that children who are second language learners often have an aptitude for learning,” she says. “As a result of early experience absorbing two languages, they have the cognitive tools to make quick gains upon entering school. But all students make gains early on. That means that the second language learners need a head start to make real headway in closing learning gaps.”

Shared success

Goetze, the co-director of the i3 grant and an economist by training, knows costs will factor into wider replication efforts. “This intervention is cost-effective because the capital resource, the school, is already there — and what better place for children to be?” she asks. “Here success can feed success and build an important comfort zone.”

Stewart agrees, “There has been a big change in attitudes. Kindergarteners are no longer apprehensive about coming to school for the first time. By the first day of school, they say, ‘Look at what we can do.’”

Parents, who must be involved with their children’s summer program, also develop a different relationship with schools. “They are forced to acknowledge: My child needs more time in school,” says Stewart. “The program is engaging parents with schools and doing it early enough that they may well continue to be involved. Some parents even come in to help during the summer.”

Goetze says, “The people of New Mexico are proud of this effort and hope the numbers bear out the difference this program is already making.”

HIGHLIGHTS

New Mexico K–3 Plus:

- **Extends school year by 25 days.**
- **Uses scientifically based early literacy curricula.**
- **Builds lessons on content from school-year core curriculum.**
- **Staffs classrooms with students’ regular teachers.**
- **Provides two days of professional development for all participating teachers.**
- **Engages parents through a contract that creates the potential for their increased involvement.**