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November 14, 2005

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Education Study Committee

FR: David Harrell

RE: STAFF BRIEF: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: KINDERGARTEN PLUS EVALUATION REPORT

The workplan for the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) for the 2005 interim includes a presentation on the Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project, enacted by the 2003 Legislature. In addition to creating the project, statute requires annual reports to the Governor and the Legislature on the efficacy of the pilot project.

Issues:

- As provided in statute (see Attachment 1), the three-year Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project has been conducted in "high-poverty schools" in four school districts – Albuquerque Public Schools, Gallup-McKinley County Public Schools, Gadsden Independent Schools, and Las Cruces Public Schools – to study the efficacy of extended kindergarten for disadvantaged students. The purpose of the pilot project is to demonstrate that increased time in kindergarten narrows the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other students and that it increases cognitive skills and leads to higher tests scores for all participants.

- Among other provisions, the law:
 - defines a high-poverty school as one in which at least 85 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-fee lunch;
 - requires the Public Education Department (PED) to determine application requirements and procedures and criteria for evaluating applications;
 - requires that participating students be evaluated at the beginning of Kindergarten Plus and that their progress in literacy, numeracy, and cognitive and social skills be measured through standardized assessments in kindergarten and first grade; and
 - requires that PED provide additional professional development for Kindergarten Plus teachers in how young children learn to read.

- For the first year of the pilot project, school year 2003-2004, the Legislature appropriated \$100,000, which PED supplemented with an additional \$300,000 from the federal Reading First funds so that each of the four districts could receive an appropriation of \$100,000. That same arrangement prevailed for the second year, school year 2004-2005; but for the third, school year 2005-2006, the Legislature appropriated the full \$400,000 because PED had indicated that Reading First funds could no longer be used for that purpose.

- In three of the four pilot districts, at least for the first year, the project extended the kindergarten year by 40 instructional days; the fourth district, Gadsden Independent Schools, chose to implement a half-day pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds, the approach that this district has used for each of the three years. In another variation, for the second and third year of the project, Las Cruces Public Schools chose to add time at the beginning of first grade rather than at the end of kindergarten.

- As a measure of student progress, three of the four districts have used the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which assesses four skill sets said to be “key foundation skills of early literacy”: Initial Sound Fluency, Letter Naming Fluency, Nonsense Word Fluency, and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency. To assess students in its pre-kindergarten program, Gadsden Independent Schools has used the Bracken Basic Concepts assessment, which is designed to measure such concepts as students’ sense of direction and position, self-awareness and social awareness, shapes, sizes, numbers, and time sequences.

- Using data gathered from these two assessments, the Office of Education Accountability (OEA) evaluated the project during its first year of operation, school year 2003-2004. As explained in the evaluation report published in January 2005 (see Attachment 2), OEA found:
 - that teachers and administrators alike saw improved social skills among students and higher levels of parental involvement as a result of the Kindergarten Plus pilot project;
 - that attendance declined at the end of the kindergarten year, in part because of family vacations;
 - that staff members were feeling fatigued by the end of the year and, in some cases, struggling for material; and
 - that time spent in the program prior to the beginning of kindergarten proved the most valuable.

- The OEA report recommends that:
 - OEA and PED compare the performance in first grade of the Kindergarten Plus students with that of regular full-day kindergarten students;
 - more research is needed to determine the impact of Kindergarten Plus on students' academic achievement in first grade and to determine whether the program has helped to close the achievement gap; and
 - PED should work with the pilot districts to standardize some common program elements.
- The OEA report also suggests the option of considering time spent in Kindergarten Plus before the beginning of the regular kindergarten year as pre-kindergarten.
- Referring to the different approaches taken by Gadsden Independent Schools and Las Cruces Public Schools, the OEA report also notes, "These 'real-world' variations on the theoretical Kindergarten Plus concept . . . make it difficult to measure the program's impact on closing the achievement gap."
- Finally, in addition to this formal evaluation, the Kindergarten Plus programs in the Las Cruces Public Schools and the Gallup-McKinley County Public Schools have received some favorable media attention (see Attachment 3 and Attachment 4, respectively).

Background:

- The concept for Kindergarten Plus originated with the late Sandra Feldman, former president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).
 - In a speech to the AFT convention in July 2002, Ms. Feldman called on the federal government "to help states and districts to provide disadvantaged children with the opportunity to start kindergarten during the summer months BEFORE they would ordinarily enter, and then to stay on through the summer BEFORE they will enter first grade." Ms. Feldman proposed Kindergarten Plus as a "down payment" on her ultimate goal: universal access to high-quality preschool, especially for poor children.
 - Later that same year, in one of her "Where We Stand" columns, Ms. Feldman explained that Kindergarten Plus "would accelerate the progress of poor children and help them maintain it"; and she contended that the infrastructure for the program is already in place: schools, kindergarten classrooms, and a pool of qualified public school teachers.
- New Mexico is evidently the first jurisdiction to implement a Kindergarten Plus pilot program. Interest has been reported in other states, however; and in 2004 the Louisiana legislature enacted an extended kindergarten pilot project, or Kindergarten Plus, to be implemented during school year 2005-2006, "subject to the appropriation of funds for this purpose." Also in 2004, Senator Christopher J. Dodd (D – Connecticut) introduced in Congress Senate Bill 2654, the *Kindergarten Plus Act of 2004*. As of this writing, the bill is pending before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Presenters:

For this presentation, Dr. Lana Paolillo, Bureau Chief, Early Literacy Bureau, PED; and Ms. Beata I. Thorstensen, Education Policy Analyst, OEA, will present the findings and recommendations derived from the OEA evaluation of the second year of the Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project, particularly as they build upon or respond to those from the first year.

Questions the committee may wish to consider:

1. Do the children in Kindergarten Plus remain in a separate classroom throughout the academic year or are they co-mingled with regular full-day kindergarten students? If they are co-mingled, does co-mingling affect either student performance or the assessment of students' gains?
2. Has the Kindergarten Plus program led to "higher test scores for all participants," as the statute suggests?
3. Because of the variations upon the Kindergarten Plus model in two of the four pilot districts, has the pilot project produced enough data to support conclusions and recommendations about the efficacy of Kindergarten Plus as a program in and of itself?
4. What additional professional development in the teaching of reading has PED provided to Kindergarten Plus teachers?
5. Particularly in light of Sandra Feldman's suggestion that Kindergarten Plus is a down payment for universal access to preschool, in what ways might Kindergarten Plus and New Mexico PreK be related?

ATTACHMENT 1

22-2-20. Kindergarten plus; pilot project; eligibility; application; reporting and evaluation [evaluation]; creating a fund.

A. The "kindergarten plus" pilot project is created as a three-year study that extends the kindergarten year by four months for participating students and measures the effect of additional time on literacy, numeracy and social skills development. The purpose of kindergarten plus is to demonstrate that increased time in kindergarten narrows the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other students and increases cognitive skills and leads to higher test scores for all participants.

B. The pilot project shall be administered by the department of education and shall provide the funding for approved full-day kindergarten programs to be extended by forty instructional days, beginning approximately two months earlier and ending approximately two months later than other classes. For the first year, the pilot project shall begin July 1 and run two hundred twenty instructional days; in the second and third years, kindergarten plus may begin or end at any time that provides for the same number of instructional days.

C. Kindergarten plus shall be conducted in the Albuquerque, Gallup-McKinley, Gadsden and Las Cruces school districts. Full-day kindergarten programs in high-poverty public schools in those school districts are eligible to apply for kindergarten plus. For the purposes of kindergarten plus, "high-poverty school" means a public school in which eighty-five percent or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. If enough eligible high-poverty schools in those school districts do not qualify for the pilot project for the amount of funding available, the department of education may extend eligibility to high-poverty schools in other school districts.

D. The department of education shall determine application requirements and procedures and criteria for evaluating applications. An applicant must demonstrate that its kindergarten plus program will meet all state board standards and employ only qualified teachers and other staff. The department shall provide additional professional development for kindergarten plus teachers in how young children learn to read. Teachers shall be paid at the same rate and under the same terms for kindergarten plus as teachers are paid for regular full-day kindergarten programs.

E. Students participating in kindergarten plus shall be evaluated at the beginning of kindergarten plus and their progress in literacy, numeracy and cognitive and social skills shall be measured through standardized assessments in kindergarten and in first grade. The department of education shall provide additional professional development for kindergarten plus teachers in how young children learn to read.

F. The department of education shall establish reporting and evaluation requirements for participating schools, including student and program assessments. The department shall provide interim and final reports annually to the legislature and the governor on the efficacy of the pilot project.

G. In addition to legislative appropriations for the pilot project, the department of education shall seek public and private grants and donations. Grants and donations shall be deposited in the "kindergarten plus fund" created in the state treasury. Income from investment of the fund shall be deposited in the fund. The department shall administer the fund and money in the fund is appropriated to the department to carry out the purposes of the pilot project. Money shall be expended in accordance with the terms of the grants and donations. Unless otherwise specified by the terms of a grant or donation, money in the fund at the end of the pilot project shall revert to the general fund. Expenditures from the fund shall be by warrants of the secretary of finance and administration drawn pursuant to vouchers signed by the state superintendent or his authorized representative.

History

History: Laws 2003, ch. 130, § 1.

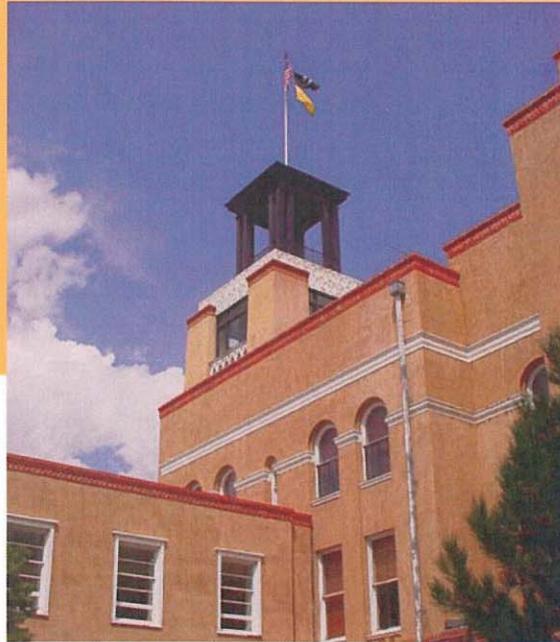
Annotations

Effective dates. — Laws 2003, ch. 130, contains no effective date provision, but, pursuant to N.M. Const., art. IV, § 23, is effective June 20, 2003, 90 days after adjournment of the legislature.

Bracketed material. — The bracketed material in the section heading was inserted by the compiler for clarity. It was not enacted by the legislature and it is not part of the law.

Compiler's notes. — Laws 2003, ch. 143, § 3 would have repealed Article 2 of Chapter 22 NMSA 1978 effective July 1, 2004. The repeal of Article 2 of Chapter 22 was contingent upon the adoption of an amendment to Article 12, Section 6 of the constitution which was approved at a special election held September 23, 2003. However, the repeal of Article 2 of Chapter 22 did not take effect, as prior to the July 1, 2004 effective date of the repeal of Article 2, Laws 2004, ch. 27, § 29, effective May 19, 2004, repealed Laws 2003, ch. 143, § 3.

New Mexico Office of Education Accountability



The New Mexico Kindergarten Plus
Pilot Program:
Initial Findings and Recommendations
January 2005

The New Mexico Kindergarten Plus Pilot Program:
Initial Findings and Recommendations

Report Prepared for:
Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish and
The New Mexico Public Education Department

By:
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Education Policy Analyst

Dr. Peter Winograd
Director

January 2005

New Mexico Office of Education Accountability
Department of Finance & Administration
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Executive Summary

New Mexico is engaged in a landmark reform effort aimed at improving student success for every child in the state. A key strategy for reaching this goal is strengthening and expanding the educational opportunities for young children. One of the programs that New Mexico is exploring in this regard is Kindergarten Plus. Kindergarten Plus is designed to provide an extended year of Kindergarten to at-risk students by adding a total of forty additional days before and after the regular school year. Kindergarten Plus does not have a specific curriculum. Rather, the belief is that the additional time students spend in developmentally appropriate classrooms will enable them to develop and practice early literacy skills, social skills and other critical abilities needed to succeed in school.

New Mexico's Kindergarten Plus Pilot Program began in 2003 in four school districts: Albuquerque, Gadsden, Gallup-McKinley and Las Cruces. During the 2003-2004 school year approximately 260 students participated across all four districts in 11 high poverty schools. The pilot project has been funded with \$100,000 in state General Fund dollars and an additional \$300,000 in federal Reading First funding per year. Each district has been awarded \$100,000 to operate the pilot project.

Key Findings:

- Albuquerque, Gallup-McKinley and Las Cruces implemented the Kindergarten Plus pilot model that added extra days to the regular Kindergarten year. Gadsden received approval to implement a half-day pre-Kindergarten program for four-year olds.
- The three Kindergarten Plus pilot projects were implemented in a variety of ways including the way the extra days were scheduled and number of students per classroom.
- The Kindergarten Plus districts used the DIBELS—the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills— as their measure of student progress. The assessment trends on the DIBELS were positive, particularly in letter naming fluency and phoneme segmentation fluency.
- The pre-Kindergarten pilot project in Gadsden used the Bracken Basic Concepts as a measure of student progress. The assessment trend on the Bracken was positive, with a decrease in students classified as having delayed skills.
- District teachers and administrators feel that Kindergarten Plus helps students develop important social maturity skills as well as promotes greater parental involvement.
- Results indicate that time spent in the program prior to the beginning of Kindergarten was the most valuable to students and teachers, allowing students prepare for and adjust to Kindergarten.
- Suggested improvements include more support for transportation, better strategies for student recruitment; increased flexibility in the arrangement of the extra program days, and additional support for Kindergarten Plus curriculum development.

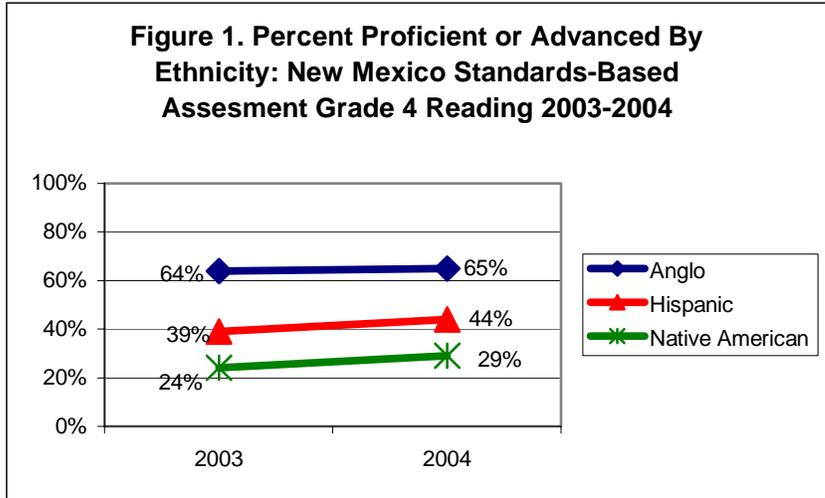
Recommendations:

- The PED and districts should use the lessons learned from these pilot projects to build consensus about which elements of Kindergarten Plus are most valuable and how those elements might be implemented across the state.
- Given that results indicate that time spent in the pilot programs during the summer prior to the start of the Kindergarten year was most helpful, the positive results in Gadsden and New Mexico's commitment to providing access to high quality pre-Kindergarten programming to all students, one option worth considering is to classify time spent in Kindergarten Plus prior to the start of the Kindergarten year as pre-Kindergarten.
- The OEA and PED should conduct follow-up studies of how well Kindergarten Plus students perform in first grade compared to students who participated in regular full day Kindergarten.

Education Reform and Closing New Mexico’s Achievement Gap

Over the last two years, New Mexico has undertaken landmark education reform. This sweeping commitment is designed to alter the course of education in our state and ensure that every child is successful in school. New Mexico is fundamentally changing the ways in which teachers are evaluated and compensated, the ways in which student progress is measured and the ways in which student achievement will be improved.

One of New Mexico’s greatest challenges lies in closing the large achievement gap that



exists among students. **Figure 1** highlights the challenge New Mexico faces in closing this gap.

One approach to closing the achievement gap is through the implementation of high-quality early childhood education programs. National research in early childhood and school readiness has found that children come to Kindergarten with a variety of home experiences and begin with varying degrees of school readiness. Coley (2002) established that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were less prepared for school than their affluent counterparts. Elizabeth Gershoff (2003) confirmed that by the time they begin formal schooling, children in families living below the federal poverty level scored well below average in reading, math and tests of general knowledge (pg 5). In addition to this research, there has been a substantial growth in women’s participation in the workforce over the last 30 years. In 1976, 31

% of women with children under age one were working, compared with 55% in 2002 (Williams & Mitchell, 2004.) The growth in the numbers of mothers of young children participating in the workforce increases the need for high quality early education programs.

Over the past five years, New Mexico has begun to invest heavily in the education of its youngest students. The Governor and the Legislature funded the fifth and final phase-in of Full-Day Kindergarten for the 2003-2004 school year. In 2004, Governor Richardson and Lt. Governor Diane Denish embarked on an ambitious, long-term campaign to ensure that all children in New Mexico have access to high quality early childhood education. Clearly, the state is exploring ways to ensure that all of New Mexico's students are successful. One of those ways is Kindergarten Plus.

Kindergarten Plus

Kindergarten Plus is a model for extended-year Kindergarten that has been suggested by Sandra Feldman, former president of the American Federation of Teachers (<http://www.aft.org/topics/ece/downloads/KPlusQ%26A.pdf>). Feldman proposed that a way to increase the student achievement for disadvantaged, particularly low-income students would be to extend the school year for Kindergartners, adding an additional four months to the traditional school calendar year. Feldman argued that at-risk children, especially economically disadvantaged children, are more likely to enter Kindergarten with lower levels of basic skills than their more affluent peers. This skill disparity, Feldman reasoned, is the baseline of the achievement gap that often stays with disadvantaged children into adulthood. Feldman further reasoned that if schools extend the Kindergarten year and allow additional time for disadvantaged children to master basic skills, participating students would begin first grade with

the same tools and knowledge of their non-disadvantaged peers. This extra instructional time would level the playing field and close the achievement gap. Feldman estimated that an implemented Kindergarten Plus program should cost \$ 1,974 per student (AFT, 2002).

New Mexico's Kindergarten Plus Pilot Initiative

New Mexico's Kindergarten Plus Pilot Initiative began in 2003. \$100,000 was appropriated by the New Mexico Legislature for fiscal year 2004 for the first year of a three-year pilot under House Bill 61 the *Extended Kindergarten Plus Pilot Project* carried by Representative Mimi Stewart (D- Albuquerque). With an additional \$300,000 in federal Reading First funding, pilot Kindergarten Plus classrooms were started in Albuquerque, Gadsden, Gallup-McKinley and Las Cruces, New Mexico. The program was re-funded in 2004 for fiscal year 2005. Reading First has funded Albuquerque, Gallup-McKinley and Las Cruces while Gadsden is funded through General Fund Kindergarten Plus dollars. New Mexico statute [*Section 22-2-20 NMSA 1978*] outlines the Kindergarten Plus pilot project:

- 22-2-20. Kindergarten plus; pilot project; eligibility; application; reporting and evaluation [evaluation]; creating a fund. (2004 AARS)
- A. The "kindergarten plus" pilot project is created as a three-year study that extends the kindergarten year by four months for participating students and measures the effect of additional time on literacy, numeracy and social skills development. The purpose of kindergarten plus is to demonstrate that increased time in kindergarten narrows the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other students and increases cognitive skills and leads to higher test scores for all participants.
 - B. The pilot project shall be administered by the department of education and shall provide the funding for approved full-day kindergarten programs to be extended by forty instructional days, beginning approximately two months earlier and ending approximately two months later than other classes. For the first year, the pilot project shall begin July 1 and run two hundred twenty instructional days; in the second and third years, kindergarten plus may begin or end at any time that provides for the same number of instructional days.
 - C. Kindergarten plus shall be conducted in the Albuquerque, Gallup-McKinley, Gadsden and Las Cruces school districts. Full-day kindergarten programs in high-poverty public schools in those school districts are eligible to apply for kindergarten plus. For the purposes of kindergarten plus, "high-poverty school" means a public school in which eighty-five percent or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. If enough eligible high-poverty schools in those school districts do not qualify for the pilot project for the amount of funding

available, the department of education may extend eligibility to high-poverty schools in other school districts.

- D. The department of education shall determine application requirements and procedures and criteria for evaluating applications. An applicant must demonstrate that its kindergarten plus program will meet all state board standards and employ only qualified teachers and other staff. The department shall provide additional professional development for kindergarten plus teachers in how young children learn to read. Teachers shall be paid at the same rate and under the same terms for kindergarten plus as teachers are paid for regular full-day kindergarten programs.
- E. Students participating in kindergarten plus shall be evaluated at the beginning of kindergarten plus and their progress in literacy, numeracy and cognitive and social skills shall be measured through standardized assessments in kindergarten and in first grade. The department of education shall provide additional professional development for kindergarten plus teachers in how young children learn to read.
- F. The department of education shall establish reporting and evaluation requirements for participating schools, including student and program assessments. The department shall provide interim and final reports annually to the legislature and the governor on the efficacy of the pilot project.
- G. In addition to legislative appropriations for the pilot project, the department of education shall seek public and private grants and donations. Grants and donations shall be deposited in the "kindergarten plus fund" created in the state treasury. Income from investment of the fund shall be deposited in the fund. The department shall administer the fund and money in the fund is appropriated to the department to carry out the purposes of the pilot project. Money shall be expended in accordance with the terms of the grants and donations. Unless otherwise specified by the terms of a grant or donation, money in the fund at the end of the pilot project shall revert to the general fund. Expenditures from the fund shall be by warrants of the secretary of finance and administration drawn pursuant to vouchers signed by the state superintendent or his authorized representative.

History: Laws 2003, ch. 130, § 1.

Programs began in the summer of the 2003-2004 school year. The pilot application, mailed to the individual districts in May of 2003, specified that \$100,000 would be available to each district to comply with the pilot specifications. It stated that each district must submit a “description to meet all requirements of the Kindergarten Plus pilot program,” and that each program must be “comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, and be based on scientifically-based reading research.” Districts were allowed to distribute the additional forty days on either side of the traditional school year in a way that best suited their individual needs. **Table 1** shows how each district in the pilot program chose to distribute these additional days.

Table 1. District Calendars.

District	Summer	School Year	Summer	Total Number of K+ Days
Albuquerque	July 1-August 4, 2003	Regular Year Full Day Kindergarten	May 25- June 15, 2004	40
Gallup-McKinley	July 28-August 22, 2003	Regular Year Full Day Kindergarten	June 9-June 30, 2004	40
Las Cruces	July 16-August 6, 2003	Regular Year Full Day Kindergarten	May 21-June 11, 2004	40
Gadsden	None	March 2, 2004- June 17, 2004	None	N/A

As is illustrated in **Table 1**, Albuquerque, Gallup-McKinley and Las Cruces all began Kindergarten Plus classrooms in July 2003. Rather than implementing the Kindergarten Plus program Gadsden felt their needs would be better met through the implementation of a pre-Kindergarten program. Gadsden received approval from the PED and utilized its Kindergarten Plus funding to implement a full-year, half-day pre-Kindergarten program that began in March 2004.

In the spring of 2004, Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish requested that the Office of Education Accountability (OEA) undertake an independent evaluation of the Kindergarten Plus pilot project to ascertain whether or not the pilot was succeeding in its goal of effectively preparing at-risk Kindergarteners for first grade. Working in conjunction with the Public Education Department (PED), the OEA collected DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy) assessment data and conducted site visits at each of the Kindergarten Plus demonstration districts. The PED collected staff, student and program information from each of the districts and submitted that data to the OEA for analysis. To the best of OEA's knowledge, New Mexico represents the one of the first pilots of the Kindergarten Plus concept in the nation.

Table 2 (on the following page) highlights some of the basic characteristics of the Kindergarten Plus participants in each school within the demonstration districts.

Table 2. Characteristics of Kindergarten Plus Participants (N= 260)

School	# Students	Ethnicity					% Spec. Ed	% Not English At Home	Primary Language				Average Number Program Days
		Anglo	Hispanic	N. American	African American	Asian			English	Spanish	Navajo	Other	
Albuquerque													
Dolores Gonzales	19	5.3%	94.7%	0	0	0	5.3%	89.5%	84.2%	15.8%	0	0	36.11
Hawthorne	16	20.0%	66.7%	13.3%	0	0	6.3%	37.5%	100.0%	0	0	0	39.56
Los Padillas	15	0	93.3%	6.7%	0	0	0	100%	40.0%	60.0%	0	0	30.53
Mountain View	15	0	86.7%	6.7%	0	6.7%	0	80.0%	46.7%	46.7%	0	6.7%	32.4
Gallup-McKinley													
Chee Dodge	16	0	0	100.0%	0	0	7.1%	86.7%	13.3%	0	86.7%	0	204.5
Lincoln	13	0	23.1%	76.9%	0	0	15.4%	38.5%	61.5%	7.7%	30.8%	0	172.69
Thoreau	6	0	16.7%	83.3%	0	0	66.7%	83.3%	0	0	100.0%	0	53.3
Tohatchi	16	0	0	100%	0	0	18.8%	100%	0	0	100.0%	0	191.69
Las Cruces													
Cesar Chavez	36	11.1%	86.1%	2.8%	0	0	8.3%	44.4%	55.6%	44.4%	0	0	159.93
Valley View	65	10.8%	80.0%	4.6%	4.6%	0	20.3%	29.2%	70.3%	28.1%	1.6%	0	153.55
Gadsden													
Desert View	44	4.5%	95.5%	0	0	0	N/A	77.3%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	52.27

Student Performance on the DIBELS—The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills

Three of the districts: Albuquerque, Las Cruces and Gallup McKinley used the DIBELS as a measure of student progress. The DIBELS is designed to be a K-3 assessment for measuring progress in early literacy development in students. The *DIBELS Administration and Scoring Guide 6th Edition* states that,

“The word “test” is less appropriate for DIBELS than “measure,” “assessment,” or “indicator” because DIBELS is a tool for planning instruction. It is designed not so much for determining a final outcome of instruction but to help improve those outcomes.” (p. 2)

The DIBELS assessment can be utilized in two ways. According to the *DIBELS Guide*, the DIBELS benchmark assessments should be administered three times during the traditional Kindergarten year to all students. During these administrations, four skill sets are assessed: Initial Sound Fluency, Letter Naming Fluency, Nonsense Word Fluency and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, skill sets that according to the *DIBELS Guide* have been shown through research to be key foundation skills of early literacy (pg 1). Descriptions of these measures are available in the **Appendix. Table 3** below, illustrates the when each skill set is assessed. However, there are additional assessments available for at-risk students. These supplemental assessments are termed in the *DIBELS Guide* as “progress-monitoring” assessments, and may be administered more frequently. (pg. 1)

Table 3. DIBELS Benchmark Assessment Schedule

	Fall	Winter	Spring
Initial Sound Fluency			
Letter Naming Fluency			
Nonsense Word Fluency			
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency			

(DIBELS Administration & Scoring Guide 6th Edition)

Of the 260 Kindergarten Plus participants, 215 were assessed on these measures. The DIBELS benchmarks were administered during the traditional academic year—benchmark assessments were not conducted when students began the program in July, or again after the traditional year ended in May. Progress-monitoring assessments were conducted in Albuquerque, but those data were not submitted to the PED for this evaluation. Overall, it appears that Kindergarten Plus students made positive progress on the DIBELS benchmark assessments during the first pilot year. Across each skill set, there is a measurable decrease in the number of students labeled “At-Risk” or “Deficit” and an equal measurable increase in the number of students who are subsequently labeled at “Some or Low Risk” or “Emerging or Established.”

- In Initial Sound Fluency, the percentage of students classified as “At Risk” or “Deficit” decreased by 3% between the fall and winter administrations.
- In Letter Naming Fluency, the number of students classified as “At Risk” decreased by 27% between the fall and spring administrations.
- In Nonsense Word Fluency, the number of students classified as “At Risk” decreased by 2% between the winter and spring administrations.
- In Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, the number of students classified as “At Risk” or “Deficit” decreased by 9%.

Figures 2-5 (on the following pages) illustrate the overall performance of Kindergarten Plus students on these assessments.

Figure 2. Initial Sound Fluency Fall and Winter Administrations 2003-2004 School Year, Kindergarten Plus Students.

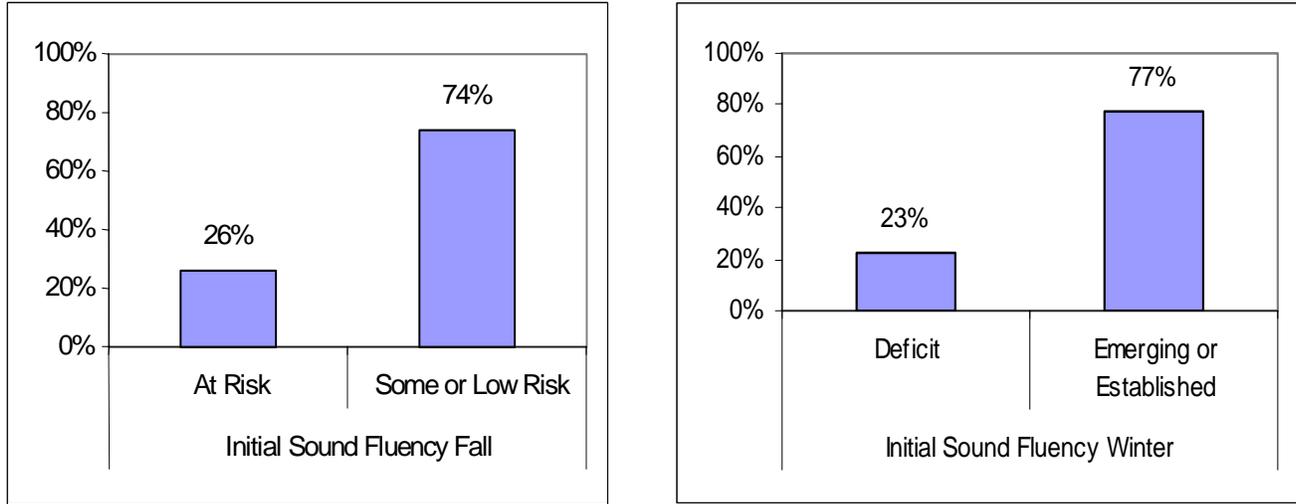


Figure 3. Letter Naming Fluency Fall, Winter and Spring Administrations 2003-2004 School Year, Kindergarten Plus Students.

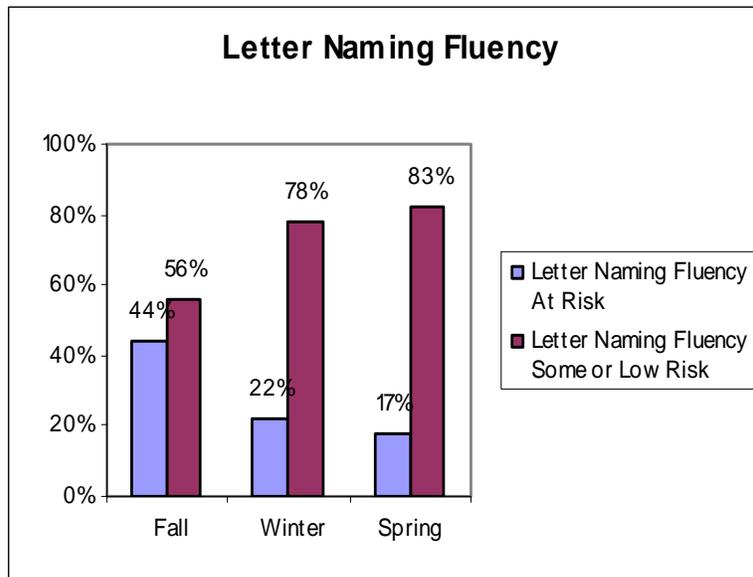


Figure 4. Nonsense Word Fluency Winter and Spring Administrations 2003-2004 School Year, Kindergarten Plus Students.

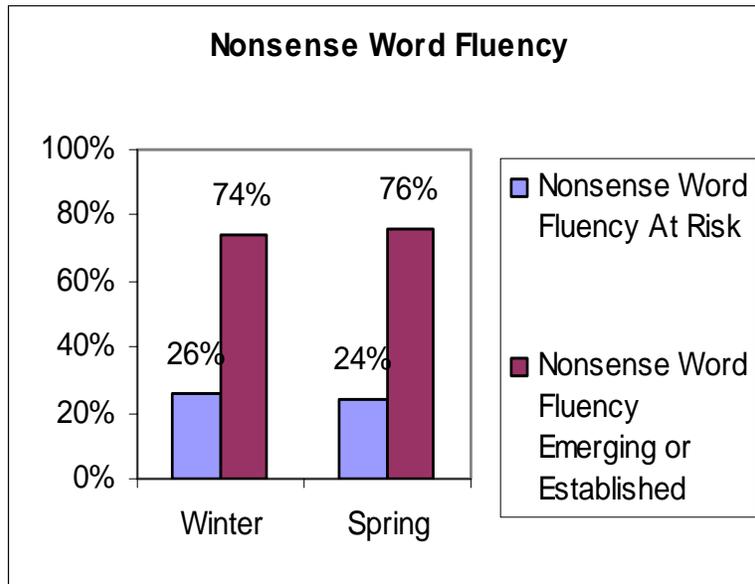
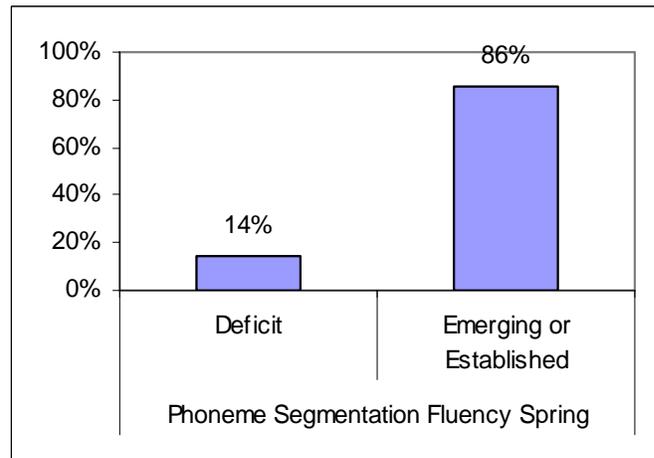
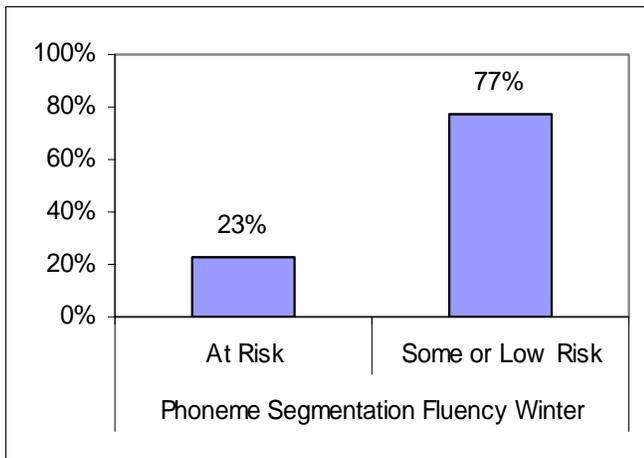


Figure 5. Phoneme Segmentation Fluency Winter and Spring Administrations 2003-2004 School Year, Kindergarten Plus Students.



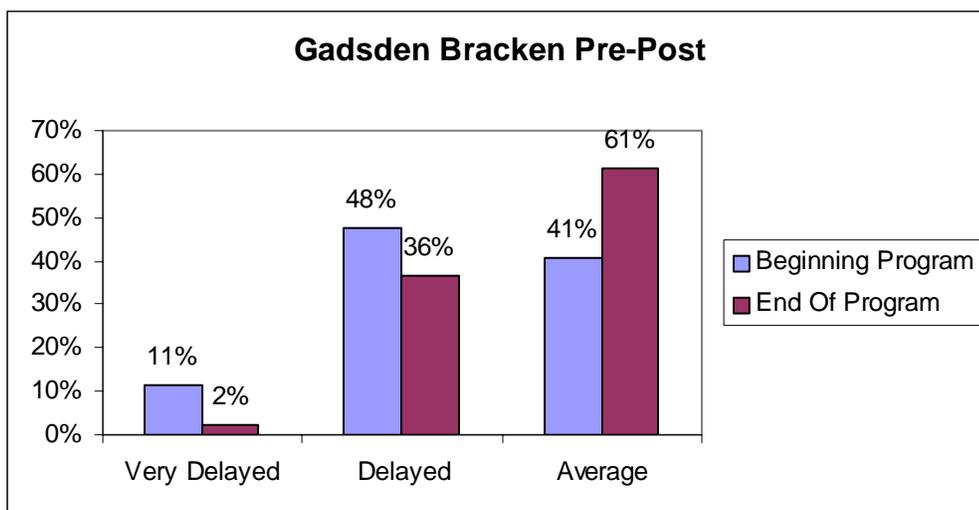
The **Appendix** contains the data charts showing student progress across the DIBELS categories by district and individual school. When examined by district, Kindergarten Plus

students still made progress in basic literacy skills, though the extent of this progress varied from school to school.

Gadsden opted not to use the DIBELS as a measure of student progress, because the program in Gadsden is a pre-Kindergarten program for four year olds rather than an extended Kindergarten experience for five year olds. Instead, Gadsden selected the Bracken Basic Concepts assessment. The Bracken is a test of academic readiness that measures students' conceptualizations of direction/position, self/social awareness, texture/material, quantity, colors, shapes, sizes, numbers and time/sequences

(<http://harcourtassessment.com/hai/Images/resource/techrpts/brack1.html>). The results of the pre-post data from the Bracken for Gadsden are displayed in **Figure 6**. The results are positive and show that the number of students who were classified as “Very Delayed” decreased by 9% between the beginning and end of the program, the number of students classified as “Delayed” decreased by 12% and the number of students classified as “Average” increased 20% between the beginning and end of the program.

Figure 6. Gadsden Bracken Pre-Post Scores for School Year 2003-2004, Pre-Kindergarten.



Site Visits With Pilot Schools

Another way of assessing how well a pilot project is meeting its goals is through direct observation of the program in progress in the classroom. This provides insight from program staff on the how effectively the pilot concept has been implemented, and provides information about the practicality and impact of the pilot program on classrooms and schools. On-site visits were conducted in each of the sites by the OEA in September 2004. During those visits the OEA met with district staff in order to get their perspective on how well the individual district programs were working, and what could be improved to better serve students. The following are observations from each of those visits.

Albuquerque Public Schools

General Program Characteristics

Kindergarten Plus is currently operating in four Albuquerque schools—Dolores Gonzales Elementary, Hawthorne Elementary, Los Padillas Elementary and Mountain View Elementary. During the 2003-2004 year, each school was allowed to establish its own Kindergarten Plus schedule, however, this year (2004-2005) they have regularized the schedule across schools, beginning 26 days prior to the regular school year and ending 14 days after. Kindergarten Plus classrooms in Albuquerque are mostly composed of Kindergarten Plus students; with minimal transfers and late registrations for Kindergarten being added to the classrooms at the start of the traditional year. Albuquerque does not offer transportation for Kindergarten Plus students during the extended period. Parents must commit to providing transportation for their children during the extended days. This added parental responsibility does not appear to have affected Kindergarten Plus enrollment, and most parents are willing to provide transportation.

Administrator and Teacher Observations

Most teachers reported that Kindergarten Plus students are more socially and academically advanced than students in regular full day Kindergarten classrooms, indicating that students have been able to master letters and simple words by the end of September. Staff reported that students in one teacher's classroom who were monolingual in Spanish at the beginning of the program were able to begin reading in English by the end of the first Kindergarten Plus year. Teachers also noted an increase in parental involvement among the families of Kindergarten Plus students. Parents and other family members participated more actively in their children's school time. Teachers developed and provided family involvement activities during the summer to reinforce and encourage this involvement. Teachers noted that student attendance lagged during the end of the program year, and that fewer students were present for the second half of the extended program.

Program Concerns/Revisions

One administrator noted that the quality of the Kindergarten teacher affected the overall quality of the Kindergarten Plus program being delivered in each classroom. Because Kindergarten Plus does not have a prescribed curriculum, individual teachers in each classroom may approach the program differently, which may affect student performance. One major change in the Albuquerque program is a re-arrangement of the program days. Albuquerque is shifting to add more days in the beginning of the program, taking advantage of the flexibility allowed in statute. This is being done in an attempt to increase student attendance at the end of the program year.

Gallup McKinley Schools

General Program Characteristics

Gallup McKinley School District has four Kindergarten Plus classrooms in four elementary schools—Chee Dodge Elementary, Lincoln Elementary, Thoreau Elementary and Tohatchi Elementary. The Gallup-McKinley Kindergarten Plus program adds an additional four weeks to either end of the traditional school year—starting four weeks earlier than the traditional school year and ending four weeks after the traditional school year. According to staff, the majority of the students in Gallup-McKinley schools are members of the Navajo Nation. Staff also indicated that the majority of the students in the district are English Language Learners (ELL). Gallup-McKinley Kindergarten Plus classrooms are not made up entirely of Kindergarten Plus students. Some have a limited number of Kindergarten Plus students, and during the traditional school year, classrooms are a mixture of both Kindergarten Plus students and regular Full Day Kindergarten students. Kindergarten Plus students are recruited through a number of methods: Kindergarten teachers conduct home visits; flyers are sent home with siblings and flyers are posted in the local Navajo Chapter Houses.

Administrator and Teacher Observations

Teachers indicated that they were able to clearly see the difference in levels of maturity and social skills between Kindergarten Plus and regular Full Day Kindergarten students. Kindergarten Plus students were much more adept at functioning in a “school” environment and one teacher indicated that her Kindergarten Plus students were taking it upon themselves to guide the Full Day Kindergarten students in learning Kindergarten routines and procedures. Teachers

indicated that they felt the extended time frame of Kindergarten Plus assisted their ELL students with their oral language skills and they were more adept and comfortable expressing themselves than their Full Day Kindergarten peers. Teachers in Gallup-McKinley feel that there are definite benefits to extending the school year through programs such as Kindergarten Plus.

Program Concerns/Revisions

One concern in Gallup-McKinley is transportation. Currently, Gallup-McKinley's Kindergarten Plus program is funded using federal Reading First dollars. Those funds cannot be used to provide transportation for the Kindergarten Plus students. District staff estimate that transportation for Kindergarten Plus students accounts for an additional \$35,000 in program cost. An additional issue noted by Gallup-McKinley staff concerned attendance during the second half of the program year. Attendance during this period lagged, as students left for the summer on family vacations and for other reasons. Finally, district staff indicated that they struggled to recruit a new group of Kindergarten Plus students in some schools this year (2004-2005) and needed more effective recruitment techniques. Staff in Gallup-McKinley noting declining enrollment and falling attendance during the second half of the summer are planning on offering swimming as an incentive at least one site in an attempt to ensure good attendance during the second half of the program.

Las Cruces Public Schools

General Program Characteristics

Las Cruces Public schools operates their Kindergarten Plus pilot in two schools-- Valley View Elementary and Cesar Chavez Elementary, with the majority of students in Valley View.

Cesar Chavez Elementary did not participate in the second half of the 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus program, and during the site visit, district staff arranged for Office of Education Accountability staff to visit Valley View Elementary only.

Las Cruces is serving approximately 58 students this year during the 2004-2005 school year. In Las Cruces, Kindergarten Plus classrooms remain largely intact-- the majority of students in the classroom are Kindergarten plus students, with only a few new enrollments entering the classrooms during the traditional beginning of the school year. All Kindergarten classes at Valley View focus heavily on pre-literacy skills. Valley View does not have a recruitment strategy for Kindergarten Plus. Rather, parents are being informed that at Valley View, all Kindergarten classes begin the school year early and extend beyond the traditional year.

Administrator and Teacher Observations

Teachers and the principal at Valley View feel that there is an educational impact on students through Kindergarten Plus. They believe that starting earlier has definite educational advantages for students in younger grades. One teacher said that she felt her current first graders, who were part of the first Kindergarten Plus cohort were “at least half a year ahead” of where her first graders have traditionally been at the beginning of a school year. Visiting the classroom in late September OEA observed that first grade students were reading and writing simple sentences, as well as constructing simple stories. Teachers noted that Kindergarten Plus students were more adept socially, and came into first grade possessing basic pre-literacy skills. One first grade teacher explained that the Kindergarten Plus students “raised the bar” on what she considered a high-performing first grade student to be. Administrators and teachers note that

parents of Kindergarten Plus students are more involved than parents have been in previous years. The staff attributes this to the program start date, which they feel piques parental interest in the program and in their children's learning. The principal at Valley View indicated that she is curious about the long-term impact of Kindergarten Plus on the academic achievement of students as they progress through elementary school.

Program Concerns/Revisions

Like Gallup-McKinley, Las Cruces indicated that travel for Kindergarten Plus students was an additional cost for the district. Transportation is not covered under Reading First monies, and the district must cover the cost of transportation for students. Las Cruces also indicated that they had difficulty keeping both students beyond the end of the traditional school year. In order to remedy this situation for the current school year, Las Cruces and the PED have agreed that in lieu of the extra days beyond the end of the traditional Kindergarten year, this year's cohort of Kindergarten Plus students will begin first grade twenty days earlier than the start of the traditional first grade school year.

Gadsden Independent School District

General Program Characteristics

Gadsden Public Schools chose to implement a model that differs from the Kindergarten Plus model. Instead of providing an extended year of Kindergarten, Gadsden has developed a pre-Kindergarten model, providing a full year of half day pre-Kindergarten to 80 district students during the 2004-2005 school year. The curriculum is bilingual and focuses on oral literacy and

social skills. Gadsden chose this route because it does not have access to Headstart, the federal program for three and four year olds, and the district feels strongly about the need to implement universal access to preschool.

The Gadsden program currently operates in two classrooms at Desert View Elementary, with both morning and afternoon classes. Students are assessed using the Bracken assessment, rather than the DIBELS. During the first year of their pre-Kindergarten program, due to a late start, Gadsden had only one semester (Spring) of their program, and served 44 students.

Teachers in the program receive active mentoring throughout the school year, and have attended several professional development workshops on such topics as classroom management. Gadsden is committed to providing pre-Kindergarten opportunities for all of their students, and has recently secured private funding for the construction of permanent pre-Kindergarten facilities. Gadsden is funding its program through a variety of sources. In addition to the Kindergarten Plus funding, they reported that they are using additional Title 1 dollars for transportation and staffing (\$225,000).

Administrator and Teacher Observations

The Kindergarten teacher interviewed indicated that he felt that those students who had participated in the pre-Kindergarten program were better prepared for Kindergarten than their peers who did not participate in the program. The mentor teacher assigned to both of the pre-school classrooms noted that the program funding had allowed them to outfit the classrooms with a number of materials and curriculum that they would not otherwise have. Teachers indicated that the half-day format often made them feel pressed for time, but both felt the program was worthwhile and helped students gain critical skills.

Program Concerns/Revisions

During the 2004-2005 school year, Gadsden has been able to implement a full-year pre-Kindergarten program. As mentioned earlier, Gadsden has begun the construction of permanent pre-Kindergarten facilities and hopes to expand their program in the coming years.

Overall Findings and Lessons Learned

Kindergarten, traditionally, has introduced most children to the school environment. It is a place where students learn how the school environment operates, as well as the expectations for behavior and social interaction. The assumption underlying the Kindergarten Plus program is that extended time in Kindergarten will provide at-risk children with an expanded opportunity to learn those crucial skills.

The students who participated in New Mexico's Kindergarten Plus pilot project did demonstrate positive results on the DIBELS assessment, with fewer children being classified in risk categories over the course of the Kindergarten year. The extended number of days in summer in Kindergarten Plus also appears to benefit students by providing them with additional social skill development and more practice in being students that they would not otherwise have an opportunity to practice. This additional time has the potential impact of lessening summer learning loss for students returning to first grade—because of their extended Kindergarten year.

The long-term impact on closing the achievement gap needs to be measured over time by following those students who participated in the Kindergarten Plus program and comparing their academic achievement to that of a group of comparison students who did not participate in the

program. The analyses reported in this study are only the first steps. Anecdotally, teachers report that students are progressing further and faster than their non-Kindergarten Plus peers. Parental involvement has also been improved in Kindergarten Plus classrooms in some districts. Parents are curious about the program, and are willing to participate more readily.

Several lessons were gleaned from the first pilot year:

- Districts learned at the end of year one that attendance lagged. Some students did not stay through the second 20-day Kindergarten Plus segment into the summer because of family travel and schedules, etc. In addition, districts reported that staff expressed fatigue by the end of the year and sometimes struggled for material. Districts are addressing these issues in various ways: Gallup McKinley, for example, is planning to offer swimming lessons as an incentive. Las Cruces is planning to add 20 days to the beginning of first grade, rather than extending the Kindergarten year by an additional 20 days. Albuquerque is extending the beginning of the program with extra days and reducing the number of days at the end of the program.
- Adequate funding is an issue. Three of the pilot districts are currently funded by federal Reading First dollars. PED staff has determined that Reading First funding cannot continue to be used to fund the project. In addition, Reading First dollars cannot be used for transportation, which means that districts that must provide transportation for the Kindergarten Plus students have incurred extra costs.
- All four of the districts are approaching Kindergarten Plus from very different directions—varying in program start and stop times, number of students served, assessments and grade level. Clearly, districts have designed programs that best meet their individual needs and that is appropriate. These “real-world” variations on the theoretical Kindergarten Plus concept, however, make it difficult to measure the program’s impact on closing the achievement gap. Ideally, the PED should provide districts with more guidance in program development and in technical assistance during implementation of Kindergarten Plus pilot projects.

The PED should seek to build greater consensus across the pilot districts about common program elements that meet all district needs in order to have a more consistent program in each district.

Recommendations

Overall, the Kindergarten Plus pilot program seems to be an effective way to nurture student success, particularly among high-poverty students. At-risk students in the Kindergarten Plus programs displayed gains in literacy skills as measured by the DIBELS; developed important social skills; and benefited from increased parental involvement. The OEA's first recommendation, however, is that additional research is needed to establish the impact of Kindergarten Plus on students' academic achievement in first grade and in determining whether Kindergarten Plus has helped to close the achievement gap.

Secondly, results indicated that the time spent in the pilot programs during the summer prior to the start of Kindergarten was most helpful. Across all three Kindergarten Plus districts and in Gadsden, the time spent in school before Kindergarten was the key in helping students prepare for and adjust to Kindergarten. Given New Mexico's commitment to providing access to high quality pre-Kindergarten programs to all students, one option worth considering is to classify time spent in Kindergarten Plus prior to the start of the traditional Kindergarten year as pre-Kindergarten.

Thirdly, the PED should work with pilot districts to build consensus on, establishing and standardizing some common program elements (e.g., distribution of Kindergarten Plus days, number of students per class, whether classrooms are composed only of Kindergarten Plus students or mixed, etc) across all sites. This approach would provide more a stronger test of whether the Kindergarten Plus concept of extended days really benefits at-risk students.

Appendix

DIBELS Charts

The following pages contain charts of DIBELS results for each school in Albuquerque, Gallup McKinley and Las Cruces. Each chart highlights one particular DIBELS scale. DIBELS monitors student progress on these scales in different ways, depending on the age of the student. The assessments given are used for screening and grouping children. The scales are designed to be stage-appropriate, which means that some scales are completed and additional scales are begun at different times.

(Adapted from the *DIBELS Administration and Scoring Guide 6th Edition*, pg 6)

Initial Sound Fluency: This subtest measures the child's ability to identify, isolate and pronounce the first sound of an orally presented word. The examiner produces the sound and the child must find which four pictures begin with that sound. The child is also asked to orally produce the beginning sound for an orally presented word that matches one of the given pictures. The examiner measures the child's response time. The score is the number of correct initial sounds given per minute. This assessment was given twice—once in the fall and again in winter. The first assessment measured student's risk level for failure (*At Risk, Some Risk* or *Low Risk*), the second measured whether students' skill levels are *Deficient, Emerging* or *Established*.

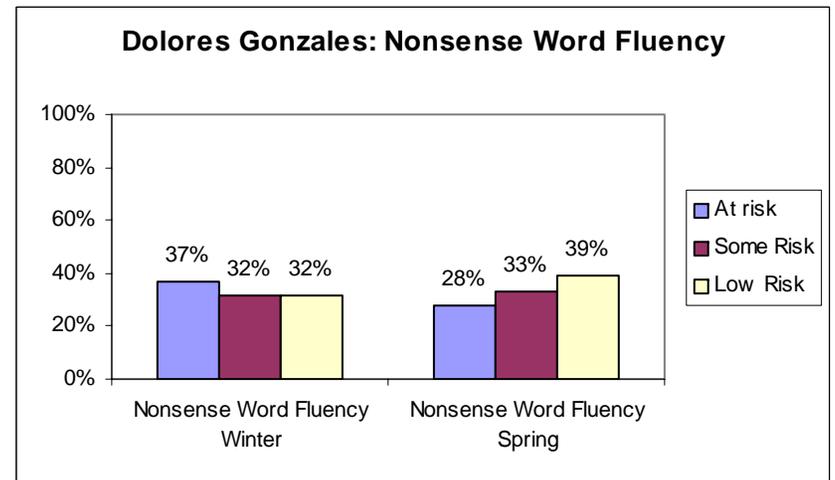
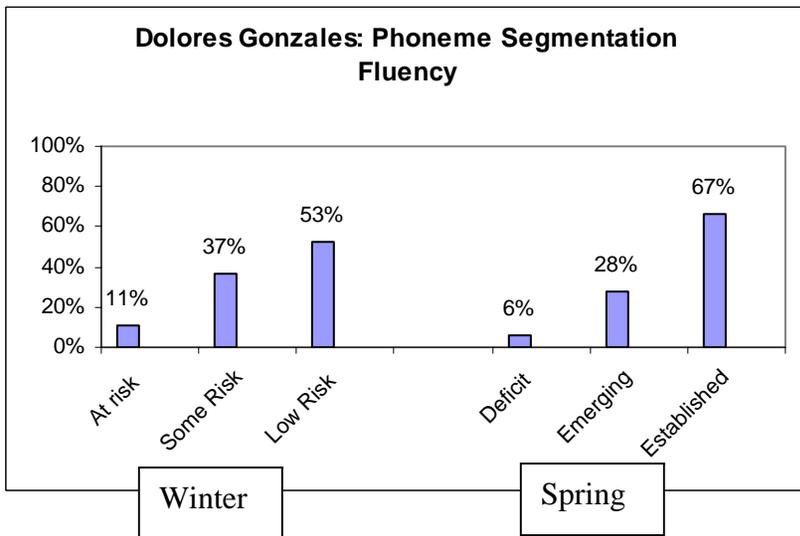
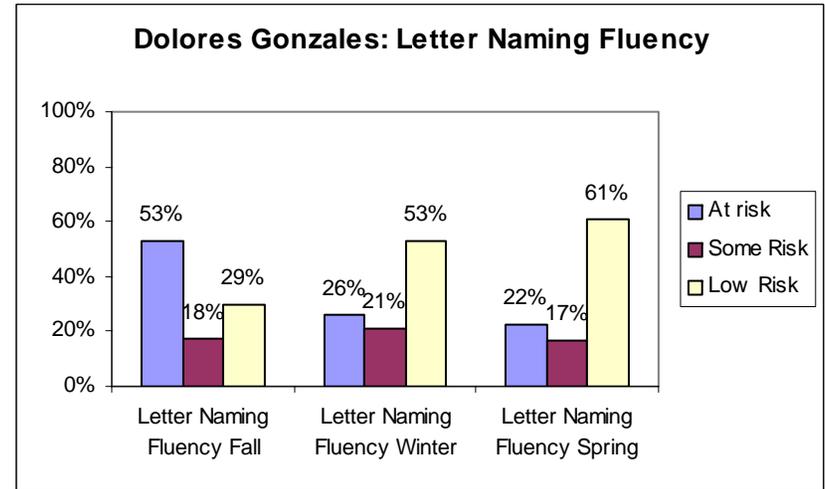
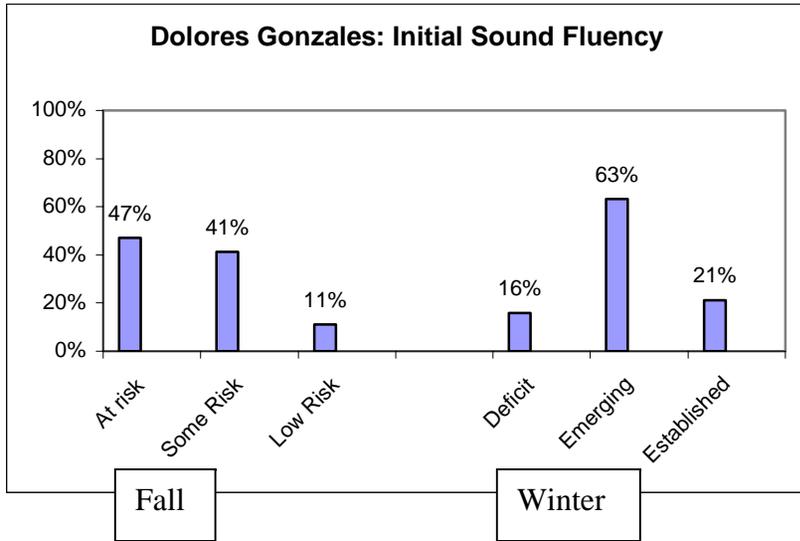
Letter Naming Fluency: Students are asked to name as many letters as they can, uppercase and lowercase randomly mixed, within one minute. This assessment was given three

times—once in fall, once in winter and once in spring. Each time it measured students’ level of risk for failure as *At Risk*, *Some Risk* or *Low Risk*.

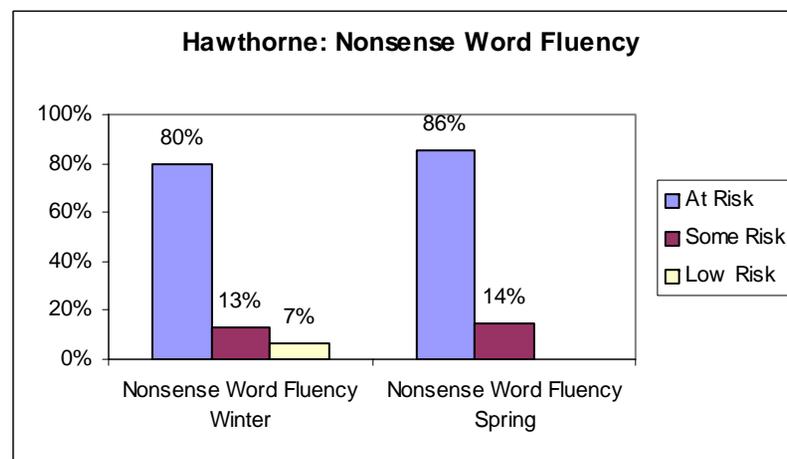
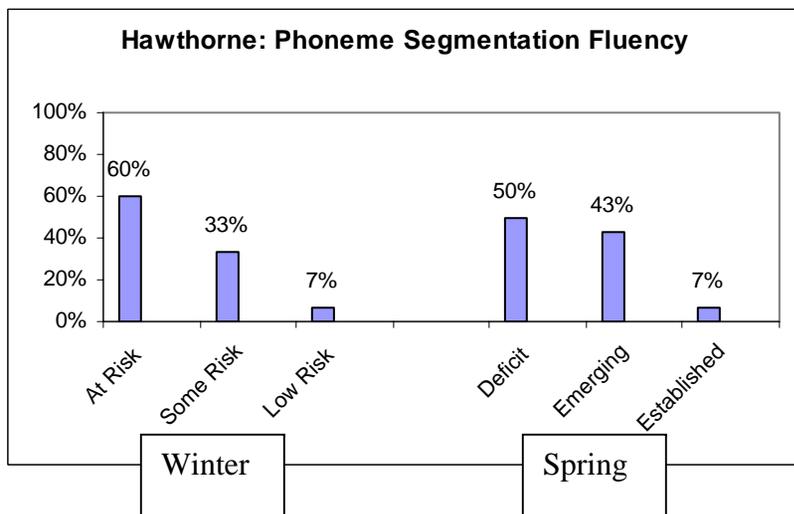
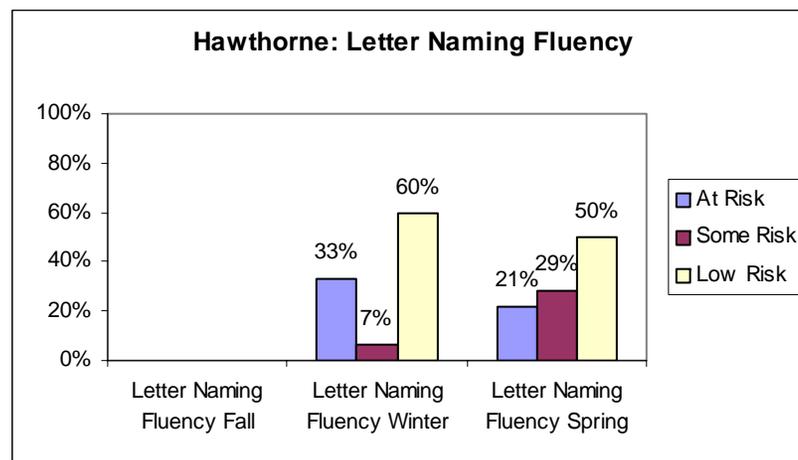
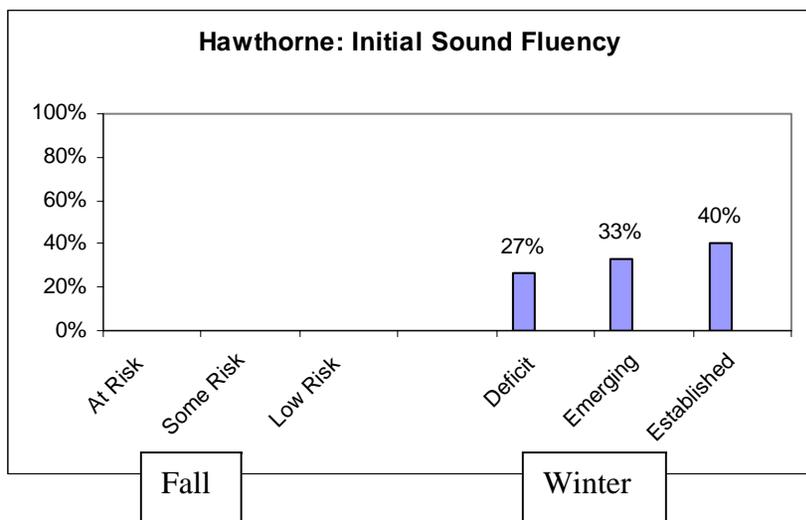
Phoneme Segmentation: The examiner gives the child a word or syllable with three or four phonemes and asks the child to say the individual sounds that make up the word. The score is the number of correct phonemes produced in one minute. This assessment was given twice—once in winter and again in spring. The first assessment measured students’ risk level for failure (*At Risk*, *Some Risk* or *Low Risk*), the second measured whether students’ skill levels are *Deficient*, *Emerging* or *Established*.

Nonsense Word Fluency: Measures the ability to link sounds and use that knowledge to decode three-letter syllables that are nonsense words. The child reads randomly ordered vowel-consonant and consonant-vowel-consonant words. The child receives credit for pronouncing individual sounds or the correct sounds in the whole syllable read as a unit. The score is the number of letter-sounds correct in one minute. Reading whole syllables leads to a higher score. This assessment was given twice—once in winter and again in spring. Both times it measured students’ level of risk for failure as *At Risk*, *Some Risk* or *Low Risk*.

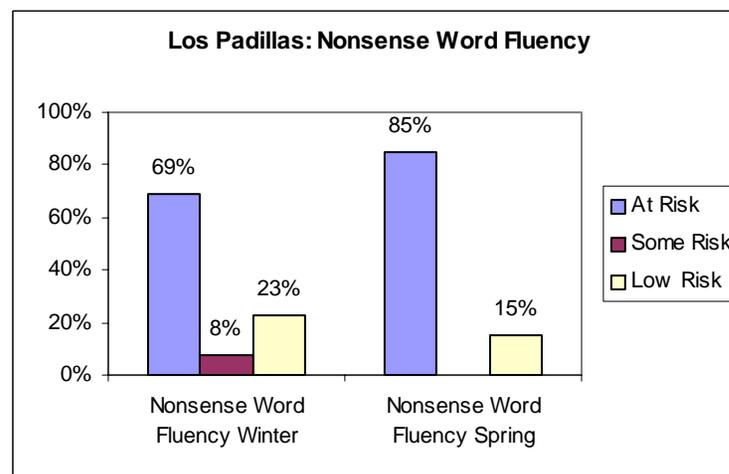
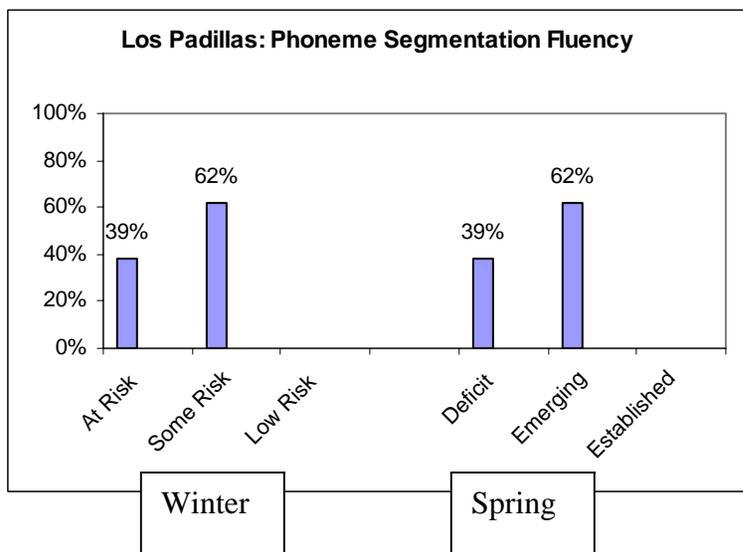
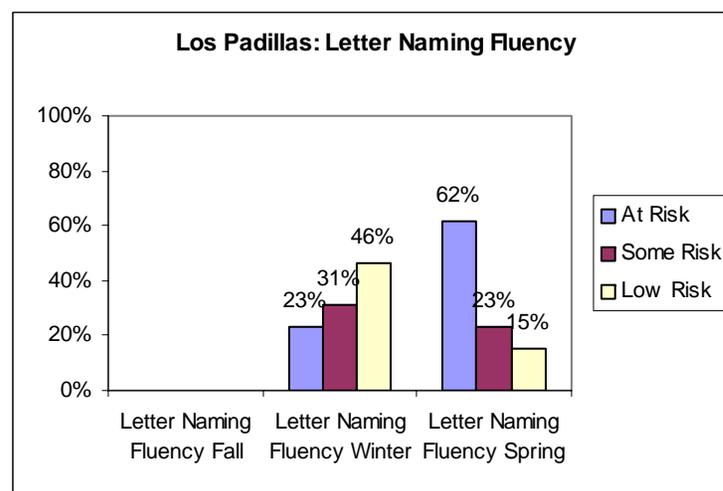
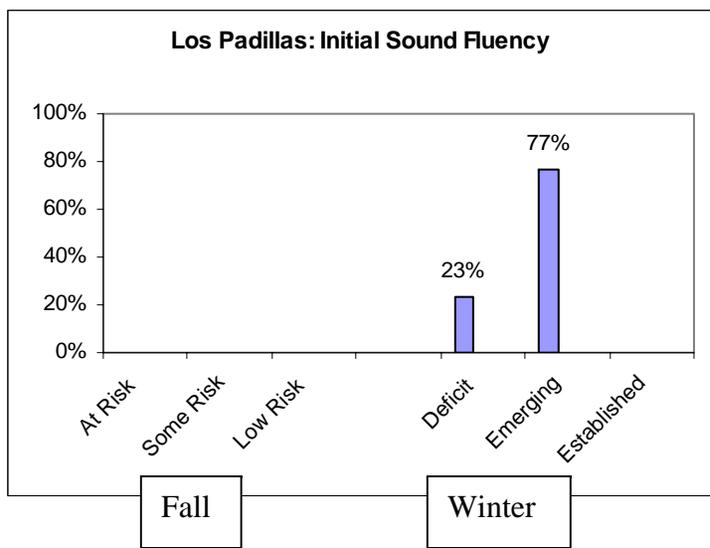
Albuquerque – Dolores Gonzales Elementary (N=19) 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus



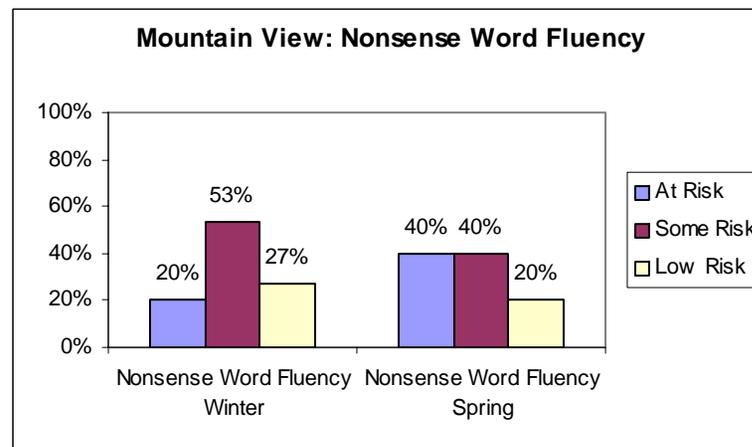
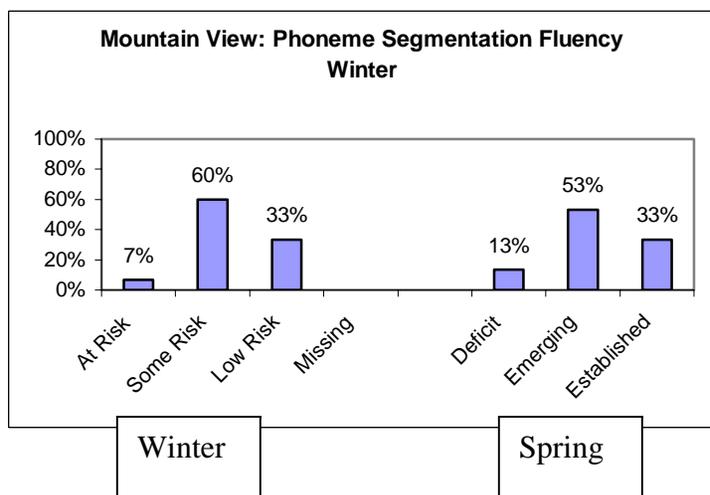
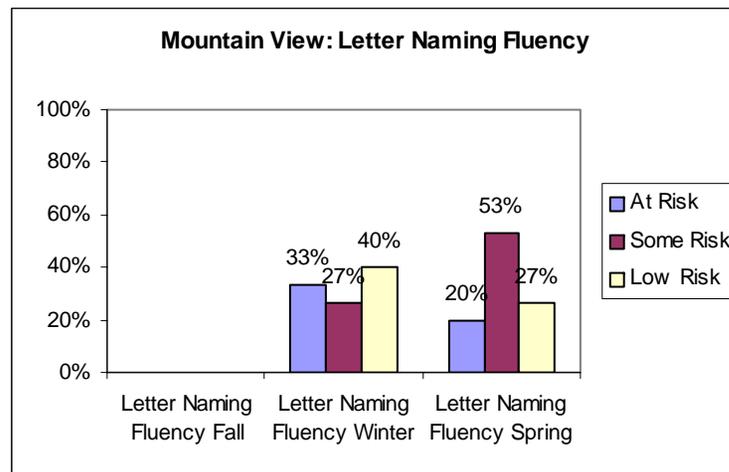
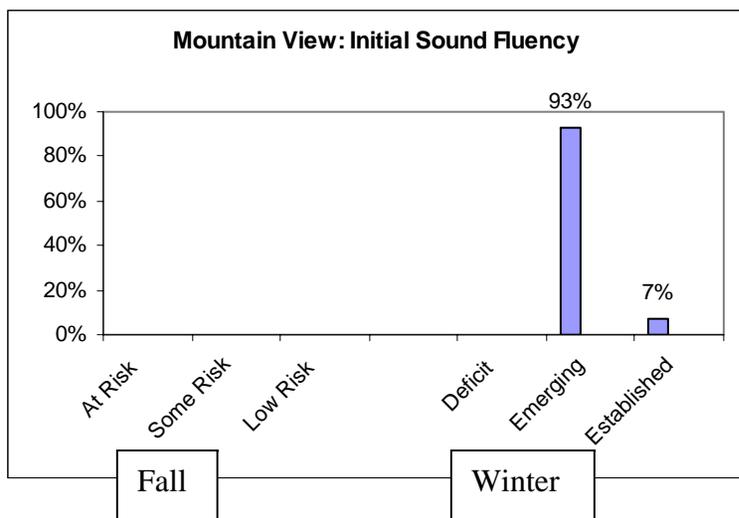
Albuquerque—Hawthorne Elementary (N=15) 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus



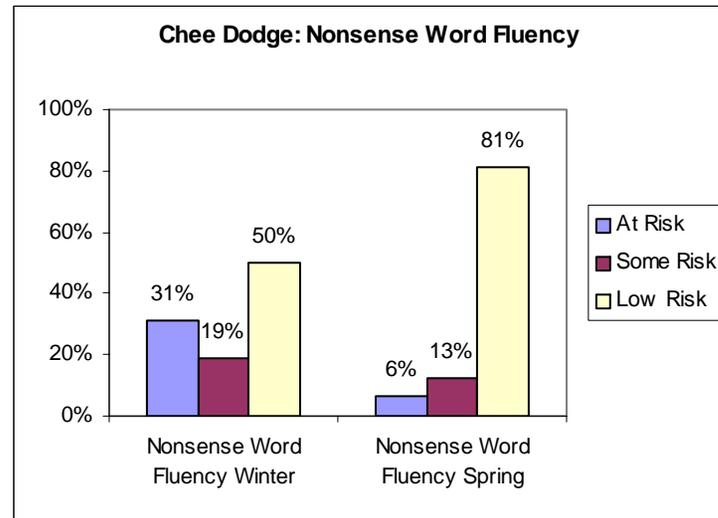
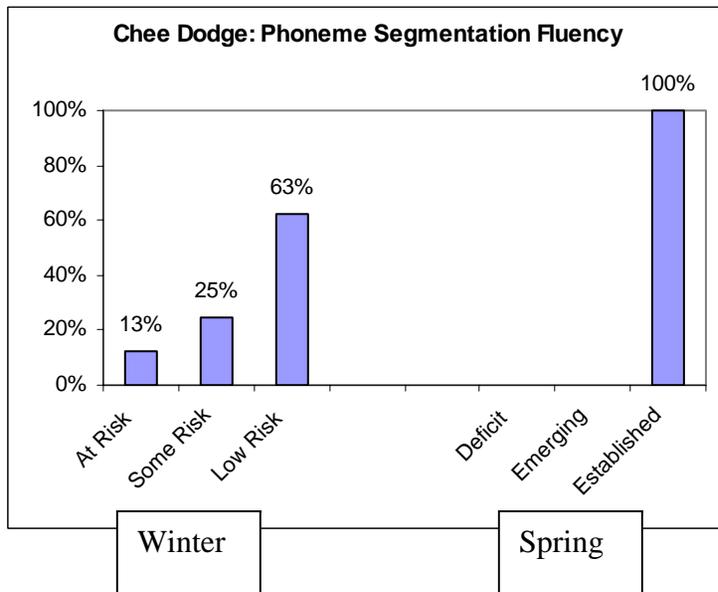
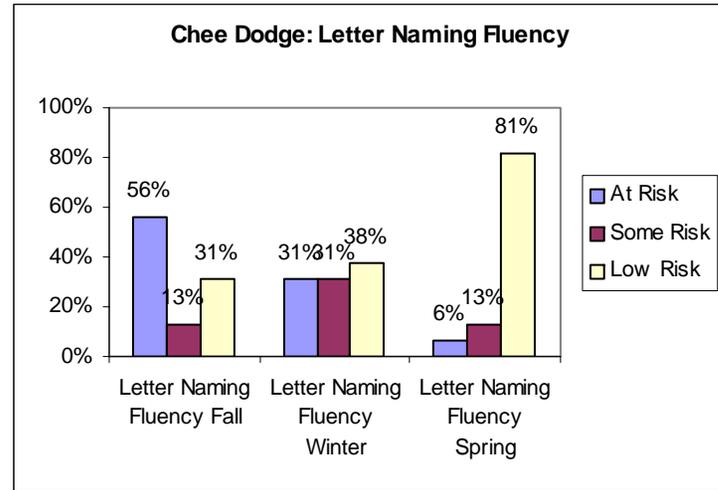
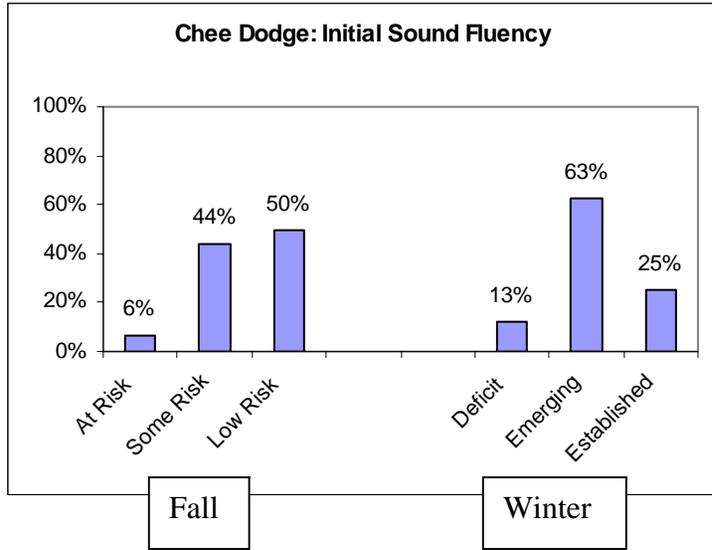
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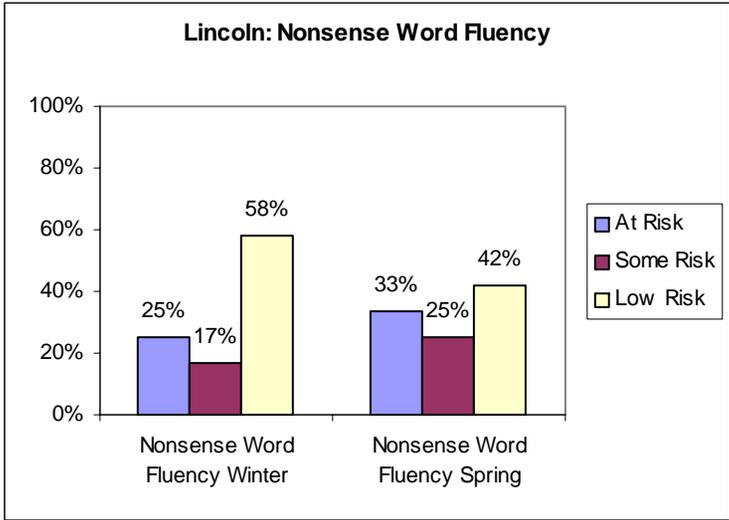
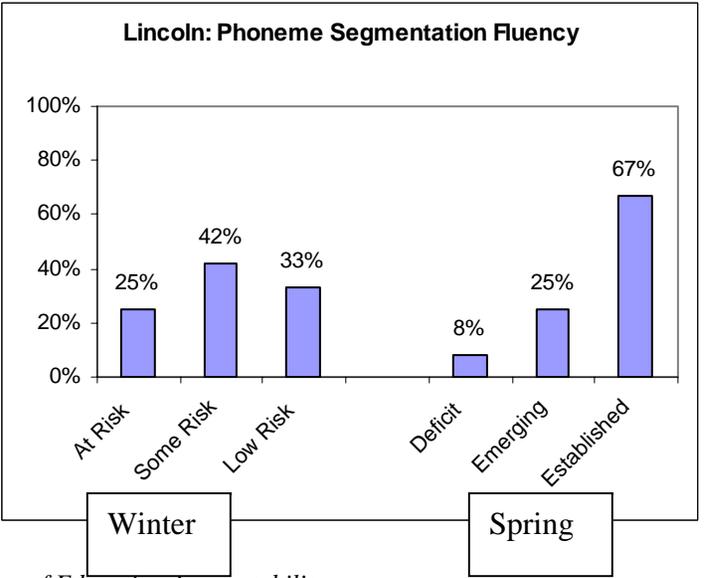
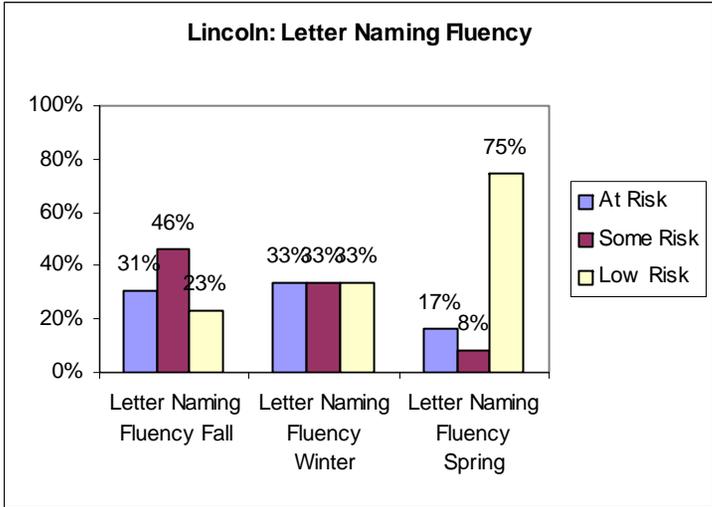
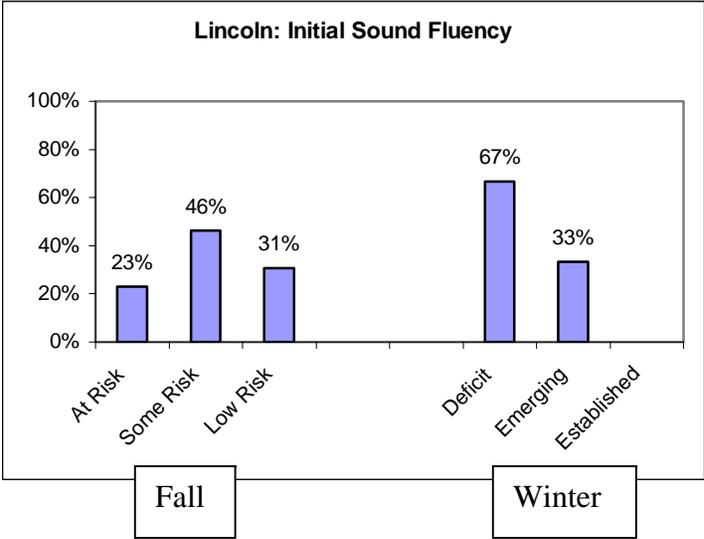
Albuquerque—Mountain View Elementary (N=15) 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus



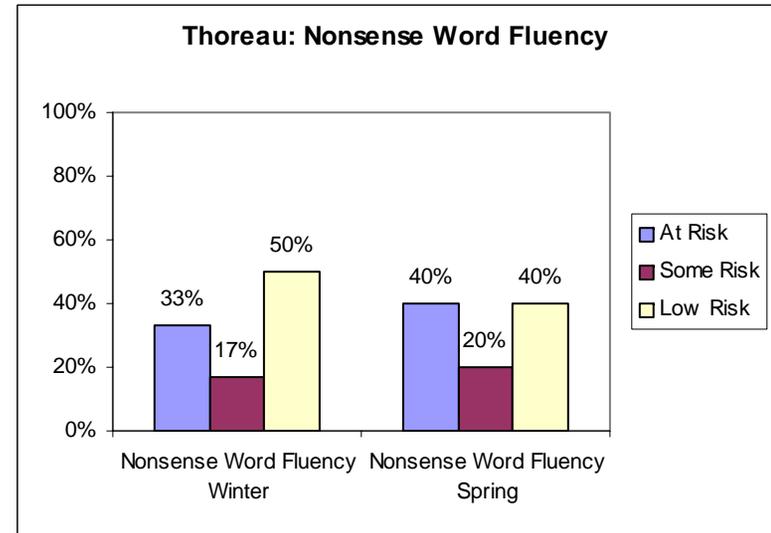
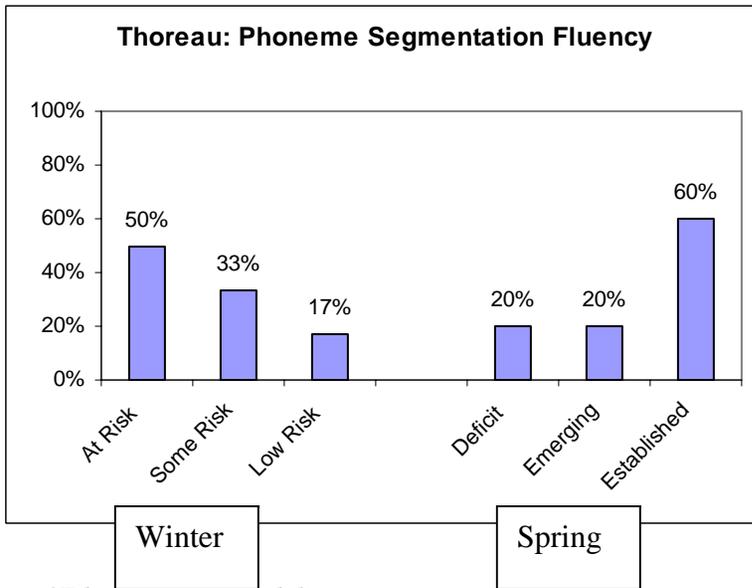
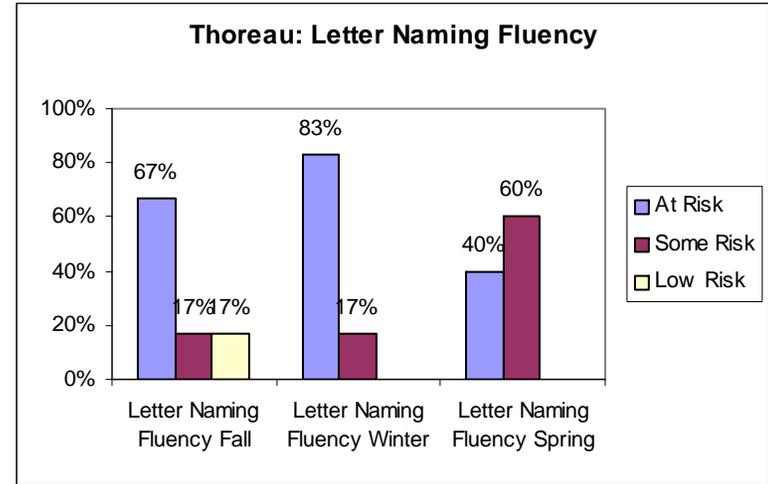
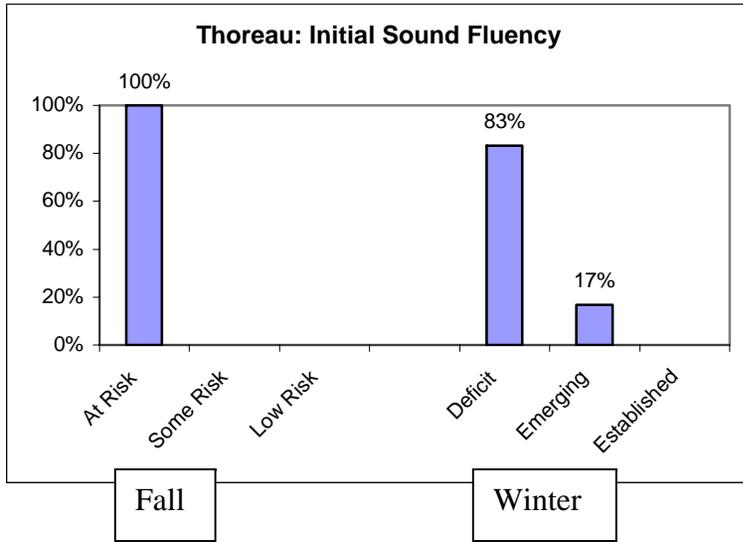
Gallup McKinley—Chee Dodge Elementary (N=16) 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus



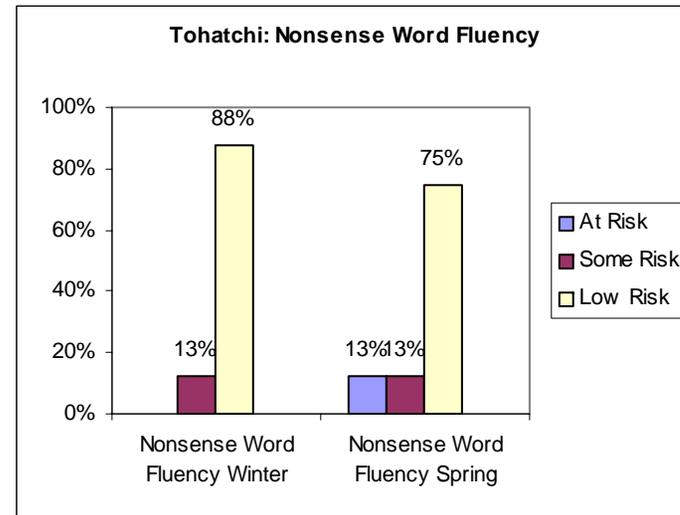
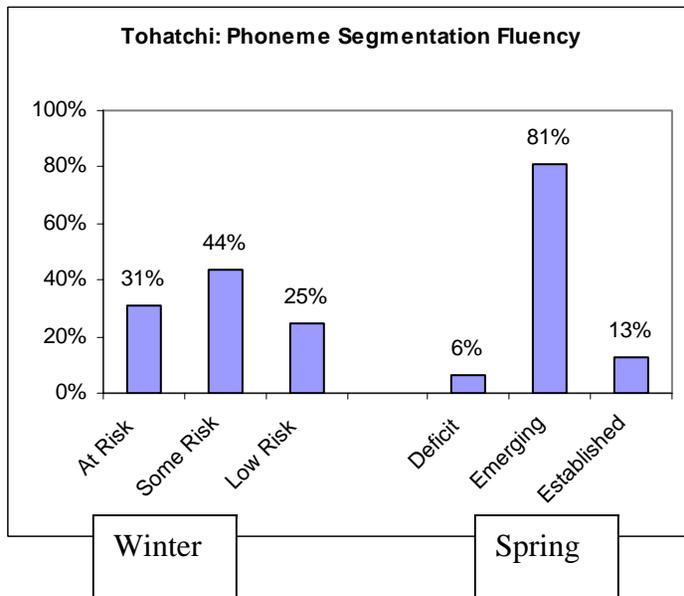
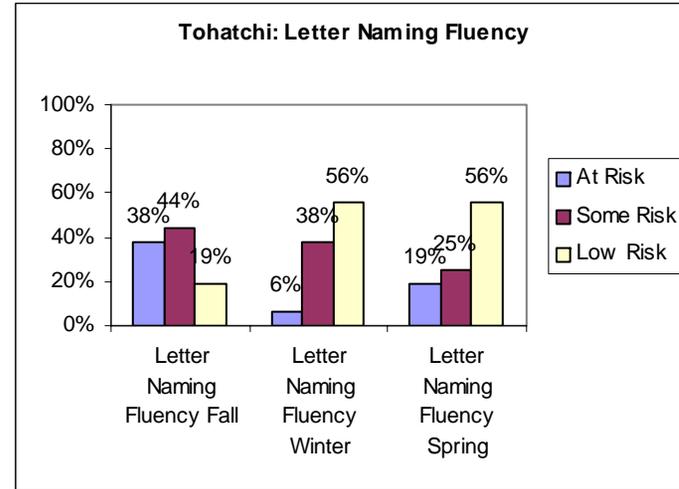
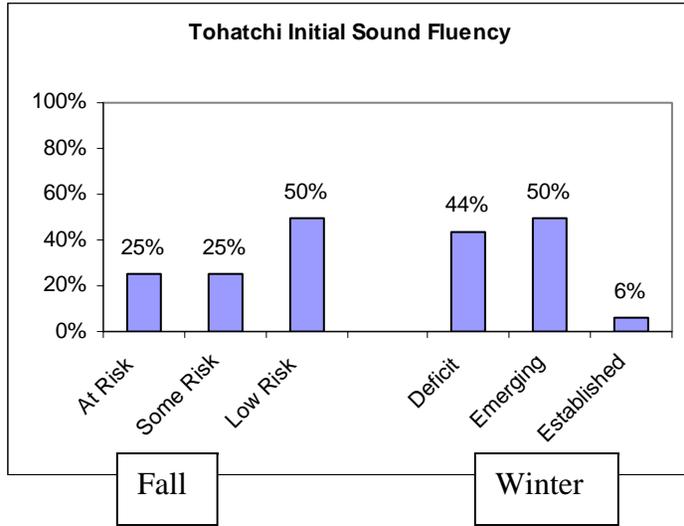
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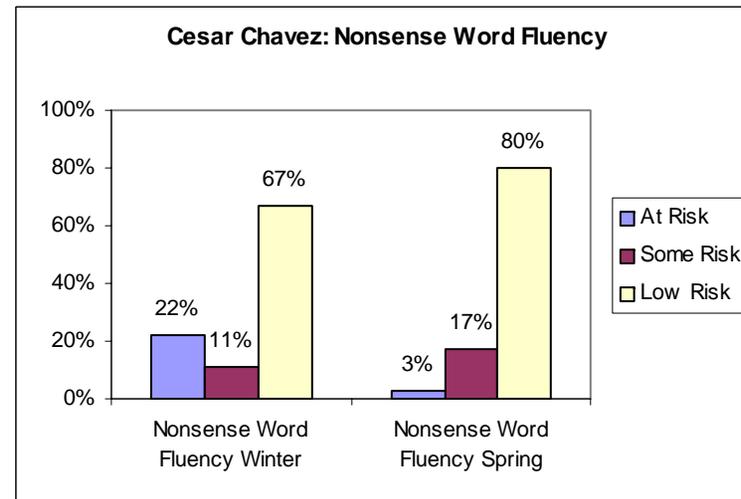
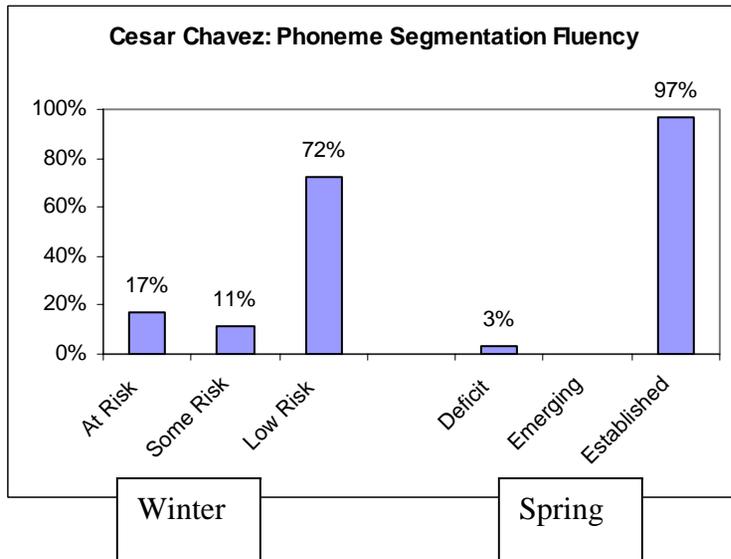
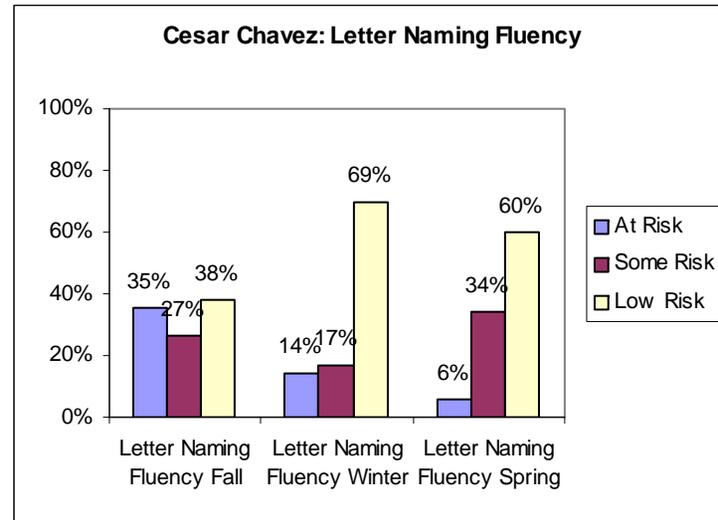
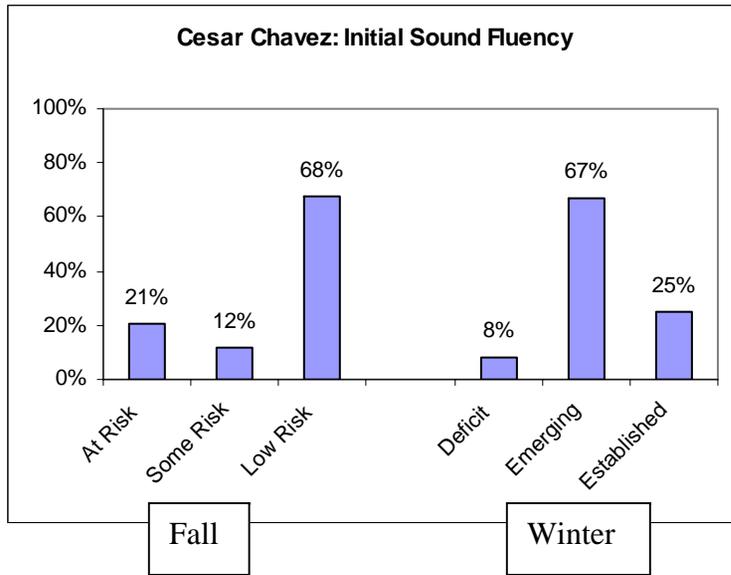
Gallup McKinley—Thoreau Elementary (N=6) 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus



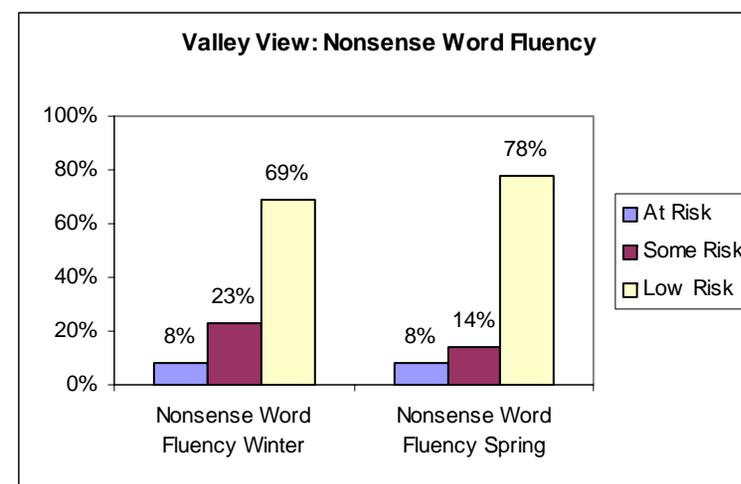
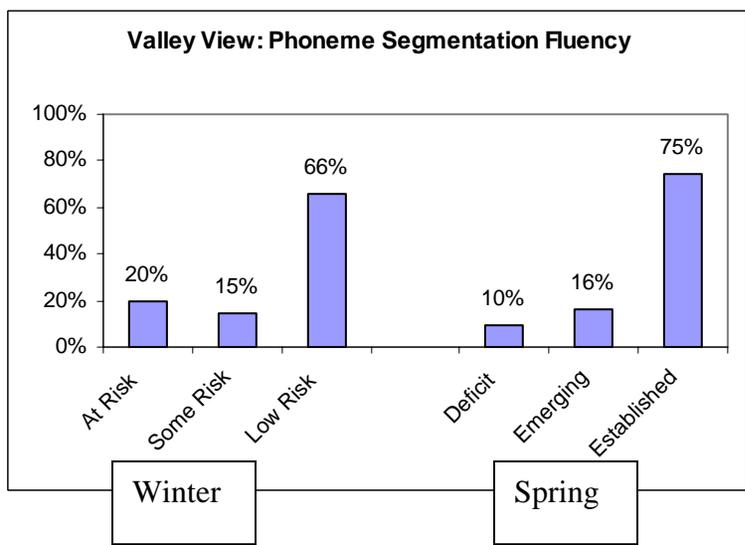
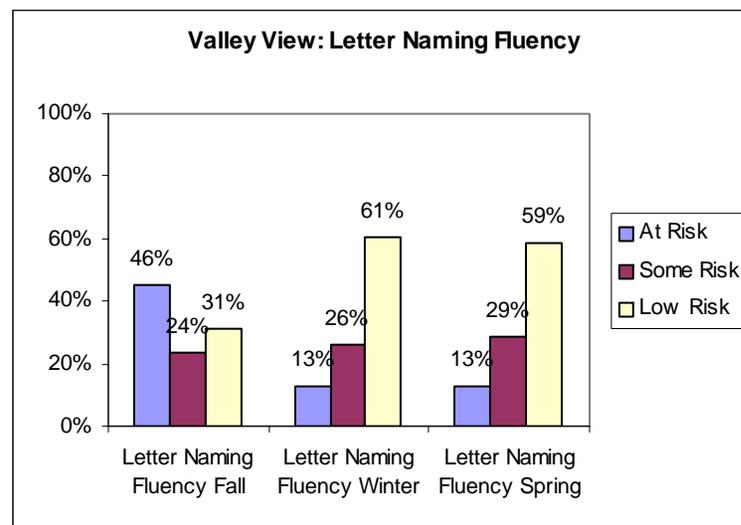
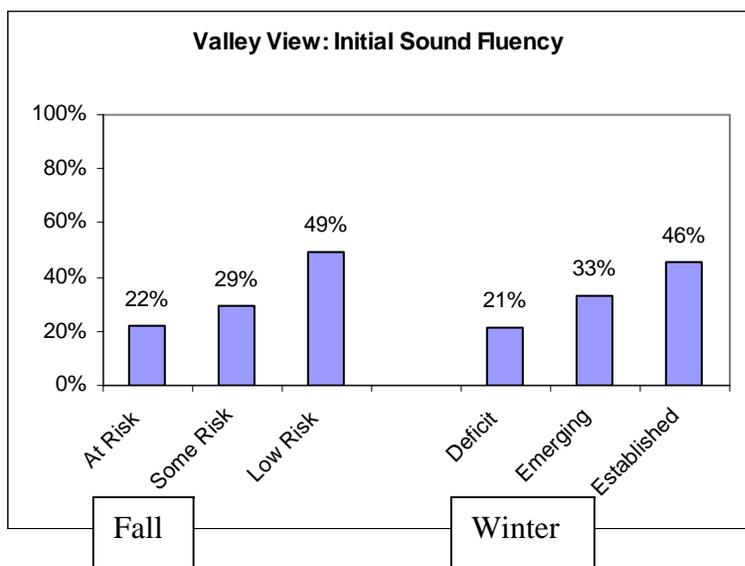
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Las Cruces—Cesar Chavez Elementary (N=36) 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus



Las Cruces—Valley View Elementary (N=61) 2003-2004 Kindergarten Plus



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EDUCATION WEEK

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Ahead of Their Class

A pilot project in New Mexico gives kindergartners— and some 1st graders—20 extra days before the school year begins to learn the ropes and jump into their lessons.

By Linda Jacobson

Las Cruces, N.M.

On top of a colorful classroom rug, Pattie Burnam places four basic shapes. Asking her pupils to close their eyes, she hides a cutout of a gingerbread man under the triangle.

She then calls on the children one by one, giving them a chance to guess where the figure is hiding. But first, they have to name it.

“No peeking—that’s what people do in preschool, and we’re not in preschool anymore,” Burnam tells her “grown-up kindergartners,” as she calls them.

In addition to a welcoming teacher, these new kindergartners at Valley View Elementary School have an extra advantage as they adjust to an unfamiliar building, new faces, and higher expectations. By the time the school year starts here two weeks hence, they will have already had 20 additional days in class—20 days without older students in the lunchroom or on the playground, 20 days before the hectic pace of the new year begins.

“That quietness translates to amazing comfort,” says Principal Jamie Jones. “The kids are calm.”

Called Kindergarten-Plus, the concept is the brainchild of former American Federation of Teachers President Sandra Feldman.

At the union's 2002 convention, she challenged the federal government "to help states and districts to provide disadvantaged children with the opportunity to start kindergarten during the summer months before they would ordinarily enter, and then to stay on through the summer before they will enter 1st grade."

Such a program, Feldman added, "could make a big difference in the lives of our poorest children. It will accelerate their early education, socialization, and well-being, and can help make sure that they don't enter 1st grade with as large a disadvantage."

While the AFT has also advocated universal prekindergarten nationwide, Kindergarten-Plus could be thought of as a "down payment," said Feldman, who wrote about the concept in the frequent "Where We Stand" columns she penned.

State Rep. Mimi Stewart, a resource teacher who provides professional development in the Albuquerque public schools, kept seeing those columns.



First graders Melissa Placencio, top, and Alejandra Arbizo work on their computer skills during class.

—Victor Barajas

"Every time I read it, I thought, that's the answer for New Mexico," she says. "We had just started [the federal No Child Left Behind law], and I knew we were going to be having these schools that were not going to be meeting adequate yearly progress."

Funding was unavailable in 2003 to implement the program statewide. Still, Stewart, a Democrat, was able to move a bill through the legislature that launched a three-year pilot in the four New Mexico districts with the highest percentage of students in Title I schools, which generally enroll more disadvantaged children.

The state gives a total of \$400,000 each year to enroll eligible children in the program in the four districts: Albuquerque, Gadsden, Gallup-McKinley, and here in Las Cruces.

A preliminary evaluation of the program, released earlier this year by New Mexico's office of education accountability, found increases in children's ability to name letters and identify and pronounce word sounds. According to the analysis, which was conducted after the 2003-04 school year, the program also led to fewer children being classified as having "delayed skills" during their kindergarten year.

Despite that analysis and anecdotal evidence indicating that it works, the program could be in jeopardy.

A prekindergarten initiative for 4-year-olds kicks off this fall in the state, and advocates of Kindergarten Plus are concerned there won't be enough interest in the legislature to keep the kindergarten program going.

"I hate in education how we keep adding things," Principal Jones says, "but we don't keep doing things until we perfect them."

The new, \$5 million pre-K program, pushed by Democratic Gov. Bill Richardson during the 2005 legislative session, will be provided in some schools as well as in community-based preschools and child-care centers. Like Kindergarten-Plus, it will initially target children in communities with the most Title I schools as well as youngsters in areas with the highest percentages of students not making AYP.

While Jones is not opposed to the idea of a prekindergarten program, she says her school doesn't have any empty classrooms to accommodate 4-year-olds. The kindergarten classrooms, however, are already there.

Because the idea of Kindergarten-Plus is to give children extra time before and after their kindergarten year, Valley View Elementary also invites incoming 1st graders to start school early—sort of a "plus-plus."

"These kids are so much better prepared," says Becky King, who has been teaching 1st grade at Valley View for 30 years and has seen how the program has benefited the mostly disadvantaged children who attend the school. "The more they're here, the more they're getting. It's not like they would be going to camps or Bible school [otherwise]."



First graders use masks as a tool during a read-aloud exercise in the Valley View cafeteria.

—Victor Barajas

As she shows off simple book reports her pupils have completed, she adds, “I’m very pleased with their writing.”

Kindergarten teacher Burnam naturally has to encourage the newcomers in her class to pay attention, sit “crisscross, applesauce,” and keep their hands to themselves, but those reminders aren’t needed in King’s class. Behavior has improved since the Kindergarten-Plus program began, King says, as she hands out graham crackers to the youngsters while they work.

The children are quiet as they color a connect-the-dots picture and trace pictures of garden tools—a skill that will help later with their handwriting.

Across the hall, outside Cherie Love’s 1st grade class, impressive writing samples—about helicopters in the sky—hang on the wall.

“It’s amazing what you can get a 1st grader to do,” says Love, showing an example of a child’s work, how he wrote from margin to margin and clearly spaced his words. “What used to happen in 1st grade, they’re doing in kindergarten—those readiness skills.”

Lawmakers outside New Mexico have also shown interest in harnessing such readiness skills for their states’ children. Louisiana has passed a Kindergarten-Plus law, but so far the program has not received any funding, according to Giselle Lundy-Ponce, a senior associate in the AFT’s educational issues department.

In Rhode Island, a bill was introduced, and interest in crafting legislation has also been expressed in Texas and Virginia.

Before Feldman retired from the AFT presidency in 2004 because of a recurrence of cancer, U.S. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., introduced a federal Kindergarten-Plus bill. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, the Senate education committee’s top Democrat and a strong proponent of more spending for early-childhood education, also likes the idea, according to Lundy-Ponce. Still, she says, the bill is “just sitting there, waiting for the right amount of interest.”

In New Mexico, Kindergarten Plus is a heavily academic program instead of simply a get-to-know-you-better time, though some fun activities, including field trips and water play, are built in. Getting her teachers to focus on academics, Jones says, took some persuasion.

“Some of my [kindergarten] teachers thought kindergarten should just be social,” says Jones, who taught 1st grade in the 1980s. She says she earned a reputation as a rebel because she taught her pupils spelling before the curriculum said they were supposed to learn it.

Jones says she still gets questions about whether the children are being hurt by higher academic expectations. She responds: “How can you hurt a kid when they’re learning? All of our kids could benefit from 40 extra days.”



First graders walk through Valley View Elementary's cafeteria.
—Victor Barajas

Persuading teachers to cut their summers short also took a little extra work, despite the extra pay.

“We’ve programmed ourselves to having a summer off,” Jones says.

Without teacher buy-in, in fact, the program can’t work, as shown by the experience at Cesar Chavez Elementary School, also here in Las Cruces. The school offered the program the first year, but when the two teachers involved had family emergencies, no one else was willing to take their places.

At Valley View, King says her initial reaction was something like, “Oh my! I have to go back to work?” But she says she realized she’d rather be spending her time with children than in a staff-development seminar.

“I’ve probably had all the training I can handle,” she says. “I love my job, and I’d rather be doing this.”

Jones describes herself as a “picky principal” when it comes to mealtimes at school because she requires her teachers to stay with their charges instead of taking a break. She believes the informal atmosphere is an optimal time for conversation and vocabulary development.

Earlier this summer morning at breakfast, which is served to all the children, Burnam takes time to squat down next to some of her pupils as they eat, answering their questions and encouraging good behavior.

Those additional days without the older students, she says, really come in handy because the cafeteria routine had changed. Instead of simply grabbing their cereal and milk, the children are now instructed to pick up a tray first and choose additional food items, including the apple-cinnamon square that the food-service worker describes as “like a Pop-Tart.”

The change, Burnam says, “may seem insignificant,” but deciding which item should be placed in which tray compartment is a big decision for a 5-year-old.

During breakfast, Eli Guzman, stands off to the side to watch his daughter, Giovanni, eat her breakfast and talk quietly with other girls. Even though he lives outside Valley View’s attendance zone, he requested a transfer for her, partly because of the Kindergarten-Plus program.



Barbara Rhodes escorts her kindergarten class to the school's pond to feed the fish and reinforce listening skills, group work, and respect for nature.

—Victor Barajas

“It’s supposed to better prepare them for the school year,” he says, adding that his two older children, now 11 and 12, attended Valley View Elementary. “I liked this school so much.”

Because of the age difference between Giovanni, who goes by “Gigi,” and her older siblings, Guzman says his daughter was eager to spend time with children her own age. Since Kindergarten Plus began, he says, she has come home talking about her new friends.

He stays to watch Gigi, dressed in bright pink and wearing two pigtails on top of her head, walk down the hall to Burnam’s class.

Not only does Burnam expect good kindergarten behavior, but she also frequently encourages her youngsters by telling them they’re about to do 1st grade work.

In fact, when the class begins singing an alphabet song using the letter sounds, Cecelia Martinez, a talkative pupil with a know-it-all attitude asks, “Is this a 1st grade thing?”

Later, as the children sit in small groups for more individual instruction, Burnam says Kindergarten-Plus gives children the exposure to learning that they might not get outside of school.

“Some people have been everywhere and done everything,” she says, placing her hands gently on Cecelia’s head. “And some people haven’t.”

When the pilot program ends next year, Jones hopes to have more than just her own gut feelings to convince policymakers that Kindergarten-Plus should continue.

While New Mexico’s standardized-testing program doesn’t start until 3rd grade, she’s gathering scores that compare basic early-literacy skills of 1st graders who attended Kindergarten-Plus with those of 1st graders in other schools.

For now, the future of Kindergarten-Plus depends on whether state policymakers are willing to support more than one early-childhood initiative at a time.

“If it continues, it will have to continue as part of the legislative process,” says Karen Ehlert, the full-day-kindergarten coordinator at the New Mexico education department.

Rep. Stewart says she will try to make that happen in next year’s session by somehow linking the pre-K legislation with Kindergarten-Plus.

“It’s a perfect progression,” she says. “The infrastructure is there, the teachers are there, and these kids really own the school.”



Thursday
October 20, 2005
Selected Stories:

Kindergarten program has impressive results; officials want funding

Kindergarten program has impressive results; officials want funding

By Bill Donovan
 Staff writer

GALLUP — It's called Kindergarten Plus and it has gotten the attention of local public school officials in a big way.

Some are indicating that it just may be a way for the Gallup-McKinley County Public School District to turn around years of bad test scores and provide students who heretofore have been problem learners a chance to excel early on.

The program has some supporters within the Central Office staff as well as the school board. And if it is going to survive, it also must get some support from state legislators.

Ed Monaghan, assistant superintendent for research for the district, said some children in the program have shown the ability to excel in areas that indicate the program may actually give students a boost in the learning curve.

Kindergarten Plus is now in its third and last year of a pilot program at four area schools Chee Dodge, Lincoln, Thoreau and Thoatchi elementary schools.

Its approach is simple. Kindergarten students in the program attend school an extra 40 days, 20 days before the start of regular school and 20 days after the end.

Tammy Hall, director of Early Childhood Education for the district, said this allows the student a chance to "catch up" to the other students in the class in the areas of reading and language.

This is especially true of students who are in the English as a second language category.

School officials said that in many cases, students who have been raised speaking Navajo, for example, have a hard time catching up with students who have been brought up with the English language because much of the instruction and all of the testing is done in the English language.

It sometimes take years before these students can start reading, writing and comprehending the English language on the same level as their English speaking peers and many find themselves never able to catch up fully.



Kindergarten teacher Marilyn Ellison helps Tyler Holiday with his work during classes on Wednesday at Chee Dodge Elementary School, north of Gallup. Ellison has been participating in a pilot program, Kindergarten Plus, which runs from July through June and helps students learn to read and write before entering first grade. [Photo by Jeff Jones/independent]

But students in the Kindergarten Plus program are showing signs that they are being able to excel in reading and language far better than many of their peers who aren't in the program.

Marilyn Ellison, a kindergarten teacher at Chee Dodge, said she has been noticing the difference in the kindergarten students who are taking the program.

For example, usually it takes most of the class until the middle of April to reach a certain level in language comprehension, but she has found that students in the Kindergarten Plus program have been hitting this level by December.

Danny Smith, the principal at Chee Dodge, said he has been noticing immediate improvements as well, especially among those students who have come into the school at the age of five with a reading and language comprehension level of two years and five months.

By the end of kindergarten, students in the Kindergarten Plus program in this category have been brought up to the five or five and a half year level in just nine months.

There have also been cases, he said, where students in the program have been tested at a first grade or better reading level by January of their kindergarten year.

Everyone who has seen the early results has been very pleased with the results and say that the program should be continued.

All the district has so far is early indicators. The first students in the program won't reach the third grade until next year and that's the year that students are really tested for the first time for things like the Average Yearly Progress by the state.

But Monaghan and others say that if the progress is there as expected, students who have been in the Kindergarten Plus program should do well in tests by the third grade.

And if it is successful, educators say that the state and the district should put as much money into the program as possible.

Otherwise, many of these students by the third grade would be found to be far behind their peers and the district would have to spend a great deal of money in programs to help them catch up.

So, said Monaghan, it's a question of whether you put the money into a program in the kindergarten year that shows it can make a difference or start putting it in the third grade when students start showing they need help to catch up with their peers.

The program isn't that expensive.

School Superintendent Karen White said the district received a \$100,000 grant from the state to implement it for three years. The district had to throw in another \$40,000 to pay for the extra bus runs.

Only four districts in the state were chosen to be part of this pilot program and all have indicated that they have seen a lot of positive results; so, White said there will be a movement in the next session of the legislature to get the state to continue funding the program.