

Pathway Schools Initiative

Developmental Evaluation | Learning Brief 4

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Developmental Evaluation

To support its Pathway Schools Initiative, The McKnight Foundation engaged initiative leaders in a developmental evaluation (DE) led by SRI International and Child Trends. DE is a collaborative effort that begins with identification of high-priority questions of practical interest. DE then supports continuous improvement by gathering data and offering rapid, relevant feedback to the initiative leaders. The DE team is composed of leaders from each of the initiative's participating schools and districts, as well as staff members from The McKnight Foundation, the Urban Education Institute at the University of Chicago (UEI), SRI, and Child Trends.

This learning brief describes the fourth and final DE cycle of the Pathway Schools Initiative (PSI), conducted in spring 2017. For the fourth cycle, the DE team decided to maintain its focus on independent work practices in the four PSI schools.¹ The **study goals** for this DE cycle were the following:

1. Understand the school, district, and/or initiative practices in place to support independent work.
2. Examine independent work practices for areas of continued growth, including how independent work is structured and managed, the types of independent work activities assigned to students, student collaboration and engagement, and how teachers monitor and provide feedback on students' independent work.
3. Delve deeper into understanding teachers' use of reading response to promote and assess comprehension and text analysis during independent reading.

Data Sources and Methodology

The SRI/Child Trends research team relied on classroom observations, instructional artifacts, a teacher survey, and interviews with school, district, and initiative leaders to investigate independent work practices.

Forty-five teachers (54% of all preK–3 teachers) agreed to be observed.² Using a tool SRI developed to record student and teacher activities

during independent work, observers collected data on lesson introductions and closings for independent work, classroom setup, student transitions, student behavior, time management, learning objectives, student and teacher actions, monitoring strategies, and materials used.

The research team also asked observed teachers to submit artifacts from independent work in which students responded to a text. In total, the research team collected 120 artifacts from 41 teachers (approximately three artifacts per teacher). Researchers then analyzed the artifacts for alignment with students' STEP level goals, rigor of the prompt, and type of feedback and support students received.³

In addition, the research team administered an annual survey to all preK–3 classroom teachers in the PSI schools about school-level supports for independent work and a range of literacy-related instructional practices, including those relevant to creating, monitoring, and assessing independent work. Ninety-six percent of preK–3 teachers completed the survey.

Finally, the research team conducted interviews with leaders and coaches from each participating school and district, as well as UEI professional development providers; 25 in total. Interview questions concerned school, district, and initiative practices and guidelines meant to support independent work.

Findings

Three of the four Pathway schools directed substantial attention and resources to independent work via coaching, professional development, and classroom observations. In their efforts to improve independent work, the schools concentrated on strengthening connections between independent work and small- and whole-group lessons, ensuring the rigor of independent work, and increasing student engagement and collaboration

¹ Community of Peace Academy, Earle Brown Elementary School, Saint Paul Music Academy, and Wellstone Elementary

² Five observations did not produce data on independent work and were not included in analyses.

³ STEP (Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress) is a formative assessment tool UEI developed that tracks how students are developing as readers along a 13-step trajectory from preK through grade 3.

during independent work. UEI also provided school leaders, coaches, and some teachers with professional development on independent work through cross-site collaborative meetings and site-specific supports. For example, UEI helped school leaders shadow English learner students using an observation tool to learn about their independent work experiences. Surveyed teachers reported a significant increase from 2016 to 2017 in the support they received on independent work: Whereas only 17% of teachers reported receiving coaching on independent work to a moderate or great extent in 2016, 51% of teachers did so in 2017.

In most classrooms, teachers introduced independent work tasks and explicitly told students what to do. In almost all classrooms (88%), teachers introduced independent work tasks, but in less than a third of the classrooms (30%), teachers implemented some type of closing activity for independent work. In two thirds of classrooms, teachers explicitly told students which activities to work on and in which order. In the remaining third of classrooms, students were able to choose which independent work activities they would complete and in which order (often within specified parameters).

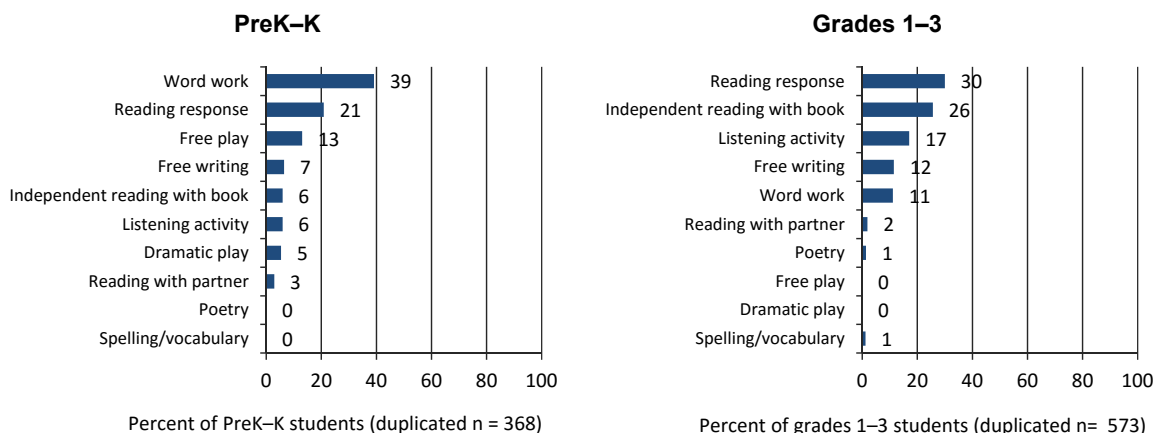
Teachers’ classroom management during independent work appeared to be strong. Many had support from other adults. Most teachers received the highest rating on each of three

classroom management measures: They efficiently dealt with disruption (70%), experienced little to no student misbehavior (73%), and implemented quick, efficient transitions (75%). More than half the teachers (53%) received the highest rating on all three items. Most (80%) classrooms had at least one other adult, and those adults were frequently working with small groups (80%) and managing behavior (70%).

The type of independent work activities students completed varied by grade level. PreK and kindergarten students most often did word work, responded to texts (including drawing pictures and dictating answers), and engaged in free play during independent work. In grades 1–3, students most frequently responded to text, read independently, and engaged in listening activities, free writing, and word work (Figure 1).

In preK, students typically drew pictures or wrote words in response to open-ended, factual, or recall questions about a text. Students drew pictures in 89% of preK artifacts and wrote in approximately half (56%) of them. Three fourths (74%) of preK prompts asked students to recall factual information from text, and 59% of prompts were open ended (e.g., no correct answer or desired finished product). For example, one prompt asked students to draw their favorite part from the Three Little Pigs.

Figure 1. Independent Work Activities by Grade



Note: Students were counted more than once if they participated in multiple independent work activities.

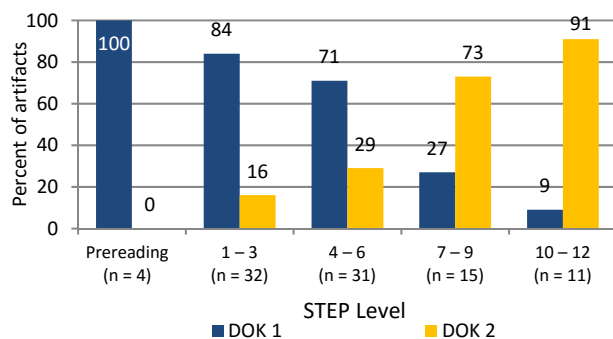
Most K–3 reading response prompts did not require higher order thinking. All 93 K–3 artifacts were coded as Level 1 or Level 2 tasks using the four-level Depth of Knowledge rubric. Levels 3 and 4 tasks, which include making connections across themes or making inferences across multiple texts using evidence, require support and scaffolding that may be difficult to provide during independent work. Almost two thirds (62%) of artifacts prompted students to complete Level 1 tasks, such as answering factual questions or offering opinions without text evidence. One third (38%) of artifacts were Level 2 tasks, requiring students to make inferences or compare and contrast (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Example Prompts in K–3

Grade	Example Prompts	Depth of Knowledge Level
K	What did Rosie do on her walk?	1
1	My favorite part is __ because __. I noticed __. The characters are __. Setting is __.	1
2	Compare and contrast Tacky the Penguin with his companions.	2
3	Predict what will happen next using text evidence.	2

The complexity of reading response prompts increased by grade and STEP levels. Students in higher grades and at higher STEP levels were more likely to complete Level 2 tasks (Figure 3). Whereas kindergarten and first-grade prompts frequently asked students to recall facts or specific events in a story, second-grade students were often asked to compare and contrast characters. In grade 3, students were often asked to summarize stories and make inferences using text evidence.

Figure 3. Depth of Knowledge (DOK) by STEP Level



The majority of reading response prompts were either below or above students’ current STEP-level goals. Prompts in approximately one third (38%) of K–3 artifacts required students to practice skills that exactly matched their STEP-level instructional goals (i.e., STEP bottom lines). Another third (29%) of prompts involved goals above students’ current STEP levels, and 33% focused on goals for earlier STEP levels.⁴

Student collaboration decreased with each subsequent grade from preK to grade 3. Students were observed collaborating in 48% of preK independent work activities, 36% of kindergarten activities, 18% of first-grade activities, 16% of second-grade activities, and only 13% of third-grade activities.

Student engagement varied by grade level but not by type of independent work activity. The majority of preK–3 students were off task in 10% of observed independent work activities. However, off-task behavior was observed more frequently in first and second grade, where the majority of students were off task in approximately one fourth of observed independent work activities. Being off task was not related to specific types of independent work activities (e.g., independent reading or writing).

Surveyed teachers reported using criteria that roughly aligned with students’ STEP-level goals to evaluate students’ reading responses. PreK and kindergarten teachers most frequently reported concentrating on letter formation, spacing/capitalization/punctuation, and accuracy of students’ summaries of stories. Teachers in grades 1–3 were more likely to report focusing on completeness of students’ responses, correct identification of story elements, and use of evidence from the text. These criteria roughly aligned with expected STEP goals for students in those grade levels.

The frequency with which teachers reported monitoring and providing feedback on independent work did not change from 2016. In 2017, approximately half of surveyed teachers reported collecting student work, reviewing reading responses, assessing completed work, and giving feedback to students at least three times per week. Fewer teachers (36%) reported conferencing or checking in with students at least three times per week.

⁴ STEP goals about decoding and fluency were often unobservable in the artifacts, which may have resulted in their undercounting.

Less than a third (31%) of artifacts contained written feedback from the teacher. Most of the feedback (58%) was on whether the task was done correctly. Less than half of artifacts (42%) contained feedback on the student’s process for completing the task (e.g., how students made a connection between texts) or the relationship between what they did and the quality of their work (e.g., how students’ use of evidence strengthened their argumentative paragraph). Fifteen percent of artifacts with written feedback contained only unspecific and non-actionable feedback (e.g., Good job!).

DE Team Reflections on Findings and Their Implications

DE team members met as a group to discuss these findings and their implications for the initiative and participating schools. They identified actions that school leaders and teachers and those who support them could take to improve the quality and effectiveness of independent work.

Clarify the purpose of independent work activities, learning objectives, and feedback for students. DE team members acknowledged a need for school leaders and teachers to set clear expectations for what they hope to accomplish through independent work. One DE member noted, “We should always be asking why.” Teachers should then communicate that purpose to students so that they are aware of their own learning goals. The DE team also noted the importance of being purposeful when providing students with feedback and varying its purpose throughout the school year. For example, at the beginning of the year, positive and unspecific feedback (e.g., Good job!) may serve the purpose of building relationships with students. Then teachers could change the content of feedback to building specific writing and comprehension skills.

Provide teachers with strategies and scaffolds to improve the quality and rigor of independent work time. The DE team agreed that with support, younger students, English learners, and students below grade level are able to complete rigorous and complex tasks. One participant noted that first-graders can do higher order thinking with appropriate scaffolds. For example, graphic organizers like Venn diagrams can help younger students compare and contrast character motivations using text evidence. DE team members suggested that teachers may need support designing higher Depth of Knowledge tasks

for students and adapting them for English learners and students who are below grade level.

The DE team also discussed how to help teachers increase the frequency of monitoring and assessment during independent work. One suggestion was to have students monitor their own work using rubrics or provide peer feedback. Another suggestion was to provide more frequent informal formative feedback, perhaps through quick oral check-ins rather than written feedback.

Help teachers increase student academic talk and collaboration during independent work. The DE team recognized that teachers have traditionally thought of independent work as being literally “independent” time in which students are quiet and working alone. Team members agreed that students need more opportunities to practice academic language and collaborate with one another during independent work and examples of how to do so effectively. For example, teachers may need to explicitly model expectations for what peer-to-peer discussion should look like. Scaffolds and routines for collaboration, such as sentence starters (e.g., I agree/disagree with ____, because ____), could also help students learn how to collaborate. Finally, technology could be used to increase students’ academic talk; for example, students could record videos of one another or collaborate via web-based chat functions.

Next Steps

The Pathway Schools Initiative DE concludes with this Learning Brief, but leaders from the participating schools will continue to support teachers in improving independent work with the lessons learned from the DE findings.