

# Pathway Schools Initiative

## Developmental Evaluation | Learning Brief

JANUARY 2016

By supporting the adoption of evidence-based PreK–3 policies and practices, The McKnight Foundation’s Pathway Schools Initiative seeks to dramatically increase the percentage of proficient third-grade readers in high need schools. To support real-time learning, decisionmaking, and improvement of new practices, programs, and policies, The McKnight Foundation has engaged Pathway Schools Initiative leaders in a developmental evaluation (DE) of high-priority questions of practical interest. DE is a collaborative effort that begins with identification of a question about challenges or new approaches to meeting students’, teachers’, and other critical stakeholders’ needs. DE then supports continuous improvement by gathering data and offering rapid, relevant feedback to the initiative leaders, who develop action plans based on the implications of the findings. The DE team was composed of two to three leaders from each of the participating schools and districts<sup>1</sup> and staff members from McKnight, the Urban Education Institute (UEI) at the University of Chicago, SRI International, and Child Trends.

This learning brief summarizes the team’s first DE question, research methods, findings, and action plans. The team intends to address two to three DE questions each year.

### The DE Question and Data Sources

The DE team members began by reviewing the findings from the evaluation of the first 3 years of the Pathway Schools Initiative—state achievement results (MCA-III), STEP results, student enrollment patterns, and teacher survey results. Over the 3 years (fall 2012 through spring 2015), the participating districts and schools did not see the student growth on STEP that would indicate progress towards achieving the goal of more students becoming proficient third-grade readers (as measured by STEP and the MCA-III).

<sup>1</sup>Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center Community Schools; Wellstone Elementary School and Saint Paul Music Academy, Saint Paul Public Schools; Jefferson Community School and Andersen United Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools; and Community of Peace Academy.

### The STEP Assessment System

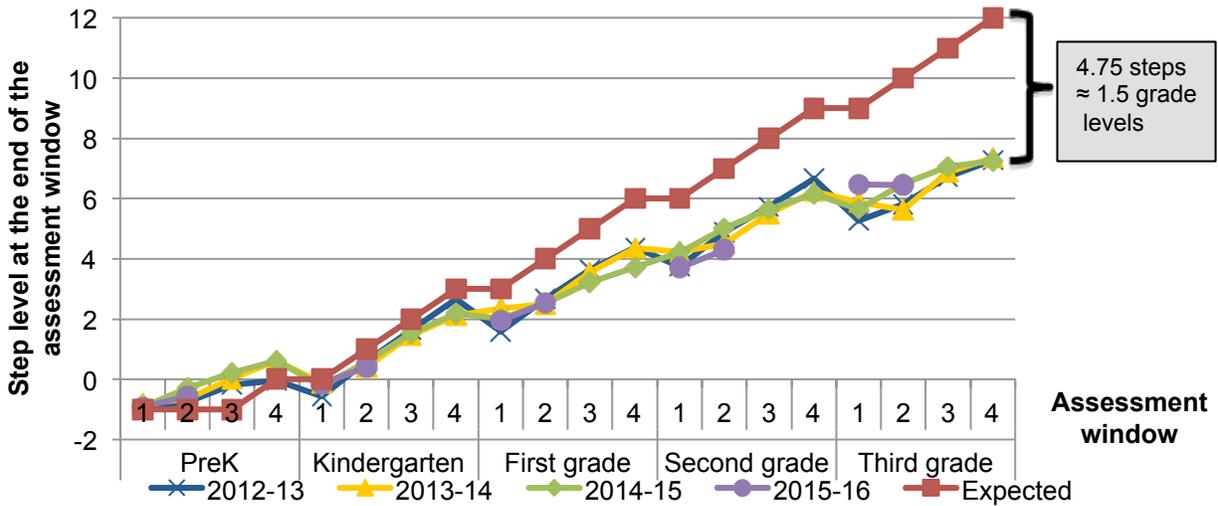
A major strategy of the Pathway Schools Initiative has been to inform instruction through collection of high-quality formative assessment data using the STEP (Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress) assessment system developed by UEI. The STEP system includes tools to assess and track how students are developing as readers along a 13-step trajectory from PreK through third grade. Students are expected to progress one STEP level in PreK and three STEP levels per year in kindergarten through grade 3. Each STEP level denotes specific reading skills or strategies students have mastered and informs teachers of the skills and strategies students must learn to continue developing as readers. UEI provides schools using the assessment with STEP trainers who offer ongoing support with the system and with data-driven literacy instruction.

Although students were generally on track on STEP at the end of PreK, many did not make the expected progress in subsequent grades. The cumulative effect of making less than expected progress each year was that students were behind by 1.5 grades, on average, by the time they completed third grade (Exhibit 1). As a result, DE team members decided they wanted more information on students’ lack of progress on STEP.

The DE team sought to better understand teachers’ knowledge about and skills in supporting students to make the expected level of progress on the STEP assessment. The team developed a main evaluation question and several subquestions:

- What knowledge, skills, and resources do teachers use to advance students the expected number of STEP levels each year?
  - What knowledge do teachers use to plan and implement reading lessons?
  - What strategies do teachers use to support literacy progress on STEP?
  - What resources do teachers rely on to improve their practice?
  - What areas of knowledge, skills, and resources need to be strengthened for both teachers and coaches?

**Exhibit 1. Pathway Schools Initiative Students' English STEP Level, by Assessment Window**



To answer these questions, the SRI/Child Trends evaluation team interviewed 47 teachers and nine literacy coaches from the six Pathway schools. The evaluation team interviewed one randomly selected PreK, first-, and third-grade teacher and three randomly selected kindergarten and second-grade teachers from each school. Teachers were asked general questions about their use of STEP data to inform instruction; the resources they use to plan instruction; strategies they use during guided reading, independent work, and whole group instruction; challenges to using STEP; how they work with their literacy coach; and areas in which they desire support. To obtain additional information on specific instructional knowledge and skills in a consistent manner, the evaluation team asked kindergarten and second-grade teachers how they would approach planning and instruction for a hypothetical student who was reading two STEP levels below the expected end-of-year achievement for a student at that grade (STEP 1 in kindergarten and STEP 6 in second grade).

The evaluation team interviewed literacy coaches from each school about the resources available to teachers for advancing students, including the amount, type, and focus of their coaching efforts. Coaches also answered questions about their capacity to provide the support they felt teachers needed and additional resources they required to meet teacher needs.

Finally, the evaluation team administered a short survey to all interviewees. The survey asked teachers and coaches the extent to which they were interested in training or resources to support their practice in particular areas.

### Findings

**Teachers used STEP data to create guided reading groups and inform guided reading instruction but did not use some more fine-grained data available through STEP.** Teachers most often used students' STEP levels and performance on STEP subskills (e.g., fluency, making inferences) to create guided reading groups and to develop objectives for guided reading instruction. For example, a teacher might create a guided reading group of students who were all working on mastering the skills and strategies needed to achieve STEP 3 or who were all working on a specific STEP 3 subskill, such as making predictions.

**Teachers varied in how frequently and for how long they met with guided reading groups.** All teachers reported meeting with small groups of students for guided reading on a semiregular basis. The frequency of guided reading group meetings varied from two to three times per week to every day. Typically, teachers met with the lowest performing guided reading groups more often and for longer periods. Teachers sometimes reported meeting with

higher performing students less frequently and assigning them more independent literacy work. Most teachers created a schedule for meeting with particular groups, while some pulled groups as needed. The length of time spent meeting with guided reading groups varied from 5 to 30 minutes, with teachers most frequently reporting spending 12 to 20 minutes with groups.

**Most teachers organized independent work around centers where students work on specific literacy skills and strategies. Yet teachers did not have systems for checking students' progress on independent work.** Most teachers used centers during independent work time (e.g., the Daily 5 method and the Café board) and relied on a variety of resources such as computer/iPad apps, tutors/specialists, and phonics programs. A few teachers did not mention using any particular structure for independent work time.

Teachers most often had students work on word work (letter/sound identification, building words/sentences with manipulatives, sight word identification) and independent reading during independent work time. Second-grade teachers also had students work on comprehension during independent time by reading to themselves and sometimes completing reading response logs. Teachers less frequently mentioned having students practice writing or using particular reading strategies during independent work.

Many teachers differentiated center work to address individual student or group needs, especially for word work. Activities related to comprehension (e.g., reading response logs, worksheets, graphic organizers) were not typically differentiated.

Finally, teachers did not discuss strategies for holding students accountable during independent work time. For example, they did not mention assessing work completed at this time.

**Teachers used grade-level Common Core standards and district/school instructional programs (Mondo, International Baccalaureate, Benchmark) to guide whole group instruction.** Teachers mentioned that whole group instruction provided an opportunity to expose students who were below grade level in reading to grade-level content. They appreciated that during whole group instruction students could interact with and learn from peers who

were in different reading groups and had different strengths.

**Teachers felt that STEP sometimes did not align with other instructional priorities.** Some teachers noted that grade-level standards, standardized assessments, and instructional programs adopted by the school or district sometimes did not align with STEP because STEP's developmental approach contrasted with the standards-based approach. That is, STEP data might suggest that a first-grade student needs to work on STEP 2 skills, such as recognizing high-frequency words, whereas the grade-level standards would suggest that the student work on more advanced skills such as decoding multisyllabic words or words with complex letter patterns.

Some teachers also mentioned feeling that focusing only on STEP-identified skills "compartmentalized" instruction. For example, they struggled with focusing on specific skills to ensure that students would pass to the next STEP level if this focus was not consistent with other instructional priorities (e.g., reading nonfiction text, developing academic vocabulary) or their notions of best practice (e.g., integrating reading and writing instruction).

**Many teachers explained that they did not differentiate explicitly for dual language learner (DLL) students because they felt that instruction during guided reading was sufficiently differentiated.** Even though teachers frequently mentioned using visuals/graphic organizers, emphasizing speaking/discussion, and previewing vocabulary as strategies to support DLL students, they also mentioned not differentiating instruction for DLL students in guided reading groups. Some teachers said that DLL students often cluster together in guided reading groups due to being at similar STEP levels and noted that DLL students have difficulty progressing through the STEP levels because particular English skills like rhyming and segmentation are harder for them because of their limited experience with English language sounds.

Teachers reported relying on specialists to provide targeted or differentiated instruction. Teachers rarely mentioned using WIDA/Access scores to help inform instruction of DLL students. All the teachers who reported using these data were English language specialists or dual-language teachers.

**At this stage of the Pathway Schools Initiative teachers felt they had a good understanding of how to use STEP data and were interested in getting help with instructional strategies to better address the specific literacy skills students need to develop.** While teachers found the initial UEI trainings on how to administer the STEP assessment and make sense of the data to be helpful, survey results revealed that they now were most interested in receiving support with (1) developing independent work (57% were highly interested), (2) teaching comprehension strategies (48% highly interested), and (3) supporting dual language learners (40% highly interested).

**Teachers reported that planning differentiated instruction is very time consuming and they need more time or tools to support it.** Teachers mentioned having to plan for four to six reading groups that meet multiple times a week in addition to whole group and independent instruction and not having enough time to do so. Teachers reported wanting model lessons and texts tied to STEP skills to help them more efficiently differentiate. They also mentioned having spent considerable time gathering STEP data but not having enough time to make use of the data.

**Teachers received valuable supports from their literacy coaches but found they were often unable to provide needed supports because of time constraints.** Teachers reported highly valuing their coaches, particularly their support with creating and acquiring materials, modeling instruction with students, informally observing instruction, and providing feedback on lesson plans and instructional decisions. However, according to teachers, coaches' time was often constrained. For instance, coaches spent significant time at the beginning of the school year training new teachers to use STEP, familiarizing them with the data wall and data reports, and ensuring that teachers were able to give the assessments reliably. Moreover, some teachers were unsure about when and how to initiate a dialogue with a coach and did not always know whether they needed help or what kind of help they needed (or the coach could provide). Finally, coaches involved in the formal teacher evaluation process struggled with navigating their dual role as evaluator and mentor, sometimes resulting in tension in their relationships with teachers and limiting their time for mentoring.

**Teachers at most schools received support with STEP data analysis and with planning instructional strategies through formal and informal collaboration with their peers.** Formal grade-level professional learning community (PLC) meetings provided opportunities to meet horizontally to review data, set instructional goals, and plan lessons. Teachers mentioned wanting opportunities to meet in vertical teams that cut across grade levels to learn strategies to support students who are below or above grade level. Dual-language teachers and English language specialists had fewer opportunities to collaborate with grade-level colleagues.

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### **DE Team Reflections on Findings and Their Implications**

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The DE team members convened to examine these findings and reflect on next steps. They identified implications for school policy, instructional and coaching practice, and professional development.

**Expectations for level and pace of growth may be too low.** Some DE team members hypothesized that a lack of academic press may be related to teachers' mindsets about student achievement. To support a focus on pace, some DE team members said their teachers have used progress monitoring between formal STEP assessment windows (especially running records). Progress monitoring between STEP windows was seen as a practice that teachers would develop after mastering the basics of analyzing data from the formal STEP assessment and using the data to inform instruction.

**STEP could inform whole group instruction and independent work.** DE team members indicated that STEP data could be leveraged to support whole group instruction and independent work. For example, teachers might identify an area many students are struggling with (e.g., critical thinking skills) and then model skills for the whole group that they could reinforce during guided reading. DE team members had questions about the quality of learning during independent work time.

**Teachers need support to connect STEP and grade-level Common Core standards.** DE members reflected on the tension teachers described with teaching students at their developmental level (based on STEP data) and teaching to grade-level Common Core standards. DE team members agreed on the

importance of using grade-level standards in conjunction with the STEP assessment data. DE team members suggested that teachers might need additional coaching to understand how to meet students' developmental needs while also providing them access to grade-level curriculum and considered how to best support teachers to make this connection. Some DE team members noted that work was being done during PLC meetings to connect STEP bottom lines to grade-level standards. Some DE team members also said that changes to STEP could help this process. For example, a suggestion was to add nonfiction texts and associated skills to the STEP assessment system. Some DE team members also expressed concerns about STEP not adequately addressing vocabulary development.

**Teachers may not be spending enough time engaging with individual students.** DE members reported not being surprised that teachers often meet with each small reading group about three times a week for about 15 minutes, noting that it is challenging to fit in more guided reading groups per day given other expectations. However, DE members wondered whether the amount of time between teacher and students in reading groups was sufficient.

**DE team members emphasized the importance of ensuring that DLL students were exposed to more advanced language models and participated in small groups with non-DLL students outside of the literacy block.** DE team members noted that clustering DLL students during small group literacy instruction enabled teachers to provide instruction at their language development level and may be beneficial *as long as* they have exposure to more advanced language modeling at other times during the school day. DE team members noted that WIDA/Access data were often substantially lagged, so it could be hard for classroom teachers to use them to inform instruction.

**The focus of training and support may need to change based on teachers' current needs.** DE team members understood that most teachers were proficient in using STEP data to identify student needs and now needed support from coaches or other professional development providers to learn how to design and implement instructional plans to address those needs. They also noted that building teachers' repertoire of strategies was not sufficient; teachers

also need to learn the theory behind the strategies so as to know when and why to use a particular strategy.

**Coaches may need more dedicated time and support to help teachers improve their instruction.**

DE team members saw the value of coaches' work and wondered whether coaches were getting enough support, including protected time, to be sufficiently focused and strategic. DE team members discussed what could be done to maximize coaching skills, in particular to ensure coaches were well versed in the principles of adult learning. DE team members from schools using a voluntary coaching model noted that only the strongest teachers were getting stronger because they were the ones initiating contact with the coaches.

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### Next Steps

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Within weeks of the DE team meeting, each participating school/district team identified goals for improvement that emerged from the DE findings, specific action steps, a timeline for implementation, resources needed, and measures of success.

**Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS).** BCCS identified the goal of implementing more consistent and effective guided reading practices across PreK–5 classrooms. To achieve this goal, BCCS planned to create and disseminate to teachers a document detailing guided reading “Look Fors”—essential practices and strategies an observer should see teachers use during a guided reading session. Teachers would then identify areas they want to concentrate on developing with the coach's support. Successful implementation of the action plan will be indicated by teachers' use of the identified practices and strategies. Administrators will gather observation data via classroom walk-throughs.

**Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS).** The SPPS team's identified goal was to support teachers with comprehension strategies through coaching and professional development. To achieve this goal, SPPS planned to host two professional development days for teachers on strategies for teaching comprehension with support from UEI and school coaches. After each professional development day, coaches will work with teachers by modeling lessons, observing lessons, and debriefing with teachers. Administrators will also support teachers by conducting classroom

walk-throughs, helping teachers create anchor charts for teaching specific comprehension strategies, and developing a bank of videotaped lessons teachers could use as models of best practice. To measure success administrators will collect data on whether coaches are completing coaching cycles with teachers and whether teachers are using the strategies presented in the professional development sessions during their classroom walk-throughs.

**Community of Peace Academy (CPA).** CPA identified the goal of strengthening and supporting progress monitoring. To achieve this goal, CPA planned to have its literacy coach create progress monitoring tools, with support from the UEI-led Literacy Collaborative, and to introduce these tools to teachers during common planning time. Beginning in March 2016, teachers will begin to use the tools to gather data, plan for instruction, and share progress and ideas at their PLC meetings. In June 2016, the literacy coach will collect completed progress monitoring tools to assess their effectiveness.

**Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS).** MPS is preparing to transition out of Pathway Schools Initiative at the end of the 2015-16 school year. To give the district more time for transition planning, the evaluation team (with the Foundation's blessing) opted not to request an action plan from MPS.

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The DE team reported that collectively reviewing findings from this first DE cycle generated ideas for action plans and they were eager to implement those plans and examine related outcomes. The DE team also committed to continue working together to identify a new question focused on a related problem of practice and engage in a second developmental evaluation cycle in winter/spring 2016.