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Leveraging University-School District Research Partnerships: Exploring the Longitudinal Effects of an Early Kindergarten Transition Program

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Introduction

University schools of education play a critical role in preparing our K-12 leaders for future challenges by adding to our research-based knowledge, enabling us to meet the growing needs of our public school systems. Yet, university–district research partnership models vary widely, and many struggle to develop research projects collaboratively that both assist public school districts and improve the profession.[1] Furthermore, with increasingly tight budgets, many local districts lack research personnel to evaluate program efficacy or investigate best practices that raise student achievement. We highlight an example of a successful university–district partnership in Multnomah County, Oregon, which offers district-driven research support while providing opportunities for practitioner-scholars to learn firsthand how to perform rigorous evaluation work. This article details the early kindergarten transition (EKT) program evaluation study conducted by a university–district partnership, as well as testimony from district leadership on the utility of the research deliverables and the long-term benefits of the research collaboration.

Case Study: Early Transition Kindergarten in the Portland Public Schools District

The EKT program is a free Multnomah County summer program for incoming kindergarten students at Title I schools. The community-wide program brings early childhood and school partners together to promote successful kindergarten transition for children and their families in high-need schools. Several districts have replicated the model, first piloted in 2010 in two elementary schools, and EKT is now implemented in 41 sites. EKT is a school-based, family-oriented program designed to increase parental involvement in their children's learning, reduce chronic absenteeism in kindergarten, and promote children's success in school. Children gain literacy skills and practice school routines and expectations with a kindergarten teacher every morning for 3 weeks (15 half-day sessions) in the late summer. Throughout the program, the children build social skills, acquire confidence, and become excited about classroom learning. The program's goal is to help kids who may struggle with the transition to kindergarten feel less anxious about school, build relationships with future teachers and with one another, and learn about school routines.

Parents and guardians also attend meetings twice a week to begin fostering relationships with one another and school staff, and to learn how to support their children's learning at home. The emphasis on family involvement stems from a wealth of literature indicating that when parents

are involved in their children's schooling, students achieve higher grades, have better attendance, show more positive attitudes and behaviors, have higher graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in higher education.[2-5] Topics covered in these classes include the importance of attendance, ways to read interactively with children, and strategies for promoting math skills and concepts at home. Additionally, partner organizations provide resources and training for parents. For example, the local library provides education about literacy and ensures that each family has a library card. Classrooms are also supported by bilingual educational assistants, meals are provided, and child care is offered during the parent meeting times. These efforts are designed to ensure that family members become active participants throughout their children's school transitions.

Portland Public Schools (PPS) offers the EKT program in 14 elementary schools. The urban district is the largest in the state, serving more than 49,000 students. Of all PPS students, 46% qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and 44% are children of color.[6] The program prioritizes the enrollment of children who have not had a structured preschool experience, have a primary language other than English, and/or have struggled with attendance or behavior while enrolled in Head Start.

As the EKT program began to expand in PPS, district leaders felt a growing pressure to measure the program's effectiveness. Like many education leaders, those in PPS must respond to parents, the school board, and taxpayers, who increasingly are demanding evidence of return on their investment. In education, the return on investment is measured in student learning and other desirable student outcomes. However, with additional compliance and accountability policies and tight budgets, many local districts' research services lack personnel to evaluate and report on program efficacy. To meet these research demands, districts are beginning to reach out to form local research partnerships.

University–District Partnerships

University–district research partnerships have gained popularity as a means of extending university intellectual resources to the larger community.[7] The PPS district belongs to a county-wide research partnership, the Multnomah County Partnership for Education Research (MCPER). MCPER was established in 2013 by the University of Portland School of Education and the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) to provide real-time research and program evaluation services to the six largest urban school districts in Multnomah County, Oregon. These include Centennial, David Douglas, Gresham-Barlow, Parkrose, PPS, and Reynolds (Figure 1). Additionally, the partnership offers long-term

research support and builds capacity for sustained research by preparing doctoral candidates to work within these districts. In sum, this partnership aims to assist districts to make informed, data-driven decisions to increase student learning and equity.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Evaluation Study: Longitudinal Effects of an Early Kindergarten Transition Program

PPS turned to MCPER to conduct a study on its EKT program to better understand the students enrolled in the EKT program and to measure the long-term impact of participation in the program. Although experimental designs with random assignment of subjects to treatment and control groups to investigate causal effects are viewed as the gold standard in treatment outcome research, random assignment is often impractical, unethical, or too expensive in educational settings.[8] This study is best described as a retrospective program evaluation based on cohort comparison groups.

The demographics, attendance, and dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills (DIBELS) scores of EKT students were compared with those of students who attended EKT schools but did not participate in the EKT program. The total number of student participants in the program for this analysis in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014 was 459. Figure 2 displays the number of students participating by year. Table 1 displays the demographics of the students in the 2010 through 2013 cohorts participating in the EKT program: gender, racial/ethnic group, special education (SPED) identification, and English as a second language (ESL) category. Overall, the program served more nonwhite than white students, and many were identified as ESL learners.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

[Insert Table 1 here]

One of the primary goals of the EKT program is to reduce chronic absenteeism in kindergarten and beyond. Nationally, 1 in 10 kindergarten students are chronically absent. Research shows that students who are chronically absent are more likely to suffer academically, and this can be an early warning predictor of dropping out of high school.[9] Attendance data were analyzed to see how EKT participants and non-EKT students compared. The study found that the attendance rates of the EKT students

were higher than those in the comparison group of students who did not participate in EKT in every cohort (Figure 3). Additionally, trends over time suggested that student attendance rates remained higher for EKT participants than for non-EKT students in EKT schools (Figure 4).

[Insert Figure 3 here]

[Insert Figure 4 here]

The second goal of the EKT program is to promote children's success in schools. Research finds that academic indicators can predict long-term educational outcomes, such as high school graduation.[10] For example, a student who cannot read at grade level by the third grade is four times less likely to graduate than a child who reads proficiently and at grade level by that time.[11] The DIBELS scores for EKT and non-EKT students in EKT schools were compared to examine the impact of EKT on literacy. DIBELS is an early literacy skills fluency measure used to monitor the development of early reading skills. Figure 5 suggests that the EKT students tended to outperform the non-EKT students, indicated by the higher proportion of EKT students who met early literacy benchmarks. Additionally, a smaller proportion of EKT students were identified as requiring intensive support based on the students' early literacy skills.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

Limitations and Recommendations

Small sample sizes, large variations in academic growth over time by individuals, and floor effects limited the ability to measure statistical significance. Furthermore, EKT students and their families self-selected to participate in the program. Thus, the evaluation design cannot dismiss the possibility of selection effects. In other words, the students who participated in EKT may have been inherently different from the students who did not participate in EKT. For example, the students who attended EKT may have had higher attendance rates in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade regardless of participation in the EKT program. Without random assignment of students either to participate or not to participate in EKT, causal statements cannot be made. Additionally, it is difficult to form true comparison student groups. As students leave and enter the schools, the same students are not necessarily being compared from year to year in comparison groups. Intact groups were created and compared to

attempt to address this issue; however, the demographics still may not be precisely comparable, and the sample sizes were quite small.

District Impact and Conclusions

The limitations notwithstanding, encouraging trends emerged over time for the EKT program participants, including higher attendance rates, higher DIBELS scores, and fewer students who fell into the "intensive support" designation in PPS.

PPS leadership spoke directly to the utility of such research: "I was very pleased with the EKT report. …This report helps us to better understand EKT and specifically whether we should continue to invest in this program at all, maintain the current program, or expand the program. I was particularly excited to see that EKT impacts attendance, which will be a heavy focus for our district this year," commented Senior Director of System Planning and Performance for Portland Public Schools, Sarah Singer.

The district used the findings from this study to create a research brief that is publically available and accessible for parents and community members.[12] Moreover, this evaluation project highlights how university–district partnerships can provide timely research deliverables for public school district partners. Such collaborations between universities and districts can help bridge the gap between theory-based preparation courses and field-based practice.[13] Singer echoed the importance of research partnerships in commenting, "This partnership is hugely valuable. It allows our district to expand our research and evaluation capacity with a strong and credible partner."

Additionally, the project propelled a larger effort in systematizing data collection for further studies. EKT District Program Manager Nancy Hauth also expressed appreciation for the EKT report and research consultation recommendations: "[MCPER] synthesized a lot of information that was collected over time in multiple databases and was able to crunch it and analyze it in an informative, easy-to-access format. Their recommendations about data collection will be very helpful as we try to streamline information so data collection across systems aligns. I feel that [MCPER] went over and above expectations because they provided us not only the data we needed, but an improved template for going forward…. This is an incredibly useful collaboration that will help the EKT team improve the overall program and thus increase the positive impacts on families."

School districts work hard to provide learning opportunities for children of all ages, but that effort can go unnoticed without the ability to

analyze and report the results of such work. Likewise, continuous improvement occurs when decisions are informed by data. A university–district partnership helps provide this much-needed program evaluation.

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Figure 1. Ready for kindergarten initial partner school communities. Reprinted from *All Hands Raised*.[15].

Table 1. Portland Public Schools Early Kindergarten Transition Participant Demographics by Year

Variable	2010	2011	2012	2013	PPS*
Male, %	52.9	53.9	54.4	63.7	50.9
White, %	41.2	28.1	16.2	26.5	56.2
Asian, %	11.8	29.2	38.2	27.5	8.0
Black, %	8.8	3.4	14.7	9.8	11.3
Hispanic, %	32.4	30.3	20.6	27.5	15.7
ESL learner, %	44.1	50.6	54.4	40.2	24.0
SPED, %	2.9	11.2	11.8	16.7	13.8

ESL, English as a second language; PPS, Portland Public Schools; SPED, special education.
* District-wide demographics for 2013 are presented for comparison.[14]

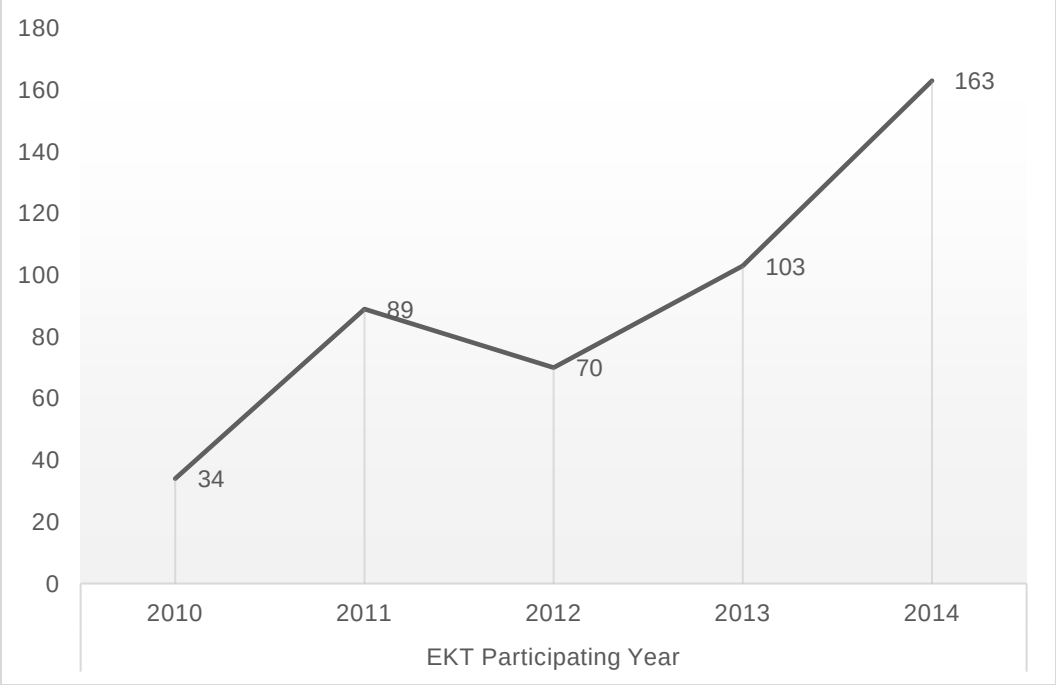

Figure 2. Number of Portland Public Schools early kindergarten transition (EKT) participants by year.

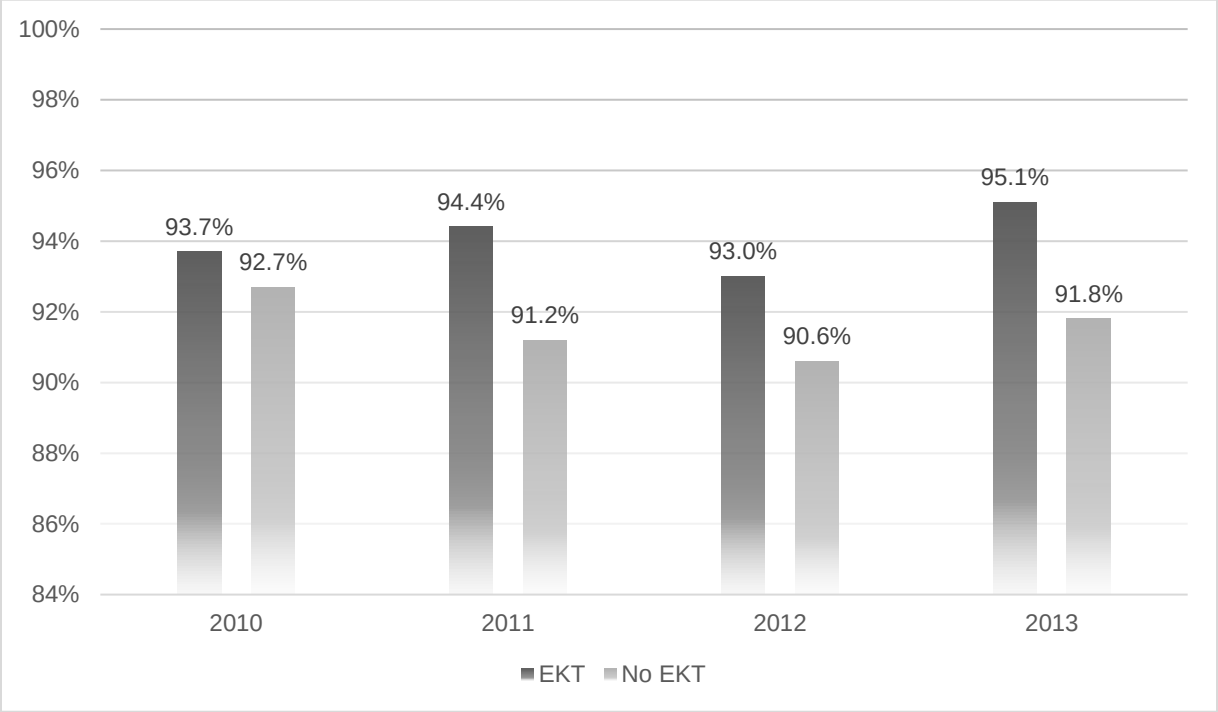

Figure 3. Portland Public Schools kindergarten attendance rates for early kindergarten transition (EKT) students and non-EKT students in EKT schools: 2010 through 2013 cohorts.

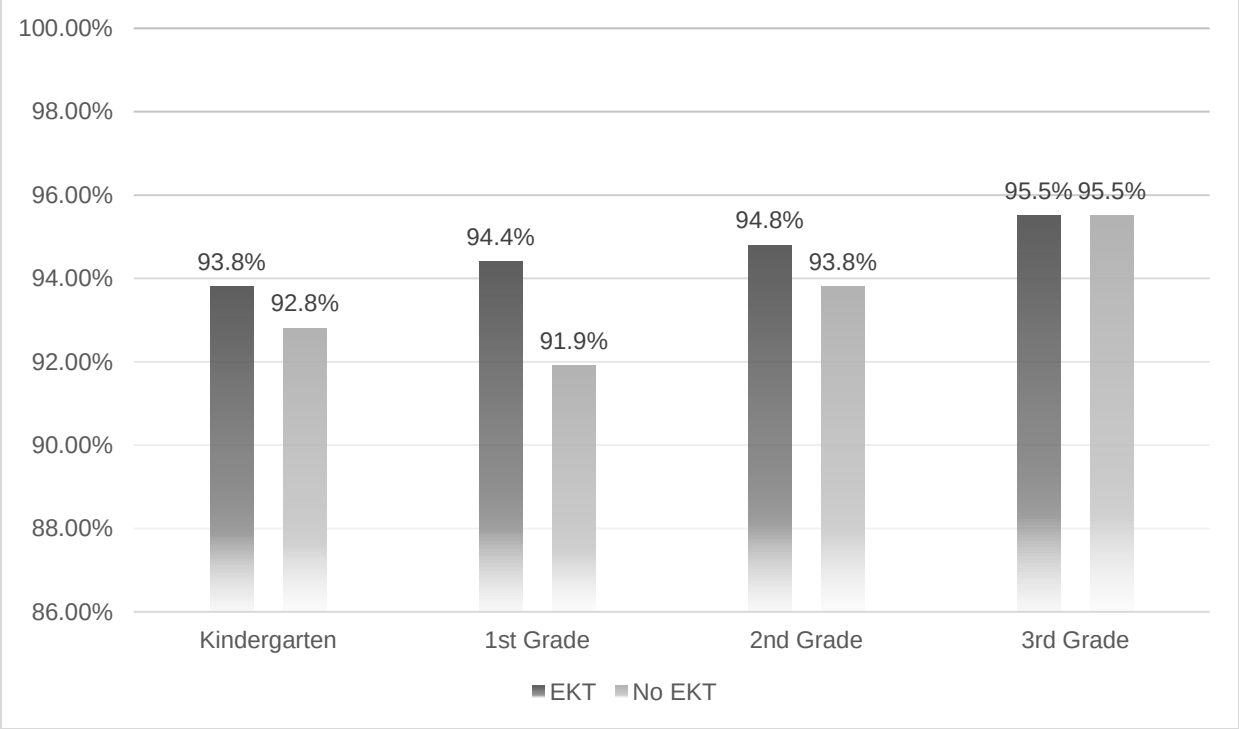

Figure 4. Student attendance rates for the 2010 cohort of early kindergarten transition (EKT) students and non-EKT students in EKT schools.

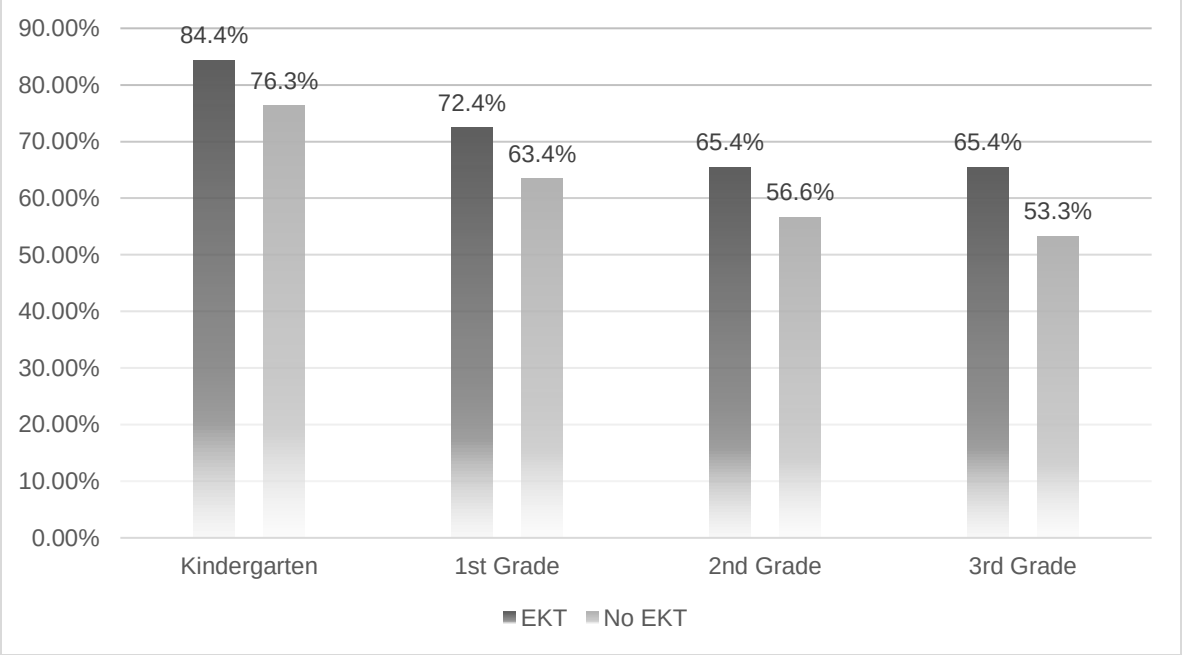

Figure 5. Percentages of early kindergarten transition (EKT) students and non-EKT students in EKT schools at dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills (DIBELS) benchmark.