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## **Beyond Activities: Engaging Families in Preschoolers' Language and Literacy Development<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

- Given the compounding nature of early reading problems, early intervention is critical for preschoolers at risk for reading difficulties (Juel, 1988; NICHD, 2000).
- When parents are meaningfully engaged in children’s learning, significant gains in social-emotional, behavioral, language, and cognitive skills result (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011).
- As defined here, parent engagement entails parental practices that support early language and literacy skills.
- Integrated, systemic interventions across home and school are needed to promote early literacy development (Sheridan et al., 2011).

### **Response to Intervention Models (RTI) and Family Engagement**

- RtI models demonstrate improved reading-related outcomes for elementary children (Vaughn et al., 2003); however, few tiered early literacy preschool models have been studied.
- Furthermore, tiered models that join families and schools in an integrated, comprehensive approach are lacking.

### **Family Engagement Approach**

- Descriptive and illustrative data from an RtI model focused on early literacy are presented to assess the potential added contribution of innovative tiered family engagement strategies.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

- Approach developed as part of a larger, three-year, federally funded development project including 220 children from 10 classrooms across two states.
- Data from participants in one state, including 81 children and their families from a rural Midwestern town are presented. Demographic information is presented in Table 1.
- Four-year-old children enrolled in Head Start programs and their parents were enrolled in the project for one year.
- Literacy coaches provided coaching support to teaching teams regarding implementation of classroom and family engagement strategies.

	<i>N</i>	Percentage
Child <sup>1</sup> ( <i>N</i> = 81)		
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	25	30.9
Black/African-American	1	1.2
White, Hispanic or Latino	29	35.8
American Indian/Alaska Native	4	4.9
Other	8	9.9
Parent <sup>2</sup> ( <i>N</i> = 81)		
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	37	45.7
Black/African-American	1	1.2
White, Hispanic or Latino	35	43.2
American Indian/Alaska Native	4	4.9
Other	4	4.9
Education		
Less than high school diploma	30	48.8
High school diploma/GED	19	23.4
Some education beyond high school	17	21.0
College degree or higher	10	12.3

<sup>1</sup>Mean age = 54.21 months (*SD* = 4.75)

<sup>2</sup>Mean age = 30.62 years (*SD* = 6.70); Median household income = \$16,001-\$18,000

### Child Measures

- *Curriculum-based measures* (CBMs) were created to assess expressive vocabulary based on key words from classroom instruction. Students were asked to name pictures of 8-10 words. Raw scores based on correct identification of words.
- *Get Ready to Read! Revised Screening Tool* (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2009) measures preschoolers' Print Knowledge and Phonological Awareness via 25 items. Step scores, based on number of correct responses, and Performance Level scores, based on same-age peer score comparison, are derived.
- *Tests of Preschool Early Literacy* (TOPEL; Lonigan, Wagner, & Torgesen, 2007) is comprised of three subtests: Print Knowledge (36 items); Definitional Vocabulary (35 items); and Phonological Awareness (27 items) measuring letter, word, and picture identification; word elision; and blending. The Early Learning Index is computed as a composite score.
- *Woodcock Muñoz Language Survey – Revised* (WMLS-R; Woodcock, Muñoz-Sandoval, Ruef, & Alvarado, 2005) measures Spanish language proficiency of English Language Learners. The Picture Vocabulary subtest requires the child to name familiar and unfamiliar pictured objects.

## Program Measure

- *Family Engagement Self-Reflection Tool* (Sjuts & Sheridan, 2011) is a self-reflective interview used to evaluate the quality of universal program/teacher family engagement practices in language and literacy development.

## Intervention Feasibility and Acceptability

- *Semi-structured focus group interviews* were conducted with teachers and parents following intervention implementation to assess perceptions of intervention feasibility and effectiveness.

## Description of Family Engagement Approach

### Tier 1: Universal Family Engagement

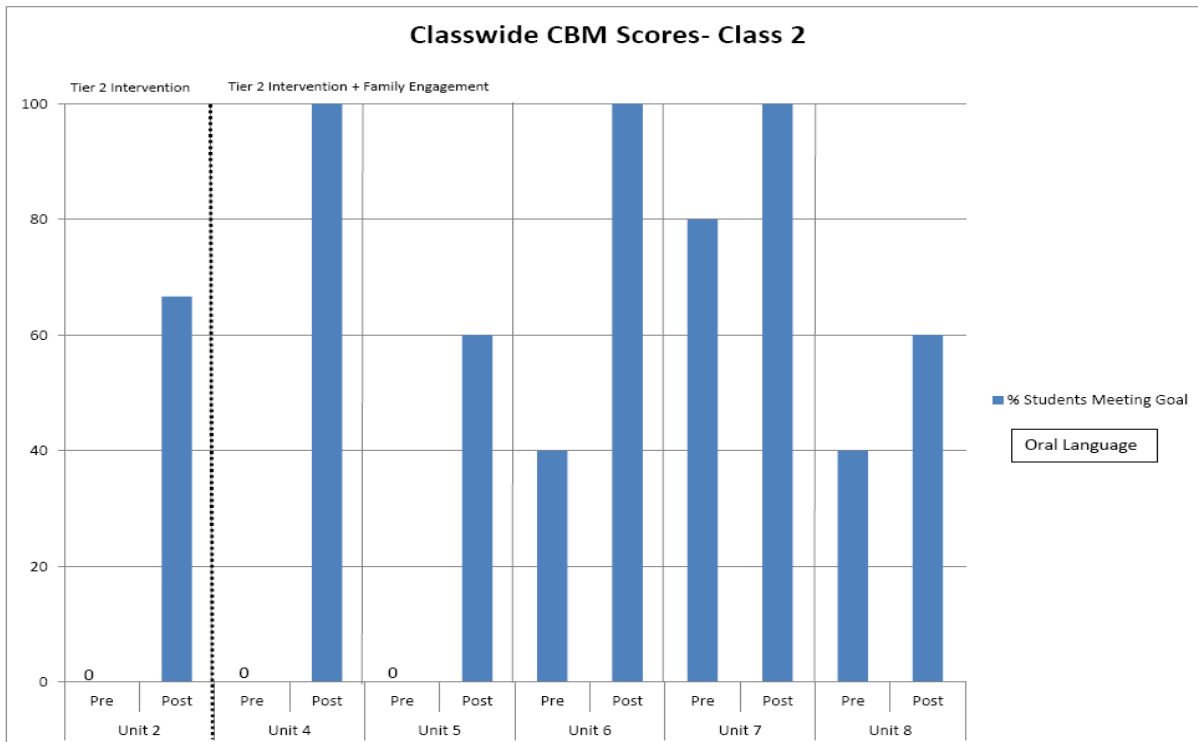
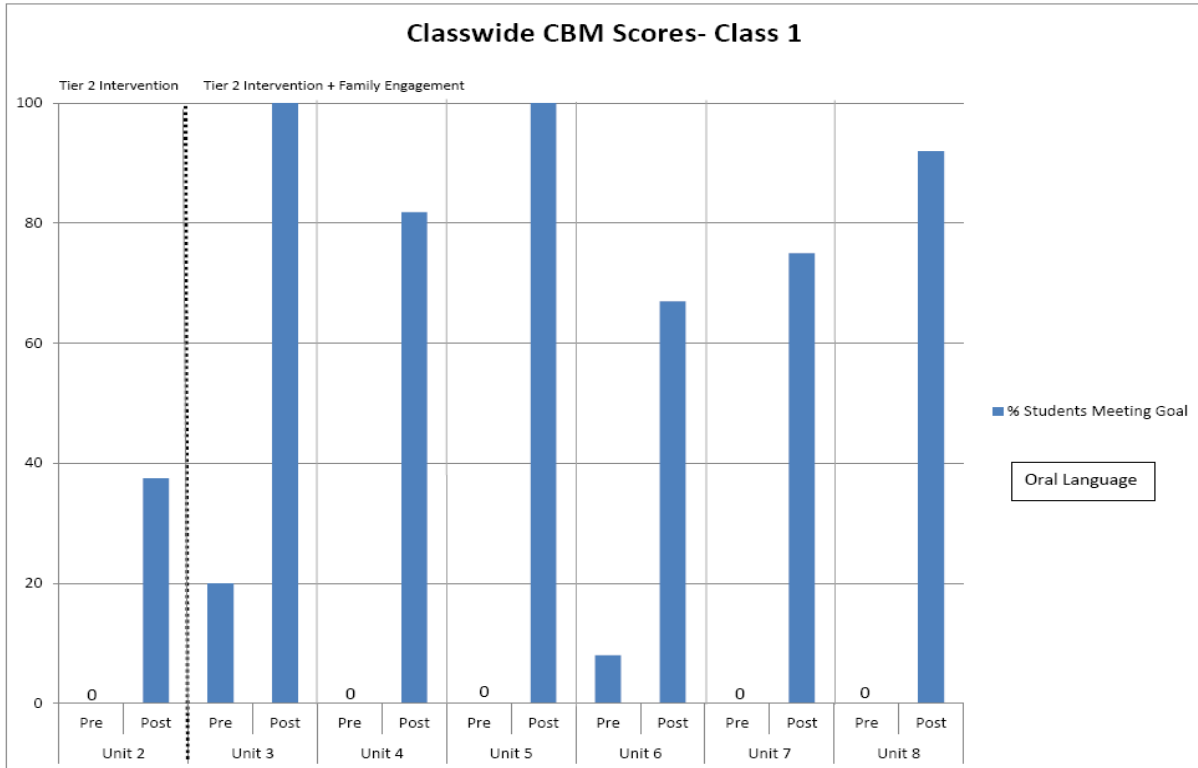
#### Key targets:

- Effectively *communicate* with parents
- *Share information* to support family engagement
- *Partner* with parents to support the child's learning
- Interact with families in a manner that is *culturally sensitive*

#### Strategies:

- Formative reflection by teaching teams using family engagement interview to identify areas of family engagement strength and need for improvement.
- Guided practice of literacy strategies at school-based Family Literacy Events.
- Guided practice with literacy materials/activities sent home (i.e., book sharing with dialogic reading instructions, vocabulary cards with practice instructions).
- Family interviews to gather information about home learning/language.
- Children's progress monitoring reports shared on a regular basis.
- *Support for Family Engagement Effectiveness: Tier 1 Class-wide Examples*
  - Class 1: 100% of students met post-test CBM goal following introduction of family engagement strategies in Unit 3.

- Class 2: Family engagement practices not maintained during Unit 5; Unit 8 classroom-based interventions implemented with low fidelity.



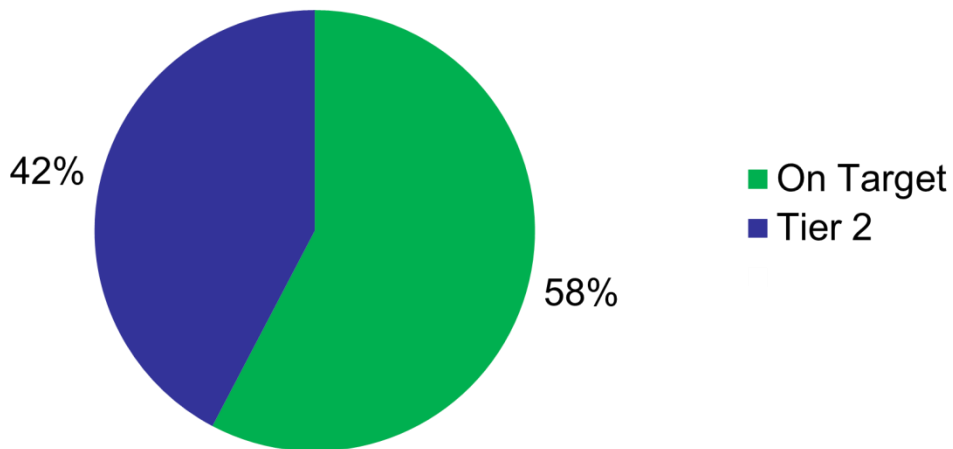
- Focus group teacher feedback on Tier 1 Family Engagement:
  - “I saw a lot more parent involvement this year than in any of the past years...and I think it’s modeling.... You can’t just hand them the material and say, ‘here use these.’ ...you have to show them and explain it to them and even explain the purpose and how they’re gonna benefit. And then being able to show them the graphs for the CBMs. They were like, ‘wow,’ and it’s like, you know, you helped get your child here because you used those cards at home...”

## **Tier 2: Targeted Family Engagement**

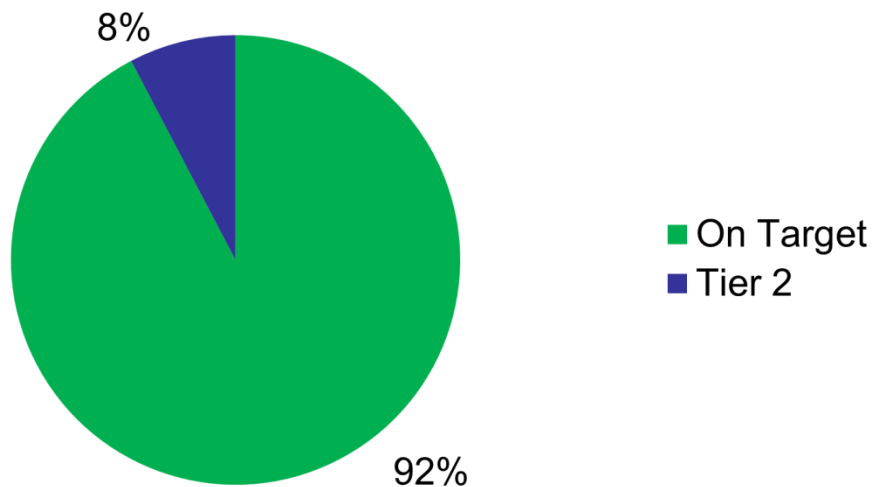
### Key Targets:

- Increase *communication* and *information sharing* with families
- Increase opportunities to *partner* with families
- Increase *support* (instruction, modeling, practice) offered for families
- *Problem solve* to address potential barriers to family engagement
- Strategies:
  - Coaching was conducted with teaching teams using a structured interview checklist to identify specific domains and strategies to target:
    - With families whose children needed additional support
    - Through evidence-based classroom interventions
- *Support for Family Engagement Effectiveness: Tier 2*
  - In the final year of the development project, the number of children selected to receive Tier 2 intervention in oral language was 11 out of 26.
    - Selected based on assessment data, progress monitoring scores, and teacher observations.
  - By the final assessment, only 2 of the 26 students remained below benchmark criteria as being on-target for kindergarten.

**Percent On Target for Kindergarten  
Mid-Year**



**Percent On Target for Kindergarten  
Final Assessment**



- Focus group teacher feedback on Tier 2 Family Engagement:
  - "...We did the checklist, and it made you more knowledgeable about what you did with parents and what you needed to do more of...calling parents, doing parent teacher conferences, home visits, sharing that info with them, phone calls, check-ups, it just made you more knowledgeable of what you needed to do and how with the parents."



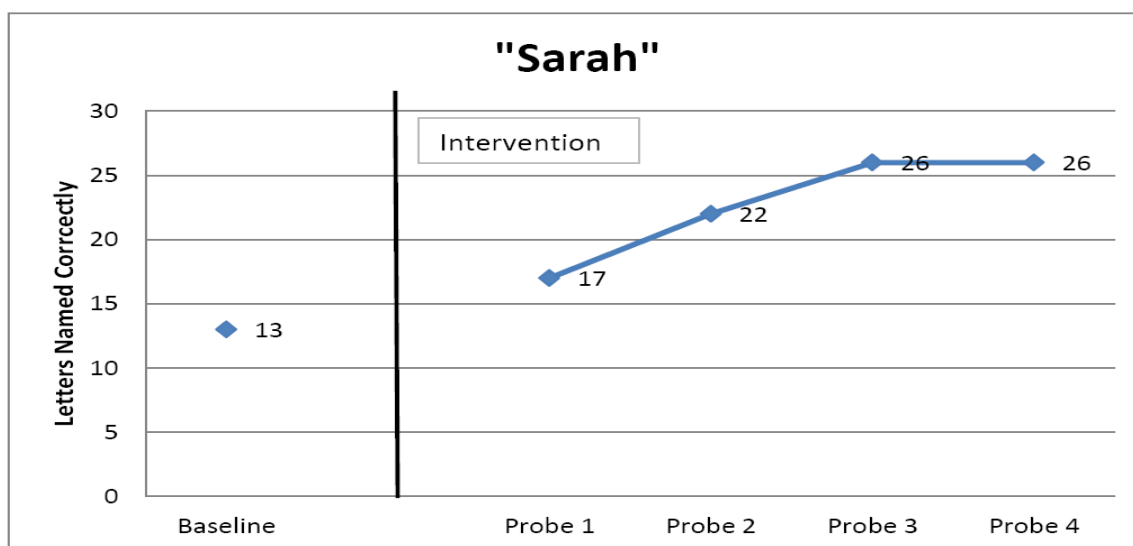
### Tier 3: Individualized Family Engagement

Key targets:

- *Collaboratively problem solve* how to address child and family needs
- Increase *communication, information, and resource sharing* with individual family
- Increase *individualized intervention supports* offered to family

Strategies:

- Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008) was provided to engage families and teachers of children who continued to remain below benchmark criteria on language and literacy measures.
- CBC is an evidence-based, indirect consultation model that aims to jointly engage families and teachers in a collaborative problem-solving process focused on the child's specific needs. In this case, the trained literacy coach served as the consultant.
- The four-phase CBC process included a series of three structured meetings and intervention plan implementation:
  - Meeting 1 – *Building on Strengths*
  - Meeting 2 – *Planning for Success*
  - Plan Implementation
  - Meeting 3 – *Checking and Reconnecting*
- *Support for Family Engagement Effectiveness: Tier 3 Case Study Example*
  - “Sarah” – Four-year-old English-speaking female identified for Tier 3 due to inconsistent letter naming.
  - Individualized plan included individual practice across home and school with target letters, positive reinforcement and home-school communication.
  - After six weeks of intervention, Sarah recognized all 26 letters of the alphabet with consistency (gain of 13 from baseline).
  - The parent and teacher both rated the consultation intervention as being acceptable (5.67 and 4.47 respectively) and effective (5.67 and 5.00 respectively) based on the BIRS *Acceptability* and *Effectiveness* subscales.



### Discussion

- Data derived from multiple sources suggest that the family engagement approach developed for this RtI model holds promise for promoting children’s language and literacy skills and is feasible to implement in preschool settings.
- Lessons learned through the development process revealed:
  - The family engagement strategies were more feasible and effective for teachers to implement when applied using an intentional and individualized approach.
  - When focused on the approach to engaging families, rather than simply providing activities, families appeared to be more engaged and children’s scores improved.
- *It was not about “activities” but the approach that was taken to engage families as partners that made the strategies work.*

### Limitations/Future Research

- The family engagement approach described herein is part of an integrated tiered model and its effects must be considered in relation to the full model.
- Data presented include preliminary case study examples of how the model was implemented.
- Further model development is needed to refine the family engagement approach as part of a tiered language and literacy model.
- The unique effectiveness of this approach as part of a tiered model needs to be tested.

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