

Start Smart: New Mexico K-3 Plus Extended School Year-Validation Study

Citizens in our country are asking important questions about how we can improve educational outcomes for our nation's children and at what cost? One solution that has shown great promise is extending the school year. The State of New Mexico has had an intriguing project for several years, called the K-3 Plus project. It provides 25 extra days prior to the traditional start of the school year for children in kindergarten through 3rd grade. The State-funded project is made available through a competitive process, available only to qualifying schools that apply, with preferences given to those in areas of poverty, rural areas, and low-performing schools.

While the State-funded program has been in operation for several years, a rigorous evaluation of outcomes for the K-3 Plus project seemed an impossibility; as did an exhaustive cost study to provide information that could drive funding formulas unique to both urban and rural schools. This changed when funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation, and several foundation partners were secured through a competitive grant process. Now, a rigorous scientific evaluation of student outcomes along with a cost study of this program is in progress. The project is called the StartSmart K-3 Plus Project; the name was differentiated from the original State-funded program to help families identify this research project as separate from the State's program.

The State program includes: An additional 25 full days of school with class sizes typically smaller than during the school year; instruction focused on literacy, math, social skills, arts, and physical education; provision of transportation, breakfast and lunch; professional development training in literacy; teachers certified in Elementary Education, with minimum of Bachelor's degree; and a parent involvement component.

Specifically, StartSmart K-3 Plus is measuring the impact of the increased instructional time on the literacy, numeracy and social skills of students as well as on costs and resources; moreover funding formulas, specific to sample sub groups (e.g., rural, urban) will be derived. StartSmart is being run as a randomized control design, which is the gold standard in educational research; roughly half of the students are randomly selected to receive summer services and the other half are randomly selected to serve as a control group, where they do not receive summer services and we can measure any potential differences between the two groups.