

Reach Out and Read: Improving School Readiness in Washington State

When children arrive at kindergarten and are not ready for school, they can face lifelong health and educational challenges. By the time a child turns three, they have already begun laying the foundation for life-long learning¹. Early childhood professionals in Washington State took note of a 2004 survey of kindergarten teachers. Teachers reported that less than half of children in the state arrived at kindergarten with the skills they needed to succeed².



This assessment coincided with several other efforts examining school readiness in Washington State. The assessments noted the critical need for public-private partnerships for both the funding and implementation of school readiness

projects and supported the ability of doctors to connect with families around early learning. The state was primed to implement Reach Out and Read (ROR) as a public health/population-based approach to school readiness.

A TRUSTED MESSENGER

Reach Out and Read is an evidenced-based early literacy program. A unique aspect of the program is its method of delivery – through the medical home. At each well-child checkup between the ages of 6 months through 5 years (about 10 visits), doctors give families a brand-new book and talk with them about how they can share it with the child. The book is integrated into the individualized medical care given by the pediatrician. The pediatrician serves as a trusted messenger for families. Beyond encouraging the parents and child to interact through reading, the provider can observe the interactions to better understand family dynamics and how the child is developing. For example, the way the child is handling the book demonstrates motor skills and cognitive skills. They can also observe whether the child is engaging with the parent and whether the parents are engaging with the child.

¹ [School Readiness Resources](#), Zero to Three, 2019

² Pavelcheck, D. (2005). Student Readiness for Kindergarten: A Survey of Kindergarten Teachers in Washington State. Olympia, Washington: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

By design, the intervention is family-focused and family-centric, with a set of messages for families, based on the child's age and developmental level as part of the individualized care they are already providing to the child and family. Providers can tailor messages to the unique needs and experiences of the family. Providers are encouraged to make sure that their waiting rooms are "literacy rich" with books and library information available, so that each well-child visit promotes literacy. In some offices, trained volunteers read stories to children while they wait, modeling the interaction for parents.



PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUCCESS

The national ROR initiative relies on partners locally, regionally and at the state level. ROR helps build connections between health care providers and other aspects of early learning. For example, facilitated by the ROR staff, local providers partner with libraries and medical providers to encourage parents to take their young children to the library. This can be new information for immigrants who did not have public libraries in their home countries or even

parents who did not grow up with a local library. In Washington, the program has also partnered with Cradle-to-Career initiatives in three counties, bringing doctors and medical clinics to the table as partners to support parents, improve school readiness, and increase equity across communities.

Statewide, the program works in collaboration with the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families and Thrive by Five Washington. In 2010, ROR was officially embedded into the newly completed Washington State Early Learning Plan. The program also partners with Early Learning Regional Coalitions across the state.

SEEING RESULTS IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Research has shown that when doctors promote literacy readiness using the ROR model, there is a significant effect on parental behavior and attitudes toward reading aloud, as well as improvements in the language scores of young children who participate. [Fifteen peer-reviewed studies](#) have shown that the model works when implemented with fidelity.

"My daughter just turned one and has received a book at her last few wellness checks. She loves books and it's great to get new ones at the doctor's office. As a parent, I feel like this is a very important program. I think that the first words and the color books have helped her learn more words. So I just wanted to say a huge thank you for this great program."

– Kate Cherrington, Parent, Centralia

Therefore, a focus on quality is critical to ensuring parental behavior change and increasing children’s kindergarten readiness. Washington ROR developed a quality rating and improvement system as part of a statewide technical assistance and professional development effort. The ratings offer a look at the quality of programs and determine the level of technical assistance to be provided, as resources allow. Once this was implemented with ROR professionals providing the analysis and technical assistance, the program saw a 35% increase in the number of programs with the highest quality rating. More specifically, families that participate in ROR report reading to their children more often than those who do not participate. Their toddlers’ receptive and expressive vocabulary scores are higher, even when adjusting for parental education, foreign-born status, and language proficiency³. When the Washington State project was initially funded by Healthy Tomorrows in 2009, there were 70 locations serving 40,000 families. Since then, the program has more than tripled and now serves 130,000 families in 236 locations.



“Reach Out and Read is the cornerstone of all my well-child checkups for children 6 months through 5 years. Giving a book to a child perfectly illustrates the importance of reading and family bonding for the growing mind. Watching the delight in a child’s eye as they open their new book is truly rewarding. It is fulfilling to sit down with the family and teach them how pointing at pictures and reading builds knowledge and language skills alike. Countless families have told me that the books we provide are the only ones on their shelves at home. Reach Out and Read is making a tangible impact in my community.”

– Thatcher Felt, DO, Yakima Valley Farm Worker’s Clinic

This case study is one of three developed to demonstrate the impact of the Healthy Tomorrows Partnership for Children programs. This case study is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of



Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$166,000 per year. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov).

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



³ [Research Summary \(PDF\)](#), Reach Out and Read Washington State, 2017