



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Promoting Preschool Quality Through Effective Classroom Management

IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS FROM THE FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING DEMONSTRATION

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Classroom Management**
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Demonstration**

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**with
Farrah Parkes**



December 2009

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Overview

The Foundations of Learning (FOL) demonstration evaluated a strategy to enhance the quality of preschool programs by promoting emotionally positive, behaviorally supportive classrooms. The program model includes intensive training in classroom management skills for lead and assistant teachers; weekly in-class support from a master's-level clinician, called a Clinical Classroom Consultant (CCC), to reinforce the lessons from the training; and a customized stress management workshop for teachers. The model also includes one-on-one clinical services for selected children who have not responded to teachers' enhanced classroom management skills by spring of the school year.

The FOL program was tested in Newark, New Jersey, and Chicago, Illinois. The Newark program is the subject of this report. Because the Newark school system had already implemented enhancements that were mandated by the New Jersey Supreme Court's landmark decisions in the *Abbott v. Burke* class action case — which sought parity in school financing for poor urban districts — it provides an opportunity to examine the incremental effects of adding an emotionally and behaviorally based intervention to other quality-enhancement efforts.

Key Findings

- **The FOL program model was implemented with fidelity in Newark, suggesting that this intervention can be joined with other efforts to enhance the quality of preschool programs.** The teacher training was especially well attended, and teachers gave the workshops high ratings for quality. A substantial number of in-class and individualized consultations were provided, although fewer than the number scheduled. The stress management workshop, which program planners had thought would be a secondary part of the FOL intervention, turned out to be highly valued by the teachers.
- **Teachers incorporated the FOL techniques into their classroom management practices.** Teachers' comments underscored three key themes: (1) the supportive relationships with the CCCs and the strengthened relationships between lead and assistant teachers were important; (2) the creation of a learning community helped reduce teachers' sense of isolation by providing opportunities for collaboration and information sharing, both between teachers in the same classroom and with teachers in other FOL programs; and (3) teachers felt reduced stress in their professional and personal lives.
- **The Newark experience provides a number of practical operational lessons.** Policy-makers and administrators who are considering implementing similar programs should pay particular attention to the program design, management and staffing, and professional development issues that arose in FOL's integration of an emotionally and behaviorally based intervention into a large urban preschool system.

A preview of impact findings from Newark was released by MDRC in September 2009. Forthcoming reports on Newark and Chicago will provide additional important evidence regarding the feasibility, impact, and cost of implementing the FOL approach in two different settings.

Preface

Policymakers are investing in early childhood education as a promising strategy for improving the school readiness of disadvantaged young children and for advancing their long-term academic success. But how can the quality of programs be maintained or enhanced when they are operated on a large scale? One critical aspect of quality is addressing children's emotional and behavioral development — that is, their ability to engage positively with peers and teachers and to focus their attention and behavior during classroom activities.

Evidence suggests that enhancing young children's healthy emotional and behavioral development is both an important outcome in its own right and can also be a pathway to improved academic achievement. However, preschool teachers in low-income neighborhoods report that between 15 and 20 percent of the young children in their classrooms exhibit clinically high levels of disruptive and challenging behaviors — to the detriment of both these students and their classmates. In survey after survey, teachers consistently emphasize their need for professional development and other supports to help them address children's behavioral issues.

This report offers lessons from the implementation of MDRC's Foundations of Learning demonstration in Newark, New Jersey. The project is evaluating a program model in Head Start programs, community-based child care centers, and public schools that provides intensive training in classroom management skills for lead and assistant teachers, weekly in-class support from a master's-level clinician — called a Clinical Classroom Consultant — to reinforce the lessons from the training, and a customized stress management workshop for teachers. The model also includes one-on-one clinical services for selected children who have not responded to teachers' enhanced classroom management skills by spring of the school year.

Early results from Newark (released in September 2009) suggest that the intervention has improved teachers' classroom management and productivity, reduced children's conflict with peers, and engaged students in the learning tasks of preschool. These promising early findings give researchers reason to further explore the idea that helping teachers manage their classrooms can improve the productivity and engagement of children in school — possibly putting them on a pathway to an improved experience in kindergarten and better academic success in the years beyond.

In early 2010, a full impact report on the Newark demonstration, including findings on children's transition into kindergarten, will be published. Results from the other Foundations of Learning site — Chicago — will be available in 2011.

Gordon Berlin
President

Acknowledgments

This report on the Foundations of Learning demonstration benefited from a collaboration among many organizations and individuals. From the outset, the support of the Newark Public Schools has been instrumental in planning and conducting the project. We particularly thank Dr. Gayle Griffin, Assistant Superintendent; Nancy Rivera, Director of Early Childhood Education; Shirley Grundy, Director of Guidance at the time the study was conducted (now retired); Dr. Marbella Barrera, Institutional Review Board Director; and Kathleen Tague and Patricia DeMarco, Preschool Intervention and Referral Team (PIRT) supervisors in the Office of Early Childhood; as well as the PIRT members and resource teachers. Babu Yalamanchili and Marisol Peñawere helpful in providing data.

Carrying out a research demonstration of this type is only possible with the commitment and cooperation of the participating programs. We thank all the teachers and administrators at the schools, Head Start centers, and community-based programs that were part of the demonstration. Clark Thompson and Ernestine Simpson of the Newark Preschool Council were especially helpful during both the pilot phase and full demonstration period.

At Family Connections, the subcontractor responsible for implementing the classroom consultation component of the Foundations of Learning intervention, we thank Paula Sabreen, Executive Director; Sheila C. Berard, Associate Director of Prevention and Partial Care and Outpatient Services; Dorothy Jordan, Clinical Classroom Consultant Coordinator; and each of the Clinical Classroom Consultants who worked so diligently to implement a high-quality program.

Greg O'Donnell, Darlene Jones-Lewis, Kimya Barden, and Dorothy Jordan conducted the teacher training sessions.

A number of foundation funders provided indispensable support for the evaluation. They are gratefully acknowledged at the front of the report.

The Foundations of Learning research effort has been a true partnership. At MDRC, we thank Pamela Morris, Project Director, as well as the following key members of the team: Megan Millenky, Francesca Longo, Ximena Portilla, and Vivian Mateo. Shirley James and her team were responsible for keying and verifying the data. Glee Holton and Shelley Rappaport helped recruit preschool programs for the demonstration. Helen Gorden provided administrative support. Gordon Berlin, Thomas Brock, Robert Ivry, Ginger Knox, and Janet Quint provided valuable comments on drafts of the report. Amy Rosenberg and John Hutchins edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

From outside MDRC, Cybele Raver of New York University, Stephanie Jones of Harvard University, and Christine Li-Grining of Loyola University drew on their experience from the Chicago School Readiness Project to provide valuable guidance and input. Karen McFadden, a doctoral fellow from New York University, and Nandita Ghosh and Jamie Camino, interns from Rutgers and Fordham University, respectively, all helped to compile and analyze data.

Most of all, we thank the children in the Foundations of Learning demonstration and their parents. We hope that the lessons from this and future reports will help strengthen the quality of preschool programs in Newark and elsewhere.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Improving the school readiness of disadvantaged young children has become a high priority for officials at the federal, state, and local levels. Even as policymakers and program administrators embrace investments in preschool programs, they confront the challenge of maintaining the consistently high quality that is needed for these programs to make a long-term difference in children's lives. An important — but too often neglected — aspect of maintaining quality is addressing children's emotional and behavioral development.

The quality of the preschool experience can be disrupted when young children's level of emotional and behavioral development prevents them from properly adjusting to the classroom environment. This can create concerns for (1) the disruptive children themselves, who are more likely to face social, behavioral, and academic difficulties throughout their school careers; (2) their classmates, whose learning is impeded when teachers are diverted from instructional time to manage problem behavior; and (3) teachers, who may experience increased stress and burnout.

This report provides implementation lessons from Foundations of Learning (FOL), a demonstration project coordinated by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, to test an intervention that trains preschool teachers to better manage children's behavior and provides them with in-class consultation from master's-level clinicians. The FOL program model was implemented in Newark, New Jersey, during the 2007-2008 school year and in Chicago, Illinois, during the 2008-2009 school year. The Newark program, which is the subject of this report, was conducted in close collaboration with the Newark Public Schools and was funded entirely by grants from private foundations.

The Foundations of Learning Demonstration

The Foundations of Learning demonstration focuses primarily on enhancing the quality of teacher-student interactions and increasing teachers' capacity to manage the classroom environment in order to promote children's social and emotional development. The intervention also includes targeted services later in the preschool year for selected children. FOL includes four components:

1. **Teacher training.** Lead and assistant teachers are invited to attend five Saturday training sessions, once a month for six hours each, from late September to January. The workshops provide training to help teachers develop positive relationships with children and their families; present classroom strategies teachers can use, such as setting clear rules, outlining predictable

limits, and instituting a discipline structure that minimizes classroom disruptions and avoids confrontation; and provide teachers with techniques to develop children's social skills, anger management, and problem-solving ability. Teachers are trained to use certain techniques liberally (such as praise, encouragement, and celebrations), while using others only selectively (such as loss of privileges).

2. **Classroom-level consultation.** To complement the training, teachers are assigned a master's-level Clinical Classroom Consultant (CCC) to work with them in the classroom one day per week throughout the school year. The CCC enters the classroom in September, before the first teacher-training workshop, to begin establishing close, supportive relationships with the teachers, children, parents, and school staff. The CCC plays an important role in modeling and reinforcing the content of the training sessions and in acting as a sounding board for teachers.
3. **Stress management.** Beginning in January or February, lead and assistant teachers participate in a customized, 90-minute stress management workshop at their own program site. In the months leading up to and following the workshop, the CCC helps support the teachers' stress management skills and techniques.
4. **Individualized child-centered consultation.** Beginning in March, the CCC provides one-on-one clinical services for selected children who have not responded sufficiently to the teachers' improved classroom management. By design, the individualized clinical consultation is delivered only after teachers have completed their training and have had an opportunity to use their newly acquired techniques and after children have had ample time to react. The clinical services, which are provided primarily in the classroom, address specific behaviors that continue to inhibit the children's ability to negotiate the classroom environment.

The timing and sequence of FOL activities are depicted in Figure ES-1.

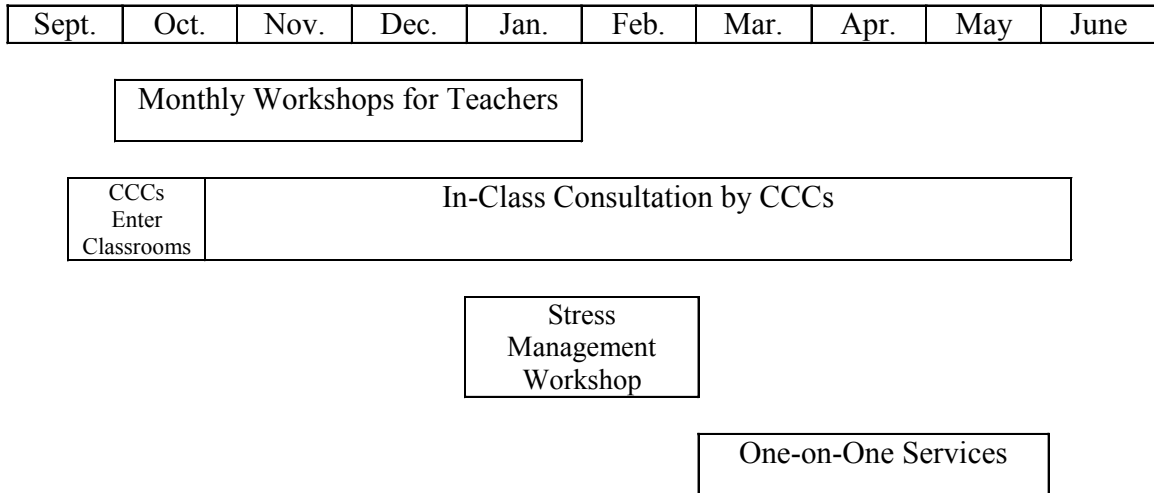
Overview of the Demonstration and Evaluation

FOL operated on a larger scale than most demonstration projects, with 26 program sites (constituting about 20 percent of all preschools in Newark). The demonstration operated in each of the three main types of preschool venues — Head Start programs, community-based child care centers, and public schools — roughly in proportion to these venues' representation in

Foundations of Learning Demonstration

Figure ES.1

2007-2008 Program Timeline



NOTE: CCC = Clinical Classroom Consultant.

the city’s service delivery system. The vast majority of the children in FOL classrooms were four years old. MDRC played an important supportive role in the demonstration by identifying the project’s flexible foundation grants, assisting with recruitment of CCCs, and providing technical assistance to help ensure that the program was implemented with fidelity to the model.

While it faces challenges common to many urban areas, Newark is ahead of most of the country in implementing structural changes to promote quality in preschools — including smaller class sizes, higher teacher salaries, and stricter teacher credential requirements — as a result of the New Jersey Supreme Court’s *Abbott v. Burke* decisions, which required the state to increase education funding in disadvantaged districts. For example, preschool classes in Newark are limited to 15 children, and each classroom has both a lead and an assistant teacher. The FOL demonstration, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine the incremental effect of adding this type of intervention over and above other resource-intensive efforts to enhance quality.

To measure this effect, a key part of the FOL demonstration in Newark was a rigorous impact analysis, in which 51 preschool classrooms were randomly assigned to one of two groups: the 26 classrooms that received the FOL intervention, and 25 classrooms in a control

group that operated their regular program without the enhanced FOL services. A similar research design is also being used to evaluate the Chicago FOL demonstration.

This report on the FOL demonstration describes the background of the intervention, the operating context and implementation experience in Newark, and early operational lessons for policymakers and practitioners interested in mounting similar programs. The information comes from a diverse set of data sources, including administrative records, field observations and interviews, teacher surveys, systematic field documentation by CCCs, and focus groups with teachers. A preview of findings on FOL's impact in Newark was released in September 2009. Forthcoming reports will present complete findings on the impact of FOL on the classroom environment and teacher and child outcomes in both Newark and Chicago, as well as a benefit-cost analysis of FOL in Chicago.

Findings

Was the Foundations of Learning Demonstration Implemented as Intended in Newark?

On the whole, the Newark experience provides a solid basis for evaluating the impact of a program that was implemented with reasonable fidelity to the FOL program model.

- **Both the dosage (frequency) and quality of the teacher training workshops were especially high.**

The training workshops were well attended: for instance, 22 of the 26 lead teachers received the full dosage (defined as attending at least four of the five sessions, since the fifth one was a refresher session). Teachers who attended at least one session received an average of about 26 hours (out of a possible 30) of curriculum content. The teachers gave high ratings (between 4.6 and 4.7 on a scale of 5.0) when asked whether the training content was clear, the training environment was conducive to learning, the trainers themselves were effective and clear, and the training enhanced the teachers' professional development.

- **The dosage of classroom consultation that CCCs provided to teachers was less than the full amount scheduled, but it exceeded what is typically offered in early childhood consultation models. Teachers gave high ratings to the quality of the consultation.**

CCCs provided an average of just over 162 hours (or about 23 days) of in-classroom consultation over the course of the academic year. Although reporting methods differ, it appears that the FOL dosage was well above that of other programs described in the research literature. Teachers rated the CCCs between 3.6 and 3.8 on a scale of 4.0 with respect to their effective-

ness in helping the teachers work on classroom management techniques, work on building relationships with children, and spend more time teaching.

- **Stress management workshops turned out to be more important to teachers than program planners had expected. Virtually all of the teachers attended their on-site workshop and rated it highly.**

Originally considered to be a relatively minor part of the FOL model, the stress management component turned out to be of great interest to the participating teachers. The teachers felt considerable stress in both their personal and professional lives, and they believed that stress in one part of their lives affected how they handled other parts. Particular concerns included managing deadlines, dealing with difficult colleagues, a lack of personal autonomy and self-efficacy at work, domestic violence, financial challenges, physical and mental health, and the management of familial responsibilities.

- **The individualized, child-centered consultation provided by the CCCs addressed a number of emotional and behavioral challenges. However, the dosage of consultation fell short of the amount expected in the FOL program model.**

A total of 63 children received one-on-one consultation, an average of 2.4 children per FOL class. The children presented with (1) externalizing issues, such as physical aggression (for instance, hitting), verbal aggression (taunting and bullying, for example), tantrums, impulsivity, and hyperactivity; (2) internalizing issues, such as anxiety, extreme shyness, and reduced socialization with peers; and/or (3) cognitive and behavioral challenges, such as an inability to focus, decreased ability to self-regulate, and delays in language acquisition and expressiveness. The Newark FOL model envisioned that the CCCs would conduct approximately 12 one-on-one sessions with each identified child. In actuality, the CCCs conducted an average of 4.7 sessions per child.

Did Teachers' Classroom Practices Change Over the Course of the Year?

- **Teachers appeared to adopt the FOL techniques and incorporate increased attention to children's social and emotional development.**

In focus groups, teachers said that the training and in-class support led them to use the new FOL techniques they had learned. CCCs also reported that, by January or February, teachers had substantially increased their use of the types of classroom-management techniques that the FOL intervention taught. The teachers' and CCCs' perceptions are consistent with the impact data (presented in other reports) comparing FOL classrooms with control classrooms. Those data show that FOL improved teachers' classroom management (reflecting measures

such as teacher sensitivity, management of student behavior, and classroom climate), classroom productivity (reflecting effective use of classroom time, including reduced down time), and engagement of students (reflecting students' focus and participation in learning activities).

What Factors Contributed to the Changes in Teachers' Practices?

- **Three key themes emerged as principal causes of the changes in teachers' practices: (1) collaborative relationships specifically among and between teachers and CCCs, (2) increased cooperation and information-sharing in general, and (3) reduced stress in teachers' professional and personal lives.**

The FOL intervention contributed to new, supportive relationships between teachers and CCCs, as well as strengthened relationships between lead and assistant teachers. Teachers attributed this to, among other things, the CCCs' enthusiasm for the FOL intervention, their immersion in the classroom, and the respectful manner with which CCCs determined when to praise, guide, support, and challenge the teachers. Teachers also cited the opportunities for ongoing learning, reflection, and practical feedback. This included the engagement of both the lead and the assistant teachers, whose collaboration began with joint attendance at the monthly training workshops and continued to be nurtured by the CCCs throughout the school year. Teachers also felt that their improved classroom management skills, increased personal and professional insights, and efforts to change their personal lives all led to reduced stress, which they felt benefited both themselves and the children in their class.

Lessons for Adopting Programs Similar to Foundations of Learning

The findings in this report should be interpreted in light of the particular context in which FOL operated, including the well-above-average resources available to Newark preschool programs and the short-term nature of the FOL demonstration. The following implementation lessons should also be considered preliminary since data on the full effects of the FOL demonstration on teachers, children, and the classroom environment are not yet available.

- **An emotionally and behaviorally based intervention such as FOL can be joined with other efforts to enhance the quality of preschool programs.**

The FOL experience confirmed that the quality-enhancement efforts mandated by the *Abbott v. Burke* rulings did not fully address teachers' classroom management needs and that an intervention focused on children's social and emotional development can be integrated into these classrooms. Also, while Newark preschool classrooms used a particular curriculum (called

The Creative Curriculum), it appears that the FOL program model could be used in conjunction with a variety of classroom curricula.

- **FOL was implemented as an integrated, multicomponent program model.**

The quality of the intervention might be affected by modifications, such as reducing the number of training sessions, the days of in-class consultation, or the level of skills, training, or supervision of the CCCs. Also, assigning CCCs to more than the four classrooms they each served in the FOL demonstration could compromise the important time needed for planning, reflection, and building relationships with teachers and children in each classroom.

- **The program design should take into account teachers' level of stress, the extent to which teachers feel isolated, and the need to strengthen the relationship between lead and assistant teachers.**

Teachers embraced the stress management component as an important opportunity to address the significant stress that they felt. FOL teachers also appreciated that the program helped to facilitate a level of cooperation and coordination, both within and across classrooms, that they had not previously experienced. Since lead and assistant teachers were viewed as a team (for instance, through joint attendance at training workshops), they developed common goals, a shared vision, and opportunities to learn and practice the FOL techniques together.

- **Particularly if run on a large scale, a program such as FOL requires an effective means to promote and coordinate the overall effort.**

The Newark experience confirms the feasibility of the FOL model in a major urban system but also suggests that implementation on a similar or larger scale requires some form of central coordinating mechanism, like that provided by MDRC in this demonstration. This will help create economies of scale and high quality in the recruitment, training, and supervision of CCCs; planning and conducting monthly training workshops for teachers who come from multiple programs across the city; developing linkages with other classroom support efforts; and providing a mechanism for CCCs and teachers to engage in ongoing reflection, feedback, and problem-solving. There appear to be considerable benefits to having a source of technical assistance with sufficient capacity and time to support the project.

- **Teachers valued the training workshops' depth of content, combination of sound theory integrated with real-world practicality, and sequencing of monthly training sessions.**

The Incredible Years training curriculum that was used in the teacher workshops has a sound research and theoretical basis, while also providing opportunities to incorporate real-

world issues that the teachers face in their classrooms. The FOL teachers emphasized that this weaving together of theory and practice helped to ground them in the strategies in a way that was particularly relevant to their everyday experiences. In contrast to what are sometimes one-time training sessions for teachers, the monthly FOL workshops built on each other: teachers received in-depth exposure to research-based content in workshops that were spaced to provide opportunities for them to test the FOL techniques between sessions, give feedback to the trainers, and see the feedback incorporated into subsequent sessions.

- **In organizing training sessions, careful attention should be paid to providing teachers with incentives to attend, to the number and type of attendees invited, and to other logistical matters, such as transportation, child care, and refreshments.**

The FOL training sessions were held on Saturdays, rather than as part of regular district professional development days, in part to facilitate joint attendance by lead and assistant teachers as well as by the CCCs. To encourage attendance, the demonstration provided the training in a central location with free parking and child care, the teachers were compensated, and hot meals and refreshments were provided.

With an average of 40 people attending each session, the FOL training workshops probably reached the maximum size at which they could be effective. Indeed, some teachers felt that the sessions were too large to foster full and open discussion. While larger groups would presumably reduce the cost per attendee, the sessions could become unwieldy. Center administrators and supervisors were not invited to attend the trainings because their presence could have discouraged teachers from sharing their views openly; however, administrators and supervisors should receive a separate orientation to the program so that they can support the classroom teachers.

- **It was important for the teacher training sessions to be reinforced by the CCCs' regular in-class consultation.**

Valuable as the training sessions were, the focus groups and surveys confirmed the importance of the CCCs' regular presence in the classroom to model proper techniques and provide feedback. The effectiveness of the training sessions, support from CCCs in the classroom, and teachers' observations of changes in children's behavior all combined to motivate teachers to use the FOL strategies.

- **Since CCCs need a combination of clinical, communication, and interpersonal skills, careful attention should be paid to recruitment and retention of qualified individuals.**

At its core, classroom consultation is a relational process. The CCCs certainly required clinical skills to provide effective classroom support, deliver one-on-one services for selected children, and deal with community issues that affected the programs. However, their strong interpersonal skills were equally important; these skills helped ensure quality interactions with teachers, other adults in the preschool setting, and children.

The FOL demonstration struggled to recruit and retain the required number of qualified CCCs, in part because the short-term nature of the demonstration meant that the CCCs could not be assured of employment for more than one year. Because of the importance of identifying CCCs with a particular combination of skills (which could also include proficiency in a language other than English), early and active recruitment efforts need to be in place; this challenge will be even greater if the program operates on a larger scale than FOL did in Newark. Similarly, retention of the CCCs is important to maintain continuity in their relationship with the teachers and children.

- **Consideration should be given to lodging the CCCs on the staff of an outside agency rather than employing them within the school system.**

MDRC contracted with Family Connections, a community-based counseling and family services agency, to provide physical space, clinical supervision, and administrative oversight for the CCCs. FOL teachers consistently stated that their working relationship with the CCCs was enhanced by the fact that CCCs were not employed by the school system and did not evaluate the teachers. This encouraged teachers to share their vulnerabilities and struggles without fear that it would have an impact on them professionally.

Conclusion

Coming at a time of increased interest in preschool programs, the findings from the studies of Foundations of Learning in both Newark and Chicago will provide important insights into the feasibility and impact of efforts to strengthen teachers' classroom management skills and promote children's social and emotional development. The operating experience in Newark indicates that the program can be implemented with fidelity, addresses a genuine need, and is valued by teachers. FOL could be a model worth replicating or adapting to promote high-quality preschool programs.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.