

# Pathway Schools Initiative

## Developmental Evaluation | Learning Brief 2

July 2016

### Developmental Evaluation

To support its Pathway Schools Initiative, The McKnight Foundation has engaged initiative leaders in a developmental evaluation (DE) led by SRI International and Child Trends. DE is a collaborative effort that begins with identification of high-priority questions of practical interest. DE then supports continuous improvement by gathering data and offering rapid, relevant feedback to the initiative leaders, who develop action plans based on the implications of the findings. The DE team is composed of two to three leaders from each of the initiative's participating schools and districts, as well as staff members from McKnight, the Urban Education Institute (UEI) at the University of Chicago, SRI International, and Child Trends.

This learning brief describes the second cycle of the Pathway Schools Initiative DE. In the first DE cycle in fall 2015, the DE team sought to better understand the knowledge, skills, and resources teachers use to advance students the expected number of STEP levels each year.<sup>1</sup> One of the DE findings indicated that teachers typically do not use STEP results to inform independent work, yet students spend a large portion of the literacy block in independent activities while teachers are leading guided reading groups. In the second DE cycle, the DE team therefore sought to understand the nature of the activities and learning opportunities students engage in during independent work time. The team addressed three main evaluation questions and several subquestions for the second DE cycle:

- What are students doing during independent work time?
  - How does that vary by grade and STEP level?
- How purposeful is independent work time?
  - To what extent is independent work

aligned with instructional goals/objectives?

- How rigorous is independent work?
- How are teachers monitoring and assessing independent work time?

### Data Sources and Methodology

To answer these questions, SRI researchers developed an observational checklist to record students' activities during independent work and teachers' monitoring of the work. Sixty teachers (approximately 70% of all PreK–3 teachers) agreed to participate in the classroom observations. Observers used the checklist to code the content and skills focused on during independent work, as well as teacher and student actions. Observations lasted an average of 89 minutes and concentrated on the experiences of two teacher-identified students: one at or below the average class STEP level and one at or above the average class STEP level.

When possible, observers also photographed artifacts of student work, such as worksheets, writing responses, and independent reading texts. These artifacts were coded along two dimensions: (1) comparison with STEP bottom lines to assign a STEP level for the task and (2) according to Bloom's Taxonomy to identify the complexity level of the task.

The evaluation team also administered a survey to all PreK–3 classroom teachers in participating schools. The survey asked about a range of literacy-related instructional practices, including those relevant to creating, monitoring, and assessing independent work. Approximately 88% of PreK–3 teachers in the Pathway schools completed the survey.

<sup>1</sup> STEP (Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress) is a formative assessment tool developed by UEI that tracks how students are developing as readers along a 13-step trajectory from PreK through third grade.

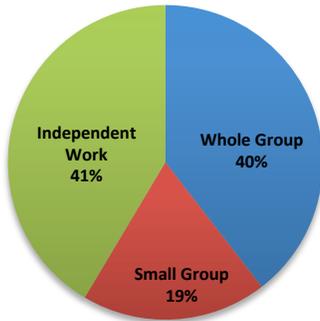
**Findings**

The evaluation team analyzed the observation, artifact, and survey data to determine what students and teachers were doing during independent work and how purposeful and rigorous the independent work was. The findings were as follows.

**Students spent approximately 40% of the literacy block working independently (Figure 1). Nearly all students (92%) spent some time working independently and were generally on task during independent work.**

Across all grades, the observed students spent about twice as much time working independently as they did working in small groups. When working independently, students were on task 81% of the observed time.

**Figure 1. Learning Formats Observed (n = 120 students)**

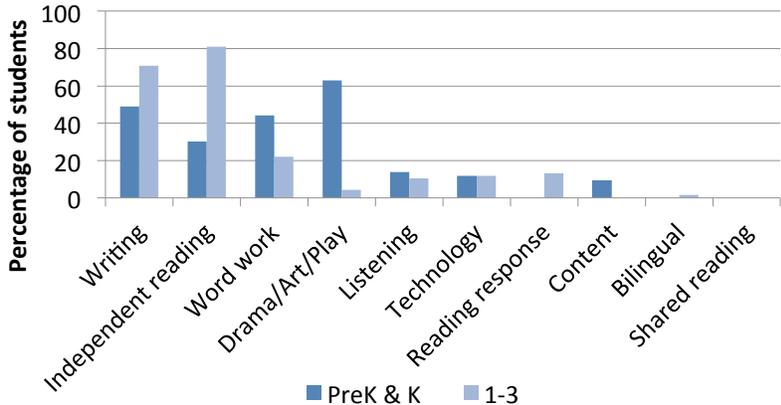


**Less than half (42%) of the students who were assigned a closed-ended task completed it.** Of the observed students, 75% were assigned a closed-ended task during independent work, but they frequently did not complete it. For example, a student might have been assigned to respond to a set of questions but failed to answer them all of them before needing to move to the next activity. An open-ended task such as journaling was assigned to 57% of students during independent work. Students were expected to continue working on the open-ended task for the rest of the time period.

**Students in grades 1–3 most often engaged in reading and/or writing independently during independent work; very few (13%) engaged in reading response activities during independent work (Figure 2).** Students frequently read independently either as an option after completing a closed-ended task or as an explicitly assigned open-ended task. When reading responses occurred, they most often took the form of students recording information about the text on a worksheet or sticky note chart.

**PreK and kindergarten students engaged in a wider variety of tasks, including drama, art, play, and word work, than students in grades 1–3 (Figure 2).** Creative play activities occurred more often in PreK and kindergarten classrooms. Content-specific centers, such as a science center, were observed only in PreK and kindergarten classrooms, and very few students (9%) used these centers during the literacy block.

**Figure 2. Types of Independent Work Activities Observed (n = 111 students)**



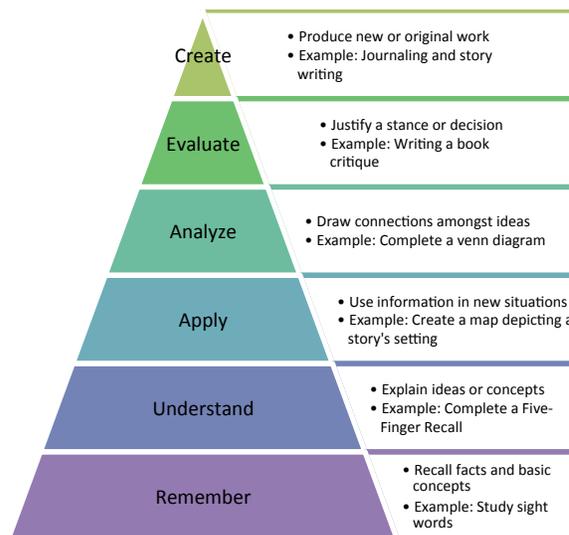
**The scaffolding provided to students on writing tasks varied greatly.** Some writing assignments had a high degree of structure, including sentence stems or frames, such as completing a birthday card or writing a sentence about the current month. Other writing assignments provided slightly less structure, such as pages formatted with spaces for a story title, illustrations, and text to help students write stories. Finally, some assignments had little to no structure, such as free writing in journals.

**Most of the independent work artifacts were not linked to a STEP bottom line.** Of the artifacts analyzed, 15% directly aligned with the observed student’s STEP bottom lines. These types of tasks would help students practice the skills necessary to achieve the next STEP level. Few (19%) artifacts came from activities that required students to practice a skill from the previous STEP level that would be necessary to master their current STEP bottom line. For instance, a student who had achieved STEP 3 might have been practicing identifying specific beginning sounds (STEP 3), a precursor to problem solving new words using letter chunks (STEP 4). Of the artifacts, 16% were 2 or more STEPs below the student’s level. Researchers could not link 48% of students’ independent work artifacts to a STEP bottom line.<sup>2</sup>

**Most independent work was low in complexity according to Bloom’s Taxonomy.** Students most commonly worked on Remember-level tasks (59% of independent work artifacts), which require students to memorize, copy, read, categorize, or recall information (Figure 3). About a quarter (23%) of the independent work artifacts represented activities at the Understand level of Bloom’s Taxonomy. These activities ask students to predict, infer, discuss, and summarize information. Create-level tasks were less common (15%) and mostly were independent writing activities.

<sup>2</sup> The evaluation team had difficulty linking independent work artifacts collected during observations with STEP bottom lines for two reasons: (1) STEP bottom lines do not include writing skills or activities and (2) without a reading response, it is difficult to determine the purpose and STEP level of reading independently.

**Figure 3. Bloom’s Taxonomy**



**During independent work, almost all teachers (91%) led guided reading groups. About half the teachers also circulated during independent work.** Independent work commonly occurred at the same time as guided reading, enabling teachers to spend time working with a smaller group of students while the rest of the class was engaged in independent work. Teachers in upper grades were more often able to both lead a guided reading group and circulate or monitor independent work in the same period.

**More than 85% of teachers reported collecting and assessing work completed during independent work time at least once a week; 20% fewer teachers reported checking in with students individually about independent work at least once a week.** The observation data confirmed that teachers conducted individual conferences during independent work less frequently; 7% of teachers were observed checking in or working with students one on one during the literacy block.

**On the survey, teachers reported aligning independent work with state and district standards and STEP levels. Many teachers reported that they rarely, if ever, differentiated independent work for dual language learners (DLLs) or students with IEPs.** Nearly all (96%) surveyed teachers reported aligning independent work with state and/or district standards to a great or moderate

extent, whereas slightly fewer (83%) reported the same extent of alignment with STEP skills. Almost half of surveyed teachers rarely or never differentiated independent work for DLLs or students with IEPs; 53% and 47% of teachers, respectively, reported differentiating independent work for DLLs and students with IEPs to a small extent or not at all.

**Most teachers reported rarely working with coaches on independent work.** Most (72%) teachers reported that they worked with coaches on independent work to a small extent or not at all.

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### DE Team Reflections on Findings and Their Implications

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After the evaluation team completed data collection, DE members met as a group to discuss the findings and their implications for the initiative. They agreed that given students are spending about 40% of their literacy block in independent work, it should be rigorous and purposeful. The DE team identified various actions that school leaders and teachers could take to improve the rigor and intentionality of independent work.

**School leaders could provide teachers with greater clarity about goals and expectations for independent work.** During the discussion, DE team members posed the question to each other, “What do we want students to get out of independent work?” School leaders agreed that they need to clarify their goals and expectations for independent work within their respective school leadership teams and share those expectations explicitly with teachers. The DE team also considered whether independent work should align with students’ STEP bottom lines or act as an extension of the lesson objective for whole group instruction that day. Team members brainstormed possible ways to clarify expectations for teachers, including providing guidance for selecting independent reading texts, linking back to the lesson objectives in closings, assessing independent work assignments, and developing tasks that give students more opportunity to practice specific literacy skills.

**Teachers may need additional strategies to assess whether students are benefiting from**

**independent reading and other independent work tasks.** Students spend much of their time reading independently during independent work time, especially in grades 1–3. However, in this activity’s current structure, teachers do not have a mechanism to assess students’ learning outcomes. DE team members discussed ways to help ensure that students use independent reading time to improve their literacy skills. They agreed that schools and teachers should take additional steps to match students with texts appropriate for their STEP level for independent reading. DE members also agreed they may need to support teachers in assigning activities that require students to interact with the text during independent reading, such as writing a response to record reactions to the text. DE team members also discussed the need for teachers to assess and provide feedback for other independent work tasks so that students remain engaged.

**Teachers may need support to provide students with more opportunities to work on complex tasks during independent work.** Because students typically engaged in lower complexity tasks during independent work (e.g., Remember-level tasks in Bloom’s Taxonomy), the DE team discussed how to increase the complexity of student work. DE members noted that independent work rarely involved student collaboration or discussion and suggested incorporating more student-centered collaboration as a way of increasing the complexity of the tasks. For example, teachers could ask students to share what they learned with classmates after reading independently or ask students to read together and discuss throughout.

**As teachers feel more capable with guided reading, professional development providers could begin to focus on strengthening independent work.** To date, Pathway schools have directed most of their initiative-related professional development to improving guided reading. DE members noted that perhaps because of the focus on guided reading, teachers may view independent work centers as a way to keep students on task rather than as a mechanism to further develop their literacy skills. DE members discussed the need to shift teachers’ mindsets toward independent work as an extension of the classroom’s literacy objectives.

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## Next Steps

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The DE team reported that collectively reviewing findings from the second DE cycle generated ideas for action plans that they were eager to implement. Following the DE team meeting, each participating school/district team identified goals for improvement that emerged from the DE findings, specific action steps, a timeline for implementation, resources needed, and measures of success.

### **Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS).**

The BCCS literacy leadership team plans to create a set of research-based look-fors to help identify and support high quality practices during independent work. The ultimate goal is for classroom teachers to implement independent work with fidelity to these look-fors. To accomplish this goal, BCCS will use the look-fors to inform training and professional development activities for teachers, support independent work lesson planning and implementation, and conduct classroom walkthroughs using the look-fors. Successful implementation of the look-fors document would be indicated by a high level of teacher fidelity to those practices.

**Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS).** Wellstone leaders plan to implement a co-teaching and co-planning strategy that will include planning for independent work. SPMA leaders plan to focus on teachers' selection of appropriate texts for independent reading, with the goal of 100% of teachers matching students with appropriate leveled texts. To accomplish this goal, they plan to build teacher capacity around selecting texts for independent work based on conferring with students, STEP data, and individual students' interests.

**Community of Peace Academy (CPA).** CPA leaders aim to increase the rigor of independent work tasks. To accomplish this goal, they plan to collect and analyze student independent work samples and teachers' independent work lesson plans using Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels. With this data, they will support teachers in designing independent work activities that use higher DOK levels and modifying independent work activities to better align with whole group and small group instructional objectives. The result of this work will be a collection of independent work activities labeled with DOK and lesson objectives. Students completing rigorous tasks during independent work time will be evidence of successful implementation of this action plan.

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In the future, the DE team hopes to delve deeper into a single topic over the course of multiple DE cycles rather than address unrelated topics in each cycle. The team committed to working together to further examine independent work during a third DE cycle in fall 2016.