

The Catalyst for Change:

How EDI Data Helped Shape Newport Mesa Unified School District's Early Learning Programs



We can't predict a preschooler's future. We can't determine what incredible things they will achieve, what job they will pursue or what memories they will create. But, we can, with a certain degree of certainty, predict a child's success.

How a child grasps a crayon, how he or she reacts when another child is crying, and how a child listens in a kindergarten classroom is predictive of his or her health, well-being and ultimately, success in school, work and beyond.

In an effort to inform and make sure every Orange County child has a solid foundation for a thriving future, First 5 Orange County pioneered the countywide collection of the Early Development Index (EDI). This kindergarten readiness data, collected in partnership with researchers at UCLA, shines a light on where young children are doing well and sounds the alarm on the areas where immediate action is needed.

This important data lays out a roadmap for targeted intervention and support – EDI gives us the tools to create positive change for young children.

Newport Mesa Unified School District was the first Orange County school district to participate in the collection of EDI. The district is home to approximately 22,000 students at 32 schools, and has 12 preschool sites. The student population is diverse: 44% Hispanic or Latino/a, 42% White, 9% Multiracial and 5% Asian, Native American or other Pacific Islander. More than 44% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

The district's EDI data revealed two areas of great need: 44% of its kindergarten population lack necessary gross and fine motor skills, and many students are falling behind in social-emotional development, including 52% of students showing significant gaps in overall social competence and 51% of students displaying little or no prosocial and helping behavior.

To address these areas of greatest need, the district, led by Kathleen Leary, Director of Early Childhood Education and After School Programs, mobilized into action and quickly established new preschool programs and expanded opportunities and support for parents to positively impact young children and their families – before they enter kindergarten.

At the core of this work is one important and achievable goal: to ensure every student is on a positive trajectory for success in school, and ultimately in life.



To improve the gross and fine motor skills of its youngest learners, Newport Mesa implemented a new curriculum to complement and expand its existing Pre-K curriculum. Called *Hand Writing Without Tears*, the program helps young students understand the basics of writing – from how to grasp a pencil, how to hold scissors appropriately to learning new letters and numbers. The curriculum focuses on students' ability to physically tackle the school day and successfully use and manipulate school supplies.

To address the social-emotional development, *Second Step*, an early learning curriculum focused on how a child learns and gets along with others was implemented. The Second Step program teaches skills in four critical areas: **Skills for Learning**, including how to focus and listen carefully; **Empathy**, how to understand their own and others' feelings; **Emotion Management**, how to calm down when experiencing strong feelings such as worry or anger; and **Friendship Skills and Problem Solving**, how to make and keep friends and solve problems in a positive way.

Both new curriculums were rolled out for the first time in the 18-19 school year and results are already shining through – students are sharing better with one another and showing noticeable growth in overall social-emotional development.

Newport Mesa also recognized that the majority of learning and development for these kids takes place outside of preschool settings – at home with parents. To reinforce the development of the whole child and the skills being taught during preschool programs, the district also expanded its opportunities for engagement with parents.

To start each day, the preschool classrooms participate in Parent and Child Together (PaCT) Time for the first 15 minutes of class. During this time, teachers facilitate an interactive activity between the parent and child to reinforce the learning happening in the classroom and provide easy activities and tools that can be recreated at home to further encourage development and learning.

Beyond its own preschool sites, Newport Mesa's early childhood education team is also conducting kindergarten readiness luncheons to partner with preschool, child care centers, and faith-based and in-home early childhood care providers. Attendees are provided with a comprehensive look at their community's EDI data and the areas of success and concern, as well as support for implementing programs to address these gaps in achievement.



The quick mobilization by Newport Mesa Unified School District to make needed changes and address critical concerns for its youngest learners is encouraging. The EDI data served as the catalyst for these changes and provided a clear map of where resources were needed to create more enriching environments for children and their families.

Newport Mesa will continue to monitor and track progress of its youngest learners in these critical areas over time to make sure a lasting positive impact is made as a result of its new programs.