Literacy is the fundamental skill on which school and future work success are based. Unfortunately, poor literacy skills place children at risk, often leading to grade retention, school failure and dropout, delinquency and running away, as well as unemployment and underemployment in adulthood. It is estimated that the price tag of illiteracy in America is in the billions as a result of criminal and incarceration costs, health care costs, low productivity in the workplace, and strains on the welfare system.

Children for whom English is a second language often have an especially difficult time in school. They frequently start school with no or limited English; their parents often lack the resources and knowledge to help prepare them for schools in this country. Given that the percentage of Spanish-speaking immigrants is expected to continue to increase in Nevada over the next 25 years, ever-larger numbers of children will enter school as non-English speakers and at risk for low achievement.

Support for the approach to prevention and intervention used within the Literacy First project was grounded in the literature demonstrating the critical importance of the home and parents as contributors to young children’s emergent literacy. The home serves as a setting in which language and literacy are typically first encountered. The home can provide children opportunities to:

- become familiar with literacy materials
- observe the literacy activities of others
- independently explore literate behaviors
- engage in joint reading and writing activities with other people
- benefit from the teaching strategies that family members use when engaging in joint literacy tasks
Program Description

Literacy First was a multifaceted family literacy program aimed at strengthening the home literacy environment by increasing the amount and quality of time Spanish-speaking parents and young children spend together in literacy-enriching activities. The program had two primary goals: 1) parents would enact strategies to improve their children’s literacy, language and learning skills, and 2) children would increase time engaged in literacy and learning activities. Secondary goals included increased parent-child frequency and enjoyment of reading time, as well as increased parental confidence in their ability to help their children succeed in school.

Literacy First targeted those Spanish-speaking families with preschoolers and beginning readers (ages 3-7) who may have limited language skills and few children's books at home. Target families already or soon would have children attending high-risk elementary schools in our target communities (Reno and Sparks, Nevada). The program was based on a family literacy framework that focused on both children and parents. It included weekly sessions during which families: discussed key parent-child reading techniques; watched a video developed specifically for the project that modeled the techniques; practiced reading; learned about home enrichment activities that enhance the value of the reading; and received a free book and materials to complete literacy-building activities at home. Carefully selected books were featured in the project and provided the cornerstone for children's emerging literacy and academic skills. Home enrichment activities extended the learning from parent-child workshops into families' homes and provided guides for expanding literacy efforts.
Project Outcomes and Impacts

Between 2010 and 2015, we reached 982 Spanish-speaking families—nearly 3,000 parents and children. We taught 79, six- to eight-week workshop series (over 500 individual parent-child workshops) at 28 targeted high-risk elementary schools. Over the five-year period, our total number of contact hours with families was 12,522, an average of 12.75 hours per family.

Parents responded to a variety of evaluation forms before, during and after the workshops. Selected impacts of Literacy First include:

**Goal 1: Parents enact strategies to improve their children’s literacy.** A primary goal of the program was to teach parents specific skills that research has shown to be related to children’s literacy development by helping children get the most out of shared book reading. Parents significantly increased their use of 12 critical joint-reading skills taught in the program, such as using expression while reading, pointing to pictures and words, building vocabulary, encouraging children to ask questions, and asking expansive questions about the story.

![How Often Parents Enact Strategies to Improve Their Children's Literacy](chart.png)
Goal 2: Children increase time engaged in literacy activities. Children’s literacy and language outcomes are improved when their parents engage them in enriching activities, such as singing songs, reciting rhymes, learning the alphabet and the sounds of letters, drawing pictures, playing games involving language, and so forth. In addition to literacy-enriching activities during the workshops, each week we sent home ideas and activities to do additional literacy and language activities during the next week. Over the course of the program, children engaged in 12,908 literacy and language activities at home (an average of 13.14 per family) that otherwise likely would not have been done with these targeted vulnerable children. In essence, through participating in the program, parents and children were engaged in more literacy and language activities that build school readiness and success.

Goal 3: Parent and child increase their frequency and enjoyment of reading. One of the most important activities for building the foundation for reading success is reading aloud to children. Children who are read to regularly before they begin school are much more ready for and successful in school. Every time a parent reads a book with a child, it is a mini-literacy lesson in which children hear the sound of words, connect the words to the pictures and action in the book, increase their vocabulary, understand how books and stories are structured, and become more excited about reading. Over the course of the program, parents increased the number of days and books they read with their children, as well as the amount of time spent reading with them. Also, parents reported that their enjoyment of reading with their children increased.

Goal 4: Parents increase their confidence. In addition, children gain stronger literacy and language skills when their parents have positive attitudes about the importance of early literacy development and their role in helping in that development. Consequently, a focus of the Literacy First project was to enhance parents’ attitudes and confidence in their ability to help their children develop early literacy and school-readiness skills. By the end of the program, parents reported feeling confident that they could use the skills taught in the program, that their children could learn from them, that they were prepared to help their children learn, and that they could help their children succeed in school.
In Their Own Words

At the end of each series of workshops, we asked parents what they gained. Parents told us that after participating in the program they learned:

- “To do things I didn’t do before, like doing activities and ask many questions; and spend lot of time with my kids.”
- “To spend more time with my daughter reading to her. I almost never did that. Learn skills and practice on how to do it.”
- “To be more tolerant, and to value more the time that my son and I spent together while reading.”
- “Ways and skills that have helped me in getting my son interested in reading, therefore to do better in reading.”
- “That it is important that our kids learn how to read at an early age.”
- “That now my daughter wants me to read with her all the books she sees. I liked the program very much.”
- “That reading is so much fun.”

When asked what they liked best about the program, parents said:

- “The activities, the participation of my daughter in reading, and that she’s more interested in reading.”
- “That we parents, all learned together and shared experiences, a new way to read.”
- “That we learned how to have a good time with the kids and read without feeling anxious.”
- “We learned about patience and how to communicate with our kids. We learn more about our kids and from family meetings.”
- “How to improve reading, and the time we spent with our children reading during the class here at school.”
- “That we are taught the skills on how to read to our kids! It’s too bad that it is over.”

Home-School Engagement

Another positive outcome of the project was the increased teamwork among Cooperative Extension, partner elementary schools and the families. Research shows that one of the best ways to improve children’s school performance is to strengthen the connection between the home and school. School staff at our partner elementary schools mentioned that parents told them they:

- were reading books with their children and using the techniques learned in the program
- learned that it is never too early to start reading
- have asked for additional support and reading material
- like coming to the school and working with their children
- ask teachers more questions in regards to homework and other strategies they can do at home
- were more comfortable and active in other school events

School staff also mentioned that specific children were now more excited to read.
Program Expansion

The long-term success of the program can be seen in its expansion throughout Nevada. We conducted one-day training sessions in eight additional school districts throughout the state, reaching 68 trained facilitators, including school staff, ESL providers, Head Start/Even Start staff, early childhood teachers, librarians and parent volunteers. These school districts conducted several workshop series in their local elementary schools resulting in an expansion of the project from the original two sites. Moreover, the original curriculum model on which Literacy First is based has been used by Cooperative Extension systems and other educational agencies in 29 other states.

Literacy continues to be a critical issue in Nevada. In 2013, 39 percent of Nevada fourth-grade students were below the basic reading level and another 22 percent were at basic reading levels, well behind the national average. An estimated 25 percent of youth and adults in Nevada are illiterate. They cannot read or write well enough to fill out a job application or read a newspaper. Programs such as Literacy First address this need by giving parents the tools and confidence to help their children gain literacy and language skills; providing children with opportunities to be engaged in literacy-enriching activities; and strengthening the bonds between families, schools and the community.

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