Children participate in an immersion activity in the StartSmart K-3 Plus program in New Mexico

StartSmart K-3 Plus, a five-year research project measuring the effects of an extended school year for children in grades kindergarten through third grade, is showing “substantial gains” in reading, writing and math skills.

According to Damon Cann, an associate professor of political science at Utah State University and a Faculty Fellow at USU’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, the students are also showing smaller gains in expressive and receptive language and social skills.

The State of New Mexico’s K-3 Plus project provides 25 extra days prior to the traditional start of the school year for children in kindergarten through 3rd grade. The state-funded project is made available through a competitive process, available only to qualifying schools that apply, with preferences given to those in areas of poverty, rural areas, and low-performing schools.

Thanks to a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant, the CPD is conducting a rigorous scientific evaluation of student outcomes along with a cost study of this program. The project is called the StartSmart K-3 Plus Project to differentiate it from the original state-funded program.

“We said, let’s give these kids a boost and let’s see how it’s going,” said project director Cyndi Rowland. “It’s a really fabulous opportunity to look at the science of it.”

StartSmart is being run as a randomized control design; roughly half of the students are randomly selected to receive summer services and the other half are randomly selected to serve as a control group, where they do not receive summer services and any potential differences between the two groups can be measured.

Children are evaluated in the spring and the fall for academic and social outcomes, Rowland said.

“We have finished with all the kindergarten, first and second grade data,” Rowland said. “We’re now processing the end-of-school-year results.”

“What we are finding so far with the time we’ve had—what’s happening a few weeks into the regular school year is still in process by the end of the year,” said Cann. “At two to six weeks into the semester, we are finding the intervention group is doing better. The academically enriching environment is pushing them forward.”

Cann is co-investigator statistical lead for the project.

Rowland said a focus group was held for teachers at a recent annual meeting.

“The teachers’ perception is that students come in ready to learn and are more socially advanced,” Rowland said. “They become classroom leaders. Above and beyond academics, there are social benefits.”

The research staff has been looking at variables that might impact the results, Rowland said, including non-native English speakers, children who are on Individualized Education Plans, rural vs. urban, maternal education, time spent watching TV and parental expectations for high school and college, among others.

“There are years’ worth of analysis that could be done here,” Cann said. At this point, however, project funding through September 2015 only covers the data collection, not an analysis of the deep, interesting points.

The five-year project began in the fall of 2011 and is operating in seven school districts, including Albuquerque, Deming, Gadsden, Gallup-McKinley, Hobbs, Roswell, and Santa Fe. Currently, there are more than 2,225 families (1,900 active families) across the participating districts. Over the 5 years of the project, StartSmart hopes to have child outcome data on 2,280 students.