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Vocabulary Improvement and Oral Language Enrichment through Stories

“During my 17-year teaching experience in early childhood education, I have never come across a better training program than VIOLETS or seen children show so much improvement in their cognition and verbal language.”

Margaret Moka, Teacher

CentroNia – a bilingual early childhood program in Takoma Park, Maryland

About VIOLETS

VIOLETS is an early childhood language curriculum that promotes the development of pre-reading skills, oral language proficiency, and background and conceptual knowledge.

Developed by Ready At Five and Diane August, a national expert in the education of English language learners, with funding from the Maryland State Department of Education, VIOLETS is addressing the language & literacy skills gap and improving school readiness of children learning the English language.

VIOLETS in Maryland:

- 267 classrooms (pre-kindergarten, Head Start, and child-care programs) in Title I communities are implementing VIOLETS.
- 100% of Maryland jurisdictions (24) have at least one VIOLETS classroom.
- 300+ early educators are trained in the VIOLETS model.
- 4,200+ of Maryland’s young children have participated in the VIOLETS program.
- 120 new classrooms in Title I “breakthrough” school communities will begin using VIOLETS in the next two years through Race To The Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant funding.

Realizing the Benefits of School Readiness

School readiness has powerful academic and economic impacts:

- Nobel-Prize-winning economist James J. Heckman’s research shows that effective early care and education decreases the need for Special Education and remediation and reduces juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, and dropout rates.¹

¹ James Warren, “Economist’s Plan to Improve Schools Begins Before Kindergarten,” *New York Times*, December 23, 2010.

- A Pew Center study finds that the societal “pay now” price of supporting sound parental skills and quality PreK programs are a fraction of the “pay later” price associated with the problems of high school dropouts.²
- Children who enter kindergarten “fully school ready” are eight times more likely to get an “advanced” ranking on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) in reading and math than those who start kindergarten with significant skill deficiencies.³

VIOLETS is a vital approach to help children learning the English language realize the benefits of school readiness.

Addressing the School Readiness Gap Among English Language Learners

According to a recent longitudinal research study, PreK English language learners (ELLs) who enter school approximately two years below their English proficient peers, are not able to “catch-up” by eighth grade – even though they were schooled predominantly in English and developed vocabulary at faster rates than their English proficient peers.⁴

In Maryland, we have a large percentage and rapidly increasing number of English language learners (ELLs or children whose first language is not English):

- 14.7% of Maryland kindergarteners (nearly 10,000 children) are ELLs.
- Maryland experienced a 3% one-year jump in the number of ELLs.



² Pew Center On the States, Issue Brief, “Paying Later: The High Costs of Failing to Invest in Young Children,” January 2011.

³ Maryland State Department of Education, the Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) 2012-2013.

⁴ Mancilla-Martinez, J., & Lesaux, N. K. (2010). Predictors of reading comprehension for struggling readers: The case of Spanish-speaking language minority learners. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(3), 701-711.



In 2012-2013, the Maryland Model for School Readiness⁵ data reveal that Maryland faces significant challenges regarding ELLs and school readiness:

- 18% of Maryland’s children (over 12,000 students) required considerable or targeted assistance to do kindergarten work; a disproportionate percent (25%) of these kindergarteners are ELL.
- School readiness disparities continue to exist for children from high-risk subgroups, such as ELLs: 69% of ELLs were fully school ready, compared with 84% of their English proficient peers.
- ELLs often have significant skill deficiencies, which can hinder their ability to successfully carryout kindergarten work: only 53% of ELLs were fully school ready in the area of Language & Literacy, compared with 76% of their English proficient peers.
- The language and literacy skills gap continues to widen between Maryland’s ELLs and English-proficient children, rising from 21 points in 2011-2012 to 23 points in 2012-2013.

VIOLETS: A Proven Approach

Vocabulary Improvement and Oral Language Enrichment through Stories (VIOLETS) is an MSDE-approved, early childhood language curriculum that promotes the development of pre-reading skills, oral language proficiency, and background and conceptual knowledge. It was designed for 3- to 5-year old children that would benefit from oral language enrichment activities – namely, English language learners and children living in low income environments.

VIOLETS can be implemented in Head Start, child care programs, pre-kindergarten classrooms, and/or kindergarten settings.

VIOLETS Involves:

- **Interactive Reading.** Using high-quality children’s literature (12 popular children’s books), educators employ paraphrasing and questioning techniques while “reading aloud” to students to further students’ oral language proficiency, background knowledge, and comprehension skills. Each session incorporates core knowledge themes that tie the children’s books to state standards.

- **Vocabulary Development.** Carefully selected words and phrases are taught before and after the “read-aloud.” Selected words are multi-dimensional (have depth of meaning) and help children understand the meaning of the story. For all English words, an appropriate Spanish version of the word and a brief definition are provided.

Professional Development

To ensure the fidelity of the VIOLETS model, Ready At Five requires all early educators to attend a full-day training session prior to implementing the curriculum.

Early educators trained in the VIOLETS model receive a VIOLETS Tote, containing the daily structured Read Aloud scripts, Teacher’s Guide, a video of a teacher implementing VIOLETS, large and small vocabulary cards, 12 Books and Ready At Five resource materials. Participants receive MSDE Core of Knowledge clock hours.



Powerful Results

VIOLETS is a proven school readiness curriculum that increases the number of children meeting age-appropriate language & literacy learning goals.

A recent evaluation of VIOLETS, which looked at the overall performance and language acquisition of 426 randomly selected students (English language learners and English-proficient learners) from 53 classrooms, revealed the following results:

Improved Performance

- All students – children learning the English language and their English proficient peers – participating in VIOLETS experienced significant language gains from pre-test to post-test.
- While English-proficient kindergarteners continued to outperform ELLs at pre-test and post-test, all students made comparable gains.

Significant Vocabulary Acquisition

- ELLs made statistically significant gains on vocabulary words taught in the VIOLETS program.



⁵The Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) is an annual assessment by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) of all kindergarten children on their knowledge skills and abilities to do kindergarten work in each of the seven Domains: Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development, Language & Literacy Development, Mathematical Thinking, Scientific Thinking, Social Studies, and The Arts.

The Bottom Line

VIOLETS benefits and supports the language acquisition of all children. Through VIOLETS, ELLs and children with low expressive language skills were able to make significant gains in vocabulary that would not normally be observed.

What Works?

Successful implementation of the VIOLETS curriculum requires:

- **Qualified Implementers.** Early educators must be knowledgeable, skilled and possess the abilities required to implement VIOLETS; professional development gives early educators the opportunity to improve their knowledge, practice their skills and gain confidence in their abilities.
- **Fidelity to the Model.** Adherence to the program design, implementation protocol, scripts, and established timeframes and dosage are critical for maintaining quality and achieving desired outcomes.
- **Buy-in.** Commitment from and dedication of early educators to “buy-into” VIOLETS and implement the curriculum as developed, as well as organizational or management support in center-based programs is essential.
- **Coaching.** A report by Frank Porter Graham researchers at the University of North Carolina found that coaching was an effective strategy for increasing the quality of programs and promoting systemic-level change. When coaches are available to observe early educators “in action” (i.e. implementing the VIOLETS curriculum), provide constructive feedback, help apply new knowledge, and implement the best practices, the quality of instruction is heightened.
- **“Booster Sessions”** or supplemental professional development extends early educator knowledge of VIOLETS and literacy best practices.
- **Networking & Discussion.** Networking sessions and discussion groups afford early educators the opportunity to examine the challenges and advance successes.
- **Reflection.** Self-reflection, examination, and introspection encourage continuous improvement in how VIOLETS is being implemented; early educators can adjust and tailor instruction to the needs of all the children in their classrooms.

Lessons Learned

Jurisdictions, local communities, schools, and classrooms implementing VIOLETS use innovative implementation, replication, and expansion strategies. They are:

- **Bringing VIOLETS to Scale.** By operating multiple VIOLETS classrooms and serving a critical mass of their high-need students, the Y of Central Maryland realizes higher levels of readiness.
- **Using Community Networks.** VIOLETS Totes, which include 12 children’s “books,” can be costly for small centers, single classroom settings and/or family-care providers to purchase and update. By using a community “host site” or a central location in a multi-classroom model to house the VIOLETS Totes, Ready At Five trained early educators in the community can share the curriculum and resources, as well as foster professional networks for staff who often work in silos and have limited opportunities for peer support and collaboration.
- **Employing Site-based Leadership.** The Emily Price Jones Head Start Center in Baltimore City benefited from a VIOLETS Coordinator to manage implementation; roles and responsibilities include: ongoing professional development and training of staff, coaching to ensure fidelity to the model, establishing an implementation timeline, and assessment of students. A site-based mentor teacher continues to give early educators on-site support and encouragement.

Looking Ahead.

What’s Next for VIOLETS?

Ready At Five is exploring the feasibility of implementing various strategies to boost the number of children served and reap additional benefits, while maintaining the fidelity of VIOLETS.

Potential actions include:

1. **Expanding the VIOLETS Curriculum** for the birth to three population – focusing on boosting the oral language in children with significant language delays.





2. **Piloting VIOLETS in Non-Traditional Settings.** In an effort to reach an increased number of at-risk children – who often are not enrolled in formal early learning environments, potential and new pilot efforts involve:
- **A VIOLETS Bus.** Run by the Queen Anne’s County Judy Center, this pilot will use a “VIOLETS Bus” to bring the curriculum into the community; children and parents will visit this *classroom on a bus* for instruction.
 - **Community-based Organizations,** including libraries, Hispanic-focused agencies and service providers, doctors’ offices, clinics, and churches may prove to be optimal settings to implement VIOLETS.

Beyond VIOLETS

There are many resources available to support and complement the implementation of VIOLETS and further improve school readiness among English language learners and children with low expressive language skills, including:

VIOLETS Learning Parties

Even the most effective classroom strategies can’t replace the impact of involved, engaged families equipped to support children’s learning. To support families in their endeavor to be first teachers and learning advocates for their children, Ready At Five developed Learning Parties.

Learning Parties are interactive, hands-on, “parties” for families and children that promote and enhance knowledge, skills and abilities. Guided by a trained professional, Learning Parties incorporate parent skill development, child learning, practice, networking, home connection activities (homework) and a home learning library. They help parents make everyday moments learning opportunities. Ready At Five offers a total of eight different Learning Party topics.

The **VIOLETS Learning Party** series is the parent-child companion to the classroom-based VIOLETS curriculum. VIOLETS Learning Parties empower families to build on and extend their child’s formal learning through vocabulary instruction and the development of basic language and literacy skills at home. The four 90-minute sessions focus on: 1) Developing Speaking & Listening Skills, 2) Discovering Books & Reading, 3) Learning About Sounds, and 4) Getting Started with Letters & Writing.



Ready At Five offers “train-the-trainer” sessions and materials for early educators, librarians, parents, and others interested in hosting VIOLETS Learning Parties.

Cultural & Linguistic Competence A Curriculum for Early Care and Education

Developed by Ready At Five in partnership with Georgetown University’s Center for Child and Human Development, National Center for Cultural Competence, this two-day workshop and corresponding curriculum targets early educators working with large numbers of English language learners and children of different cultures – offering activities, strategies and techniques that promote culturally and linguistically appropriate learning opportunities, staff-parent collaboration, child transitions, and family engagement.

The content of the Cultural and Linguistic Competence Curriculum:

- Examines the influence of culture and language on learning and school success.
- Explores how to identify the unique strengths and challenges of young English language learners / children of different cultures and their families.
- Addresses cultural and linguistic diversity and competence in early care and education environments.
- Supports early language and literacy for English language learners.
- Reviews strategies for engaging families from diverse cultures.

Publications

The following publications are available for free download at www.readyatfive.org:

- Building Culturally and Linguistically Competent Services to Support Young Children, Their Families and School Readiness.
- What Works? Promising Practices for Improving the School Readiness of English Language Learners

About Ready At Five

Ready At Five is committed to elevating the school readiness of all Maryland children. We believe that *Children Matter, Families Matter* and *Communities Matter*. By improving school readiness, Ready At Five is ensuring that Maryland’s students can obtain long-term success.



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