



While two-year-old Shane Simpson played in a busy room filled with other toddlers and their parents, his father John broke away to talk with Patty Hernandez, facilitator of the twice-weekly “Play and Learn” group at the Clayton Early Learning campus in far northeast Denver.

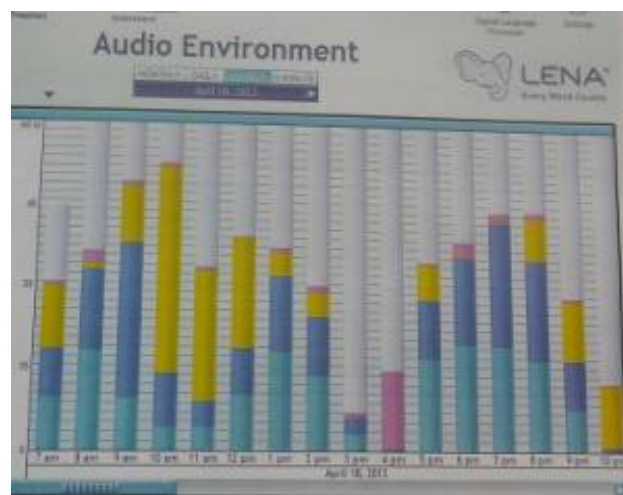
In a small meeting room, the two pored over colorful bar graphs that gave John a snapshot of how and when he communicates with Shane throughout the day. The charts — produced after Shane wore a device that amounts to a “word pedometer” one day in April — showed a distinct lull in adult-child interaction during a two-hour period in the morning. Simpson knew there was room for improvement.



"I think he was probably off playing and I was just cleaning the house because sometimes that's what happens when his brother goes to school," he said.

"I guess we don't really conversate that much during that time."

The meeting between Simpson and Hernandez, with its unusual combination of data-filled charts and workaday parenting talk, is part of a research project that will determine if the word pedometer — technically called a [LENA Digital Language Processor](#) — can impact language development in young children. The project is one of nine that are part of Mile High United Way's "[Early Literacy Social Innovation Fund](#)" initiative, or SIF for short.



One of the charts John Simpson received during his feedback session with Patty Hernandez.

The idea behind the five-year initiative is to test various early literacy strategies — ranging from the LENA device to one-on-one tutoring in elementary schools — and scale up the ones that work.

The ultimate goal is to move the needle on third-grade reading achievement. For the last decade, the [percentage of Colorado third-graders who can read proficiently](#) has stagnated at just over 70 percent.

What makes the SIF initiative different from the average grant program is its emphasis on rigorous program evaluation. That's part of the reason it's been called a "solutions laboratory" by some officials. While traditionally, non-profit organizations might measure success by the number of people served or hours of service provided, those involved in SIF must contract with third-party evaluators to study their effectiveness.

"Evaluation is not easy," said Lindsay Morgan Tracy, senior director of investment resources for Mile High United Way. "It's expensive to prove your program."

SIF's funding mechanism is also unique, involving three layers of financing that combine public and private dollars. The first layer is a [federal SIF grant](#) totaling \$9 million over five years. The second layer is United Way's matching grant, required of all 19 SIF "intermediaries" receiving federal funds. Finally, the non-profits running the nine projects are required to match the funding they receive from United Way.

Literacy times nine

While all nine projects under the SIF umbrella target Colorado children from birth to age eight, the details vary widely. Clayton Early Learning and Mile High Montessori operate the one in which John and Shane Simpson are participating. In addition to measuring the impact of the LENA device and analysis, the "Ready to Read" project will examine the effects of the "Cradling Literacy" curriculum being used at certain child care centers in Denver.

Another of the nine projects is the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition's "PASO" program, which provides training to Spanish-speaking, home-based child care providers in Boulder County. A third one, run by the Jefferson Foundation, coordinates a summer school reading program for Jeffco students in kindergarten to third grade. Other projects offer experiential after-school literacy programs and home visiting programs.

Originally, when Mile High United Way selected projects in 2012, there were two additional organizations on the SIF roster: Save the Children and Centennial BOCES. Both dropped out because the evaluations demands were too much or didn't fit with the organization.

Those demands were clear at the recent play group in far northeast Denver when two researchers from the [Butler Institute for Families](#) at the University of Denver stopped by to videotape parents reading to their children, and distribute parent surveys and child development questionnaires. The researchers, who visit Ready to Read sites about once a week, are also collecting data using the LENA devices as well as early childhood assessments such as

SIF SUB-GRANTEES

The following organizations are part of the Early Literacy SIF managed by Mile High United Way

- Clayton Early Learning and Mile High Montessori
- Colorado Parent and Child Foundation
- Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition
- Colorado Humanities
- Denver Public Schools Foundation
- Reading Partners
- Jefferson Foundation
- Summit 54
- The Bridge Project

Teaching Strategies GOLD.

While children like Shane Simpson won't take state readings tests till well after the SIF initiative is over, project administrators believe their interventions will position the children for success when they do learn to read.

"We're actually looking for increases in oral language and vocabulary," said Shelly Anderson, project manager for Ready to Read.

For Anderson and others intimately involved in SIF projects, there's a sense of excitement about being part of something that could guide internal improvement and produce sustainable, big picture results.

Jessica Simmons, executive director of the SIF sub-grantee Reading Partners, said her program's twice-a-week tutoring program helps struggling readers grow far faster than they would otherwise.

"We have real results," she said. "I believe that the results are compelling enough that hopefully we can bring more people to the table."



A parent reads to children in a "Play and Learn" group in northeast Denver. The children all wear the LENA device every few months so their parents or caregivers can get feedback about their verbal interactions.

Reading Partners, which came to Colorado because it was selected as a SIF sub-grantee, has already expanded its reach in the state. This year, it serves 560 students in the Denver, Aurora and Sheridan districts, up from 360 the year before.

Results child by child

Back in the meeting room with Hernandez, John Simpson jotted down some ideas for upping his verbal interactions with Shane. He planned to include Shane in more of his daily chores—perhaps having his son throw the laundry in the washing machine or help sweep the floor. He also decided to carve out more father-son activity time.

"So what do I need to do to support you with your goal?" asked Hernandez.

Simpson joked, "You take over the chores." They both laughed.

A moment later, he became serious, asking if Hernandez could give him more ideas for toddler-friendly activities like the homemade Play-Do recipe she'd passed along previously. She readily agreed.

The conversation may have ended with talk of children's crafts, but the implications for Shane Simpson and the other children in the play group are much bigger.

"We believe strongly...that third grade is sort of the end not the beginning, so let's start at the beginning" said Pamela Harris, president and CEO of Mile High Montessori. "By third grade it's too late for many of the children."

That's why the "Ready to Read" project as well as three other SIF projects include babies and toddlers just learning to talk. It's also why Hernandez talks passionately about the importance of parent-child exchanges, called "conversational turns" in LENA-speak, and hands out articles about the groundbreaking [30-million word gap study](#).

While John Simpson admitted to having some trepidation about whether the LENA device would allow researchers to eavesdrop on private conversations (It doesn't), he said the data has been interesting.

"I think I have increased my own talking because that's how you get them to talk."

The future of SIF

As with any complicated project, SIF entails inevitable conversations about logistical details, mid-stream adjustments and long-term plans. Among the open questions project leaders must address in the coming months is how to handle the switch to a new state reading test next year. That change, coinciding with the implementation of Common Core State Standards, will likely mean a dip in scores as teachers and students acclimate to the new material.

United Way officials say they will work with sub-grantees affected by the new tests on a case by case basis. They are also in the process of revising one of their original SIF initiative goals—to improve third-grade reading proficiency among children served by 25 percent. The new tests and the fact that a segment of the children served by the nine programs won't be in third grade by the time the project ends in 2017 necessitate that adjustment.

What's also unclear right now is how the projects deemed effective will be scaled up after the SIF funding period ends. United Way officials say such decisions will be left up to each individual non-profit.



Patty Hernandez talks with parent John Simpson during a LENA feedback session.