



CASE STUDY

Stronger Together

How Acelero Learning Is Transforming
Family Engagement in Clark County, NV



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County, NV

About Acelero Learning

Since 2008, Acelero Learning has played a pivotal role in shaping early learning, working hand-in-hand with children, families, and educators to strengthen the Head Start framework. With a focus on data, evidence, and outcomes, Acelero is committed to ensuring every child in Southern Nevada has the foundation they need to maximize their full potential.

14
Centers

Asian/Pacific Islander: **3%**

Black/African American: **38%**

Latino: **41%**

Other Ethnicity: **13%**

White: **0%**

Declined to Respond: **3%**



The Challenge

Supporting Children, Engaging Families

In the fast-paced landscape of Clark County, families are met with a wealth of early childhood options—from private centers and community organizations to public and charter school programs. While this “friendly competition” reflects a healthy ecosystem of choice, it creates a significant hurdle for providers: how do you not only recruit families, but truly engage and retain them over time?

For Acelero Learning, the mission is even more critical. Serving some of the most under-resourced neighborhoods in the Las Vegas area through its Head Start program, Acelero provides high-quality, no-cost services designed to close the opportunity gap.

For these families, the barrier isn't the cost of tuition; it's time, trust, and connection. While enrollment was rarely the issue, sustaining consistent participation and engagement was. Acelero's greatest challenge was retention, particularly among returning families who already knew the programs but struggled to stay consistently engaged. Success required more than participation; it meant ensuring children stayed

actively involved and continued progressing toward key developmental milestones. Like many educational organizations nationwide, Acelero recognized that lasting engagement depends on something deeper: families must feel a strong, personal connection to the center and the people who welcome their child every day.



Diana Varillas, Acelero Family Services Coordinator,
captures the complexity of this outreach:

“ **Cultivating trust is not easy, especially with families who are constantly on the go. In our community, family looks different for everyone—it might be a grandparent taking the lead rather than a parent. We have to meet our families exactly where they are. It requires our advocate teams to be incredibly intentional and consistent in how we communicate.** ”



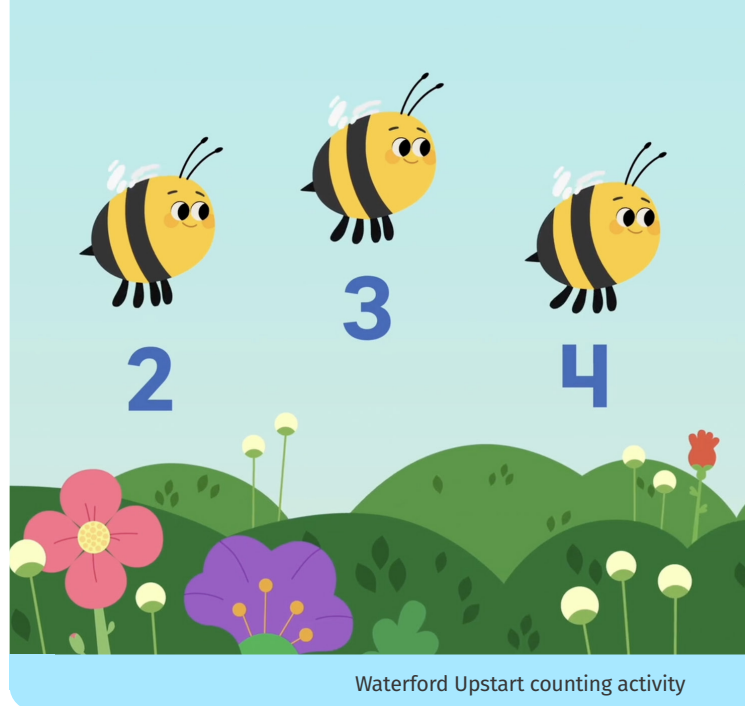
The Opportunity

Better Together: Partnering for Family Engagement and Student Outcomes

A cornerstone of building trust with families is moving beyond the classroom and connecting them with the resources they need to truly thrive.

Enter Waterford Upstart, a research-backed, kindergarten readiness program designed to bridge the gap between school and home. Funded through a competitive grant from the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Waterford Upstart provides children with adaptive online instruction in literacy, math, and science, while equipping caregivers with tools and guidance to support learning at home, as their child's first and most influential teacher.

Initially, the idea of a partnership was met with skepticism. Diana Varillas recalls the moment the Acelero Family Services Director proposed the collaboration, "Our common goal is to achieve childhood outcomes and empower families, but I wondered, 'How do we marry both of our curricula?' We decided to let the results speak for themselves. We launched a pilot across 13 of our centers to see if this could truly work for our community."



What they discovered was a harmony of efforts. Waterford Upstart wasn't a competitor; it was a powerful complement. While Acelero educators provided expert, in-person instruction throughout the day, children returned home to a tailored learning path on the Waterford software.

The "secret sauce," however, was the human connection. Every family was paired with a dedicated Waterford coach—an ally who reviewed the child's progress, offered tips for meeting milestones, and helped families navigate the unique challenges of modern life, from establishing routines to mastering new technology.



The Results

Kindergarten Readiness That Lives Beyond the Classroom

Aligning Acelero’s community-based expertise with Waterford’s evidence-based tools, proved that when families are empowered as essential partners, children benefit. Caregiver involvement increased, building the confidence and habits necessary for lifelong success.

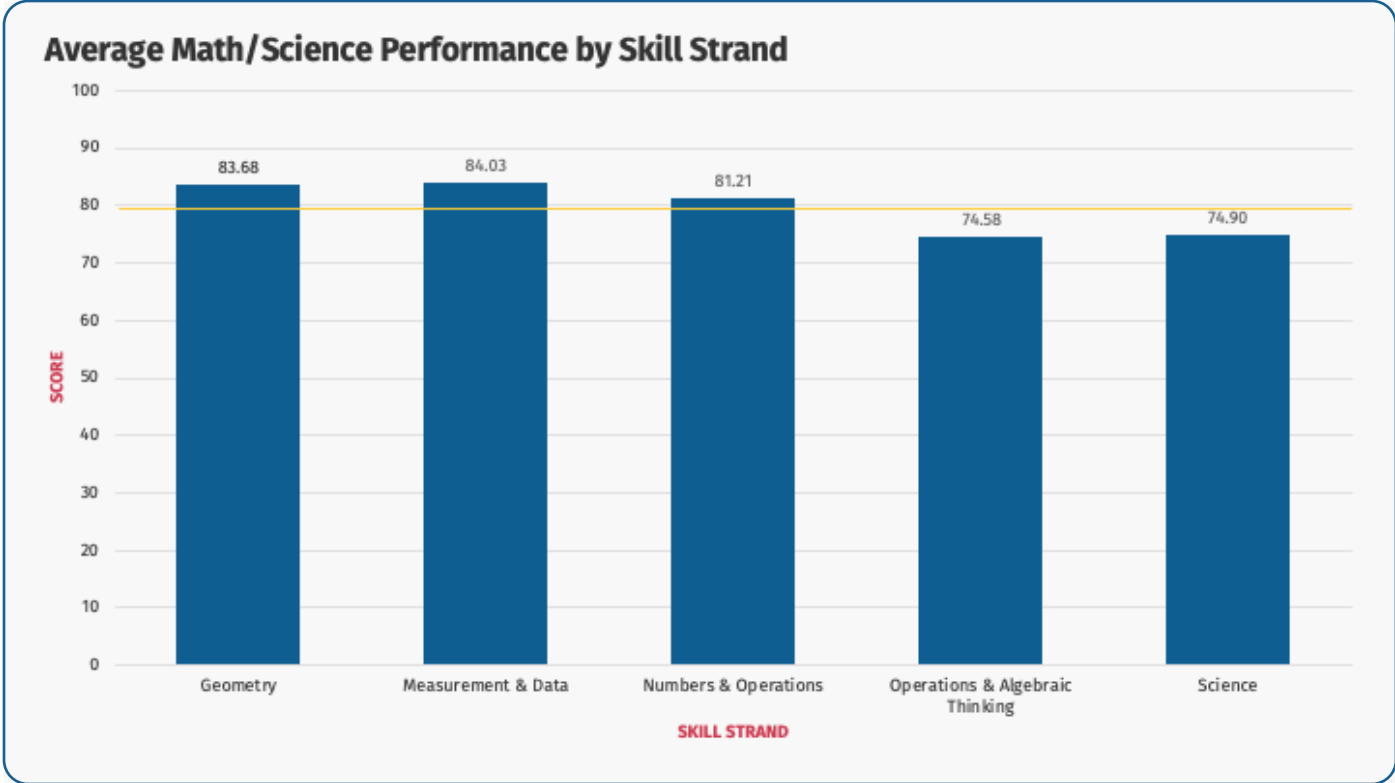
By leaning into the trusted relationships Acelero has spent decades building, this partnership achieved what many “at-home” initiatives struggle to do: true, consistent

engagement. In the 2024-25 school year, 90 Acelero children registered for Waterford Upstart, and **81% (73 children) actively participated** in the program—a testament to the power of a unified school-to-home message.

Success in early learning is about developing consistent routines. Waterford’s research shows that the “sweet spot” for academic growth in the program is 15 minutes of daily use, five days a week. This consistent rhythm helps children build the stamina they need for the transition to kindergarten and sets them on a path toward the critical 1,500-minute threshold of total learning time.



Figure 1:
**Average Learning Time by Group –
Acelero & Waterford Collaboration**





Mastering the Building Blocks of Literacy

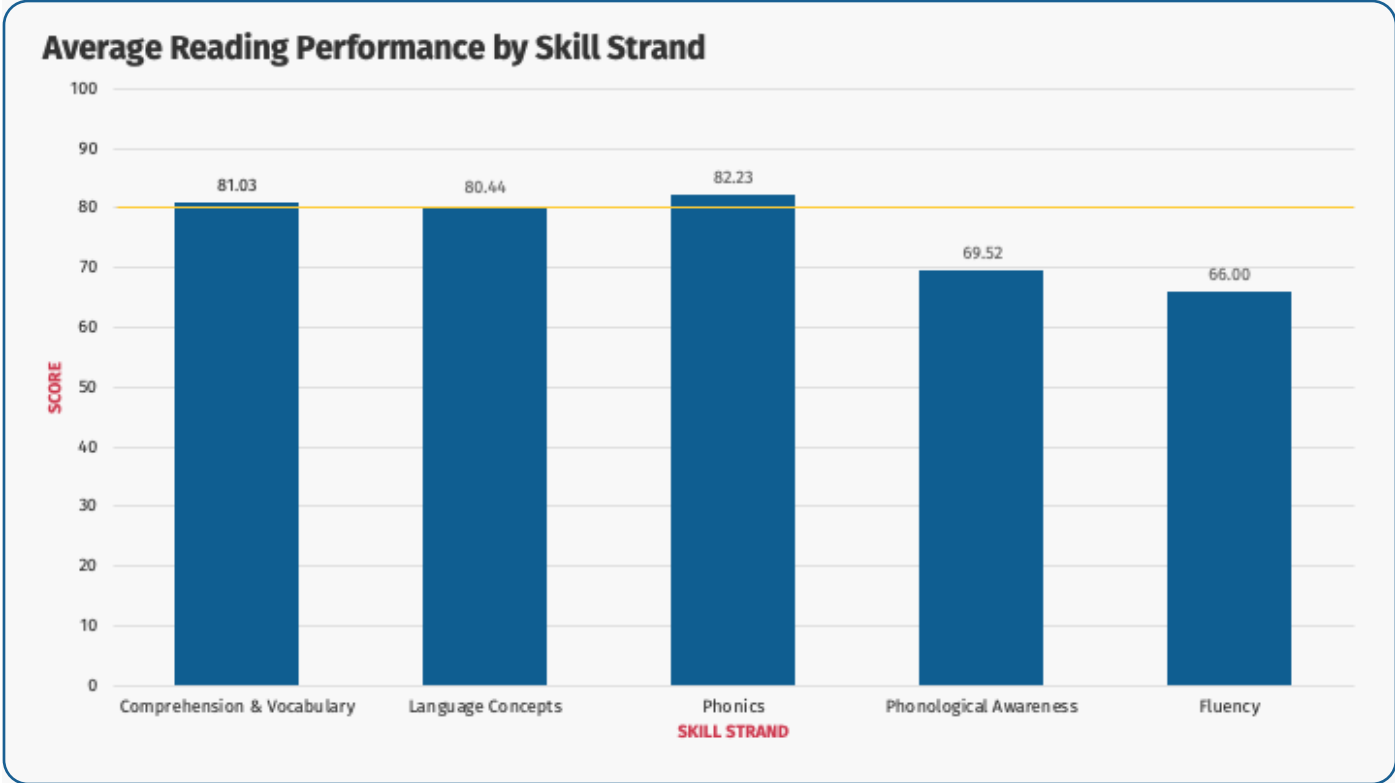
The Waterford Upstart software is tailored to the individual learner, which means that no two children have the same experience. The program moved at their speed, ensuring they were challenged but never frustrated.

A score of 80% represents a high level of mastery, and the data from Acelero participants showed remarkable progress in:

- **Comprehension & Vocabulary:** Building the background knowledge to understand the world.
- **Language Concepts:** Mastering the “rules” of how we communicate.
- **Phonics:** Connecting sounds to letters.
- **Phonological Awareness:** Developing the sophisticated ability to hear and manipulate the sound structures of words (a critical, age-sensitive skill).
- **Fluency:** Transitioning from decoding words to reading with ease.



Figure 2:
Average Skill Mastery by Literacy Area



In Their Own Words:

Caregiver Impact

To understand the true impact of the partnership, families were invited to share their experiences through an anonymous end-of-program survey available in both English and Spanish. While the data shows academic growth, the testimonials reveal the human side of the “Acelero + Waterford” success story.

Ojong, a mother in the program, shared how the partnership built her child’s confidence:



I am beyond grateful for the Waterford Upstart program. It has been an amazing resource in preparing my daughter for kindergarten. The lessons are engaging, age-appropriate, and easy for young children to follow — all while being fun and educational. My daughter has gained so much confidence in her letters, numbers, and reading skills. She looks forward to her daily lessons and is always excited to share what she’s learned.

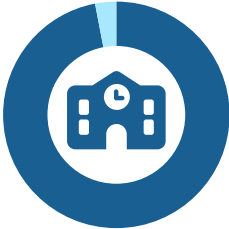
The platform is very user-friendly, and the support from the Waterford Upstart team has been outstanding. They are responsive, encouraging, and truly care about each child’s progress. I highly recommend Waterford Upstart to any parent who wants to give their child a strong, confident start before kindergarten. This program has made a real difference in our home, and I’m so thankful for it.



Caregiver Impact

97%

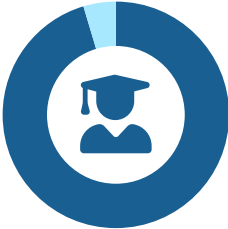
The program helped prepare my child for kindergarten.



● Agree ● Disagree

95%

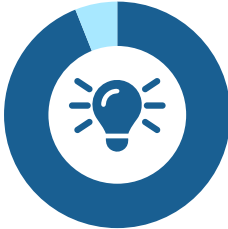
I feel confident that I can help my child transition from PreK to Kindergarten.



● Agree ● Disagree

94%

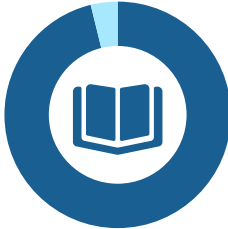
The program was engaging to my child.



● Agree ● Disagree

96%

In general, did your child enjoy the Reading program?



● Yes ● No

“On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend Waterford Upstart to a friend or colleague?”

9.8

“On a scale of 0 to 10, overall, how satisfied are you with your and your child’s experience using the Waterford Upstart program?”

9.7

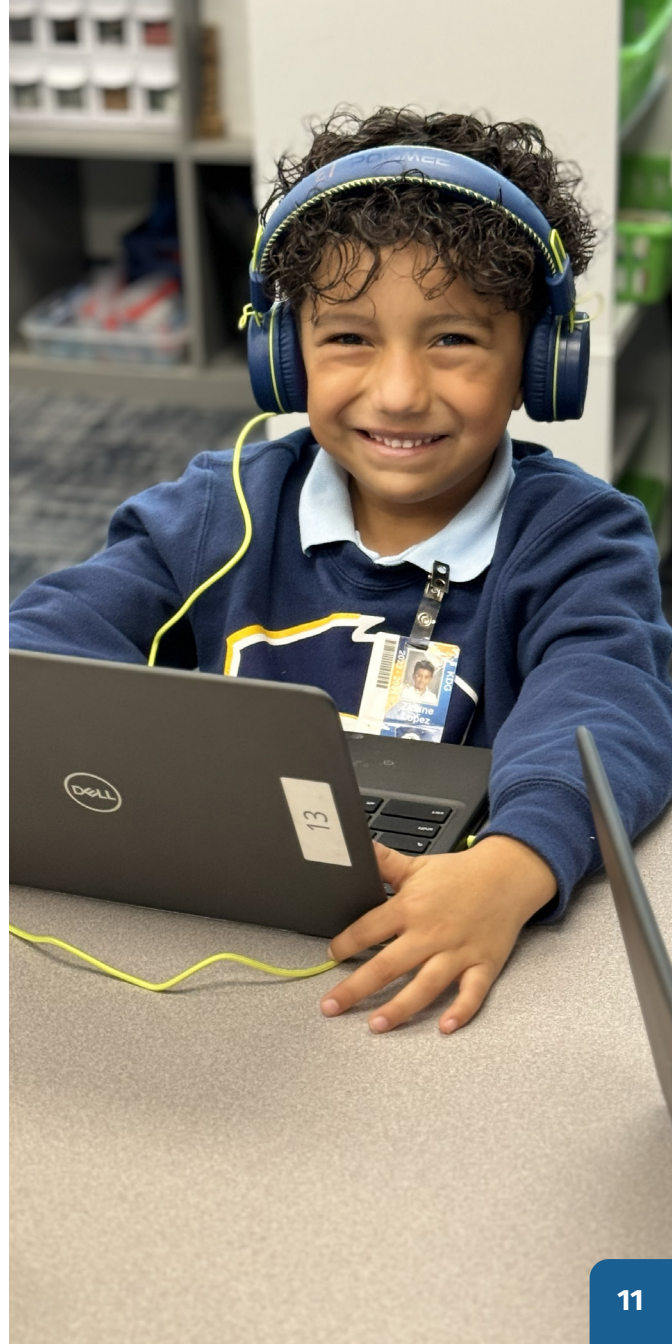


Lessons from the Field

The Blueprint for Collaboration: Advice to Others

Drawing from the success of the Acelero and Waterford collaboration, Diana Varillas offers three foundational principles for organizations looking to deepen their community impact.

- **Unite Around a Common Goal:** True partnership begins with a shared mission. We are all in the business of unlocking access to knowledge and education. We owe it to our families to break down organizational silos and work together to provide a comprehensive web of services that no single entity could offer alone.
- **Embrace the Growth in Discomfort:** Real innovation happens when we lean into new models and challenge the “we’ve always done it this way” mentality. Invite your staff and your families to step outside their comfort zones and try something new. The hard work of building buy-in is what creates a foundation for lasting change.
- **Lead with an Asset-Based Mindset:** The “magic” of family empowerment lies in celebration, not just instruction. Every child’s developmental journey is unique. By approaching families with a focus on their strengths and celebrating their daily wins, you build the trust and confidence necessary for them to lead their child’s learning.





Conclusion

Bridging the Gap: A 360-Degree Support System

The collaboration between Acelero and Waterford created a seamless “wraparound” ecosystem, ensuring that a child’s learning journey didn’t end when the school bell rang. By aligning classroom instruction with home-based digital tools, the partnership provided a unified support structure for both the learner and the family. This dual-layer, multi-generational approach empowered parents to become active participants in their child’s academic foundation without the pressure of acting as a formal instructor.

Beyond the Screen: The Power of Presence

For many families, the true value of the program wasn’t just the curriculum—it was the connection. Diana Varillas highlighted that the manageable time commitment was appealing to families. “It’s 10 minutes, 15 minutes—whatever time you have matters,” she shared.

Ultimately, the impact transcended the digital lessons. As Varillas noted, “It wasn’t only about the content and the reading. It was more so the quality time and being present with their children.” This shift from “learning” to “bonding” is what turns supplemental learning into a sustainable habit for busy families.



[Waterford.org](https://www.waterford.org)