

Ellison Grant Reflection

Good Beginnings Preschool - AAC in the Preschool

Why I Applied

I applied for this grant because communication is the foundation of so many of our most basic human needs. In preschool, many of our students are just beginning their journey with AAC, and for some, this is the start of a lifelong relationship with these tools. Nineteen students across the sessions I support use AAC devices, with 18 using Proloquo2Go. Their families are eager to hear from them—to know what their child is thinking, what they need, what brings them joy.

One way I find it helpful to think about AAC is like learning another language. The adults in the classroom communicate in English, but students who use AAC communicate through the language of visuals and symbols. When staff can speak that language too—modeling it naturally throughout the day, the way you would any spoken language—students have a true communication partner, not just an observer. That shared language is what makes real connection possible.

This grant was an opportunity to give our team something every educator deserves: dedicated time, the right tools, and structured support to grow. With it, we set out to build a preschool environment where AAC is woven into the fabric of every day—not a specialized intervention, but a natural part of how our community communicates.

What you did with the grant

The grant provided each of the 10 staff members with their own iPad loaded with Proloquo2Go, access to over 10 hours of self-paced online training through AAC Academy, and six hours of in-person learning together as a team. I personally completed 20 hours of online training to better support my colleagues. This was the beginning of the learning.

One of the more impactful activities for staff was the Core Word Challenge. Each week, staff chose a core word and committed to modeling it intentionally throughout the day—with a little friendly competition and weekly prizes to keep good engagement. What started as a fun structure quickly revealed something important: staff reported modeling their chosen word anywhere from 30 to 300 times in a single week. They began noticing when a word was missing from a student's device and adding it. They started helping each other navigate vocabulary. They used screen captures of Proloquo2Go during whole-group activities so every student could see the language being modeled on the board.

By the end of the year, 87.5% staff respondents reported using AAC daily. Confidence scores ranged from 3 to 5 on a 1–5 scale—solid, honest growth. Staff shared that they were surprised by how quickly students picked up skills, how engaging the devices were for all children, and how rewarding it felt to witness communication happen in real time. Some expressed interest in continuing to practice over the summer. That kind of ownership—wanting to keep going beyond what is required—is the clearest sign that something has genuinely shifted.

Staff are also candid that they want more. They would like to continue training next year and feel they still need time to build fluency. That honesty is not a setback—it is exactly the mindset that sustains long-term growth.

Every student showed increased interest and engagement with AAC over the course of the year. This year, our students moved through that continuum in ways that were meaningful.

Two students began the year with no connection to a device at all. By the end of the year, they were aware of the devices, comfortable in their presence, and surrounded by staff who modeled AAC consistently throughout the day. The foundation is being laid. That is growth.

Three students moved into active exploration — pressing symbols, discovering the device, beginning to understand that it has something to offer them. This is the babbling stage. It looks like play. It is actually the beginning of communication.

Four students reached the point of matching icons and using the device to communicate — but only when the device was placed in front of them and the opportunity was created. They are learning that the device is a tool, not just an object. That shift in understanding is significant.

Six students are now independently navigating the device to communicate what they want and express what they care about. One student moves through the device to find topics he loves — not because it is part of the lesson, but because he has something to say. He is using language the way language is meant to be used.

Four students are constructing sentences. They take an initial model and build on it. They ask questions. They initiate. For children who arrived at preschool with very limited ability to express themselves, this is not a small milestone. It is transformational.

Three moments stand out. One student, not feeling well during the school day, was shown the emotions page on her device. She selected an icon to show she felt sick. She went home with a fever. That small act of self-advocacy, made possible by her comfort with the device and a staff member who knew to offer it, is exactly what this work is for. Another student navigated from the snack screen to request more crackers, then independently moved to the animals screen to join in on an Old McDonald song—following his own curiosity across two different contexts in a single session. A third student now reaches for the device on her own when she is frustrated, using it to communicate rather than to act out. She grabs the device. She tells us.

Based on the learning of the staff there were changes around the students—the environment, the routines, and the shared understanding of what communication can look like throughout a preschool day.

This year, communication boards were added to the playground and to the entrances and exits of the building. Icons were increased throughout the classroom spaces. Devices were made accessible to students across the full preschool session.

Some of this is still a work in progress. Getting devices consistently outside, finding vocabulary that truly reflects the language of our youngest learners, making modeling feel automatic rather than effortful—these are ongoing goals. Staff are thinking about communication differently. They notice when a student needs a word and go find it. They have conversations with each other about what is working. AAC is becoming part of how this preschool operates. That kind of change is an ever-evolving journey—and this year, the journey moved meaningfully forward.

Looking Forward

This grant gave our team a foundation—in tools, in knowledge, and in confidence—that we intend to build on. Next year, we plan to continue in-person training and support staff in deepening their AAC fluency. We will keep expanding environmental supports and developing shared resources that any staff member can reach for, with any student, at any moment in the day.

Most importantly, we will keep following the lead of our students. Their curiosity, their persistence, and their joy when communication works—those are what fuel this work. We are grateful to the Ellison Foundation for making this year possible.

