



Information Briefing

IOWA SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

March 2007

Vol. 1 • No.1

High-Quality Preschool

The increased focus on the importance of early childhood education brings with it important questions about the components of high-quality preschool most closely associated with success in school. This document provides a brief summary of research findings on the student benefits linked to preschool attendance and the characteristics found to be most associated with high-quality preschool education.

Does preschool attendance make a difference?

Significant evidence from research reveals a strong link between preschool attendance and children's success and progress in school, particularly for children with high-risk factors related to poverty. Children who attend preschool typically enter kindergarten with increased cognitive abilities, increased literacy and mathematics skills, and tend to get along better with others than children who do not attend preschool. Children who attend preschool are also more likely to progress through the grades successfully with lower retention rates, fewer special education placements and are more likely to graduate than peers who did not experience preschool prior to kindergarten. Preschool attendance has also been associated with positive benefits lasting into adulthood that include higher-skilled jobs, increased earnings and reduced crime rates.

What does high-quality preschool look like?

Not all preschool programs are equal. In early education research, model preschool programs were strongly associated to positive increases in student achievement. To achieve the same results as well-known preschool models (e.g. the Perry Preschool Study, 2000), programs must be well funded to ensure certain program characteristics are provided that studies show are related to quality learning and development. In order for children to receive the most benefit from early childhood education experiences, research strongly suggests that high-quality preschool programs incorporate the following key components:

Highly qualified and well-compensated teaching staff: Teacher training and experience are two of the most important aspects associated with quality preschool education. Research suggests programs linked to success in school provide:

- ❖ Classroom teachers with at least a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood education
- ❖ Competitive teacher compensation in order to recruit and retain high-quality educators

High-quality teaching and learning:

Children are born with a vast capacity to learn, but disparities commonly exist between what children are capable of learning and the kind of experiences preschools provide. High-quality preschool programs linked to short- and long-term learning benefits include:

1. A comprehensive, well-planned curriculum

- ♦ Content that lays the foundation for school-related skills and knowledge.
- ♦ A written set of early learning standards that are clear, high-level and appropriate.

- ♦ Activities and suggestions that help teachers implement the learning standards in meaningful and developmentally appropriate ways.
- ♦ A heavy emphasis on language development.
- ♦ Materials that reflect individual children's development.

2. High-quality instruction

- ♦ A combination of teacher- and child-initiated activities to nurture social, developmental and academic growth.
- ♦ Learning through play with adult interactions that emphasize:
 - thinking and reasoning skills.
 - language growth.
 - self regulation.
 - social skills.
- ♦ A mix of whole-group, small-group and one-on-one interactions designed to meet individual needs of students.
- ♦ A focus on dialogue between teachers and children that fosters higher-level reasoning and thinking skills.
- ♦ Instruction that supports the home language and culture of all children.
- ♦ Warm, caring relationships with teachers that promote children's emerging abilities and aptitudes to learn.

High-quality, appropriate assessment:

Assessment is a critical component in high-quality early childhood preschool education. Observational and student performance assessment, aligned to curriculum and instruction, provide critical insight into growth and learning. Environmental assessments provide important information regarding the quality of program characteristics. When used appropriately, assessments are powerful tools used in high-quality preschool programs to:

- ♦ Observe and measure student progress to guide teaching and learning.
- ♦ Inform parents about children's learning and development.
- ♦ Identify unique learning needs of individual children.
- ♦ Support continuous improvement efforts and provide program evaluation information.

High-quality professional development and support from qualified supervisors:

Ongoing supports for teachers through strong leadership and quality professional development are critical components in high-quality preschool programs. Program characteristics associated with lasting benefits for children include:

- ♦ Administrators who provide high expectations for program, staff, and student outcomes and the necessary resources to achieve the desired outcomes.
- ♦ Teachers as reflective practitioners who revise and plan teaching activities and strategies according to children's needs.
- ♦ Ongoing professional development with the following key characteristics:
 - A focus on improving teaching as a means to improving student learning.
 - Time to study and reflect with others on the content area of focus using data, research and information.
 - Ongoing training on research-based strategies that includes theory, demonstration, practice and feedback.
 - Time to study the effect of the efforts and make needed adjustments.

Low teacher-child ratio and small class sizes:

Preschool programs that have lower teacher-child ratios and smaller class sizes are positively related to increased student achievement scores and improved social outcomes for children.

Recommendations for high-quality preschool programs include:

- ♦ Staff-child ratios at 1:10 or less.
- ♦ Class sizes at 15 students or lower (studies show adding an assistant to a large class does not achieve the same student results as limiting class size).

Collaboration with parents:

Parent involvement is an important component of model preschool programs linked to lasting benefits. Engaging and supporting parents helps to develop communication to share knowledge about the child from the home and school perspective. At least two broad outcomes are associated with parent engagement practices in high-quality preschool programs:

- ♦ Parent and child interactions are supported.
- ♦ Teachers better understand the child, the home environment and culture, and are thereby more responsive in meeting the individual needs of the child in the classroom.

For more detailed information about the research findings and studies included in this review, see the Iowa School Boards Foundation (ISBF) research synthesis titled *A Literature Review: The Influence of Preschool Attendance* (2007) at www.ia-sb.org or contact Lou Ann Gvist at the Iowa School Boards Foundation, Lgvist@ia-sb.org, (515) 288-1991 or 1-800-795-4272.

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This report made possible by the generous support of:

