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Are Preschool Program Standards Enough to Ensure Quality?

As the Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy (2001) stated, “Children come into the world eager to learn.” Years of research demonstrate the immense and competent ability children have to learn during the first years of life. Capitalizing on this innate learning nature, more states, including Iowa are opting to provide publicly-funded preschool for 4-year-old children. With strong evidence that quality early childhood education promotes positive cognitive, social, emotional and physical development, more local districts are utilizing state funds to provide preschool as part of their public education system. Therefore, it is imperative that school leaders access and use information from research to properly monitor and support programs to ensure quality.

Experts in early childhood education define preschool quality in two domains: structural quality and process quality. Due to national expansion of state-funded preschool, much attention is focused on policies that mandate structural program features such as the physical classroom space, child-adult ratio and qualifications of staff. While structural program characteristics are important, experts also stress the need to pay attention to *process quality* features such as positive adult-child interactions, curriculum and learning standards. In fact, evidence from new studies reveals that positive adult-child interactions in particular are more strongly associated with how well children learn and develop during their preschool experience than structural program features.

The University of Northern Iowa recently held their second statewide summit on early childhood education. Summit keynote speaker, Dr. Bridget Hamre from the University of Virginia, presented compelling findings with important implications from two new studies on various state-funded preschool programs across the US. In short, providing high quality preschool requires more than building a program with specific structural characteristics such as hiring a teacher with a degree and keeping class size small. According to experts, preschool program characteristics associated with quality indicators are necessary, but not sufficient to ensure children experience a quality early childhood education. Educational decision-makers must also pay attention to process quality features, specifically the quality of interactions between teachers and children, if districts want to achieve the maximum benefits for which preschools are designed.

Two recent large-scale preschool studies

In 2001 and 2003, two large, multi-state studies were conducted to gain an understanding of what was happening in state-funded preschool across the nation. More than 700 classrooms were studied in 11 different states. At the time, these studies – the NCEDL and SWEEP studies – represented

approximately 80% of the available state-funded preschool programs in the United States. Researchers observed and collected data on various classroom components including global classroom quality, teacher-child interactions and child assessment outcomes. The following findings have strong implications for school leaders working to ensure investments in preschool yield high returns in the form of children's positive cognitive, social and emotional development.

Key findings

✓ **Quality of state-funded preschool is variable and inconsistent; instructional quality is particularly low**

- *Only 15% of observed classrooms were high quality*

Researchers studied different dimensions of preschool quality that including developmentally-appropriate instructional support and the emotional climate of the classroom. Across the approximately 700 preschool classrooms studied, findings showed that access to high quality teaching was uneven. Classrooms ranged from high quality programs with high ratings in both instructional support and emotional climate, to mediocre programs with a mix of high, medium or low ratings in either dimension, to the lowest quality rated classrooms with low ratings in both instructional and emotional supports. Unfortunately, only about half of the observed classrooms provided the kind of instructional quality likely to produce academic gains in young children.

✓ **The students who need good teachers most are the least likely to get them**

- *18% of the observed classrooms were rated as low quality, providing minimal instructional supports and a negative emotional climate. These classrooms also had the highest percentages of children living in poverty.*

Students in state-funded preschools who are typically most in need of a quality early education, are the least likely to get it. These findings echo other reports that show children living in poverty tend to be in the poorest quality early care and education environments. State-funded programs designed to provide quality preschool access for all children are not delivering on the promise of equity. The reality is that children from low-income homes tend to start school behind their more economically advantaged peers. Yet the fact that children living in poverty tend to be in lower quality early childhood programs reveals the irony and challenges of providing quality preschool to help equip all children for later school success.

✓ **Preschool program characteristics were not related to quality classroom ratings**

- *Highest and lowest quality classrooms did not differ on teacher education, class size, adult-child ratio and location (school or center)*

Landmark studies of early education programs (Perry Preschool and others) have helped experts identify important characteristics of quality preschool programs. For example, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) developed an index to help rate the quality of state-funded preschool programs. The NIEER benchmarks identify 10 different policies related to preschool access, quality standards and resources. As a result, states often use the NIEER preschool indicators as a guide to developing the requirements and regulations of publicly-funded preschool. Iowa is one of those states.

Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program requires that programs have a licensed teacher with a degree in early childhood education, a class size of 20 or less and an adult-child ratio of 1-10. All three indicators are part of the NIEER preschool index.

Ensuring that preschool programs meet certain structural quality guidelines is important especially when it comes to the safety and well-being of young children. The structural quality features described by NIEER and others are designed to support the physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth of young children. However, studies now show structural features do not guarantee children will experience the quality process features such as effective teacher-child interactions that lead to academic gains and emotional growth.

- ✓ **Observed adult-child interactions were positively associated with gains in academic skills and emotional development; structural program features were not**
 - *Process feature data from observations of adult-child interactions predicted whether children were likely to make cognitive and emotional gains; program structural features were not associated with changes in academic or emotional growth*

From the NCEDL and SWEEP studies, researchers found that the quality of interactions between the children and the adults were closely associated to the children's skill development and emotional competence. This may not come as a surprise to K-12 school leaders. Research has consistently provided evidence demonstrating the relationship between teacher effectiveness and improved student learning. Now preschool studies confirm the same need for young children. Whether children develop important cognitive and emotional abilities that prepare them for later school success depends heavily upon the quality of interactions between the child and his or her teacher in the preschool classroom. School leaders cannot rely on recommended or required structural program features alone to ensure preschools provide developmentally appropriate, responsive and stimulating early learning experiences that maximize the growth and learning potential of young children.

Implications for school leaders and other policymakers

- ✓ **It is not sufficient to simply expand access or mandate structural quality**

As stated earlier, quality preschool structural features play an important function. The early years are a time of dramatic, episodic growth and preschool children need and deserve skilled teachers with specialized knowledge and training in early childhood education. Small class sizes and low adult-child ratios increase the likelihood children receive responsive, individualized attention and instruction during a time of tremendous brain growth when children develop critical emotional attachments to adults. Quality program features are designed to provide appropriate environments and key supports to promote positive outcomes for children. However, simply mandating program features is not enough. School leaders must recognize the significance of teacher effectiveness in relation to program quality. Monitoring and supporting teacher skill development is a critical role for educational policymakers with investments in early childhood education programs.
- ✓ **Maximizing the benefits of quality preschool requires a significant investment in professional development**

Too often professional development opportunities available for preschool educators are fragmented, one-time workshops that are not part of a comprehensive delivery system. Learning opportunities for preschool teachers should be based on the same principles that research shows are effective for K-12

teachers learning new instructional practices: learning that is continuous and based on theory with demonstration, practice and feedback. School leaders must work to limit barriers to quality professional development such as isolationism of teachers and scarcity of available technical assistance. Creating conditions for success by committing to significant investments in quality professional development is a key role for school leaders to play for ensuring quality preschool for their youngest students.

✓ **Measures of quality that are linked to student outcomes can and should become the targets of professional development**

When selecting the content for professional development, experts recommend using information gained from classroom assessment measures that are linked to student outcomes. The good news is that different classroom observational tools exist to provide teachers and program administrators with vital information to help guide professional development and inform program evaluation. For example a new instrument, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), measures the emotional and social climate and instructional supports for learning in PreK-12 classrooms. Information from classroom observations and child assessment measures is analyzed and used to plan the content for professional development based on identified areas of need. An implication for school leaders is to ensure professional development is based upon teacher and student learning needs as identified by quality assessment measures.

All young children deserve access to a high quality early childhood education, a noble goal more easily obtained by establishing policies and practices designed to support and monitor both structural quality *and* process quality as part of an effective preschool program.

For more detailed information about the research studies and findings included in this research brief, 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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