

Evaluation of Early Childhood Programs and Child Development in Indiana, second report, May 2023

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) conducted a landscape evaluation of early childhood programs in Indiana (IN) between the spring of 2021 and the summer of 2022. The evaluation focused on understanding program components, quality, and children's learning and development across a variety of programs in the state. Commissioned by Early Learning Indiana (ELI), with generous support from Lilly Endowment Inc., this study aims to provide Indiana programs and policymakers with research-based information on the quality of early childhood programs and the learning and development status of young children birth to five in the state. The report summarizes classroom quality experienced by children in a sample of 321 classrooms in 206 programs in Indiana. In addition, the report describes developmental growth in the sampled programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. It is important to note that through the period of the study, programs continued to experience interruptions or quarantines due to the COVID-19 pandemic (including the omicron and delta variants of COVID-19).

Key Findings

Program quality

- Findings demonstrate that across 2021 and 2022, infant, toddler, and pre-K classrooms were nurturing and caring environments.
- Classrooms were observed to be on average moderate to high quality in responsive caregiving (infants), emotional behavioral support (toddlers), and emotional support and classroom organization (preschool) domains.
- In contrast, areas related to language and instructional support demonstrated low scores across all types of classrooms. This resembles patterns in other similar studies of early care and education programs across the country.
- PTQ 3- and 4-rated programs tended to score higher than other programs for the infant and toddler CLASS instruments and in instructional support for the pre-K CLASS instrument.
- On average, infant and toddler classroom quality as measured by the CLASS was found to be consistently higher than those in Early Head Start classrooms, while preschool quality was found to be in the mid-to-low range relative to other state and city programs in the U.S.

Children's developmental growth

- We find lower developmental levels in language and cognition for infants and toddlers, and socio-emotional levels on par with what we expect due to maturation. However, we also find growth across children higher than typical for this group age.
- At baseline, the children of preschool age in the sample had lower levels of literacy and math skills compared to their typical peers, but they had similar language and executive function skills.

- Children made strong gains in vocabulary during the study period, which were higher than typical growth for children their age, and showed expected growth in math and executive functions.
- However, their literacy skills showed slower growth than typical, and in fact, they had a loss relative to their peers in standard scores.
- The patterns were consistent across PTQ ratings, urbanicity, and program type, with all children showing significant growth in receptive vocabulary, regardless of their enrollment location or center type.
- However, literacy development lagged for all children, similarly regardless of where children were enrolled.
- Overall, children also showed improvements in externalizing behaviors.

Implications for Policymakers

Based on the findings of this study, we observed that while teachers are doing well in setting up a warm environment and building emotional connections with young children, they could use more support in strategies that enhance early language development.

- Enhance infant teachers' skills to support early language development & cognitive development.
- Increase toddler teachers' acumen in facilitating instruction and modeling language.
- Enhance pre-K teachers' skills in strategies to facilitate instruction, scaffolding learning, and application of knowledge to new concepts, with an emphasis on language development and content (i.e., math).
- Increase effective use of research-based curricula.
- Increase the availability of developmentally appropriate materials in classrooms.

There is an opportunity for Indiana decision-makers to use these findings to inform their efforts to support young learners. The Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee (ELAC) submitted a report to the governor in December of 2022 to strengthen the early learning system to ensure young children in Indiana, especially vulnerable children, to prepare them with the necessary skills to thrive in school and in life. The report identified a number of actions for state agencies and policymakers to improve the quality of the early care and education programs in the state and the school readiness of children. In this context, this study aims to provide a landscape on the current quality of publicly funded programs and the developmental status of children that could potentially serve to inform initiatives to improve quality and outcomes in the state.

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