



Series edited by
Ellen Frede and
W. Steven Barnett

Preschool Policy Facts

National Institute for
Early Education Research

Contact Us:
120 Albany Street
Suite 500
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Tel 732 932-4350
Fax 732 932-4360

www.nieer.org

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Graduate School of Education

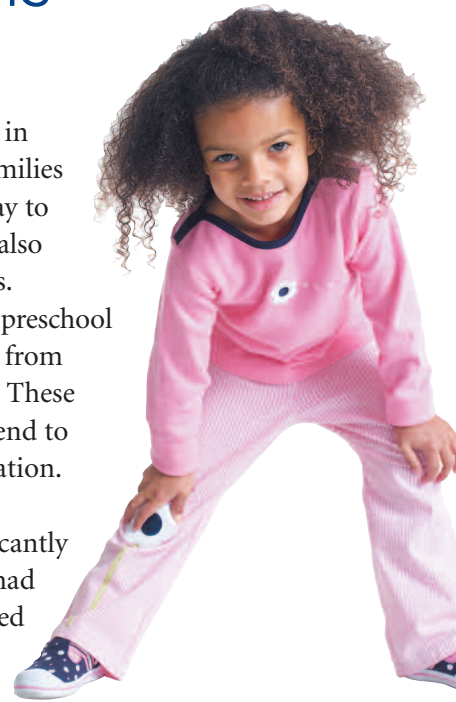
Increasing the Effectiveness of Preschool Programs

by Debra J. Ackerman and W. Steven Barnett

Preschool attendance has become the norm for 4-year-olds in many parts of the country. Policymakers, educators, and families have embraced publicly funded preschool programs as a way to improve young children's learning and development. They also expect preschool programs to bring about long-term effects.

Although such gains have been produced by high-quality preschool programs, the quality of programs currently available is far from uniform, with the vast majority considered to be mediocre. These results stem in part from weak program standards, which tend to be lower and more variable than those found in K-12 education. Inadequate funding often is behind weak standards.

The effectiveness of preschool programs could be significantly improved if they more closely replicated models that have had strong impacts and if formative evaluations were implemented to provide regular feedback to program staff regarding how well programs work.



What We Know:

- The effectiveness of preschool programs is related to variations among individual children, a child's family and community, and most importantly, the quality of the programs themselves.
- Many preschool programs fail to fully achieve what society expects of them. In the majority of cases, poor quality limits the effectiveness of programs.
- We currently lack sufficient definitive data on the minimum quantity—and mix—of inputs required for highly effective programs. However, programs that have produced large gains share similar characteristics: highly educated teachers, teacher-child ratios of 1:10 or higher, and support for teachers' ongoing professional development. They also provide intellectually challenging curricula.
- Standards for many publicly funded preschool programs are inconsistent with what is required for success, particularly in the areas of teacher qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, and learning standards.

Policy Recommendations:

- Minimum requirements for publicly funded preschool programs should include: teachers with BA degrees and specialized training in early childhood education, class sizes no larger than 20, and staff-child ratios no lower than 1:10. Such programs have been found to be cost effective when delivered for at least 2 1/2 hours a day over a 180-day school year.
- Future research should systematically vary program inputs to refine standards for specific communities.
- Programs need adequate funding to meet these minimum requirements. Choosing increases in available slots over quality will jeopardize the benefits of preschool programs.
- Learning standards should be strengthened so that teachers have clear and comprehensive guidelines.
- Ongoing, formative evaluations can help gauge program strengths and weaknesses and inform decisions about how programs can best be improved.

The Role of Quality in Preschool Program Effectiveness

Preschool programs are unlikely to be effective without first meeting a specific level of quality. Policy leaders, parents and educators should view quality from two critical aspects:

- **Structural Quality** – Characteristics such as the physical facilities and their ability to support positive learning environments, number of children in each class, staff-to-child ratios, and qualifications of teachers and staff. Research shows smaller classes with more favorable staff-to-child ratios lead to more effective programs because teachers can engage in stimulating, responsive, and supportive interactions and provide more individualized attention. One of the most crucial influences on the quality and effectiveness of preschool programs is teacher education and training. A concentration in early childhood coursework is positively correlated with teachers' beliefs about providing learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate for young children.
- **Process Quality** – The quality and nature of engagement, interactions and activities in preschool settings that lead to children's learning. Young children who have frequent opportunities to interact with teachers, engage in creative, often self-directed activities with their peers and have access to quality learning materials are better able to develop important social, emotional and cognitive abilities. Teachers skilled at engaging children, eliciting their ideas and observing their progress shape the experiences young children have in preschool in important ways.

Characteristics of Effective "Model" Programs

Researchers have focused on three model programs that are known to have produced strong positive effects for the children who attended them. Studying the classroom characteristics these programs had in common help inform our understanding of what makes preschool programs effective:

- **Carolina Abecedarian** – Maximum class size of 12, teacher/assistant-to-child ratio of 1:6, teachers with BA, MA or demonstrated skills and competencies.
- **Perry Preschool Project** – Maximum class size of 13, teacher/assistant-to-child ratio of 1:6.5, teachers with BA and elementary and special education certification or better.
- **Chicago Child-Parent Center Program** – Maximum class size of 17, teacher/assistant ratio of 1:8.5, teachers with BA and early childhood certification or better.

Effectiveness of State-Funded Preschool Programs

Evaluations of state-funded preschool programs, which are larger in scale than the model programs, also inform our knowledge about the effectiveness of preschool education. Recent studies have examined the impacts of state-funded preschool programs in Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia. Outcomes for children enrolled in these programs include:

- Growth in vocabulary development and print awareness.
- Gains in early math skills.
- Gains for disadvantaged children as well as middle-income children.
- Gains for English Language Learners (ELL).

The programs studied are not necessarily typical of all preschool programs. The disparity between the effectiveness of these programs and the more modest results found in other programs may be explained by how closely aligned programs are with the "model" programs.

The regulations governing class size, teacher-to-child ratios, and teacher qualifications vary from state to state or even within states. Standards regarding teacher salaries, per-pupil funding, and length of program day also vary, despite evidence that larger positive effects are achieved if these standards are of high quality. Outcome standards are also important for program effectiveness. They should contain enough information so that teachers can document where children are in their progress towards achieving these outcomes and should also be linked to some form of valid and reliable assessment.

Ongoing Improvement in Preschool Programs

Preschool effectiveness also depends on a continuous improvement cycle of setting goals, assessing progress, and making changes to programs as necessary. Additionally, a broader understanding of how "good" programs actually are—or are not—can help increase their educational effectiveness by increasing demand for high-quality programs. Approaches such as quality rating systems within the state-funded preschool sector can educate parents and other stakeholders about the overall quality of programs in their communities. This knowledge can in turn fuel an increased demand for both high-quality preschool programs and expanded efforts to assist programs in improving their effectiveness.