Possums, Politics And Preschool

I’m an economist and not a politician, so I don’t really know what went on behind the scenes in the Florida Legislature’s attempt at a quality universal prekindergarten program. But judging from the headlines, it appears politicians there are well versed in the art of “playing possum” when it comes to hot potato issues.

More than a few of the state’s leaders seem to have rolled over like the proverbial possum that, when confronted with danger, plays dead until the crisis passes. What the legislators were confronted with, of course, were tight budgets and special interests. Apparently, it was easier to pass off a cheap substitute on the public than stand and fight for quality.

It is this ethic that makes our jobs in getting better preschool education all the more difficult. There are plenty of possums in the political ranks and many of them will vote on future preschool education measures across the country. Comparing the states and giving each a report card on preschool performance is a powerful way to persuade politicians to do the right thing when it comes to correcting the failing grade most states get for their preschool programs.

At NIEER, we have gone a long way toward accomplishing that goal with NIEER’s yearbook “The State of Preschool,” published in February. The yearbook’s 50-state comparison benchmarks quality and gives each state a very public report. It points out, for instance, that only 18 states require teachers with B.A. degrees and special training in all their classes.

Comparing the states and giving each a report card on preschool performance is a powerful way to persuade politicians to do the right thing when it comes to correcting the failing grade most states get for their preschool programs.

It explores the state-to-state variations in funding per child—from $451 to $10,088—and contrasts the $3,455 national average investment per preschool child with the $8,733-per-child national average investment in K–12.

The electronic version of the yearbook on NIEER’s website has drawn loads of attention, having received more than 10,000 visits from those with inquiring minds as to where their states stand. We have recently made it easier for Internet visitors by upgrading the data with a new interactive feature. Now, reporters and researchers, educators and advocates have a new and easier way to understand where their states stand in the national scheme of things, since the interactive feature automatically ranks according to the inquisitor’s interests. Also made interactive is Appendix A of the yearbook, which has a wealth of information not summarized elsewhere. Reporters and advocates, in particular, should find this useful.

With tools like this, we can do a better job of shining the light on how poorly we are serving our children. One hundred years ago, America created mass education. We were a world leader for over a century. Thirty years ago, this changed. Governments fell asleep at the education wheel and our major competitors passed us. That’s why, when politicians play dead, we need to keep the pressure on them.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

Groundbreaking Court Case

Judge Sees Quality Pre-K Necessary Part Of ‘Adequate’ Public Schools

Key Finding Could Lead To Public Preschool For 60,000 Children Across The State

If the Massachusetts Supreme Court follows the recommendations of a superior court judge, more than 60,000 3- and 4-year-olds in that state will soon have a right to public preschool. And not just any public preschool program, but one of high quality, with certified teachers and small classes.

That would make Massachusetts the second state to require preschool for students at risk of school failure, essentially adding pre-K to the state’s public education system. New Jersey’s highest court made that state the first, back in 1998.

“This is groundbreaking, and we believe the higher court will follow these recommendations,” says Michael Weisman, the attorney who brought the long-running case, Hancock v. Driscoll, against the state years ago, in search of a way to equalize educational opportunities for all children in the state. Back in 1993, the court found the state’s school funding formula failed the poorest children, and over the last decade ordered new money and programs to improve student achievement. But until now, preschool was not considered a necessity. It was just one of many optional approaches school officials might try to close the achievement gap between poor children and their more affluent peers.

But the new report, issued by Judge Margot Botsford, now argues that preschool is nothing short of a “necessity” for children at risk of school failure, based on the scientific evidence she reviewed—and the “sorry” state of many schools in impoverished districts, which leave low-income children far behind their peers. Without preschool, she found, low-income children, those children with special needs and those who do not speak English as their primary language are likely to fall behind and stay behind their peers all the way through high school. "There is a consensus among the experts," she concluded, that preschool can close the learning gap.

Much of that evidence was presented by NIEER’s director, Steven Barnett, in the latest round of testimony in the case. Researchers Kathleen McCartney from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and psychologist Nancy Marshall from Wellesley College also presented studies showing how children would benefit from high-quality early education. Marshall’s studies, in particular, revealed a gap in quality between public and private preschool, and between rich and poor districts. That research showed that public preschool with qualified teachers could boost student achievement. "High-quality preschool," Botsford noted, provides “a far greater opportunity for positive achievement in school and thereafter.”

She provided that conclusion in her more-than-300-page report issued in late April. Her findings were requested by the state’s highest court to help the justices decide what further steps the state might need to take to fulfill its constitutional obligation to see to it that all its children receive an adequate public education. The seven Supreme Court justices are expected to issue a decision on this phase of the case by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, the state’s Legislature had already begun to move on legislation to create and fund more high-quality preschool programs across the state. Even as news of Botsford’s report hit the pages of the state’s newspapers, lawmakers passed new and far-reaching bills to expand high-quality early education across the state. Massachusetts House Speaker Thomas Finneran championed a proposal to create a new state board of early education, an innovation and possible model for other states, to oversee a statewide program of voluntary and universal early education for all the state’s preschoolers.

“We have already reached remarkable consensus on the need for early education in this state,” says Margaret Blood, executive director of Strategies for Children, an advocacy group that has led a campaign for universal prekindergarten across the state. “We know that no one wants to do this under court order, still the judge’s report couldn’t have come at a more opportune moment. She is articulating exactly what a growing number of people—including the heads of both our House and Senate—believe. Our children need more high-quality early learning programs.”

Many other observers also cheered the new report as a landmark for preschool. “This is absolutely good news, great news for all of us who hope to see more states add high-quality preschool to our public education systems,” says Ellen Boylan, executive director of Starting At 3!, a new initiative funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to help establish a legal right to preschool for all children. For more information on the lawsuit or to get a copy of Judge Botsford’s decision, email Boylan at eboylan@edlawcenter.org.
Jim Rohr is chairman and chief executive officer of The PNC Financial Services Group, a Pittsburgh-based $70 billion company with 23,000 employees. The company recently launched PNC Grow Up Great, the country’s most comprehensive corporate initiative to improve school readiness. PNC will invest $100 million over the next 10 years on advocacy, agency funding, volunteerism and other materials designed to help bridge the gap between underserved children and those who are ready for school.

These initiatives were an eye opener. They allowed me to gain a better understanding of the depth and scope of the early childhood development issue, and I realized that so much more needed to be done to make a meaningful impact.

Then, about 18 months ago, we began to talk to our employees about what causes they felt PNC should support. Children and education topped the list. That clinched it for us.

Q: Many business executives are converted by the power of the new scientific research on brain development. Did that research win you over? If so, do you remember how you first learned about it?
A: The research can be very convincing—Dr. Steve Barnett’s in particular. When I read that underserved 5-year-olds begin school 18 months behind the average 5-year-old in terms of vocabulary, I just shook my head. That's a huge gap to bridge. The children recognize that as well, which can lead to them participating in less desirable activities.

Q: Do you see pre-K as an integral part of school reform?
A: In designing PNC Grow Up Great, our goal is to make more people aware that the pre-K years play a critically important role in a child’s development. And we will channel resources and develop tools that will hopefully make a meaningful impact.

But we are not the experts, so we are not attempting to dictate reform per se. From an advocacy perspective, we want more people talking about the issue and working toward feasible solutions. That means we have to engage all interested parties—educators, legislators, corporations, and, of course, parents.

Q: You have worked in many coalitions in Pennsylvania that focused on improving early education opportunities. What brings other business leaders to the cause?
A: Awareness. Whether you’re in business, government or the nonprofit community, you cannot ignore the tremendous impact this issue will have on our country’s future if it is not adequately addressed.

Whether you’re in business, government or the nonprofit community, you cannot ignore the tremendous impact this issue will have on our country’s future if it is not adequately addressed.

Business leaders will become involved for one of two reasons: one, it’s the right thing to do; or, two, this issue will impact my future employee pool or the economic strength of the communities I serve, so I will take the necessary steps to run my business.

I think the vast majority of business leaders will fall in the first category. Either way, the business case for improving school readiness is strong. As we increase awareness, I believe more business leaders will be drawn to the issue.
It was the fall of 2001, and the world outside was full of fear and trembling. But inside the classroom, Amy Hornbeck found a certain calm. She was in Denver and it was her chance to observe “Tools of the Mind” in action.

“The quiet was the first thing I noticed, and that the children seemed to know exactly what to do without adult direction,” she says. “They were completely absorbed. No one was running around crazy, no one was at loose ends. They were busy, relatively quiet, and so self-directed.”

That would be notable in most any classroom of 3- and 4-year-olds. But it was especially noteworthy, given the children’s background. This was a Head Start classroom, with nearly every child at risk of school failure and many suffering significant deprivation. Yet here they were, intent on the projects at hand, from fantasy in the housekeeping corner to building with blocks. Not only that, but they used language in a way that showed not only recognition, but comprehension.

Even better, Hornbeck says, these children were self-motivated and directed. She’d watched them plan the activities before they even went to their stations, drawing pictures—sometimes only scribbles, but representations nonetheless—of what they intended to do that day. Then they spent more than a half hour—up to 50 minutes—carrying out the plan, with little input from the classroom teachers.

“I couldn’t believe what I saw at first,” she says. “They all planned out their activities and then they went off and did it. And they did it for longer than you normally see in a preschool classroom. Many teachers wouldn’t even believe me at first when I told them about it. They’d say it would be cruel or harsh to expect kids that age to spend that much time on one thing. But there it was. I’d seen it with my own eyes. The kids weren’t suffering!

If anything, they were happier and more focused than most preschoolers I’d ever observed,” she says. “And not one, not even one, was wandering without a purpose. Each one was engaged.”

Welcome to “Tools of the Mind,” a new approach to early education that seeks to cultivate children’s ability to regulate their emotions, activities and actions—to plan and follow through, using language and writing to get the job done. “It’s truly an innovation, a bridge between the two main schools of thought in early education. It’s not just free play with clay that can leave children directionless, nor is it what some of us call the “drill and kill” approach that stresses teaching basic skills through drills and worksheets that can kill their love of learning,” says Hornbeck, a research associate at the National Institute for Early Education Research.

More than anything, Hornbeck was intrigued by the prospect of teaching children self-regulation, a skill that is key to getting along in life way beyond preschool and a skill that studies show is best cultivated in the pre-school years. “Learning how to regulate emotions and attention is just so basic to everything else children have
Progress In Arkansas

Arkansas lawmakers voted to invest an extra $40 million in public preschool programs to lift the achievement of children in the state’s poorest school districts.

Bottom-line for Arkansas kids? Another 7,000 are expected to attend publicly-funded pre-K this fall—a big step for a state that is relatively poor, with many rural areas. By comparison, the number of new children served will match the new numbers served in Illinois and New Jersey this past school year. “This is a good start,” says Janie Huddleston, the state official who oversees the state’s prekindergarten program. She estimates that it would take an additional $60 million to serve all the 3- and 4-year-olds in need of public preschool, but this is the first significant expansion for the program in years.

The vote for new money came in a special session of the Legislature, much of it dedicated to education reform in the wake of rulings from the state’s highest court, which continues to find public schools sub-par. Special masters appointed by the court have noted that preschool can have a dramatic impact on student achievement.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, which had worked for years to win such an expansion, immediately launched an outreach program to get more children enrolled. At the same time, Huddleston announced that she and other officials are currently developing a “road map” to serving every eligible preschooler in the state.

New Aid For Researchers

Nothing helps advance the cause of universal preschool more than good research, and now those seeking to do studies have a new tool. In the interests of promoting more research into early childhood programs, the National Center for Children in Poverty and the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan have joined forces with the federal government’s Child Care Bureau to create a “50-State Data Tool,” which will make it possible to create custom data tables that compare key early care and education demographics, and economic statistics across states. For more information, visit www.childcareresearch.org and click on “50-State Data Tool.”

Alabama Retreats

Former Governor Don Siegelman made early childhood education a top priority for Alabama, establishing a state Department of Children’s Affairs and taking some of his most senior staff to North Carolina for lessons on how to get a statewide, high-quality early education program off the ground. In 1999, he also tried to get state lawmakers to create a new lottery to fund public preschool. Siegelman managed to launch 72 preschool programs for 4-year-olds and his efforts were widely cheered by activists and experts happy to see the state address the terrible deficits so many young children there face. Indeed, Alabama continues to rank toward the bottom on nearly every measure of child health, literacy and well-being.

This winter, Governor Bob Riley’s Commission on Efficiency, Consolidation and Funding suggested rolling early childhood initiatives into a new Agency of Human Services. As this newsletter went to press, it looked like the Legislature would green-light that suggestion. If so, it would be a setback for Alabama’s kids.

The cuts are supposed to save money, but Pam Baker, the first director of the Office of Children’s Services, saw the change as penny-wise and pound-foolish. “The only money they save will be rent and utilities,” she told local reporters. Indeed, it seemed clear that lawmakers had not seen the study from the Minnesota Federal Reserve, which shows a 12 percent return on investment in preschool.

The New Necessity

Two out of every three preschoolers now attend preschool, compared to just 4 percent in the mid-1960s. The reason? “The science says it all: preschool programs are neither a luxury nor a fad, but a real necessity,” according to a recent article in Newsweek.

— American Prospect, April 2004
Parents Vote With Their Feet

Lest policymakers ever worry that support for preschool might ebb, all they need do is visit preschools at registration time. In an Atlanta suburb, parents paid caregivers up to $400 a night so they could camp overnight and hold a spot at the Mary Lin Elementary School, one of the most widely respected programs in the city. The line-up started a full two days before registration began, according to a report in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

The overnight campers echoed the strong sentiment voiced in New York State last year, when pre-K funding cuts were proposed there. More than 100,000 parents and other concerned citizens signed petitions urging the governor and state lawmakers to make good on legislation in that state which promised universal pre-K to its youngest citizens.

UPK In California?
Reiner Won’t Give Up

Actor/director Rob Reiner is not about to abandon his quest for universal prekindergarten in California, despite the recent withdrawal of a ballot initiative he helped to spearhead. Reiner and the California Teachers Association agreed to end the petition drive this spring after the drive came under attack from both business and major media outlets, including the L.A. Times.

Reiner pledges to return to voters with a new proposal by 2006. “We just see this as one more bump on the road to winning quality education for every child,” says Ben Austin, spokesman for First 5 California effort. First 5, a statewide commission dedicated to expanding public preschool programs across the state, was created after Reiner led a similar campaign in 1998 to win a tobacco tax to pay for early education and other services for children.

“We believe it is inevitable that California will have universal preschool as part of its education system in the future. It’s just a matter of time.”

And, Austin adds, the loss also offered lessons on how to win the next round. “We probably came out of the gate too fast, suggesting a commercial tax this year,” says Austin. “We see now that we should have taken more time to build support. We should have taken more time to win over big business, to help them see it was in their interest to support early education. We also needed to build more support among our natural allies across the state.”

“But,” he adds, “We are not giving up. We are not going away. That’s the one thing we want to make clear. We will be back. Rob believes passionately in this cause, and we just see this as a learning curve,” says Austin. “Sooner or later, there will be public preschool for all—and we hope to make sure it is sooner, rather than later.”

New National Center Clears Way For Disabled Kids

Most public preschool initiatives still experience difficulties when it comes to dealing with children who have disabilities. Such students are often educated separately rather than fully integrated into state preschool programs. Often, it’s not for lack of trying—nearly all educators now recognize the benefits of integrating children of all ability levels into the classroom. In fact, 31 percent of preschool kids with disabilities who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in public school are in general education classes and 13 percent of Head Start kids have IEPs—they are all integrated.

But few state systems have perfected the supports for transition of the preschool children with disabilities as they graduate from infant-toddler programs or move along to kindergarten. That’s why the federal government has funded a new National Early Childhood Transition and Training Center (NECTC) at the University of Kentucky to study and report on the best practices in early education for helping disabled children—and their families and teachers—navigate the choppy waters of transition.

The new center is currently collecting descriptions and evidence on specific approaches in order to study and validate the best practices and smooth the way for children with disabilities as they progress through the early years. To share information from your program or learn more about the ongoing research, visit www.ihdi.uky.edu/nectc/.
to learn,” says Hornbeck. “With it, they can get along, pay attention and build more skills. Without it, they almost certainly get frustrated and frustrate other people.”

NIEER Director Steve Barnett now has a full-fledged research study underway to see how well the “Tools” method works. “The initial results look good, and I am very excited to see more,” says Barnett. “This could be one of the most important innovations in early education in years.”

Think First, Act Later
The “Tools” method is based on the writings and philosophy of L. S. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who had developed quite a following in Eastern Europe even before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Initially trained as a philologist, Vygotsky decided to take up psychology to follow his lifelong interest in human development. Though he died in the mid-1930s, his work about the central importance of language and culture in child development gradually gained a wide following in the Soviet Bloc. More than most of his peers, he saw the potential for using language and dramatic play to cultivate both children’s ability to learn and to enhance their emotional growth.

In the Vygotskian classroom, children use language and other forms of representation—drawing, scribbling and eventually writing—to plan their activities. “They are learning to think ahead and act based on those thoughts,” says Deborah Leong, who co-created the “Tools” methods with Elena Bodrova. “That’s the beginning of self-control and self-regulation, the ability to direct oneself instead of always needing the adults to plan and regulate everything.”

But the curriculum is based on an even deeper and richer conception of human development, calling upon children to use their minds in a more expansive way than most other techniques. “Vygotsky understood that language was a vehicle for not only representing the world, but expanding development and learning. Vygotsky believed that planning play was the activity that would produce the most positive developmental outcomes. This approach gets children to use language and representation to plan and think before they even begin to act,” says Leong. Those activities, in turn, lead children to create ever-more sophisticated narratives, role-playing, and representations that keep them engaged and expand their universe of knowledge.

Such learning is evident in public preschool classrooms in Passaic, New Jersey, which have adopted the “Tools” approach. One teacher, Yannelys Aparicio, and her aide, Leticia Dennis, gather the 17 children who show up in mid-March and get them to plan their morning play. Nearly every child in this classroom started out as a non-English speaker, and most qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Yet each one takes paper and scribbles or draws a “sketch,” some more representational than others, of what he or she plans to do for the next hour.

One child, Zavier, plans to go to housekeeping and enact a drama about taking the baby to the doctor. Emily also has plans for the housekeeping corner, but initially, they do not include a sick baby doll. But within minutes, the two join each other there, gradually adapting their narrative to include each other and the baby doll. The other children troop to other learning stations, using blocks, paints, or a sink and a sand table for their imagi-
nary dramas.
Aparicio watches, but rarely takes part in the play unless it is to help the children move their narrative along. “The teachers ask questions and get children to think their way through their roles and expand the narrative,” says Hornbeck. “In that way, they scaffold the children’s ability, serving as a platform and asking questions so the children can add ideas and language, solve problems and keep on learning.”

So it is with Aparicio who only gently asks Emily in housekeeping, “Oh, do you hear the baby crying?” That simple inquiry sparks Emily and Zavier to expand their imaginary roles as parents and move the story along, dress the baby and go to the doctor. “With each question, the children enrich their play and take it to a new level,” says Leong. “Or at least, that’s the idea.”

The increasingly sophisticated role-playing helps the children problem-solve, empathize, and get along. So do other parts of the “Tools” method. For example, at reading time, children pair off and one gets a pair of toy lips and another gets toy ears. The one with the lips reads, while the one with the ears must listen. “This helps children learn to listen, take turns, really important social skills,” says Hornbeck. “But it’s not because a teacher is telling them to. It’s because they are doing it themselves. After a while, they don’t need the props. It’s internalized.”

Citation: The “Tools of the Mind” curriculum helps children learn to think ahead and plan their own activities.

Certainly, the results are promising in Passaic. The number of children sent to the principal’s office for a time-out virtually disappeared by mid-year. That’s down from two incidents a day at the beginning of the year.

“What’s exciting is that this is coming from the children directing themselves, not from the teachers directing them,” says Hornbeck. “You see and feel the difference as soon as you are in these classrooms. The children don’t need to challenge the teachers because they are in charge of themselves. And with their improved language, they are better able to get along with each other.”

Study Underway
Can the method be adopted across America? That is Leong’s hope and a question that Barnett, Hornbeck and their colleagues at NIEER are now exploring. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has already embraced “Tools” as a promising innovation and features it on the International Bureau of Education’s website.

The big question remains whether the approach can be replicated, or whether it depends heavily on particularly talented teachers. “For me, that’s the ultimate question,” says Dorothy Strickland, professor of education at Rutgers University and member of the National Early Literacy Panel. “It will take teachers who are really well-trained in the method. When they are, it is a very, very exciting new approach.”

For more information, contact Hornbeck at ahorbeck@nieer.org or Deborah J. Leong at leongd@mscd.edu. For UNESCO’s endorsement of the new method, visit http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/Databanks/innodata/igraph.htm.
How To Get All Of The Teachers Certified? Illinois Tries To Chart A New Roadmap

This spring, activists in Illinois went where few others have dared. Yet, it’s a place that nearly all policymakers agree is essential to moving the cause of public preschool forward.

They asked state legislators to mandate statewide “articulation” agreements among colleges and universities to make it easier for aspiring teachers to transfer credits on their way to getting certified. Initially, the activists proposed that such agreements be in place, by law, by 2005.

The goal was to remove a key obstacle for aspiring teachers eager to get the credentials they need to teach in public preschool classrooms. Many start out at community colleges, only to find that few universities will recognize and grant credit for the work at two-year institutions. That translates to major headaches for students and policymakers trying to increase the supply of certified teachers. In Illinois, one aspiring teacher told lawmakers about her star-crossed journey to a bachelor’s degree. “I have spent an exorbitant amount of money taking and re-taking classes,” said Samantha Blake, student at William Harper College. She finally abandoned the cause and decided to just get certified in elementary education. “It was just too frustrating.”

Multiply Blake’s experience by the thousands and a major public policy dilemma is born. “Anyone who spends any time at all looking into the issues around pre-K quickly bumps into this issue,” says Wanda Newell, education program officer at the McCormick Tribune Foundation. “We want a qualified workforce and preschool teachers are doing everything we tell them to do to get those qualifications—only to run into a wall of frustration when they try to put together the college credits they need for the certification.”

The dilemma is not unique to Illinois. Increasingly, state boards of higher education are hearing about the problem, and some are making headway toward a solution. New Mexico is the only state to have a law on the books that requires such cooperation among colleges and universities. Daniel Haggard, head of the Office of Child Development, freely admits it took years to reach consensus and hammer out an agreement. The state now has a “universal” catalogue of courses that early childhood professionals can consult and make their way from a Child Development associate’s degree all the way to a bachelor’s degree. New Jersey activists, educators, and policymakers have struggled for years to resolve articulation problems now that the state’s pre-K program requires that teachers have a bachelor’s degree and special certification. But few formal agreements are yet in place among its colleges and universities. “It’s one of the hardest barriers to clear,” says Florence Nelson of Kean College, who is overseeing that effort.

So it was in Illinois, as activists there quickly learned. “It turned out to be extremely controversial. Anyone who wants to take this up should be prepared for a fight,” says one activist, who asked to remain unnamed. “It’s so sensitive that people just stopped talking to each other. We are hoping to salvage it now by asking for something less than a mandate.”

Most notably, the state’s four-year universities were loathe to surrender their autonomy to design courses, and responsibility for ensuring that prospective teachers were well-trained in core areas of child development and early childhood teaching methods—for fear of compromising their standards. “Once you get into this, you realize there are no easy answers. What you have to do is keep the dialogue going,” says Julia Delapp of the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

By May, new headway was apparent, as lawmakers agreed to sponsor legislation that would spur a “plan” for articulation, rather than a mandate. “This is real progress,” says Delapp. “We hope, in time, to come close to the system in New Mexico. Without it, Newell adds, efforts to improve pre-K will falter. “Preschool teachers are running all over, taking courses and training, trying to comply with new demands. What we have to do now is create a real framework to support their efforts.” For more information on the legislation in Illinois, contact Julia Delapp at jdelapp@ounceofprevention.org.
New Findings On Early Literacy

What Makes A Reader? Distinguished Experts Take A Look At What The Research Says

With the federal spotlight on early literacy, teachers and policymakers alike have been both pressured and confused—pressured to come up with concrete improvement in children’s early literacy and confused about how to do that.

That’s because researchers in the field persist in their disagreements over what works best. Is phonics—and the ability to recognize sounds that make up words—the key to boosting children’s literacy? Or does a print-rich environment do more? Does simply expanding the number of words a preschooler knows enhance reading, language comprehension and facility with written language later on? Do kids pick up literacy skills in daily conversation with adults—or does more structured work on language help?

In some ways, the answer to all these questions is a resounding ‘yes’—which speaks to the confusion many teachers feel. Dorothy Strickland, professor of education at Rutgers University, member of the National Early Literacy Panel and longtime expert on early learning, recalls a teacher saying “First I was told to put up the alphabet, then take it down and teach one letter at a time. Now I am told to put it up again. I am so confused, please tell me what to do!” The teacher approached her at a meeting on early childhood literacy and Strickland was struck by the depth and sincerity of her confusion. “I felt for her. I could see she was dedicated and wanted to do what’s best for children,” says Strickland. “And what she’s been hearing from all sides has just been confusing. That’s why everyone wanted to see the panel review the research and come up with some recommendations.”

The “panel” is the National Early Literacy Panel, created through the Family Partnership in Reading Project and funded by the National Institute for Literacy to review the research and come up with some best practices for the field. The good news is that much more is known about how children develop literacy skills than a decade ago. However, much of the research has dripped out, in dribs and drabs, without an overall framework to guide it. But now, the panel hopes to provide more guidance, some operational principles and concrete insights to help teachers in the classroom. “I do believe we can teach literacy and teach it well. I think the research is very helpful in telling us what to do, and we will have some concrete recommendations this summer,” says Strickland.

Still, she adds, she hopes that practitioners and policymakers will take the new recommendations under advisement. It should be used judiciously, with an eye for the whole child—not just the development of language. “My only concern is that people use them in context—

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New Findings On Early Literacy

What Makes A Reader? Distinguished Experts Take A Look At What The Research Says

Continued from page 11

that they really place them in the context of child development, and not apply what we have to say too literally,” Strickland cautions. Nonetheless, she adds, “I feel so hopeful about the direction of the field and what we have to offer teachers, parents and children.”

The new panel had four basic questions to answer, starting with an appraisal of the skills and abilities of young children, ages birth to 5, that predict later outcomes. Already, the panel has issued a summary of its findings to that initial query, describing the range of skills that contribute to children’s growing facility with language: Oral language, knowledge of the alphabet, an understanding of print language and how it is used in everyday life, and knowledge of letters and numbers. These—along with visual memory—all contribute to a child’s early literacy.

“Those findings point to a number of useful strategies in the classroom,” says Strickland, “including many of the things many teachers and parents already do, such as read and talk to the children and teach them letters and numbers.” But, she adds, the research also underscores the critical importance of teaching these skills in the “personal context” of a child—that is, in a way that actively engages the child, allows a child to use and apply the skills. “A teacher might create what she calls a ‘print-rich’ environment, for example, by simply posting words around the room. But those words won’t mean anything to a child until the child has some experience using them, seeing them written, and seeing a connection between their written form and that usefulness,” she says.

A good example of what works? “A shopping list. Or a recipe,” she says. “In those cases, children see a relation between the words, those words as references to things in the world, and the way spoken and written words can be used to get things done.”

Many other findings of the new panel are expected to be reported this year, probably in June. In the meantime, Strickland offers some initial guidance on the best practices in an article in the journal, Children and Families, Winter 2004, pp. 24 – 30, and an overview on the panel and its activities in Educational Leadership, March 2003, p. 74.

The Four Questions

The early literacy panel was created to consider the four following issues and make recommendations based on a synthesis of existing research. Their findings will offer teachers and policymakers concrete ideas on how to turn preschoolers into avid readers.

- What skills and abilities do children under the age of 5 have that predict how well they read later on?
- How do early learning environments help or hinder those skills?
- How do the characteristics of children help or hinder those skills?
- How do early learning programs or other interventions promote or undermine those skills?