FROM THE DIRECTOR’S CHAIR

Press, Politics Make Rough Sailing For Research

You don’t need a Ph.D. to figure out that just as research can inform policy, it can also misinform it. Nowhere was the use and misuse of research more on display than in the debate over California’s Proposition 82 ballot measure calling for state-funded preschool for all. For every study cited by those favoring state-funded preschool for all California 4-year-olds, it seemed another study purported to make the case against it.

Whatever the merits or demerits of Prop 82, its defeat may have been due in part to the misuse of research that led to erroneous conclusions about the effects of preschool education. In too many cases, the press gave dubious findings equal weight with those from more rigorous studies and accepted without challenge claims that were misleading and false. While seasoned education reporters can often navigate these waters successfully, the political reporters who wrote much of the Proposition 82 story ran aground for lack of sufficient background with which to judge the research quality.

The rise of dubious opposition research to combat rigorous findings in the field is a problem that will only be addressed when consumers of research are better informed. They ought to know, for example, that randomized trials specifically designed to assess preschool program effects are better sources of information than analyses of data from general purpose surveys that provide no measures of program quality, no verification of program participation, and only post-test data on children’s abilities. They ought to know that the reported 65 percent participation in preschool among California children refers to any center-based program and that most of these are of very limited educational value.

This means that those of us in the research community have a great deal of work to do to educate the public and the media day in and day out—not just when an issue rises to the top of the political agenda.

On page 8 of this issue, we report a prime example of strong research—new results on preschool’s effects from the IHDP study, a randomized trial with a large sample of children from diverse backgrounds that followed them to age 18. Far from detecting fade-out, the IDHP study found substantial positive effects from preschool among children as they enter adulthood. On page 3 of this issue, we report results from another randomized trial—NIEER’s study of half-day vs. full-day preschool. Conducted in a New Jersey school district with predominantly low-income families, it showed significant gains for children who attended a full-day program over those who did not.

Of course, no study, no matter how strong, stands by itself. Each should be interpreted in the context of the larger body of scholarship and measured according to commonly accepted criteria for judging research. If we look harder at how a study was conducted before accepting what it says, we can considerably reduce the confusion.

This task is made more difficult when big money fuels media campaigns. In California, the campaigns for and against proposition 82 spent millions. In such a climate, half-truths can emerge and become accepted as “fact.” Turbulent waters await researchers when a combination of cash and spin intervene between their research and the public perception of it. The best way to navigate such seas is to invest in solid research for the long term and proactively educate those who will tell the story and their audiences.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

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Can More Full-Day Pre-K Address the Readiness Gap?

Latest NIEER Research Points in that Direction

The big news in preschool circles has been the double-digit rate of growth in state-funded programs in recent years. As more children attend state-funded pre-K, however, the conversation in some places is increasingly turning to the issue of duration. Are half-day programs sufficient for all kids who attend them or are the states, districts and municipalities developing full-day programs on the right track?

Support for the latter option, at least for populations of disadvantaged children, comes by way of recently-released findings from a study conducted by NIEER researchers in a New Jersey school district. It compared test scores of children from a low-income community who attended either an 8-hour public preschool program, or 2.5- to 3-hour public programs. Those attending the full-day program achieved significantly higher scores in reading and math than children who attended half-day programs. Furthermore, those gains persisted through kindergarten and into first grade.

The study is significant in that it is the first randomized trial to compare half- and full-day programs. NIEER researchers compared 85 children who were assigned to an 8-hour program for 45 weeks to 254 children assigned to 2.5 to 3-hour programs for 41 weeks. All children were from the same school district. Because a limited number of spaces were available in the 8-hour program, a lottery determined entry and provided the basis for the random assignment. Children not selected through the lottery primarily attended the half-day programs. Backgrounds of the children in the study resembled the make-up of the school district, which is 50 percent Hispanic and 21 percent African-American with more than 75 percent of all families living in poverty.

Positive Impacts

The classroom quality in both programs was rated as fairly high, teacher-to-student ratios were low and teachers in both programs were required to have bachelor’s degrees. The children were assessed in the fall and spring of their pre-K and kindergarten years, and about half were assessed again in the spring of first grade. Results showed that both programs had positive impacts on achievement—but the full-day program showed clear and promising advantages over the half-day.

In the spring of their kindergarten year, the half-day children achieved a little over 90 percent of the national norm in math and approached 90 percent of the national norm in language. The full-day children, on the other hand, bracketed the national norm in both tests—exceeding it in math and falling just short of it in language (See chart).

“The results of this study show that students who are far behind at entry to preschool can develop vocabulary, math and literacy skills that approach national norms,” says Ken Robin, one of the lead researchers on the project, “As long as high quality is maintained, children seem to benefit from more of a good thing.” Considering NIEER’s findings, high-quality full-day programs may play an important role in addressing the school readiness gap.

That thought is not lost on New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn who has proposed that the city adopt full-day pre-K for its children participating in the state Universal Prekindergarten Program. Quinn says she sees the NIEER study as confirmation that “we simply cannot wait to provide our children with the full day of prekindergarten they need and deserve.”

Meanwhile, growth in extended-day programs continues. Georgia now provides more than 70,000 4-year-olds with 6.5 hours of preschool per day. North Carolina’s More at Four program serves more than 16,000 4-year-olds with at least six hours per day. Tennessee and Arkansas are expanding access to their programs which call for 4-year-olds to receive 5.5 and 7.5 hours per day, respectively.

In Oklahoma, where districts have a choice between half-day and full-day programs, enrollment in state-funded full-day preschool has grown 82 percent since 2002. Federal Head Start has expanded its full-day programs, too.

The study is detailed in the NIEER working paper Is More Better? The Effects of Full-Day vs. Half-Day Preschool on Early School Achievement and is available at nieer.org. ■

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Math and Language Scores by Length of Pre-K Day

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* National Average Score = 100

Fall of Pre-K | Spring of K

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Standard Scores:

- **50**: Fall of Pre-K
- **100**: Spring of K

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MAY/JUNE 2006
Does Exposure to Digital Technology Really Harm Preschoolers?

The Potential to Harm or Help is There, But Definitive Answers Are Hard to Come By

The digital revolution may have passed by some adults, but it hasn't missed young children. More preschool-age children than ever learn to wield a mouse, play games, listen to music and even type on the home computer. Those who keep track of technology in education like Warren Buckleitner, Editor of Children’s Technology Review (CTR), say that is but a warm-up for the infusion of technology children will encounter in school.

Buckleitner sees a future in which computer screens hang from preschool ceilings instead of desktop versions. Dance pads and eye toys will enable children to manipulate computer images. Webcams will take them to once-inaccessible places. The same game console technology that is a platform for often-violent videogames is, he says, evolving into education applications as well.

Promising as all this may be, it is accompanied by widespread concern over what digital technology’s effect on children might ultimately be. Concern over technology’s influence on youngsters is probably as old as technology itself. Before the computer era, film, radio and television ignited debate about potential effects on children. Television, many experts said, would lower academic achievement and shorten attention spans. Such dire predictions were not always borne out by research findings.

Ellen Wartella, a leading scholar in media and children’s development says the key to whether these technologies exert a positive or negative influence is the content they carry. Her new book, *Children and Television: 50 Years of Research*, compiles and summarizes a large body of research findings. In it, there is ample fodder for both sides of the debate. She says the research is “highly consistent” in finding that children learn violence from the media and as a result develop a predisposition to this type of anti-social behavior.

**Teaching Potential**

At the same time, the research also demonstrates that television can be used to teach pro-social lessons and cognitive skills. Children watching Mr. Rogers were found to be more considerate of their peers, play well together and share with others. Studies also showed that Big Bird, Kermit, Cookie Monster and the rest of the Sesame Street gang did in fact help children learn their letters and numbers, develop strong language skills, and learn basic arithmetic.

New research from two University of Chicago economists concludes that children exposed to television in the 1950s and 1960s had the same or slightly higher test scores than those who didn’t have television. Positive results were more pronounced where the household was nonwhite, English was a second language, or the mother had less than a high school education. The study did not look at content or how television affects a child’s focus, aggression or other behaviors.

Wartella notes that besides changes in the type and volume of children’s programming, there is also something else to watch—the age of first exposure to television has dropped while the amount of time spent viewing has increased.

“The best evidence we have says that children [born in the 1950s and 1960s] began watching television between ages 4 and 5,” Wartella says. “Today one-quarter of American families with children under 2 have television in the child’s bedroom.”

Computers seem destined to follow the same pattern. The U.S. Department of Education reports that 67 percent of children between ages 2 and 5 have used computers, and 23 percent have surfed the Internet with adult supervision. A 2003 telephone survey conducted by Princeton Research Associates for the Kaiser Family Foundation found that nearly three out of four (73 percent) families with children 6
months to 6 years of age have a computer at home, and about half (49 percent) have a video game player. It also found that new media is trumping old: nearly twice as many children in this age group live in a home with Internet access (63 percent) as with a newspaper subscription (34 percent). Nearly all of them (97 percent) have products—clothes, toys and the like—based on characters from TV shows or movies.

“ar Coley, CEO of Computer Tots - Computer Explorers, a company providing software, curriculum and training, says schools—including preschools—are recognizing how technology has become an integral part of kids’ lives. For example, the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires 8th graders to demonstrate computer proficiency, an acknowledgement that such skills are critical in the globalized, high-tech marketplace today’s children will enter. Some preschool providers are finding that offering computer-based learning is necessary to compete. Wartella would like to see research that explores whether computer-based learning helps children better negotiate the multi-tasking world they encounter today.

In the vanguard of organizations concerned about technology’s growing presence in children’s lives is the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP has recommended strict limits on children’s “screen time,” which includes television, videos, videogames and computers. The AAP cites studies showing that toddlers who watched any amount of television had lower reading and long-term memory scores, were more likely to engage in bullying, and had attention problems more often. The organization recommends that screen time for children be limited to one to two hours per day. Children under 2 should not be exposed to any screen time, says the AAP.

Wartella believes caution is in order when exposing young children to television. “Television exposure often begins in the first year of life, and we just don’t know the long-term consequences of such early exposure,” she says. A voice lending support to Wartella’s position is Scott Traylor, an educational game developer and assistant professor with Harvard Extension. Like Buckleitner, Traylor is pro-technology when it comes to education applications. Yet he is suspicious of bombarding 3- and 4-year-olds with technology when the educational merits of the products are not known. His rule of thumb: “I try to think, ‘What would Mr. Rogers do?’” Shows like Mr. Rogers Neighborhood pioneered the use of television to interact with children in an educational way. Hedda Sharapan, a 38-year veteran of the Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood staff, sees a difference between that show and some of the media being developed today. She cites the personal nature of Fred Rogers’ approach and the conversation he had with children as defining qualities—what Wartella calls content—that made the show a cultural icon.

Sharapan also recognizes the limitations of the technology. “My child development background says to me that there’s something very different about building with blocks that are three-dimensional, that I can touch and that I’m balancing in my hand, than manipulating something onscreen. We need children to have real experiences with objects and then the virtual experiences can give them another level of understanding,” she says. Or as Fred Rogers was fond of saying, “A computer can help you know how to spell hug, but it can’t help you get those feelings.”
Illinois Passes Preschool for All
It’s the First State Planning to Serve 3- and 4-Year-Olds with a Universal Program

When the Illinois Legislature passed Governor Rod Blagojevich’s Preschool for All proposal and he signed it into law, the Prairie State became the first in the nation to develop a state-funded pre-K program intended to eventually serve all 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents wish them to attend. The recently passed state budget dedicates $45 million to moving toward universal preschool in 2007. According to the governor’s office, that will enable 10,000 more children to have access to state pre-K.

The latest increase follows a total of $90 million worth of increases over the past three years and raises total spending for state-funded pre-K to $318 million. A total of $145 million has been allocated to moving toward universal access over the next three years. The new program, passed by large majorities in both houses of the legislature, will enable every community to offer state-funded preschool in a variety of settings, including public and private schools, child care centers and other community-based agencies. It requires that preschools be staffed by teachers who have bachelor’s degrees and training in early education and that providers deliver at least 2.5 hours per day of high-quality instruction designed to foster cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills.

In the early years of implementation, the program gives first priority to at-risk children and to working families that meet income guidelines. A family of four with an annual income of four times the federal poverty level will be eligible in the first year and 4-year-olds will be eligible before 3-year-olds will. State policymakers say it will take 5 years to reach full implementation of the program, at which time 190,000 children are projected to be enrolled.

The new program came about in part due to recommendations made by the Illinois Early Learning Council, a group comprised of policymakers, advocates and early education experts, including NIEER Scientific Advisory Board member Dr. Samuel J. Meisels of the Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child Development.

Washington State Moves to Align Early Childhood Departments

Teachers in Washington State report nearly half of all children are unprepared for learning when they enter kindergarten. With studies suggesting these deficits plague students’ ability to succeed throughout school, policymakers, led by Governor Christine Gregoire, decided to do something about it.

Expanding access to preschool was one solution… and that is happening. Not to be overlooked, however was something more structural: Washington’s fragmented approach to providing care under the supervision of the Department of Social and Health Services and the Department of Community Trade and Economic Development as well as under the care of the state school superintendent.

Seeing redundancy and fragmentation, Gregoire and Washington legislators created a new state agency—the Department of Early Learning. The consolidated agency will reduce bureaucracy, use funds more efficiently and serve as resource for parents and teachers. The new agency will be monitored to ensure its success and must file a report with lawmakers biannually. Its performance will be audited by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee by 2010.

By creating a department specifically for early education, Washington joins other leading states such as Georgia and Massachusetts.
State Funds for Head Start: Going But Not Growing

Supplementing Head Start programs with state funds is something that makes sense to those who see Head Start filling an important niche in the mix of early education services in the states. This allows states to build upon the services offered with federal Head Start funds by serving additional children, providing extended-day/extended-year programming, or otherwise enhancing services. States are offering Head Start supplements less frequently now than in the past, however. According to The State of Preschool: 2005 State Preschool Yearbook published by NIEER, fewer states are supplementing Head Start, fewer children are being served in state-supplemented Head Start, and less money is being spent by the states for that purpose than four years ago. Here is what has happened in state funding of Head Start between fiscal years 2002 and 2005:

- Inflation-adjusted funding by the states declined from $218 million to $152 million.
- Most of the decline in funding can be attributed to Ohio, the state with the largest Head Start supplement. Using inflation-adjusted numbers, Ohio’s funding fell from $110 million in 2002 to $49 million in 2005. Starting with fiscal year 2006, Ohio replaced its supplemental Head Start programs with a new program, the Early Learning Initiative.

- The total number of 3- and 4-year-olds in state-supported Head Start programs served declined from 27,900 to 17,400.
- The number of states supplementing Head Start declined from 19 to 17.
- Indiana and Washington state stopped funding Head Start programs.

Universal Pre-K Not Yet in California’s Cards

Since California’s Proposition 82 calling for state-funded universal preschool failed to pass, support has grown for Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s less ambitious pre-K plan. His proposal calls for directing $50 million of the state’s 2007 budget toward an expansion of 43,000 new pre-K slots in low-performing school districts and $50 million for beefing up the Child Care Facilities Revolving Fund to pay for pre-K facilities expansion.

Schwarzenegger’s plan, which hadn’t been approved by the legislature at press time, calls for spending $145 million over the next three years to expand pre-K access for 4-year-olds in low-performing districts. That’s a far cry from the $2.4 billion Proposition 82 would have dedicated to state-funded pre-K if it had passed.

Still, advocates seemed to view the governor’s plan as a base upon which to build future expansions in access and quality. Actor-director Rob Reiner, who spearheaded the drive for Proposition 82 asked opponents of the measure to “help us come up with another way” to provide early education to the state’s 4-year-olds. Reiner had also led the drive for Proposition 10, a 1998 ballot measure that passed and now funds early childhood education through a tobacco tax that delivers about $700 million a year.

Not all Californians are waiting for the state to move on providing universal access to state-funded preschool, however. The counties of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Santa Clara and San Mateo are already in the process of using state funds to offer universal access for 4-year-olds.

If test scores are any indication, the state has a long way to go in preparing children to succeed in school. According to the 2005 National Assessment of Education Progress, the reading level of the state’s fourth graders is lower than in 43 other states, with half failing to read at a basic level. Improving performance will be challenging in California since 38 percent of children starting school are English Language Learners.

A key feature of Proposition 82—and one reason its implementation would have been expensive—is it raised program standards, including requiring teachers to have bachelor’s degrees and be paid commensurately with public school teachers. While the Schwarzenegger plan increases access and builds facilities, it so far has done little to tackle California’s low rating for quality. The state program achieves only 4 of NIEER’s 10 benchmarks for quality.

Despite its defeat, Proposition 82 succeeded in moving Pre-K forward on California’s agenda. “Our victory is that preschool is now high on the California radar,” says Catherine Atkin, president of advocacy organization Preschool California. “There will never be another serious conversation in this state about school reform that does not include preschool,” she says.

Rob Reiner, who championed Proposition 82 and its predecessor, Proposition 10, visits a California preschool. Photo credit: California First Five
Numerous studies have shown that children who attend high-quality preschool programs make significant gains in the short term. A more difficult challenge, however, is showing long-term gains from preschool programs. That’s why the positive effects found in recently published findings from a rigorous long-term study of low-birth weight children are so significant.

The 18-year follow-up to the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP) not only confirms findings from earlier rigorous studies like the Carolina Abecedarian study and Perry Preschool study, but it also expands the findings to a bigger, broader sample of children. Because it was a large, rigorous randomized trial conducted in multiple locations, it points to the probability that sustained positive effects can be gained from larger programs.

Harvard School of Public Health Professor Marie C. McCormick and others funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, report long-term results from this study that began with 985 low-birth weight children divided into a heavier and a lighter group. Children in the treatment groups received an intensive preschool education intervention beginning when children reached age 1 and lasting for two years. All families benefited from a home visitation program during the children’s first three years of life. The children were assessed at ages 3, 5, 8 and 18.

Because it was a large, rigorous randomized trial conducted in multiple locations, it points to the probability that sustained positive effects can be gained from larger programs.

Key findings were:
• Members of the heavier group who received the intervention demonstrated higher achievement in math and reading and a lower propensity for risky behaviors. Though effect sizes were moderate, they remained constant. Effects seen as significant at ages 3 and 5 remained relatively undiminished at 8 and 18.

• The lighter group did not demonstrate higher achievement at age 18—a not entirely unexpected result given that this group’s effects appeared to fade by age 8—though effects were found at 3 and 5.

While the lack of sustained effects for the lighter group has the researchers scratching their heads for explanations, McCormick

How Do We Judge the Size of an Effect?

Researchers struggle with how best to gauge the significance of effects these days. In the IHDP study, the effect size at the end of the preschool intervention (age 3) was .75 of a standard deviation for the heavy group of low-birth-weight children. In other words, on a test with a mean score of 100 and a standard deviation of 16, that would be a 12-point gain. At ages 8 and 18, the effect size was a little less than one-third of a standard deviation, or 4 to 5 points, for the same group. In the dose-related findings for the children who attended 350 days or more at the center over two years, the effect at age 8 was .66 of a standard deviation—an effect Brooks-Gunn considers large.

While those are substantial effects, the estimates may in fact be on the conservative side. McCormick points to two aspects of the study that in her view could account for built-in bias against finding even larger effects:

• The children were born in the mid-1980s when preschool was more prevalent than in the 1960s when the Perry Preschool Project was undertaken and the 1970s when the Abecedarian Study occurred. Therefore, the control group not receiving the preschool intervention was more likely to attend some other type of preschool program than children in those older studies. If so, that would tend to “close the gap” between the control and treatment groups, making effect sizes smaller.

• All the children studied were premature, making it possible that they didn’t achieve the same magnitude of gains that full-term children would. Also, children at some of the study sites were born at the height of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s. It wasn’t unusual for low-birth-weight children born in such circumstances to suffer from additional impairment related to parental drug abuse.
and her team are more than a little encouraged by what they see for the heavier babies. “These findings are consistent with results seen in earlier long-term studies and are widely applicable to the general population,” she concludes. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, a professor at the National Center for Children and Families at Columbia University who worked with McCormick and others on the study says the findings “provide evidence for the growing belief that investment in early childhood education pays off in enhanced achievement in high school and reduced risky behaviors.”

What sets the IHDP study apart is that it takes this longitudinal research to a sample that, at age 18, consisted of 636 youngsters whose collective profile resembles the general population of children. The samples for the Perry Preschool and Carolina Abecedarian studies were far smaller and consisted entirely of economically disadvantaged children.

Nonetheless, the IHDP study is closely related to the Carolina Abecedarian study. It used a version of the Abecedarian Partners in Learning curriculum and administered full-day preschool interventions and home visits early in children’s lives. Both studies included doctor’s visits for treatment and control groups alike.

The way Brooks-Gunn sees it, the effects for the heavier group apply to all children. “Although the heavy babies in our study were low birth weight, they were only at slightly increased risk of impairment. What we find with them we can expect to find with full-term children,” she says.

Light Baby Group

As for the lack of sustained effects for the lighter babies, there are a couple of schools of thought. One is that at 2,000 grams or less per child, there might be a biological basis, such as impaired neurological development, for the lack of sustained effects. Another possibility may be that there was insufficient dosage to sustain effects among the lighter children. Brooks-Gunn leans in that direction, since the study found that children who attended center-based care 350 days or more had large sustained effects on achievement at age 8—regardless of whether they were in the heavy or light group. McCormick agrees saying, “The issue with regard to the lower birth weight group is how do we sustain the substantial effects that we saw at age 3?”

As with other long-term studies, more time will likely tell more of the tale. The Perry Preschool Study, for instance, has followed its sample through age 40 and identified and clarified preschool’s effects in areas such as earnings and employment, crime, child rearing and health behaviors. Whether the IHDP study follows that track is an open question. McCormick says no decisions have been made. Much depends on funding and how effectively the sample can be sustained. Today’s mobile society and prevalence of cell phones for which there is no directory do not make it easy. “It would be great to get data when these folks are in their 20s to track employment and other variables,” Brooks-Gunn says. To read more about the study, go to: http://www.rwjf.org/newsroom/newsreleases/detail.jsp?id=10396.
Can Child Care Centers Thrive After Public Pre-K Comes to Town?

New York State’s Approach Proves to Be a Winner

As public preschool gains in popularity, there’s at least one crowd still on the fence: Existing child care programs already serving 3- and 4-year-olds. It doesn’t take much to draw out the anxiety among existing providers about the impact of new or expanded public programs. “I hear the concern all the time, as I travel,” says Libby Doggett, executive director of the national advocacy group, Pre-K Now. “Existing providers are worried public preschool will put them out of business.”

Many providers worry they will lose their 4-year-olds, who are often seen as the financial linchpin of their operations. That doesn’t have to be the case, says a new report on the roll-out of pre-K services in New York State where existing providers—including child care centers, Head Start programs, settlement houses, special education providers and even family child care providers—are now partners in the delivery of public pre-K services.

Those services are free to parents, but each provider receives a per-child reimbursement. By including the full spectrum of existing providers, New York’s program makes the most of public and private investments already made in early childhood education, aligns them with the public schools and brings new resources to private programs which had been traditionally underfunded. Those are among the conclusions of a new report, “A Diverse Pre-K System Delivers: Lessons Learned in New York State,” to be released in June by Pre-K Now and Winning Beginning, New York. “And I don’t want to minimize the work it took to bring everyone together. There was a lot of hard work and a lot of learning across systems. But the results are quite promising for everyone.”

Among the benefits identified by educators and researchers studying the implementation of pre-K in New York are:

• Private programs could afford to buy new equipment and teaching materials.
• More teachers in private programs sought certification.
• More low-income children had access to services.
• Programs serving children with special needs could expand, creating more integrated classrooms.
• Professional development expanded for teachers in private programs.
• Developmentally appropriate practice increased across all settings.
• Private providers and schools began to align learning expectations.

New York’s experience grew out of a mandate for 10 percent of the services to be delivered by private programs, a requirement written into the law back in 1997. The law also allowed state officials to add pre-K services to existing programs, such as child care and Head Start, fueling experimentation on a broad scale. Today, private programs enroll 65 percent of the children and operate under contracts with their local school districts.

New York’s approach does more than blend sites or add classrooms at private sites. Various UPK providers share staff, supervision, funding streams, professional development and assessment, and learning expectations. “It’s a true partnership in the most successful communities,” says Kolben. In the Bronx in New York City, for example, teachers in private programs attend professional development sessions with those based in the schools, creating a rich dialogue on best practices for early childhood education.

“We are all learning together and that is part of the success and excitement,” says Bonnie Mallonga, director of the Future of America Learning Center in New York City. “We are all richer for it. We have more resources. More children can enroll because we add not only space, but also the hours that working parents need.”

Karen Schimke, director of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy and co-director of Winning Beginning, New York, says “What we’ve learned is that pre-K can be an engine of positive change for all concerned.”

In New York, private programs are now partners in the delivery of public pre-K services.
Channell Wilkins: Brings Community Action Leadership to Head Start Bureau

Channell Wilkins, a prominent leader from New Jersey with a strong record of helping underserved populations in both the public and private sectors was recently tapped to serve as associate commissioner of the Head Start Bureau in Washington, D.C. Wilkins brings plenty of hands-on experience—as president of the Board of Trenton Head Start and executive director of the New Jersey Community Action Association. Preschool Matters asked Wilkins about the issues he and Head Start face.

Q: What prompted you to accept the challenge of leading the national Head Start Bureau?
A: My career has been in public and non-profit service and management, especially around low-income families, and opportunity presented itself. I had just heard a pastor preach about faith without fear. I decided to challenge myself and acknowledge what others had told me in the Leadership Management for Urban Executives Institute, New Jersey. Alex Haley once said, “In every conceivable manner, the family is the link to our past and bridge to the future.” For me, it was my great-grandmother, grandmother, mother-in-law, wife, and aunt and uncle who reared me and connected me to Head Start or early education.

Q: What are the issues or new initiatives where you hope to make a difference?
A: I hope to make a difference with active listening, and in areas of reorganization and in the structure of the Head Start Bureau and in broadening the collaborations and partnerships of Head Start to better serve parents and children.

Q: How do you see Head Start responding to the changing preschool landscape—such as the call for greater coordination and collaboration?
A: We will actively engage the various states in an open dialogue to see how best to create synergy of resources and ideologies to improve the quality of life for low-income children and families. Hopefully, we will not only focus on the immediate plans but how we can collectively shape a system to address every child in need. Each state’s plan with Head Start may differ but we hope to find ways to partner and each share our best practices to develop better results.

Q: Do you think research can continue to contribute to the development of Head Start?
A: Yes. Ed Zigler once said: “Head Start is not a program, but a process driven by research.” Head Start’s origins are in research and its future will also be in research. The need to constantly challenge ourselves to do better is rooted in knowing through some forms of empirical data that what we do is valid and reliable and predictive.

Q: Some conclude from the Head Start Impact Study that one year of Head Start yields fairly small gains on children’s learning and development. First, do you agree with that interpretation? Second, what conclusions or implications do you draw from the study?
A: No. To minimize the impact of any learning, but especially for very young children, by classifying results as “fairly small gains” takes away from the reality that knowledge and learning is cumulative. Emerging lessons from early brain research helps us to understand how young children’s brains develop at astonishing speeds. The seeds of learning and social development planted today may not flourish at a pace acceptable to all but they must be planted to flourish at all.

Q: Head Start serves more than 900,000 children. With flat or declining budgets, what adjustments do you foresee as a result?
A: Head Start and many other programs for low-income children and families have found ways to survive and re-invent themselves during economically hard times. When is too much and what is the scenario when it becomes undoable? I don’t know. However, with scarce resources we will seek partnerships as noted above to compliment rather than compete. An important quote to remember, and I am paraphrasing, is this: “We will be judged by how we treat those in the dawn of life and the shadow of life.” The Head Start Bureau will seek to treat those in the dawn of life the best we can with what we have.

Q: What has been your most pleasant surprise since joining the Head Start Bureau?
A: I’ve been very surprised at the level of professionalism and dedication among the people here. These people contribute yeoman’s service with many working long hours. Their work follows them home, too. I know because I get e-mails that were written at 2 in the morning.

Channell Wilkins visiting a Detroit Head Start program.
A well-trained, knowledgeable workforce is an integral aspect of a quality early care and education (ECE) program. Yet most state polices require the ECE workforce to have only minimal pre-service credentials, and much of the in-service training to which teachers have access may actually do little to advance their knowledge and practice at any point in their careers. Furthermore, the current research base on early childhood professional development is not yet large enough to provide sufficient guidance to policymakers who wish to upgrade teachers’ training in order to also improve ECE quality.

This policy context serves as the basis for *Critical Issues in Early Childhood Professional Development*, which seeks to identify “the series of problems and gaps in the understanding of early childhood professional development” as well as “strategies to move both research and practice” (p. 1) in this area forward. Using contributions from more than 45 researchers and policymakers in the United States, the book has 15 chapters and is divided into five sections. In Section I, chapters tackle issues related to defining and measuring professional development as well as accurately assessing the training needs of a workforce with a wide variety of qualifications and characteristics. Section II discusses approaches to professional development that help teachers enhance children’s early learning and self-regulation.

The third section of the book focuses on professional development that provides teachers with training in response to classroom interactions, state literacy standards, and the field's standards of quality. Given the limited amount of professional development funds most programs have, Section IV examines the variables that need to be included when considering the costs and benefits of any training initiative. Also examined are the effects of providing parents with information about the quality of available ECE as a means for also increasing teacher professional development.

The book concludes with several chapters focusing on the research needed to improve early childhood professional development. Such studies include field trials of monitoring systems that could provide an accurate picture of both teachers’ daily practices and children’s outcomes, as well as examinations of the effect of specific types of professional development on teachers’ practices and children’s outcomes. In addition, studies need to determine not only what works best for particular groups of teachers but also how limited funds might best be spent in order to maximize children’s gains.

While there is much left to be learned about effective professional development for the ECE workforce, we do know that it is key for improving both teachers’ daily practice and the quality of ECE our country’s young children receive. *Critical Issues in Early Childhood Professional Development* is a valuable resource for researchers and policymakers who would like to play a role in expanding that knowledge base.

—Debra J. Ackerman, Assistant Research Professor, NIEER