A ‘Joy of Learning’ Recipe for Quality Pre-K

As regular readers of Preschool Matters know, more leaders are recognizing the value of high-quality preschool education for our children and the nation’s future. That’s why governors are increasing access to state programs, Congress is working to expand Head Start, and school board members are finding room in tight budgets for more pre-K. While a welcome development, expanding access is just one step in making the commitment to high-quality preschool education. Also necessary are the resources needed to provide rich learning experiences, from good teachers to well-constructed playgrounds.

In addition to issuing a new policy brief on what states can do in developing facilities, three articles in this issue explore important aspects of the infrastructure ingredient in the recipe for high-quality preschool education—the physical and institutional arrangements that enable children to enjoy learning and reach their full potential. With preschool education gaining popularity in political circles, it can be tempting for leaders to decree that more children should attend without giving sufficient thought to providing the facilities that can enable them to succeed.

Those less familiar with the ways young children develop and learn may envision pre-K settings the way they do classrooms in the higher grades, with rows of desks and teachers “instructing” from the front of the room. The more we know about learning for preschool-age children, the more we realize how inadequate these settings are.

Preschoolers need to explore and experiment with their social and physical environment. That environment should include not only teachers skilled at encouraging active learning, but also features that enable them to do so—ample play space, learning centers, all kinds of “stuff” from sand and water to pots and pans, and accommodations for good nutrition, teacher preparation and parental involvement. “Pre-K’s Big Question: Where Will We Put the Kids?” on page 3 explores some of the challenges of developing high-quality facilities that foster the joy of learning while meeting licensing standards and taking into account the ever-present need to efficiently expend resources.

As preschool education grows, so does the need to integrate it effectively with primary education. One approach promoted by the Schools of the 21st Century movement is to locate early care and education in the elementary schools. “Build It and They Will Come: One-Stop Access to Early Care and Education” on page 4 profiles the experience in Independence, Missouri, where the movement began.

Providers developing new or expanding current pre-K capacity often find financial support and business guidance targeted to their sector difficult to find. That’s changing as public/private partnerships are stepping in with loans, business expertise, and a systems approach to growth. “New Investment Bank for Children” on page 6 examines how one nonprofit blends private sector expertise with the public interest to expand early care and education.

As any good cook will tell you, a recipe is only as good as its ingredients.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research supports early childhood education initiatives by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. NIEER is one component of a larger early education initiative designed, funded and managed by The Pew Charitable Trusts.
Pre-K’s Big Question:
Where Will We Put the Kids?

As State-Funded Pre-K Grows, Finding Enough Space Is One Challenge. Having the Right Space in the Right Place Is Another.

The expansion in public preschool education continues apace. Before the ink is dry on the enabling legislation, however, there are those who must ponder the facilities questions. Does the physical space exist to accommodate the swelling ranks of children? If so, does it provide enriching learning environments? Equally important, is it suitably located? If not who will provide it and how?

Supported by research showing benefits for children and economic returns to society from an “invest early” strategy, political and business leaders are driving the movement to improve and expand preschool programs. “As more states fund preschool education, ensuring an adequate supply of quality preschool facilities promises to become an increasingly critical public policy function,” says Carl Sussman, who heads Sussman Associates, a Massachusetts-based community development consulting practice.

Sussman and other experts say ensuring the supply of facilities meets the growing demand for them is no easy task. Many neighborhoods, particularly in built-up urban areas, have a limited supply of existing facilities that meet state standards for providing high-quality early childhood education and limited land area for new construction.

That proved true when California studied distribution of pre-K facilities and also when New Jersey began providing court-mandated, state-funded pre-K to needy school districts for the Abbott Preschool Program. Kathleen Priestley, a veteran Abbott Program early childhood supervisor in Orange, New Jersey, recalls, “Eight years ago, we were placing children in child care centers that met minimal licensing requirements, and still seriously under-serving the preschool population.” To begin the first Orange in-district classrooms, Priestley and her colleagues obtained temporary classroom units and rented space in a parochial school—not an ideal situation but one that enabled children to benefit from the Abbott program.

Priestley says some preschool providers have since been able to renovate and/or

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11 >>

Building Early Childhood Facilities: What States Can Do to Create Supply and Promote Quality

A joint publication of NIEER and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation addresses early childhood facilities from the quality, policy, development, and finance perspectives. Authored by community development consultant Carl Sussman and Community Investment Collaborative for Kids (CICK) founder Amy Gillman, the report and companion policy brief discuss why facilities relate to children’s learning and program quality and explore various policies that can help bridge the gap between the cost of quality facilities and the financial realities of delivering early care and education. The authors explain numerous subsidization and lending strategies, pointing out features of policies in leading states that may be of value elsewhere. Sussman and Gillman also discuss the pros and cons of school and community settings, sound practices in design and development, and propose a number of best practices. Read the policy brief at http://nieer.org/docs/index.php?DocID=172 and the full report at http://nieer.org/docs/?DocID=168.
Build It and They Will Come: One-Stop Access to Early Education

Whether It’s Child Care, Family Services or Pre-K They’re After, Parents in Independence, Missouri Know Where to Go—the Local Elementary School

Nestled in the rolling hills east of Kansas City is Independence, Missouri—arguably the most kid- and parent-friendly city in the nation. What made it so is 20-plus years of effort dedicated to combining a patchwork of early childhood programs into one system centered in the elementary schools.

Each of the 13 elementary schools in the Independence School District houses a Child and Family Learning Center with which parents can link from the time children are in the womb until they leave fifth grade. Parenting, child care and infant and toddler programs operate in the same facilities and in relative harmony with pre-K and K-5 education. So do Head Start, Early Head Start and Even Start, since those federal programs are also part of the system.

The pay-off is this: Parents not only benefit from one-stop shopping but often gain access to programs they either wouldn’t be aware of or know they qualify for. Programs have a better shot at working together and reducing the speed bumps children can encounter with transitions from one to another. Connections between families and the centers are longer term and therefore stronger. When the system is well-run, teacher turnover can be low and children can do better in school.

Basing all the programs in the elementary schools dates to 1988 when Yale child psychologist Edward Zigler spoke at a conference in St. Louis. Zigler, a founder of Head Start, was arguing for a system of early care and education embracing children from the time they come into the world through the elementary grades. “I’d been saying children need certain environmental nutrients to develop properly right from birth and these schools in our neighborhoods ought to be viewed more broadly as buildings where we can fashion a system to deliver it to kids and their families,” says Zigler.

Program Born
That sounded like a tall order. Moderating the St. Louis session, however, was Bob Henley, then superintendent of the Independence School District. Henley already had experience with the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program in the schools and was captivated by Zigler’s message. He told Zigler, “We can do this in Independence if you are willing to help.” That marked the birth of the Schools of the 21st Century program (known as 21C). Zigler, Henley and others developed it first as a demonstration project in Independence.

Today, the Independence program is so successful Working Mother magazine named it one of the top 10 school districts for children and families in the country and the Chamber of Commerce pitches it to attract newcomers. Not everyone predicted such an outcome. Two decades ago, superintendents often viewed early childhood programs as competition for funding. Henley wasn’t one. His experience with PAT and with Head Start programs in the schools told him Zigler’s vision could be accomplished. With that as a base, he says putting child care, before- and after-school programs and other pieces in place
turned out to be easier than anticipated. It was a matter of sitting down and deciding how to bring all parties to the table and make it work financially through a combination of public program funds—as opposed to general school funds—and parent fees.

Running it wasn’t as easy. Not all teachers accepted the idea of child care coming to school and child care staff didn’t always feel accepted when they got there. Boisterous young children were sometimes within earshot of elementary school classrooms. Small problems had a way of morphing into bigger ones. “We had issues like teachers guarding their supply of construction paper so it wouldn’t disappear or fretting over who could use machines or who caused them to break down,” says Henley, who is now retired. He found he had to constantly make assurances that they would buy more paper and fix machines if they broke.

There were other obstacles to overcome. Originally, the plan called for having child care services only at certain schools and transporting children from other neighborhoods to them. That didn’t work and before long, the impracticality of shuttling young kids became obvious. Now comprehensive early childhood education is in every school. Facilities had to be added, sometimes in the form of trailers brought on site. In recent years, the district has built early childhood facilities through bond issues—a sign of public support.

The second year, the centers ran more smoothly. By the time Zigler’s Yale colleague Matia Finn-Stevenson wrapped up an evaluation of the program in the 1990s, teacher turnover had dropped dramatically and parents were reporting less time taken off work because of failed child care arrangements. Schools were judged safer due to longer hours of operation for before- and after-school programs. Children who attended one of the two 21C schools evaluated were doing somewhat better on second grade reading and third and fourth grade math.

These days, the school doors open at 6:30 a.m. and don’t close until 6:00 p.m. Each school has Parents as Teachers (PAT), Head Start, Early Head Start, Even Start, Title I programs, state pre-K, kindergarten, grades 1 through 5, and before- and after-school programs.

Making It Work
Experience has taught the district to weave programs and funding. “If parents come to us with a 3-year-old and they are gone 10 hours a day, we find the programs and funding that can best serve them,” says Jim Hinson, who has been the Independence superintendent since 2002. Hinson and Zigler say the key to making it work smoothly are talented school principals. They must be capable administrators who share the birth-to-fifth grade vision and be supported by a capable early childhood staff person who is good at tracking children and funding.

Hinson monitors the early care and education markets and sets fees for parents who don’t qualify for subsidies about one-third below market rate. He says a key advantage these days is communication. Teachers across the system often sit at the same lunch tables and share insights about the children. Professional development occurs in much the same way, with private providers in the community often attending as well.

Support from parents is something Hinson calls “phenomenal.” They regularly contribute input through community site councils and acquire parenting skills in adult education classes offered by the centers. More recently, teen parents have been learning those skills through a program coordinated with the high schools. When it’s time for the teens to pick up their children at the centers, a hot meal is waiting and they learn during dinner while the kids play.

If one measures success by parent support, the Independence effort gets high marks. Those requiring scientific evidence of gains in academic and other skills have less to go on. No outcomes studies have been conducted recently but Hinson believes the 21C program has something to do with improved scores in fourth and eighth grade reading and math on the National Assessment of Education Progress. Yale is currently completing an evaluation of the Independence before- and after-school programs.

Zigler, who started it all, says the 21C model is working because it is universally available. “Everyone can attend, so communities get involved. When I go to these schools I see lots of parents around. Guess what? When they’re involved, children do better.”
New Investment Bank for Children

Between the Promise of Growth in Early Education and Delivering on that Promise Lies a Need for Business and Financial Support. This Non-Profit Provides It.

People skilled at nurturing and teaching young children are often the very people who start early care and education businesses. Yet business is not always their strong suit and many struggle finding business and financial services tailored to early childhood businesses.

That fact isn’t lost on Jerry Cutts, a former child care center director with degrees in urban planning and law who heads First Children’s Finance, a non-profit corporation that develops public/private partnerships to fund and support early care and education businesses. Fifteen years ago, he was working in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in neighborhoods sorely in need of more and better early care and education. He helped found the non-profit Development Corporation for Children that in the first few years pooled more than $3 million worth of public and private funds. They invested it to plan and develop seven early childhood centers and homes with individuals and organizations that would probably have been turned away by traditional banks.

Injecting capital and technical assistance was critical to enabling more children to attend early childhood programs and soon Cutts and his colleagues were raising more. They established a revolving capital fund, created an early care and education business development center and expanded their territory, first to the state and then to other states from North Dakota to Texas.

Today they are called First Children’s Finance—a name which reflects their investment approach. Over the last few years they have loaned more than $5 million to 210 child care businesses in seven states. They’ve helped launch, expand or improve more than 5,000 spaces for children through the lending program. Cutts says they’ve also packaged more than $5 million in other kinds of investments and technical assistance that have impacted more than 10,000 additional spaces.

Big Picture
First Children’s Finance (FCF) began their expansion to other states in 2001 when the U.S. Department of Treasury awarded a grant to look at expanding its lending operation. FCF expanded not only its geographic scope but its focus. It has done this to accommodate the increasingly complex needs that drive high-quality early care and education.

FCF’s first level of activity—providing direct loans and technical assistance to those applying for them—remains, but CEO Cutts says a broader strategy is needed. “When we systematically met with early education and business leaders in 13 states, we asked what type of structures and mechanisms will be needed to address the business and financial needs of the early education sector. In short, the answer was that states needed statewide strategies that create business and financing infrastructure as well as tools,” he says.

One of those strategies is working with states to create statewide early care and education business development centers. These centers for entrepreneurship and innovation foster organizational growth and change through consultation, training, and flexible investment strategies. FCF is currently helping six states plan and launch such initiatives. They stress that early care and education is a service business not unlike health care or law—one requiring high standards and business disciplines like budgeting, marketing, risk assessment, and leadership development. FCF provides consultation, a primer on financial terminology, and templates providers can use for business plans, budgets, cash flow statements, and tracking funding.

Children’s Chamber of Commerce
Another FCF initiative is the Children’s Chamber of Commerce—a mechanism for engaging the private sector to bring financial and human capital to the table. Cutts thinks it’s critical to have ongoing mechanisms like this that can forge lasting private sector relationships. That means giving voice to the business and financial aspects of early care and education. Business volunteers have helped educate public policymakers about the need to form public/private partnerships for loans, technical...
Another way Cutts says private sector volunteers add value is helping FCF apply business models to increase the supply of quality care. “They not only volunteer for loan and other investment committees but they also provide strategic advice,” he says. Cutts and his collaborators are envisioning ways to make dramatic increases in the supply of early care and education in a systematic way. “The YMCA and YWCA, for example, have replicated successful programs for years,” he says. “They take programs that work and use their local business connections and internal networks to expand regionally. I see no reason why it can’t happen in the early childhood field. We’re looking to support and invest in models like this that can be taken to scale.”

Aligning business with early education is a growing trend. In Washington, Thrive by Five is at work forging public/private partnerships not unlike those Cutts talks about. Graciela Italiano-Thomas, the organization’s CEO, believes they can “bring the best the public and private sectors have to offer.” She says private organizations offer credibility, nimbleness and market-based knowledge.

Engaging the private sector is not as difficult as it once was. “There’s a genuine hunger within the private sector in our state to better align dollars for early learning and to move things forward in important ways,” says Italiano-Thomas.

Cutts agrees. “Organizations like ours and other fine entrepreneurial non-profits have an important role to play.” Asked to describe that role, he says, “We’re essentially non-profit investment bankers and venture capitalists. We’re rabid about return on investment. The return is children who thrive, do better and go further in school, avoid costly government remediation programs, get better jobs, pay more taxes, and lead the way for others. It’s good business and it’s the right thing to do.”

---

**Related Reading**

**Roots of Decline: How Government Policy Has De-Educated Teachers of Young Children**


*Roots of Decline* is an analysis of the “why” behind a recent report entitled *Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education: Declining Workforce Qualifications in an Expanding Industry, 1979-2004.* In the *Losing Ground* report, the authors assert that the 1979-2004 Current Population Survey demonstrates—as the title suggests—that the early care and education (ECE) workforce currently has less formal education than has been the case historically. Moreover, because the most-educated members of the ECE workforce will be retiring within the next two decades, maintaining an adequate supply of credentialed teachers will be a difficult task.

*Roots of Decline* does a fine job of explaining all of the factors that contribute to the ECE workforce’s lack of formal education. As is the case with many troublesome situations, the factors are both longstanding and interrelated, and thus difficult to address with a single solution. Authors Dan Bellm and Marcy Whitebook provide a thorough analysis of how state and federal policies do little to promote a highly educated workforce. They also highlight the limitations of the Current Population Survey as a data source, as well as the need for additional data that could inform stakeholders’ efforts to improve both policies and the qualifications of the workforce.

While it is far from certain that state and federal policymakers have deliberately set out to “de-educate” the ECE workforce or should bear all the blame, *Roots of Decline* is a fascinating read for anyone who wants a deeper understanding of this issue.

Debra J. Ackerman
Assistant Research Professor, NIEER
Iowa Advances on Universal Preschool

Iowa moved closer to providing preschool for all when landmark legislation was recently signed into law by Governor Chet Culver.

Designed to provide voluntary, universal access to high-quality preschool education programs for the state’s 4-year-olds, the new law will expand access to 28,000 children. It also calls for early learning standards, program standards, licensed teachers with four-year degrees, a minimum of 10 hours of instruction each week, and collaboration between public and private preschool providers. Private providers who meet educational and certification standards could be contracted by districts to offer preschool education classes.

Through grants, $15 million will be allocated to local school districts during the first year of the program, scheduled for the 2007-2008 school year. Because the funding is limited in the first year, priority will be given to districts that have no existing preschool education programs, have a high number of children in poverty, and/or have established high-quality community partnerships for the delivery of preschool programs.

An additional $15 million will be added to the allocation for the next three years, with the aim of reaching 90 percent of the state’s 4-year-olds by the end of the fourth year. In addition to the $15 million allocation, the state will also create a new funding formula for preschool students, equivalent to sixth-tenths of the K-12 cost per pupil. That will be about $3,420.

Currently, public preschool programs in Iowa are available for at-risk children or those from low-income families. Only about one-third of the state’s 4-year-olds attend a federally or state-funded preschool education program.

South Carolina’s Winding Road to State-Funded Pre-K

In December 2005, Judge Thomas W. Cooper, Jr., made a landmark decision in a decade-long school adequacy suit: The state of South Carolina meets minimally adequate thresholds in support of its public schools but does not invest enough in early intervention and preschool education programs. In the 15 months since then, the General Assembly has provided $23.5 million for a pilot preschool education program, offering full-day classes to 4-year-olds in low-income districts. About 3,000 children were enrolled in public and private preschool programs this past year.

But Carl Epps, lead lawyer representing the school districts who brought the suit, said lawmakers have not done enough to comply with the judge’s ruling. The districts plan to bring the case back to court if state lawmakers do not do more.

However, many within the General Assembly do not believe that they’ve failed to deliver on Judge Cooper’s ruling, which did not say how much funding should be put into preschool education programs or give a deadline for when a program must be in place. They believe the funding they’ve already given is sufficient for now and that lawmakers should study the issue more before spending millions of dollars. The delay, they say, is unfortunate, but necessary in order to create a high-quality initiative.

A House bill to expand the pilot program in an effort to reach more than 30,000 at-risk children was sent back to committee because of concerns about the program’s $150 million price tag. According to lawmakers, the bill is likely to remain in committee this year, delaying the progress of preschool expansion to 4-year-olds across the state. Meanwhile, the state Senate Education Committee is looking into its own early childhood education bill, which could proceed even if the House bill remains in committee.

Both sides of the case requested and are currently waiting for Judge Cooper to decide on a motion to reconsider his original ruling. There are no set deadlines for judges to rule on motions to reconsider.

Neither the school districts nor the state can appeal until the judge rules on the motion to reconsider his 2005 decision. Once that motion is decided, Epps plans to approach the judge, asking for a detailed course of action to meet the state’s early childhood education needs and a time frame within which those actions should be completed.
A Different Approach to Preschool Education Takes Off in Arkansas

Making preschool education available in states with large rural populations poses a dilemma, given the relative lack of nearby programs. One solution increasingly prevalent in Arkansas focuses on helping parents do the teaching. Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is one of a number of home-based programs for parents of young children—and one that Arkansas HIPPY Director Barbara Gilkey says now serves more than 5,000 families in the state.

The program assists parents as their children’s first teachers by giving them the tools and skills to help them ready their children for school. First begun in Israel and adopted in a number of states and countries since, HIPPY’s focus is to bring families, organizations and communities together and remove barriers to preschool education participation.

Trained home-based educators reach out to parents of preschool-age children either in the home or at parent group meetings. Over a period of 30 weeks, the educators teach parents how to prepare their children academically for success in school. They employ a research-based curriculum that’s developmentally and age appropriate.

Typically, the home-based educators schedule a one-hour home visit weekly with each parent to role play and teach HIPPY activities such as language development, connecting the dots, sorting, and “following the path.” These types of activities lead children to acquire essential learning skills necessary for school success. Caseloads for home-based educators—who often travel long distances to reach a single home in rural Arkansas—range between 15 and 27 families per person.

Arkansas’ HIPPY program works in partnership with the Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education, local school districts, Title I, Even Start, Head Start, AmeriCorps, Meld, and the Departments of Education and Health. Each HIPPY program has an operating agreement with the state sponsoring agency, Arkansas Children’s Hospital. The agreement enables local programs to purchase the HIPPY curriculum as well as have their home-based educators attend workshops, training and conferences.

Each HIPPY program site undergoes an annual assessment designed to ensure that appropriate services are provided to participating families. Funding comes from several sources, with the majority coming from Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program. Other funders are AmeriCorps, the Walton Family Foundation, Pre-K ELLA, TANF and other private donors.

One sign of program success comes from the Arkansas Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention which cited HIPPY as a model program. Gilkey says outreach through Arkansas HIPPY has meant that many families have been identified and served that easily could have been overlooked otherwise. “HIPPY provides families services that are crucial because they fill an educational void,” she says.

Preschoolers in Mexico More Likely to Attend Programs than U.S. Kids

A recent research brief from Child Trends and the Center for Social and Demographic Analysis at the State University of New York at Albany draws interesting conclusions from Census 2000 data about preschool participation among immigrant families. Contrary to popular belief that cultural influences dissuade parents of Hispanic descent from enrolling their children in preschool education programs, the researchers found that Mexican families in Mexico were enrolling their children in preschool programs at a much greater rate than Mexican families in the United States were.

In 2005, 81 percent of 4-year-olds in Mexico were enrolled in preschool, where programs are free, compared to 55 percent of children from Mexican immigrant families in the United States. Of further interest, preschool enrollment rates in Mexico were also higher than those for children of native-born families in the United States: 81 percent compared to 71 percent, respectively.

The researchers argue that this data shows that socioeconomic barriers account for a larger amount of the enrollment gap between immigrant and non-immigrant families than previously thought.

Stacey Boyd: Founder, The Savvy Source for Parents Web Site

When Stacey Boyd jots Chief Executive Mom beneath her signature, it’s with good reason. She’s a Harvard-educated entrepreneur and mother who recently made national headlines with the debut of The Savvy Source for Parents, a web site she founded to help parents find the right preschool programs for their children. No stranger to innovation, Boyd founded two other companies before her current undertaking—Global Learning Ventures, which provides education consulting services, and Project Achieve, Inc., a provider of information management systems to schools. Preschool Matters caught up with Boyd during her East Coast swing for an appearance on The Today Show.

Q: What made you decide to start a web site devoted to preschools?
A: Well, as they say necessity is the mother of invention! Friends advised me that in San Francisco it is best to start the preschool search when your child is still very young. In fact, some parents start while their baby is still in utero. So, shortly after my daughter Grace was born, I started looking for information about high-quality preschools for her. To my surprise, there was not a single resource on the Internet that provided in-depth, comprehensive information about preschools. I did a bit more research and discovered the problem was not unique to the Bay Area; and that parents in other major urban areas likewise lacked adequate resources to assist in the preschool search. So I created The Savvy Source to provide this much-needed resource to parents.

Q: How does The Savvy Source work?
A: There are approximately 100 parents across the country who are responsible for collecting the information we post on the site. The parents reach out to preschool directors to encourage them to complete surveys about their schools (the director surveys cover everything from philosophy and curriculum to admissions process). They also tap into a host of parent networks to find parents willing to complete parent surveys. To date, thousands of directors and parents have completed surveys and new information is collected every day.

Q: How reliable would you say the parent ratings are?
A: The ratings are very reliable. The surveys are quite extensive (almost 10 pages long), so it is not likely that you will get parents trying to enter false information about a school.

Q: Obviously, web sites such as yours need to make money. How will you do that?
A: We will pursue advertising revenue and we are also working to develop strategic partnerships with entities that can drive more traffic to the site. We also have an electronic book that helps parents find the right preschool written by a Harvard Ph.D. and Rhodes Scholar that is available for purchase through our site.

Q: How has the web site visitor traffic been to date?
A: We have been thrilled with the traffic on our site thus far and it continues to grow every day. In just the past month we have reached five times as many parents as we did in the end of 2006! Parents are increasingly using the World Wide Web in search of knowledge and this is clearly filling a need for young parents.

Q: Any plans to expand services or move beyond pre-K?
A: Actually, we’re in the process of expanding right now. Over the next few months, we will be adding new features, including camps, classes, and an “encyclopedia” of activities that parents can do with preschool-age children.

For more information, visit www.savvysource.com.
build to pre-K specifications. “In those cases we see the difference first hand. Our teaching practices and program quality are improving each year,” she says. Priestley is looking forward to a new district preschool center and finding ways to rehab other provider classrooms so all the children are in equally healthy learning environments. In general she says the facilities situation has improved significantly across the state since the first days of the program.

Sussman says comprehensive public policies are sorely needed to ensure an adequate supply of facilities and that “it’s equally important to recognize that specially-designed facilities can provide learning environments that support child development and program quality.” Sussman, along with Amy Gillman, senior program director of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), developed an in-depth report and policy brief, *Building Early Childhood Facilities: What States Can Do to Create Supply and Promote Quality*, a joint NIEER – LISC publication.

“State early childhood facilities development policies need to address financial barriers, design and real estate development practices, and policy and regulatory issues,” Sussman says. “The most obvious policy challenge is to bridge the gap between the cost of quality facilities and the tough financial realities of delivering early care and education.”

As he and Gillman point out in the policy report, states can assist programs in obtaining the necessary capital through a number of means: subsidizing debt, debt-service support, rate enhancements and other creative approaches. The new report comprehensively details the numerous subsidization and lending strategies.

Another early childhood facilities expert, Jim Greenman, agrees there’s a need to look at facilities from a policy perspective. He believes the expansion of state-funded pre-K may be providing the impetus to re-examine what it takes to develop good learning environments for young children. Greenman heads program development at Bright Horizons, a company that develops early care and education centers for corporations and other organizations. He also wrote the book *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children’s Environments That Work*.

“We’re now in an age of purpose-built facilities where children can be for six to nine hours a day and learn in ways appropriate to their ages. Properly designed, they accommodate staff and parent needs as well as enable kids to learn creatively,” he says.

Greenman ticks off a list of features like indoor large motor space for kids to play in, learning centers where children gather for educational activities, conferencing space for meetings with parents, which translate to program quality one way or another.

**More Space, More Quality**

Research in recent years has established that it takes more space per child than previously thought to engage children as active learners. According to the Community Investment Collaborative for Kids (CICK) Resource Guide, research shows it takes between 45 and 54 square feet of activity space per child.

That’s higher than the 35 square feet per child minimum many states require for licensing child care centers. While the state standards for floor space are intended to make sure children aren’t packed in like sardines, they can also represent a stumbling block in developing new facilities for pre-K.

“If minimums like 35 square feet per child of classroom space become the guide for planning new environments, the floor in essence becomes your ceiling and it limits your ability to provide features like large indoor motor space and ample learning centers,” Greenman says. In Greenman’s experience, those spaces rarely fit in plans averaging less than 45 square feet per child. Once other features like hallways, offices, bathrooms and meeting rooms are figured in, it isn’t unusual for the overall floor space calculations for an entire facility to exceed 100 square feet per child served. CICK’s resource guide recommends multiplying the number of children served by 100 as a rule of thumb for total square feet needed in new center construction.

**Comprehensive Facilities**

In order to create comprehensive facilities development policies, says Sussman, states need to address the full array of impediments, including financial barriers, real estate development practices, and policy and regulatory issues. He says it’s not enough for state facilities policies to help construct isolated projects. The objective is to create a reliable system that enables the early education field to meet its physical and capital needs. “Otherwise,” he says, “the benefits of early education—academic achievement and long-term savings in remedial programs to name just two—will not be fully realized.”

Properly designed, purpose-built facilities enhance the quality of early childhood programs—enabling children to be enthusiastic learners, encouraging parental involvement, and ensuring good nutrition.
The gap in achievement between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers is like a weed. Despite attempts at eradication, it persists. A Connecticut study on integration of preschoolers from various economic backgrounds sheds important light on the role that verbal interaction among children plays in learning and suggests that, in addition to program quality, diversity in pupil populations could be a key to success.

Professor Carlota Schechter at St. Joseph College and Beth Bye, Director of the Capital Region Education Council in Hartford, Connecticut, studied classrooms where, thanks to a state initiative, children from low-income families were integrated into high-quality pre-K classrooms with children from middle-income families. Over four years, Schecter and Bye studied a sample totaling 274 children. Eighty-five of them were from low-income families and the remainder from middle-income backgrounds. Fifty from the low-income group attended high-quality pre-K where all children were from low-income families. Thirty-five from the low-income group attended high-quality pre-K where about 80 percent of the classes were comprised of children from middle-income families. Twenty percent of the total sample spoke a language other than English at home.

Their findings appear to confirm what some researchers have suspected but, has gone largely unproven due a dearth of economically integrated pre-K settings suitable for study. Children from low-income families who attended with children from middle-income backgrounds achieved an average of seven points higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-III) than did children from low-income families whose classrooms were comprised entirely of children from the same background.

In other words, the children from low-income families in the integrated programs moved from below the national norm in the fall to just above it in spring. Children from the low-income-only programs were still well below the national norm in spring.

When Schecter conducted her analysis by language spoken, the difference was even greater: Children from low-income families who spoke English as their primary language and attended the integrated programs gained an average of 10 points on the PPVT-III, putting their gains in the same league with their middle-income classmates.

Schecter says her results suggest a need to change the conventional approach to helping disadvantaged children in early education. “Unfortunately, most of our current programs are economically segregated. We have one system for families than can afford to pay tuition and another for families that cannot. We may need to rethink this dual system. Perhaps we can address this challenge using the public school model of magnet schools or child care models that serve families at the workplace. Creative thinking could open up new possibilities,” she says.

For more on the study, “Preliminary evidence for the impact of mixed-income preschools on low-income children’s language growth,” refer to Early Childhood Research Quarterly, Volume 22, Issue 1, pages 137–146.