Pre-K’s Resource Problem

Many who follow the development of preschool education have worried that the upside promise of public pre-K is limited by the downside reality of the resources dedicated to it. Looking at both Head Start and at state-funded preschool education—as we do in this issue—we wonder when the field will mature enough to successfully demand change. Despite some gains, public pre-K in most places in this country is under-resourced by a magnitude that calls into question how political leaders expect preschool to deliver as promised.

Four articles in this issue touch on the resource problem one way or another. On the opposite page, we report the latest trends in state-funded pre-K from our State of Preschool 2007 yearbook. There are more positives to report this year than negatives. More than a million kids now attend state programs and the half-decade decline in per-child spending has been halted. Balancing these developments, however, is the fact that 12 states offer no state pre-K and about half of the children enrolled in pre-K are in states that achieve half or fewer of the yearbook’s benchmarks for quality. And, though there was a small rise in per-child spending, it remains well below the levels we documented in 2001.

Head Start faces challenges as well. As the article on page 4 explains, Head Start was finally reauthorized late last year, along with a $460 million increase in funding. When it came to appropriating the money, however, that didn’t happen. Instead, Head Start received a budget cut for 2008. Ben Allen at the National Head Start Association calculates that inflation-adjusted funding for the program is down 11 percent since 2002.

To gain an appreciation for what that feels like, read Ron Herndon’s frank responses to our questions in the Newsmaker interview on page 5. A long-time Head Start director in Portland, Oregon, Herndon is also chairman of the board at the National Head Start Association and a no-nonsense advocate for the program. Anyone wondering how public pre-K can grow rapidly and prove effective should read the article on page 8 about New Jersey’s experience with its mixed delivery model for the Abbott Preschool Program. Not only does the Abbott program increase children’s skills beyond preschool, children within this public education program do equally well whether they attend public schools or private child care centers. It’s no coincidence that New Jersey has high standards for the program and dedicates the most resources per child to pre-K than any other state.

With the recession looming and the prospect of declining government revenues, it’s critical that policymakers look at public pre-K with a clear eye. It’s time to recognize that sound investments in children and human capital should take priority over passing the pork.
State-Funded Pre-K Passes the Million-Child Mark

NIEER’s 2007 State Preschool Yearbook Shows Much Progress and a Few Disappointments. But Will Recession Threaten Recent Gains?

State governments continue to shoulder a growing share of the responsibility for educating the nation’s young children. According to NIEER’s recently released The State of Preschool 2007, more than one million children now attend state pre-K. These data from NIEER’s new yearbook provide a snapshot of the recent gains:

- State spending per child rose to $3,642 on average, halting, if not reversing, a trend of declining per-child commitment that has persisted for years.
- Total spending by state governments reached an all-time high of nearly $3.7 billion.
- Thirty of the 38 states with programs increased enrollment.
- Twenty-two percent of all 4-year-olds in the nation attended state-funded pre-K, up from 20 percent in the previous year.
- Access for 3-year-olds rose, perhaps signaling a new trend toward expanding services at this age.
- Seven states improved on NIEER’s quality standards checklist, indicating that quality standards, while variable across states, continue to improve.

“The new data reinforce the notion that support for state-funded preschool education is broad-based and growing,” says NIEER director Steve Barnett. He points out that 10 states now serve 40 percent or more of their 4-year-olds, representing a sizable advance from when NIEER started collecting state pre-K data in 2002 (See map.)

While the data show progress in many states, they also reveal a lack of it in others. Twelve states continue to provide no state-funded pre-K, though one of them, South Dakota, has just launched a pilot program. And, more than 40 percent of all state pre-K enrollments are in three states with large programs that have quality problems—Texas, Florida and California. Those states achieve only four of NIEER’s 10 benchmarks for program quality standards, and they spend less than the national average per child. “Your child’s chances of attending state pre-K depend on where you live and even for the lucky few who win a place in state pre-K, the quality varies from state to state,” says Barnett.

Gains at Risk

Generally speaking, state-funded pre-K has benefited from relatively good economies in most states. Now a growing number of them confront the prospect of recession and declining revenue projections. In the past, that scenario has led to decreases or flat-funding of pre-K in many states. Barnett says it’s critical that policymakers recognize the value high-quality preschool education brings to future economic prospects. “It’s important for taxpayers and advocates to ensure investments in pre-K have priority over less-productive spending,” he says.

One way to help ensure that is to develop more permanent approaches. Attaching pre-K funding to state funding formulas could help ensure pre-K funding increases proportionally to expansion in enrollment. “This approach doesn’t necessarily mean pre-K funding would be exactly the same as K-12 spending,” says Barnett. “Incorporating it into education funding formulas in some manner would, however, remove the erratic approach to funding pre-K that prevails in many states.”

Barnett’s concern about the yo-yo effect is borne out by this fact: Despite recent funding increases, funding per child remains substantially below the 2001 level when inflation is taken into account.

At a time when public pre-K is increasingly seen as a strategy for enhancing equal opportunity and future economic security, it’s fair to ask what role the federal government might play to remove some of the burden from the states and help ensure progress continues. “The federal government could supplement state funds in ways that provide an inducement to states to expand enrollment, particularly at age 3, and improve quality,” says Barnett.
A Fresh Start for Head Start?

Congress Reauthorized the Nation’s Oldest Early Childhood Program but Head Start Got a Budget Cut for Fiscal Year 2008

Advocates for Head Start celebrated last December when Congress reauthorized the program for the first time in a decade and President George W. Bush signed the bill into law. That meant the nation’s oldest public early intervention program, which survived a 2003 attempt to chop it into block grants for the states, had emerged intact and received approval for a healthy $460 million funding increase.

But not so fast! Within days of the reauthorization—while visions of fresh funding danced in their heads—Head Start leaders learned the FY 2008 federal budget, which had been moving on a separate Congressional track, contained no new money but rather a $10.6 million budget cut. “The lesson here is there’s a big difference between authorizing and appropriating the money,” said a disappointed Dr. Ben Allen, research and evaluation director at the National Head Start Association.

He isn’t alone. Pat Brown, acting director of the Office of Head Start, is tasked with making the numbers work. This winter, she had her cost-cutter’s hat on and was sending guidance to Head Start grantees spelling out priorities for spending cuts. Reducing enrollment—something the new law permits in years when there is no cost of living adjustment—is an option grantees may pursue. The Office of Head Start issued a memorandum, however, outlining areas grantees should consider before looking at enrollment reductions. They include costs, supervisory structure, and staffing ratios for positions that don’t have mandated ratios. Still, Brown says this year’s fiscal balancing act is likely to result in some enrollment decline.

Head Start funding has languished in recent years. Allen says funding is down 11 percent since 2002 once inflation is taken into account. “Look at it this way: a Head Start program receiving one dollar in FY 2002 is only receiving 89 cents today,” he says. Brown agrees with that assessment. However, both believe the reauthorization greatly increases the odds that trend will shift for the better by the next budget cycle.

Program changes

Apart from funding, the reauthorization contains changes designed to clear the way for raising program quality, increasing accountability, revisiting assessment, and providing flexibility. Among the changes are these:

- Head Start can now serve families up to 130 percent above the poverty line rather than up to 100 percent, the cut-off that prevailed for years. Specifically, grantees can serve up to 35 percent of their children from families with incomes up to 130 percent of poverty if they are already meeting the needs of children from families below the poverty line. Brown says the change will result in some shift in the make-up of children served in communities where there has been a decline in poor families. Nationwide, she doesn’t foresee much change.

- All Head Start teachers will be required to have an associate’s degree by 2013 and the reauthorization sets a goal for half of all Head Start teachers to have bachelor’s degrees by 2013. The law does not specify a penalty if programs do not meet the teacher education requirements. Allen thinks that getting and retaining half of all teachers with bachelor’s degrees will be a very heavy lift. He cites calculations by the Center for Law and Social Policy.
Ron Herndon is the director of Albina Head Start in Portland, Oregon—a program that serves more than 800 children. Since 1993, he has also served as chairman of the board of the National Head Start Association, the non-profit group that advocates on behalf of Head Start and the families it serves. Herndon first began organizing citizens and fighting for causes as an activist in New Jersey and East Harlem in the 1960s, acquiring skills that have served him well as a Head Start leader. Preschool Matters asked him about the recent Head Start reauthorization.

Q: Now that Head Start has been re-authorized, how do you feel about the future prospects for the program?
A: I’m very troubled. Apparently Congress was able to agree on reauthorization and all the new mandates that come with that but the people in appropriations didn’t follow their lead and provide the money the new law authorizes to meet those mandates! It’s one of the worst examples of unfunded mandates in the history of the program. As for funding increases for next year, I have to say I don’t see anybody on either side of the aisle in Congress who has championed restoring our funding to 2002 levels, let alone provide the $460 million called for in the reauthorization legislative language.

Q: The new law says half of all Head Start teachers should have bachelor’s degrees by 2013. Do you think that can be done?
A: We’re back to the first question—it’s a matter of money. We don’t have a problem with meeting credential goals at Head Start. When we were given the mandate to get half of all our teachers associate’s degrees by 2003, we got it done a year early. Back then, we were provided the money to do it. It’s a different story this time. Who’s going to pay the salaries of those teachers with bachelor’s degrees? It’s another unfunded mandate. It almost seems to be a setup.

Q: The sometimes controversial testing scheme, known as the National Reporting System, was suspended by the new law. Why is that and what should replace it?
A: We felt from the beginning the tests in the National Reporting System were not valid instruments. Not one of the kids at Albina Head Start where I’m director ever took the tests. We made parents aware of them and they all signed statements they didn’t want their kids taking them. Since then, experts have agreed with us.

That’s not to say we’re against assessment. Head Start programs consistently assess children. This information is shared with parents and used to ensure children are meeting program and parental goals. During the Clinton administration, there was a movement to have a system that used classroom data collected from valid assessment instruments already in use. I think any new system should recognize what we already have.

Q: State-funded pre-K, the majority of which is targeted to disadvantaged children, serves about as many kids as Head Start does. Do you think the two should work more closely together?
A: Definitely. Oregon, where I live, is an example. State funding for pre-K is distributed to all federal Head Start grantees in the state and can be awarded to other providers that meet Head Start standards. State pre-K programs meet the Head Start Performance Standards. The state is building universal pre-K on a Head Start base.

Q: As you look back on your experience as both a provider and policy leader, what is your greatest concern about Head Start?
A: We receive very little credit for what we’ve done. We’ve gotten good at many of the things early education experts recommend—providing comprehensive services for children, improving programs and professional development, and involving parents in their children’s education.

Yet the mandates keep coming like those we’ve already discussed about bachelor’s degrees. I’m concerned that in the future Head Start could close itself off from the community it serves. Our classrooms could look like Teach for America. We have a great many teachers in the Head Start community who may not have that bachelor’s degree but are nonetheless well-trained. The policy community needs to ask itself this, “If teachers with degrees were the answer, why aren’t our public schools doing better?”

Q: What haven’t we asked that we should have?
A: In 1990 Congress and the White House said they’d make funding available to serve all children who are eligible for Head Start by 1994. What happened to that promise?
Thumbs Up for California P-16 Recommendations

California’s early education system passed a policy hurdle when Superintendent of Education Jack O’Connell accepted the recommendations of the state’s P-16 Council in his state of education speech earlier this year. Comprised of education, business and community leaders, the council focused on changes needed in the preschool through college system to close the achievement gap. Its recommendations include broadening access to public pre-K, raising expectations for what preschool education should accomplish, and improving program quality.

“We must work toward the day when quality preschool is available to all California children,” O’Connell said. He said his goal is to have not just the largest system in the nation but also the highest quality program. O’Connell proposed creating a quality-improvement system that would tie higher levels of funding to higher levels of quality. He announced the release of what he called “foundations,” which provide early childhood educators with guidance on what young children, including English Language Learners, should know when they enter kindergarten.

Since O’Connell’s speech, state Senator Darrell Steinberg introduced Senate Bill 1629 that would establish a commission to create an early learning quality improvement system. It would include a framework for improving program quality and an enhanced funding structure to support program improvements and teacher education.

In line with the council’s recommendations, O’Connell has asked for more research into the achievement rates of the various demographic groups that make up the public school system.

Oklahoma Shows Big Gains for ELL Kids

Hispanic pupils attending state pre-K in Tulsa, Oklahoma showed substantial improvements in pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-math skills in the most recent study of the program conducted by Georgetown University researcher William T. Gormley, Jr. Hispanic kids whose parents speak Spanish at home or whose parents were born in Mexico benefited the most from the program. Pupils whose teachers spoke some Spanish seemed to benefit more, and English language test gains were stronger than Spanish language test gains. Gormley says its encouraging that students who need more help are benefiting more from the program. The Effects of Oklahoma’s Pre-K Program on Hispanic Children is available at http://www.crocus.georgetown.edu/reports/CROCUSworkingpaper11.pdf.

New Jersey Gets New Funding Formula, More Pre-K Money

A new school funding formula passed in New Jersey means the state will move away from apportioning state education funding for disadvantaged children through a system focused tightly on court-designated Abbott districts. The new approach will distribute the money statewide, taking into account the needs and disadvantaged circumstances of children in all school districts. Governor Jon Corzine proposes expanding full-day state pre-K beyond the Abbott districts, where 41,000 children currently attend, to other districts in the state. He delivered a budget to the state Legislature that cuts total state spending by $500 million and yet increases spending for pre-K-12 education by $600 million. The increase for pre-K is $26.5 million. The governor and the Legislature must agree on a budget by July.
Immigration Raids Harm Youngsters

Immigration raids at worksites in the U.S. last year resulted in substantial harm to young children. Three communities where raids took place comprise the sample for a study from the Urban Institute and the National Council of La Raza about the effects of the raids on kids. Swift & Company meat packing plants in Greeley, Colorado and Grand Island, Nebraska, as well as Michael Bianco textile mills in New Bedford, Massachusetts were raided. Among the study’s findings are these:

- Nine hundred people were arrested, affecting 500 children.
- At two of the sites most of the children were age 10 and younger. At one, more than half were age 5 and younger.
- The impact on children was immediate, with many arrestees leaving the country before contacting their families and others afraid to divulge to authorities that they had children.
- Parents were deported or in some cases held in detention for months, causing hardship for children including difficulty coping with psychological and economic stress.
- At all three study sites, community leaders and institutions initiated responses. Religious institutions emerged as distribution points considered “safe” by families.
- Few of the affected families sought public assistance due to trust issues.

Among the recommendations from the report’s authors are that Congress provide oversight of immigration enforcement activities to ensure children are protected, that immigration authorities provide detainees access to counsel, and that schools develop systems to help ensure children have a safe place to go in the event of a raid. For more information, read the report at http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/UrbanLaRazaReport.pdf.

Illinois Systematizes Mexican Teacher Recruitment

Illinois has recruited bilingual teachers from other countries for years but that effort took on a new dimension when state officials recently inked an agreement with Mexico that takes much of the burden of international recruitment off individual school districts.

Participating schools will communicate their bilingual teacher needs to the state board of education, which will pass them on to Mexico where a list of teachers prescreened to meet Illinois requirements will be developed. Illinois will place the teachers recruited in schools in the state. A similar approach with Spain is reportedly working well.
Success with Mixed Delivery: What We Can Learn from New Jersey

Making State Pre-K Effective in a Mix of Public and Private Settings Presents Special Challenges. This New Study Looks at What it Takes to Succeed.

When the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered that high-quality preschool education be provided to all 3- and 4-year-olds in the state’s poorest school districts, it was a task that loomed large. Other states had developed public pre-K, but none had tackled programs of the quality and intensity the justices required—and none had done it on the rapid timetable they demanded.

Nine years after the Abbott Preschool Program doors opened, it delivers preschool education that research shows is making a difference in children’s lives. It’s educating more than 40,000 children per year and, perhaps most impressive, it’s doing so equally well whether the kids go to public schools or private child care centers. That’s no small achievement. (See APPLES Findings.)

The success of the Abbott program has not gone unnoticed by researchers interested in identifying ingredients of success others can use in developing programs with mixed delivery systems. A newly released study titled Partnering for Preschool provides just that. Funded by NIEER, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the Schumann Fund of New Jersey and released by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, the study focuses on child care center directors. Marcy Whitebook, director of the center, NIEER Research Fellow Sharon Ryan, Rutgers University, and Fran Kipnis and Laura Sakai at the University of California, Berkeley, interviewed 98 directors of Abbott centers by telephone to compile a profile of their motivations, opinions, challenges, and insights.

The interviews covered 10 areas including: reasons for becoming Abbott sites; contributions of the program; teacher education, preparation and relationships; director’s challenges; and their suggestions for improving the program. The responses were analyzed to identify lessons that could be gleaned and goals developed. (See 8 Policy Goals for Mixed Delivery Systems.)

Because Partnering for Preschool draws on narratives from center directors, it resonates with first-hand experience and reflects in their words what it took to move from a patchwork of independent providers to a system of high-quality pre-K in a short time. One sees through their eyes how Abbott’s launch set the wheels of change in motion. “Now we were considered a valuable part of the educational community,” says one independent director whose feelings capture the psychology of becoming part of something bigger.

Of course, being part of something bigger has its trade-offs. There are standards to be met. Directors’ comments in the report underscore the stakes involved in changing over to the new way—how teachers decided whether or not to go to school to get required teaching credentials, how centers lost teachers who didn’t pursue that opportunity despite the availability of state scholarships, and how the state and school districts scrambled to help them find replacements.

“This study shows the capacity of programs to improve the experience of children and the workforce that educates them, but only if there are adequate resources and infrastructure support provided.” — Marcy Whitebook
Helping Children, Families
Whitebook says on balance, the report reflects the positive views directors have toward the program. Many described how, once the Abbott program was established, they witnessed transformations of children’s lives in their centers. “It’s wonderful to be able to take children who otherwise wouldn’t be able to afford preschool and give them a positive first experience with school and see them really ready to go on and succeed once they get into elementary school,” said one.

They praised the Abbott program’s ability to identify and address special developmental needs. This comment is representative: “Once upon a time, we really didn’t know who to contact when we had children who had, or may have had a learning disability. But now that particular aspect is handled so well in our district—we have a liaison from the Board (of Education) along with a master teacher, and they come based on a referral. They interact with my team, with the parents and we create a meeting ground to see how we can collaborate together to help the child. I don’t feel like I’m just out there by myself.”

That feeling of security extends to funding as well. Directors pointed to multiple benefits of stable, adequate funding including well-equipped classrooms, the ability to pay teachers competitively enough to retain them, and sufficient freedom from worrying about costs to be able to maintain staffing levels throughout the year.

As the Abbott program matured, family support services became integral to the program, forging what the directors consider an important link between home and school. Centers offer help ranging from employment services to housing assistance to health services. Directors said that while many offered family services prior to the Abbott programs, having the family worker position at their centers brought a new dimension to their capabilities. Directors also voiced some frustrations with the program. As might be expected, administrative issues were most frequently cited.

Seeing the Abbott experience through the eyes of child care directors reminds us of the hurdles program designers face when they seek to accomplish more than just expand the existing early care and education system. In order to address the access and quality issues that the program has, it takes vision and those “C” words—collaboration, communication and commitment. Whitebook concludes that, “This study shows the capacity of programs to improve the experience of children and the workforce that educates them, but only if there are adequate resources and infrastructure support provided.” The report is available at: http://www.iir.berkeley.edu/cscce/pdf/partnering_preschool_highlights08.pdf.

8 Policy Goals for Mixed Delivery Systems
The following eight goals are based on the collective experience and wisdom of child care directors whose experience in the Abbott trenches led to the program’s success. States striving for mixed delivery systems should:

1. Enhance collaboration among state agencies,
2. Enhance collaboration between state agencies and school districts,
3. Enhance collaboration between school districts and private centers,
4. Develop policies to minimize the difficulties of blending preschool and wrap-around services,
5. Minimize inequalities among teaching staff within and across preschool centers,
6. Provide ongoing mentoring and support for center directors regarding staff development and equity issues within centers,
7. Provide training and professional development that is accessible to teaching staff in private child care programs, and
8. Provide ongoing leadership development for publicly funded, mixed delivery preschool services.

APPLES Findings
The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) sought to determine if the learning gains from the program found in earlier research at kindergarten entry continued throughout the kindergarten year. It also sought to assess the quality of Abbott classrooms. Findings included these:

• Regardless of setting, children who attended the program improved in language, literacy and math skills through the end of their kindergarten year.
• Children who attended for two years at ages 3 and 4 significantly outperformed those who attended for only one year at age 4.
• The gains in language and math from two years of Abbott attendance were quite large—nearly double for language and 70 percent larger for math.
• Adequate funding, high quality standards and intensive professional development have resulted in good classroom quality across all Abbott classrooms whether in private provider or school district settings.
• Almost 90 percent of Abbott classrooms evaluated in 2006 scored above the average score found in 2000.
• Areas of classroom improvement were those most directly related to child learning such as language and reasoning activities, interactions and program structure.

Our nation has numerous policies designed to foster economic and social development. Many deserve to be called “good policy” even though they can’t be shown to produce net positive economic returns. Once in a while, however, an opportunity presents itself for creating new policy that pays for itself and then some. In his latest book, economist Robert G. Lynch of Washington College makes a strong case that a nationwide investment in high-quality preschool education is one such opportunity.

In *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation*, Lynch applies a careful cost-benefit analysis to a nationwide public investment in early childhood education. He considers two scenarios—one is a targeted approach providing preschool education for all 3- and 4-year-olds in the lowest quartile of the population by income and the other a preschool for all approach that offers the same services to all children regardless of family income.

He begins with an overview of research on the benefits of high-quality early childhood education and then follows with an in-depth look at the Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) program—the one most relevant to his analysis. CPC is well-researched and relatively large-scale compared to the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian programs—two others for which much research exists. CPC resembles some of today’s successful public pre-K: half-day programs delivered five days a week, 35 weeks a year with well-qualified teachers. Children attending CPC subsequently experienced substantially lower levels of special education placement, grade retention and involvement with the criminal justice system as well as higher rates of high school graduation and grade completion.

Lynch draws on CPC longitudinal and economic research by University of Minnesota professors Arthur J. Reynolds and Judy Temple to inform his analysis. He adjusts program delivery cost to reflect program implementation in 2007, pegging it at $6,300 per child per year. He carries his analysis forth to the year 2050, calculating benefits and applying an annual cost inflator. For both the targeted and universal policy options, Lynch lays out the fiscal impacts on government and the additional benefits to the public year by year. This enables him to estimate the year in which benefits start to surpass costs as well as total costs and benefits. He does this for each state and the nation as a whole.

**Targeted**

His analysis shows it would cost $13.2 billion to serve all the kids in the nation in the bottom 25 percent of family income with a program mirroring CPC. Considering offsets for programs already serving this population, it would take an additional $8.2 billion a year to fund the program. The benefits in the targeted option grow substantially faster than the costs of delivery. In 2050, the targeted option would deliver an annual benefit value of $315 billion: $83 billion in government budget benefits, $156 billion in increased compensation of workers and $77 billion in reduced costs from less crime and child abuse. The ratio of benefits to costs is a national average 12 to 1 by the year 2050.

**Preschool for All**

As might be expected, the universal scenario plays out differently. It’s more costly to serve all the kids, requiring about $42 billion to enroll the nearly seven million children Lynch assumes would be enrolled by 2008. Considering offsets due to current spending of about $10 billion, the additional outlay would be $33 billion. Since the program effects per child are estimated to be smaller in a cohort dominated by middle-income kids, it takes longer for the program benefits to exceed its cost—16 years. In 2050, the annual benefits would total $779 billion: $191 billion in government budget benefits, $432 billion in increased compensation of workers and $156 billion in reduced costs from less crime and child abuse. The net budget surplus is $95.6 billion over program costs for a return ratio of a national average 8 to 1 in the year 2050. Although this ratio is smaller than for the targeted program, estimated net benefits for the nation are twice as large under preschool for all because it reaches so many more children.

Since the states have progressed differently regarding public pre-K and have different populations, each will realize different returns on its investments and reach net positive returns at different points in the program cycles. Lynch provides these analyses and comprehensive appendices explaining his assumptions and methods.

As with any endeavor of this scope, a *caveat* or two is in order. Since CPC is a program showing benefits for disadvantaged children, the task of valuing its benefits for the large population of middle- and high-income children receiving it depends on other studies such as Georgetown University’s research on Oklahoma’s program. While research shows high-

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**Related Reading**

**Showing Us the Money**

*Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation*

Robert G. Lynch, 2007

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 11 >>
A Fresh Start for Head Start?

estimating it would cost $2 billion over several years to pay Head Start teachers the same as kindergarten teachers with bachelor’s degrees.

• Forty percent of new funding will be dedicated to program improvement, including raising teacher pay. The law first allocates grantees base funding from the prior year, followed by a portion for training and technical assistance, a cost-of-living increase for grantees, and some funding for special expansion for Native American and migrant programs. If there is money remaining after those allotments, it would be divided among expansion, quality improvement (including teacher pay) and a fund for state advisory councils on early childhood education and care. None of these additional provisions are currently funded because the 2008 appropriation was less than the previous year.

• A new system of designating grants will be phased in over the next three years. The new system reviews each grantee every five years in specific areas of performance to determine if their status should be renewed. The change comes after a Government Accountability Office report criticized the current system. Brown says instituting the new system will be a daunting task because they cannot apply this new designation system until 18 months after the law takes effect. Yet they must make decisions on all grantees 18 to 36 months thereafter.

• The reauthorization suspends the National Reporting System, established in 2003 to assess children’s progress in Head Start. Experts critiqued the assessments as being unduly narrow in the range of developmental domains covered, insufficiently sensitive to the cultural characteristics of the kids in Head Start, and misleading. Meanwhile, policymakers await recommendations due out this year from a National Research Council panel studying the issue. The new law also requires all Head Start classrooms be assessed for quality every three years.

Assuming the federal budget is delivered on time this year, Head Start should learn by the end of September just how much of the newly authorized funding—and therefore how much program improvement—will come its way in Fiscal Year 2009.

Forty percent of new Head Start funding would be dedicated to program improvement, including raising teacher pay.

Showing Us the Money: Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation

quality pre-K benefits all children receiving it, exactly how much it benefits middle-income children in the long run requires some extrapolation.

Lynch’s answer to this dilemma is to revisit the relevant research and create high, medium, and low ranges of benefits. He applies the medium range, noting there other benefits of pre-K he does not measure such as improved health and reduced welfare dependency. It is interesting to note that even when Lynch’s low-benefit range is applied, the universal program shows a positive return on investment.

Another caveat is the relative performance of the targeted program compared to the universal one. If, as Lynch assumes, targeted programs are expected to serve all children in the bottom quartile of income and only those children, administrators will have to get much better at identifying and serving eligible families than they have been in the past.

In an age when more policymakers are wont to say “show us the money,” Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation serves a valuable role because it does just that.

Reviewed by Pat Ainsworth
Communications Director, NIEER
Study Shows Vygotskian Curriculum Improves Executive Function

Studies show that a preschooler’s ability to exercise cognitive control, also known as executive function (EF), is a stronger predictor of later school success than academic learning at that age. Executive function includes such skills as a child’s ability to resist habits and distractions, hold and use information, and adjust to change. Until recently, many thought those skills can’t be taught in preschool classrooms. Findings from a rigorous study of a program using the Tools of the Mind curriculum are changing that view.

Based on the philosophy of noted Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, Tools of the Mind was developed by Elena Bodrova, senior researcher at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning in Aurora, Colorado, and Deborah J. Leong, psychiatry professor at Metropolitan State College in Denver. Both NIEER research fellows, Bodrova and Leong believed a curriculum needed to be developed that engages children in EF-reinforcing activities such as using language and other forms of representation to plan their own activities and engaging in dramatic play. By doing such things as thinking ahead, telling themselves what they plan to do, and interacting with peers, children begin to develop self-regulation—something that lies at the heart of EF.

University of British Columbia psychiatry professor Adele Diamond, NIEER Director Steve Barnett, and colleagues conducted a randomized study of 147 disadvantaged children in a northeastern U.S. city who were in their second year of preschool. The children were randomly assigned to two preschool programs, one offering the Tools of the Mind curriculum and the other a more traditional approach.

All classrooms in the study, regardless of curriculum, received the same resources and there was no significant difference in the composition of the kids from one classroom to another. Those using Tools spent 80 percent of the day engaging children in activities drawn from the curriculum’s 40 core EF-enhancing activities. The other curriculum did not specifically address EF.

At the end of the school year, all the children were asked to perform two sets of tasks. The “dots” tasks required children to successfully remember a rule, mentally translate it to which side of a screen to press and resist the tendency to press on the wrong side. The “flanker” tasks required children to ignore a distracting image, focus on the correct image and switch their focus, depending on the mode of the task.

Children from the Tools programs significantly outperformed children from the traditional programs on all the tests requiring EF skills. What’s more, the more EF skills a task required, the larger the margin became by which the Tools children outperformed their traditional program peers.

Concludes lead author Diamond, “This research shows that executive function skills can be improved in preschoolers and it can be done using regular programs and regular teachers. Doing so could make a huge difference, especially for disadvantaged children.” To read the report, which appeared in Science magazine, go to http://nieer.org/docs/index.php?DocID=193.