

Archived Information



I. INTRODUCTION

Educators, researchers, and policymakers now acknowledge the importance of early childhood education for all preschool children. An accumulation of research recognizes that young children have a much greater capacity to learn than has previously been recognized. The first five years of life are a time of enormous growth of linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor competence. Because children learn continuously from birth, child care and education cannot be thought of separately. High-quality child care and education should provide appropriate developmental experiences for young children, including attention to the physical needs of children. Early education promotes the overall development of a healthy child, but it is also critical because children who have had the right kinds of educational experiences before kindergarten do better in school.

A recent study of kindergartners illustrates the importance of early education for later performance in school more clearly than ever before. It demonstrates that children begin kindergarten with different levels of knowledge and skills based on their background, and while the more disadvantaged children catch up on basic skills in reading and mathematics during the kindergarten year, the gap widens on measures of more sophisticated reading and mathematics knowledge and skills. New syntheses of research developed by the National Research Council show the positive connection between quality educational experiences in the preschool years, readiness for kindergarten and first grade, and later learning outcomes. An accumulation of studies points to the payoff for children and taxpayers of well-designed early childhood programs, especially for children from low-income families. As interest in improving American schools and children's performance continues to rate high as a public concern, our nation's leaders are increasingly aware of the critical role of early education.¹

Unfortunately, studies have also found that while most preschool children in the United States spend at least a portion of their days in care outside the home, they are not in settings of sufficient quality to produce later learning outcomes. The National Research Council's newly published synthesis of research, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*, cites the warning that the growing understanding of the importance of early education "stands in stark contrast to the disparate system of care and education" available to the nation's preschool children. The report suggests that many children from low income families are in child care programs "of such low quality that learning and development . . . may even be jeopardized."²

As part of the Pre-K through grade 3 continuum of learning, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System (NC) serves 2,000 four-year-olds in its Bright Beginnings program. Since 1997, the system has used 85 percent of its Title I funds to provide Pre-K services to those students with the greatest educational needs. Title I funding supports highly qualified staff, a literacy and language-oriented curriculum, professional development, family-school partnerships, and transportation. The program has a fully developed, written curriculum; program standards; and a curriculum-integrated parent component. Professional development includes summer institutes, monthly full-day sessions, and bi-weekly after school opportunities. The program involves Even Start, Head Start collaborative classes and state-funded community partnerships (North Carolina's Smart Start) in addition to classes at elementary schools. Children's progress is assessed using components from the Child Observation Record and Concepts about Print. Initial results show that the effects of Bright Beginnings are sustained; children perform consistently better on end-of-year kindergarten assessments than do comparable children who did not participate. Most important, initial results show that participation in Bright Beginnings has substantially reduced achievement gaps associated with race and poverty by the end of kindergarten. The district has the goal of doubling the number of children served in Bright Beginnings with the long term objective of having at least 85 percent of all Charlotte-Mecklenburg students reading at or above grade level by the end of grade three.

Because of concern about the quality and availability of early childhood education, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) is committed to raising awareness about the importance of early childhood education, the characteristics of high-quality programs, and the availability of federal resources to support preschool services. As part of this task, the Department is providing information to educators and policy-makers about why early education is important and what it takes to ensure that preschoolers' education experiences are of sufficient quality to make a difference in learning outcomes. Recognizing the scope of the task, the Department has chosen to focus initially on promoting the development of children's cognitive and language skills in preschool settings supported by public schools.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT?

This guide is an initial step designed to provide information to local, district, and state educators about the hallmarks of high-quality early childhood programs. It includes short syntheses of research about the characteristics of early education programs that have the most influence on the development of cognition and learning. Then, indicators are provided to assess the quality of preschool programs. The indicators are based in research as well as guidelines developed by states and early childhood professional associations. If a school or district currently operates a preschool program, the guide can be used as a self-assessment tool to judge the program's quality and make plans for improvements. If the district is considering starting a preschool program, the guide offers quality standards to be used during planning. States may find the quality indicators and outcomes useful as they prepare guidance for the operation of early childhood programs.

WHY TARGET PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

The target audiences for this document are public school educators and policymakers who are planning or providing educational programs for children ages three to five. Elementary school administrators are beginning to realize that they must invest in the quality of preschools to demonstrate success in meeting demanding educational standards. Administrators know that children need to enter the K-12 system with a

Missouri's Independence School District became the nation's first School of the 21st Century in 1988. The district provides child care for three- and four-year olds and before- and after-school care for school-aged children in every elementary school. It operates Head Start and Full Start, a program initiated to blend Head Start and child care. Independence schools also administer Medicaid and case management and offer child development training to families and child care providers.

A range of school programs in Texas' Austin Independent School District illustrates ways that public schools can support preschool education. At Becker Elementary, parents of pre-kindergarten children learn in the Parents As Partners program how to facilitate their children's literacy development. Parents learn about literacy activities to support learning and also develop supportive relationships with teachers. The school reports unprecedented progress on observational assessments of literacy. At Sanchez and Allison Elementary schools, the Parents Advocates for Literacy (PALS) program trains parents in early literacy so that they can work as volunteers in pre-kindergarten programs. Each school day features a 45 minute PALS time when parents and preschoolers work together in small groups in pre-reading and writing. PALS adds substantially to the instructional time young children receive.

strong language and literacy foundation to achieve the goal of producing competent readers by the end of the primary grades. Public schools have great potential for improving the quality and increasing the impact of preschool services. Schools have access to resources and the capacity to enhance continuity between early education and kindergarten and first grade. Public funding for pre-kindergarten has been increasing as the K-12 system recognizes its vested interest in the preparation of young children for success in the early grades. Local school districts already have the responsibility to provide education for preschool-aged children who need special education services. But public schools can do much more by supporting staff, creating community connections and providing resources to make an impact on the early foundation for learning.

There are many ways that the public school system can support early education: providing universal pre-kindergarten; financing the placement of high needs children in early education settings; extending services for some children; offering professional development to Head Start and private preschool teachers; coordinating local providers and community resources; and facilitating transitions across settings.³

WHY EMPHASIZE COGNITION AND LANGUAGE?

The Department acknowledges that attention in the preschool years to all domains is vital, but will place more emphasis on cognition and language. Research now provides clear direction in these domains, which in the past have often been neglected in preschool settings. The new research sheds light on the competencies of young children, the role of a supportive context in development, and specific ways to promote learning. An extensive body of evidence is now available, for example, to guide emergent literacy skills and early reading.⁴ Because developmental domains are related, however, growth in language and cognition will optimally occur in the context of other areas of development. Language development emerges from social interactions and rich experiences; good health and nutrition are foundational for all types of learning; and self-assurance in a group setting helps a child profit from school experiences.

WHAT ARE THE ROLES OF STATES AND DISTRICTS IN SUPPORTING HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS?

States and districts can provide leadership, guidance, and technical assistance in support of early childhood programs. Putting in place high-quality education programs for preschool children on a large scale requires action on many fronts simultaneously. States can play a leadership role by providing guidance for program design and assessment, acknowledging pre-kindergarten children as learners, creating partnerships and collaborations to extend services, and offering financial support to encourage additional and improved services. School district offices play an essential role in creating effective early childhood programming because support for young children's learning requires the involvement of the full community. Early childhood education is most effective when it is seen as part of the full continuum of a child's education.