

Georgia's Pre-K Programs

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
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"The Importance of Early Childhood Development"

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Commissioner

Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, also known as *Bright from the Start*, was created on July 1, 2004. The creation of Bright from the Start merged the Office of School Readiness, the Office of Regulatory Services Child Care Licensing Division, and the Georgia Child Care Council. Bright from the Start has been in operation since October 1, 2004.

The legislative purpose of Bright from the Start included the following objectives: to infuse a culture of education in the zero (0) to five (5) population; to streamline early childhood services; and to improve the quality, availability, and affordability of child care. Bright from the Start operates with a \$450 million budget and impacts over 400,000 students each day.

The mission of Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning is to deliver exemplary early care and education programs that improve the quality of early learning experiences, increase school readiness, and improve overall school performance.

The vision of Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning is to increase the number of Georgia's children and families who have access to quality early care and learning programs. As well as ensuring that more of Georgia's early care and learning programs achieve and maintain higher, measurable, research-based standards.

Georgia's Pre-K Program was established in 1993. It was funded by the Georgia Lottery for Education and more than 860,000 Pre-K Children have been served since 1993 (one million will be served by the Fall 2009). In the 2008-2009 school year there were 79,000 Pre-K slots.

The program has established comprehensive classroom standards and a statewide child assessment based on Dr. Meisel's work. The program also requires on-site classroom monitoring and resource coordination.

Georgia's Pre-K program is a voluntary universal program. Children must live in Georgia and be age eligible in order to participate, there is no income requirement. Fifty-six percent of Georgia's four year olds are served.

Georgia's Pre-K program is a public/private partnership that operates in both public and private sites: 59.30 percent of the sites are private; 39.34 percent of the sites are operated by a local

school system; and 1.36 percent are operated by “Other” organizations (Military, Charter, Technical Schools, Vocational Education, Refugee Centers, University Lab Schools).

Targeted or Universal

Most school failure (in absolute numbers) is for children from socio-economic levels above the poverty level. Though research has shown high quality programs have the largest effect sizes for disadvantaged children, substantial effects have been detected for children from all socio-economic levels. Publicly funded pre-k for all might produce a paradoxical but worthwhile effect in terms of educational gains. Disadvantaged children benefit (in comparison to their gains with targeted programs) but so do more advantaged children. Accordingly, while such universal programs may result in higher levels of achievement for the disadvantaged, they might leave a larger achievement gap. If a universal preschool program substantially increased the enrollment of disadvantaged children, however, the achievement gap might also be reduced.

Family income presents a moving target, due to the fact that most poverty is transient-meaning the families are below or above the poverty line at different times. Many families move from one side of the cut-off to the other during the school year; some families manage to enroll their children despite having incomes above the cut-off; and others who qualify are not eligible. Evidence suggests that program effects on disadvantaged children may be larger when programs serve children from diverse backgrounds. (Barnett, W. S. (2008). *Preschool Education and Its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit.)

Georgia Pre-K Program Essentials

The Georgia Pre-K program is a full year, full day program, carefully aligned with the State’s K-12 program. This means children are in the program 180 days per year (36 weeks), five days per week, for 6.5 hours each day.

The Georgia Pre-K program includes a credentialed teaching staff. Lead teachers are either certified and/or hold a Bachelor’s degree in elementary or early childhood education (79.85%), or they have an Associate’s Degree in Early Childhood education (20.15%). Assistant teachers must meet a minimum credential requirement of the Child Development Associate (CDA) or its equivalent.

The Georgia Pre-K program meets 9 out of 10 quality standards (NIEER). Quality is also measured through the mandated best practice teacher training directly related to instruction, assessment and program quality; the statewide child assessment focused on standards driven instruction; the onsite technical assistance to facilitate quality instruction; the enhanced probation process to eliminate programs with continued poor quality; and, finally, the curriculum review process conducted by Dr. Susan Landry (UT) to ensure that the approved curricula correlate directly to Pre-K standards and child assessments (the review is conducted on a 3 year cycle).

Head Start Collaboration

The Head Start State Collaboration Office, as part of Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, fosters partnerships between federally funded Head Start programs and early childhood programs receiving state or federal funds to improve the quality of services

to low-income children and their families in Georgia. The Head Start Collaboration office aligned all Head Start programs with Georgia Pre-K standards, which are aligned with Georgia K-3 standards. A joint letter of support for blended programs was sent to all Head Start programs from the Commissioner and the Regional Manager for Head Start.

In the 2007-2008 school year, 26,355 three and four-year-old children were served by Head Start. Of those served, 14,882 were three-year-old children, 11,473 were four-year-old children, and 2,519 children were enrolled in blended Head Start/Georgia's Pre-K programs. The number of three year olds served by Head Start programs has been increasing because of blended classes for four year olds with Georgia Pre-K.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the Georgia Pre-K program, accountability and academic achievements for Pre-K programs must be based on data and research. Also, Pre-K programs need the flexibility to meet individual state needs. Finally, the U.S. Department of Education must recognize that some states, like Georgia, that have an independent State Early Childhood department, and recognizing only one SEA means that those independent agencies cannot directly receive the dollars for their educational purposes.