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Report # 85

Pre-Kindergarten Characteristics

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Pre-K In America

Interest In Pre-K Soars

Teachers, Length of School Day Among Key Issues

America's interest in pre-kindergarten is at an all time high. Nearly all states now invest in public pre-kindergarten programs and investment over the past 10 years has surged to historic levels. Yet, a clear and complete picture of public pre-kindergarten across the nation remains a work in progress.

Recent studies, however, provide some insight into the characteristics of these programs and how certain features affect the quality of a child's classroom experience. For all of the variation from state to state, location of the program, length of the school day, and the education of teachers appear to be common issues of importance.

Investment in public pre-kindergarten in recent years has been nothing short of phenomenal, with state funding for support of pre-kindergarten programs rising from \$200 million in 1988¹ to \$2.54 billion by 2003.²

And there is reason to believe investment will continue to grow. Few states serve more than 20% of their four-year-olds and many pre-kindergarten initiatives are still in the early stages of development.

Pennsylvania only recently joined the list of states that offer funding for public pre-kindergarten. The Education Accountability Block Grant, begun in fiscal 2004-2005, offers grants to the 501 public school districts in the state to support research-based programs designed to boost student achievement, including pre-kindergarten.

In 2005, schools invested most of the more than \$200 million state allocation on early childhood education,

spending more than \$2 of every \$3 to support kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, and smaller class sizes in grades K-3. Most invested in full-day kindergarten.

Only 40 districts spent their share specifically on pre-kindergarten.³ But, as national trends suggest, investment in these programs is expected to grow in school districts across Pennsylvania.

As it does, school officials will face policy decisions that influence the implementation of pre-kindergarten programs and the outcomes of the children who attend them. Recent studies of programs across the nation offer some guidance by providing insight into several key program characteristics.

Pre-K Profile Emerges

In 2005, policymakers got their first comprehensive look at pre-kindergarten in America with the release of the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) Multi-State Pre-Kindergarten Study.

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The study examines data from 240 programs in Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, California, and New York – each of which has well-established, large-scale public pre-kindergarten initiatives.

State-funded pre-kindergarten programs vary in design, organization, and staffing. These programs typically serve a targeted population, usually children at risk of school problems, or a universal population. Most state-funded programs target at-risk children.

Recent studies drawn from the NCEDL data have examined center-based pre-kindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds that were fully or partially funded by state education agencies and were operated in schools or in the community under the direction of state and local agencies. Head Start programs were included only if the public school district was the grantee or delegate.

Programs in four of the six states

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were targeted toward children considered at risk for academic problems. These children typically scored below age norms on the Peabody Picture Test, Oral & Written Language Scale and Woodcock-Johnson III tests. Overall, the teacher-child ratio was favorable. Average enrollment was less than 18 children in a class with about eight children enrolled per adult in the classroom.

Studies identify three key issues that influence implementation and outcomes: location of the program, length of school day, and teacher education.

A Question Of Location

Whether to house pre-kindergarten programs in public schools, community centers, or a combination of both is a basic policy decision. A key question is whether there are significant differences related to the setting.

Key differences in teacher characteristics were found to be related to settings. About 81% of the pre-kindergarten teachers in public schools held a bachelor's degree or higher and only 8% did not have a college degree. Among pre-kindergarten teachers in non-public school settings, 57% had a bachelor's degree or higher and 24% had no college degree. Teachers in public school settings were also paid significantly more than those who taught in non-public school programs. Program setting was not found to be related to the characteristics of the children served or classrooms.

Time Spent In Class

Few studies compare full-day and part-day pre-kindergarten programs. However, studies of kindergarten programs suggest that the length of day matters. For example, children in full-day kindergarten are more likely to be offered a richer menu of activities, including dramatic play, science, art, music, and social studies, compared to

peers in part-day programs.⁴

In studies based on the NCEDL data, more than half of the public pre-kindergarten programs were open for fewer than 15 hours a week. A program is considered full-day if it is open 20 or more hours a week.

Differences in curriculum were noted. Full-day teachers were more likely to use High/Scope curricula, while part-day teachers tended to use state- or locally-developed curricula or — in 7% of programs — no curriculum at all.

Teacher Characteristics

The education level required to teach pre-kindergarten varies widely across states. Minimum requirements typically range from a child development associate certificate to a bachelor's degree. Some states require that a teacher's 2- or 4-year degree be in early childhood education or child development.

In studies based on the NCEDL data, 70% of the lead teachers of the programs in the six states had at least a

bachelor's degree and nearly 30% had a master's degree. Those without a formal degree beyond a high school diploma accounted for 16% of the teachers.

Significant differences were found among public pre-kindergarten classrooms taught by teachers with bachelor's degrees and classrooms taught by teachers without a degree. Teachers who did not have a bachelor's degree were teaching significantly more children — and a higher proportion of children — from low-income backgrounds than teachers who held bachelor's degrees. Those with bachelor's degrees were more likely to teach children who entered the pre-kindergarten program with higher skills, such as children with higher tests scores for receptive vocabulary and expressive vocabulary.

In other words, the children most in need of high-quality learning experiences were more likely to be taught by the teachers with lower qualifications.



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