

Education Reform

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Comprehensive Services in Pre-K

Head Start, the federally funded program for disadvantaged children, is often referred to as a comprehensive child development program. In addition to equipping children with early academic skills, teachers and staff also attend to children's other needs, such as proper nutrition, mental health, and dental care.

The theory is that all areas of a child's development must be addressed in order for them to have later success in school and life. If they have a poor diet or are having trouble focusing on the words in a book, they won't be able to learn to their full potential, experts say. While many state-funded prekindergarten programs focus on education, some are also working to provide other critical services to poor children and their parents.

In fact, one of the benchmarks that the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) uses to rate the quality of state pre-K programs is whether they conduct health, vision, and hearing screenings and provide at least one additional support service.

According to the latest NIEER "yearbook" on state pre-K programs, these additional services most often include parent involvement activities and parent training or education classes. Others mentioned were home visits, job training for parents, and referrals to other social services.

The court-mandated Abbott Pre-school Program in New Jersey, which is undergoing a major expansion due to a new school finance formula, is an example of a program where child-

Sources

W. Steven Barnett
National Institute for Early Education Research
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, N.J.
(732) 932-4350
sbarnett@nieer.org

Martin J. Blank
Coalition for Community Schools
Washington, D.C.
(202) 822-8405 x167
blankm@iel.org

Walter Gilliam
The Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy
Yale University
New Haven, CT
(203) 785-3384
Walter.gilliam@yale.edu

Cornelia Grumman
First Five Years Fund
Chicago, Ill.
(312) 922-3863
cgrumman@ffyf.org

Jane Knitzer
National Center for Children in Poverty
New York, NY
(646) 284-9600
www.nccp.org

Helene Stebbins
HMS Policy Research
(703) 769-2772
Helene.stebbins@verizon.net

ren's health and nutrition are emphasized along with their cognitive development. Standards for the program require that one nurse be available for every 300 3- and 4-year-olds in the program.

But just because state pre-K standards include certain services doesn't always mean they are being provided. Providers might be expected to screen young children for possible hearing, vision, or developmental problems but that doesn't mean children are being properly referred to the experts or services that can help them, says W. Steven Barnett, the director of NIEER.

And just because parent education classes might cover topics such as discipline, activities to encourage early learning, and the importance of establishing routines, etc. doesn't mean the programs are intensive enough to help struggling parents or that the parents who need the most help in supporting their children's development at home are taking advantage of the classes.

"Parenting education and parent involvement can mean anything," from sending home a video tape for parents to watch to highly skilled counselors working with parents, Barnett says.

The counselors might teach parents directly to handle discipline issues, encourage reading at home, and look for practical ways to blend learning into the home environment. Frequency also varies greatly: from a one-time activity to once a month or even weekly. It just depends on how

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much funding a program has for that type of effort and whether this is a priority.

Surprisingly, a study of early childhood education and development programs soon to be published in *Teachers College Record* shows that preschool classes that also provide a range of additional health and support services are less likely to contribute to children's cognitive and social skills.

The analysis examined evaluations of 120 programs over a five-decade period, and found that when children received additional non-education services, they received less instruction in academic skills.

"If a program is providing additional services but within the same time frame as other preschool programs whose sole function is children's education then the time available each day has to be allotted differently so that teachers can provide these other services," according to the study, conducted by Gregory Camilli and Sadako Vargas, researchers at Rutgers University.

But Barnett, who worked on the study, explains that the comprehensive services themselves are not the problem—it's the education program trying to do everything.

"Maybe preschool just needs to do preschool," he said. "These multi-purpose comprehensive service programs don't work. You can spend a lot of money over the first five years of life and have nothing to show for it by the time the kids are 6."

The study suggested that state

policymakers "consider carefully not only what additional services, if any, they will provide but also how these services might be delivered in a way that does not dilute intensity of children's preschool experience."

Reporters should look at whether early education programs, especially those serving disadvantaged children, have formed partnerships with health care professionals or other social service agencies that can provide the expertise that preschool teachers and directors might not have.

One other note about the study - Camilli and Vargas looked at studies on programs dating back 50 years, and noted that some current state-funded programs that follow a comprehensive model are doing a better job of building young children's literacy and math skills. The authors cited the Abbott Preschool Program in New Jersey as an example.

Definitions of Comprehensive

Reporters are likely to hear the topic of comprehensive services discussed in two different ways. First, there are the services that are provided for 3- and 4-year-olds as part of an existing preschool or pre-K program, as mentioned.

But support is also building in some states for creating broader early childhood systems that provide education and other health and family support services for children from birth through age 5. The trend is trying to address the fact that states typically have a confusing structure of services for young children.

"Programs are created in response to specific needs. They frequently are underfunded, serve only one specific age group, and feature separate funding sources, standards, regulations, and governance structures. Then, when a different need arises, the process repeats," says a 2007 report by Pre-K Now, a Washington-based advocacy organization. "Over time, a labyrinth of discrete programs develops, leaving children and families to navigate a landscape of varying and even conflicting standards and regulations, inconsistent quality and accountability, and uneven investment."

The report, "Common Vision, Different Paths" highlighted California, Illinois, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania as states that are working to put comprehensive systems that include preschool-in place.

President Obama's support of birth-to-5 programs and his pledge to create "promise neighborhoods," modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, are also creating greater interest in the comprehensive services approach.

As reporters follow these efforts in their own states, they're likely to encounter a variety of opinions—from those those who say the government still doesn't pay for enough services for families to others who argue that the "nanny state" is interfering with parents' rights to raise their children. Similar discussions have taken place regarding public schools that have added health clinics and other "full-service" options for K-12 students.

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Location Matters

The setting in which a preschool class is located makes a significant difference in whether children are more likely to receive additional support services.

Not surprisingly, states that follow a Head Start model, such as Oregon, are more likely to make comprehensive services a routine part of their program. But these services don't have to be provided at the expense of academic growth.

A 2006 study by the Children's Institute, an early childhood research and advocacy group in Oregon, showed that kids served in Oregon's state-funded Head Start pre-K program make substantial gains over the school year. In the fall, 12 percent were proficient in language and literacy and in the spring, this jumped to 62 percent.

State pre-K classes operated by Head Start agencies are also likely to have better access to health and social services than those not in Head Start centers. In fact, experts say that more partnerships between Head Start and state-funded pre-K programs is one way to ensure that children enrolled in public preschool programs are receiving additional services that could support their learning.

"A potential role for Head Start in the context of widespread public school involvement in pre-kindergarten would be to collaborate with state prekindergarten systems to provide the comprehensive services often missing from state early educa-

tion models," Walter Gilliam, the director of the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, wrote in a recent paper.

Head Start officials and advocates have long supported cooperation with other state early childhood efforts, and were instrumental in the creation of the 50 state Head Start collaboration offices. But obstacles get in the way of working together to serve children when the regulations, standards, or child eligibility rules don't match.

"The Head Start act requires collaboration, but it's a two-way street" says Ben Allen, the research and evaluation director for the National Head Start Association, which represents staff and families. State pre-K programs also have to be willing to have these services provided to children, he said.

He added that collaboration on a broader scale, perhaps what Gilliam is suggesting, "has a lot to do with federal leadership," which advocates now feel they have under President Obama.

Gilliam's paper, published in the journal *Infants and Young Children*, also highlighted the 2007 reauthorization of Head Start and its inclusion of a new requirement that Head Start programs and state pre-K programs increase their efforts to work together.

The law includes a "greater opportunity to share resources, and funding for state advisory councils that could serve as a hub for coordination

efforts," he wrote.

Such collaboration, however, is not always easy, since Head Start programs and state pre-K programs typically follow different sets of standards and guidelines, which was explored in a 2007 report from Helene Stebbins, an early childhood

Publications

"Better Outcomes for All" 2007, Helene Stebbins and L. Carol Scott, Pre-K Now
http://www.preknow.org/documents/HeadStartPre-KCollaboration_Jan2007.pdf

"Common Vision, Different Paths" 2007, Pre-K Now and Zero to Three
http://www.preknow.org/documents/CommonVision_Dec2007.pdf

"Head Start, Public School Prekindergarten, and a Collaborative Potential," 2008, Walter Gilliam, *Infants & Young Children*, Vol. 21, No. 1

"Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion" 2008, Walter Gilliam.
http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/ExpulsionBriefImplementingPolicies.pdf

"Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Early Education Interventions on Cognitive and Social Development" 2008 Gregory Camilli and Sadako Vargas, Rutgers University

"State Early Childhood Policies" 2007, National Center for Children in Poverty
http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_725.pdf

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consultant, and Pre-K Now.

“While Head Start maintains a common set of standards for all of its programs, variations in state pre-k standards occur at the state level and even at the community level,” the report said.

Reporters should monitor these issues in their states because they can lead to interesting local stories.

Following Head Start-based programs, pre-K classes in public schools are the next likely to provide children with access to other support services, largely because schools already have counselors, lunch programs, and sometimes health services and parent liaisons, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.

Mr. Gilliam writes that the growth of the “community school model,” which might include family resource centers is another reason why the non-education needs of preschoolers might be getting addressed in school-based programs.

But this isn’t always the case. The Tulsa public school system in Oklahoma, which offers the state-funded, universal pre-K program, does not provide comprehensive services. Pre-K students who attend a Tulsa Head Start center, however, do receive supplemental services, according to William Gormley, a researcher at Georgetown University who has studied the state’s pre-K program.

Community Schools

As Mr. Gilliam suggests, the community schools approach, in which

schools become a hub for a range of offerings, often includes early childhood education. This allows families of preschoolers to then have access to other programs and resources available at that school.

“We have to pay attention to all of these dimensions of young people’s lives if we’re going to educate them the way that we should,” says Martin Blank, the director of the Coalition for Community Schools. In fact, the coalition is launching a new project, funded by the Kellogg Foundation, to strengthen the connections between community schools and early childhood education providers.

But Mr. Blank agrees that schools, or preschools, shouldn’t try to provide all of the services that families might need. “They don’t have the expertise,” he says, adding that “no single institution should have so much power.”

Finally, pre-K classes located in child-care centers are the least likely to provide additional services to children and their families, Mr. Barnett suggests, unless they are specifically working with other community partners to make it a priority.

“Where are the links to special education? Where are the supports for kids who are having mental health problems?” he asked. “Head Start and public schools have frameworks to make those things happen.”

One area that is receiving increased attention from pre-K providers is that of mental health services, in part because of a 2005 report from Mr. Gilliam showing that

state pre-K programs were expelling youngsters because of serious behavior problems.

He recommended that states increase efforts to make mental health professionals available to teachers and find alternatives to removing children from the classroom. And many states, such as Connecticut, Illinois, and Maryland have responded by having early childhood mental health consultation services that are linked to state pre-K and child care systems.

As a final note, reporters should consider how the public preschool program is administered at the state level. If it’s housed in the education department, the mission might focus primarily on school readiness and academic skills. But if the human services agency runs the program or is involved, a comprehensive model might be part of the design of the program.

-Linda Jacobson is an education writer in Los Angeles

For a full listing of all early childhood briefs, go to www.ewa.org and click Resource Center. This reform brief was made possible by a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The statements cited in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Direct inquiries to EWA, 2122 P Street, NW, Suite 201, Washington, DC 20037; (202) 452-9830; ewa@ewa.org.