

Providing Preschool Programs

Center on Instruction

Over the past three decades, evidence about the benefits of quality preschool education has mounted (Barnett, 2008; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Schweinhart, 2001) and, increasingly, making preschool universally available has become a goal of state and local governments. Now more than 80% of four-year olds attend some type of preschool with about half of those enrolled in a publicly supported pre-K program; participation by three-year olds is much more limited because, to date, the growth of public programs has focused largely on education for four-year olds (Barnett et al., 2008). The outcomes associated with high-quality preschool experiences include academic and social success in kindergarten, first grade, and beyond; several landmark longitudinal studies even demonstrate the lasting effects of high-quality preschool on disadvantaged children's opportunities for academic achievement, social adjustment, and well-being (Schweinhart et al, 2005; Barnett, 1996; Ramey & Campbell, 1994; Campbell & Ramey, 1994).

Of course, the educational benefits of preschool accrue only when the preschool experiences are of high quality. Unfortunately, past studies have shown that the majority of preschool programs in the United States do not reach the necessary level of quality (Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Team, 1995), and that is especially true of those programs serving the at-risk child population. Quality characteristics that make a difference include: positive warm relationships between adults and children, regular communication between adults and children, and adults encouraging children to explore, reason, and solve problems. Other characteristics of high-quality programs include a curriculum that teaches skills associated with future academic success, including the opportunity to learn readiness skills; variety in schedule and offerings; small group sizes; credentialed teachers; appropriate adult-child ratios; a well-equipped and spacious environment; and ongoing professional development and supervision (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). The recent report of the National Early Learning Panel offers educators and policymakers more detailed information about the early skills that are important for later literacy success (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Action Principles

For State

1. Reallocate existing funds to provide financial incentives for districts/schools/community providers to offer preschool education or extend the time of services through longer days or more days per week.
2. Reallocate existing funds to support costs that enable at-risk children to participate in preschool, including reimbursing transportation costs, which are often a barrier.
3. Provide financial incentives for districts/schools/community providers to provide preschool education for children younger than age four.
4. Strengthen preschool standards to include appropriate child-teacher ratios that allow for individualized attention, appropriate screening and assessments, and educational goals.
5. Provide incentives for preschool programs that have demonstrated quality practices.
6. Set certification standards for preschool teachers that require qualifications consistent with national standards.

For District/School

1. Arrange for quality reviews of preschool classrooms to provide feedback for teachers, including expert supervision and coaching for preschool teachers.
2. Include preschool teachers in routine professional development events as well as specialized professional development.
3. Select a research-based curriculum that includes literacy and language skill development.

4. Provide education for parents of at-risk children designed to encourage their children's participation in preschool.

References and Resources

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