

Research Notes

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Going to Scale with High-Quality Early Education: Choices and Consequences in Universal Pre-Kindergarten Efforts

Several decades of research have shown that high-quality early education programs can produce substantial long-term benefits for participating children, their families, and society as a whole. Based on this research, many states have taken steps toward the creation of universal pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs. Although there is a strong base of evidence on the effects and effectiveness of high-quality early education programs, there is far less evidence about how to design a statewide system that can provide high-quality services to all participants. A recent RAND Corporation research report¹ describes the efforts of eight states to create statewide systems of high-quality early education. The report examines the policy choices that states have made during implementation and discusses the implications for policy and practice.

Research Questions and Methods

The RAND study addressed the following questions:

- What are the core implementation issues and policy choices facing states that are moving toward universal pre-K?
- How have states negotiated the consequences of their policy choices? What lessons have been learned from these negotiations?
- What are the effects of particular universal pre-K policy choices on other child populations, families, and communities?

The RAND study focused on state-led programs providing public services intended to prepare children 3 and 4 years of age for kindergarten. Forty interviews were conducted with representatives of state agencies responsible for program implementation, state chapters of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and a range of practitioner support entities in Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Washington.

Findings

The majority of states currently invest in some form of public pre-K programming. However, there is significant program variation from state to state. Some states provide full coverage (all children in an age range) while other states target intervention to limited populations (e.g., at-risk children). Some states offer full-day options, but most offer part days only. Some tie benefits to the public assistance status of parents, while others are more flexible in their definition of program eligibility. Some offer choices among public and private providers, while others locate programs only in public schools.

Regardless of the type of program in which the respondents were involved, they identified two main challenges in implementing large-scale, high-quality pre-K—providing universal services and providing comprehensive services. The following issues surfaced as the key areas of negotiation in implementing statewide programs.

- **Funding.** Fiscal necessity and the desire to integrate systems of child care, education, and welfare have caused many states to rely heavily on federal funding through the multiple funding streams of Head Start, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). States are using these funds creatively to expand their programming and to provide important support for staff development. However, use of these different streams also creates systemic complications, presses states in the direction of particular kinds of accountability, and has potential negative implications for the participation of the working poor in publicly funded pre-K. Respondents reported that the ability to balance and blend federal and state funding while maintaining program consistency will be a key challenge in future program development.
- **Auspice.** While states demonstrate a strong commitment to develop pre-K as a component of an integrated social service system for children and families, the perceived competition between education and human services agencies for limited funding can undermine these integration efforts. Multiple and segregated data systems across implementing agencies also limit the extent to which program outcomes can be tracked, analyzed, and used to target improvements.

- **Access.** "Universal pre-kindergarten" is often a misnomer. While states have ambitions of publicly funded programs that are voluntary and accessible to all age-eligible children, access to programming is limited both by funding constraints and by the contexts of particular state efforts. States that are closest to achieving universal access have done so by successfully integrating child care and Head Start providers into the state pre-K system.
- **Accountability.** The accountability movement provides structure and opportunity for states to address quality in program development. Respondents in the RAND study were concerned, however, that the current strong focus on academic standards may also press states to separate cognitive achievement from multidimensional child development and prioritize the cognitive in program design, implementation, and assessment. Respondents also noted that comprehensiveness of services—reflected in the extent to which state pre-K includes child care before and after school-day components of programs, transportation, and referral to other social services—may also be limited by accountability pressures to focus on academic outcomes, with potentially negative implications for access and participation.
- **Staffing.** The quality and stability of the pre-K workforce is a key issue for states. High standards for staff are intended to support program quality, but funding to support staff development and smooth degree trajectories is lacking in many states. Stakeholders express significant concern that incentives for teacher migration into public pre-K may limit the supply of quality staff in programs serving younger children.

Conclusion

Significant new practices are emerging across state pre-K programs in such areas as the development of standards, creative funding, professional development, technical assistance, and partnership with diverse providers. The RAND study highlights the choices and challenges faced in moving quality to scale within presently fragmented and multilayered systems of governance and programming. The study argues for more rigorous examination of current efforts in order to identify promising practices as well as careful coordination of policymaking to ensure that large-scale public pre-K programs more fully echo the small-scale, high-quality interventions that inspired them. The RAND study presents the following recommendations to support the quality of current and future efforts:

- Raise public awareness that the benefits of high-quality early childhood experiences are not entirely or even primarily academic.
- Base new efforts to develop state infrastructure for taking pre-K to scale on evidence from successful practices, where it exists, and examine ongoing efforts more closely to determine where and why they are not successful.
- Integrate efforts across state bureaucracies—if necessary, reorganizing to reduce turf wars and silo effects.
- Expand state efforts to engage linguistic and cultural minorities in pre-K as both consumers and providers.
- Work toward implementing standards that are developmentally appropriate, support program quality, and balance performance expectations across all developmental domains.
- Develop measures of pre-K teacher and administrator quality other than simple certification, and encourage their adoption as a support for quality and staff stability.
- Increase the extent to which professional development and technical assistance efforts focus on upgrading teacher and administrator quality in non-school settings, and develop a base of evidence on successful practice in these areas.
- Examine more rigorously the effects of school district dominance on access to, demand for, and utilization of programs, and consider restructuring programs so that populations most in need can be provided with services.
- Focus outcomes research on the effects of particular program components over time, once programs are taken to scale, as a support for the adoption of quality practices in other states.

1. Christina, R., & Nicholson-Goodman, J. (2005). *Going to scale with high-quality early education: Choices and consequences in universal pre-K efforts*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Tribune Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.