

Research Notes

Published by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University

FALL 2005

State-Funded Pre-kindergarten in Community-Based Child Care

State-funded pre-kindergarten programs are currently offered in 38 states and the District of Columbia serving approximately 740,000 children at a cost of over \$2.5 billion in state funds. The vast majority of states that provide pre-kindergarten use a mixed-delivery model that includes both school and community settings. Policymakers considering the development or expansion of state-funded Pre-K programs will find the report *All Together Now: State Experiences in Using Community-Based Child Care to Provide Pre-Kindergarten* most useful.¹

The report, published by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), documents the impact of policies associated with implementing a community-based pre-kindergarten model. This Research Note summarizes the key findings of the CLASP study as well as implications and recommendations for policy and practice. Two research questions guided the study:

- Do states using this model address early education for children and the needs of working families in a coordinated way?
- Does the use of this model strengthen the quality and program standards of community-based child care programs?

Sample and Methodology

The sample for the study included states that provide pre-kindergarten services for three- and/or four-year olds in community-based settings as well as schools. Only states that had pre-kindergarten program standards, teacher education and qualification standards, or monitoring and evaluation requirements beyond child care licensing rules were eligible. Twenty-nine states met the criteria. Data were collected from in-depth reviews of state Web sites, legislative history, published documents, and interviews with state pre-kindergarten administrators. CLASP examined policies in eleven areas, covering program design, standards, resources, and data collection.

Findings

The CLASP study found that the states that allow a mixed-delivery system have relatively small percentages of children in non-school-based settings. The study concludes that state policy choices matter, and that a community-based pre-kindergarten model can be designed to meet the needs of working families for consistent, full-day, full-year care, as well as to strengthen the program standards and quality of community-based child care. However, sometimes states create policy barriers that result in missed opportunities in achieving these multiple purposes.

Addressing Early Education for Children and the Needs of Working Families in a Coordinated Way

A family's ability to select a community-based pre-kindergarten program that meets its need for full-day and full-year programming is limited if state policies do not ensure inclusion of such programs in each community. To better coordinate early education with the needs of working families states should:

Require that some proportion of pre-kindergarten be delivered in settings that have the capacity to provide full-day, full-year child care services. While most state pre-kindergarten programs do not require pre-kindergarten in a full-day or full-year setting, many do consider how the needs of working families will be met by including this in the selection criteria of a competitive RFP process. Connecticut requires that at least 60% of its programs provide a full-day, full-year option.

Identify and eliminate state child care subsidy policies that may prevent participation of community-based providers in the pre-kindergarten program. Aligning eligibility periods between the child care subsidy program requirements and the pre-kindergarten program prevents the disruption of children's learning. In Illinois, a special collaboration program was created that allows for certain exceptions to the rules governing the child care subsidy program, such as an annual re-determination of family eligibility.

Require joint planning at the local level of early education and child care constituencies. Joint local planning can promote the best use of local facilities and break down barriers between school districts and community-based providers.

Redesign state governance structures to formalize policy and planning coordination among agencies responsible for early education and child care. While the authority for state-funded pre-kindergarten is most often located in the state department of education, some states (e.g., West Virginia and Massachusetts), have developed explicit requirements for coordinated policymaking between the education and child care subsidy agencies.

Allow pre-kindergarten payments to augment other child care funding without reducing existing resources, thereby assuring full workday coverage for low-income families in a setting that maintains consistent quality. States have the authority to set state-funded pre-kindergarten policies and to set payment policies under the rules of the child care subsidy program. Some states have decided on policies that allow community-based child care providers to add state pre-kindergarten funds to the full-day, full-year child care subsidies they receive for eligible, low-income children.

Conduct thorough outreach and disseminate information to all potential pre-kindergarten providers. States rarely require that all licensed community-based child care providers receive notice of the opportunity to participate in the pre-kindergarten program.

Strengthening the Quality of Community-Based Child Care Programs through Program Standards and Resources

State pre-kindergarten policies can provide resources and support that help improve the quality of community-based providers or they can exclude providers by setting the program standards, including staff qualifications, high without providing resources and support.

Set pre-kindergarten payments and provide dedicated resources that cover the cost of providing a high-quality pre-kindergarten program. Only a handful of states provide funding that is adequate to support a quality program during the hours that services are intended to be provided.

Set equivalent program standards for all communities and pre-kindergarten settings. Most states require all pre-kindergarten providers to meet the same program standards regardless of setting; some states have limited phase-in periods that allow programs extra time to meet the standards (Arizona, New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina).

Invest in the community-based child care teacher workforce by providing targeted resources to help teachers meet pre-kindergarten teacher education standards and receive comparable wages. Only a handful of states have funding available and policies implemented that give community-based providers access to higher education to meet teacher standards (Oregon, Massachusetts, West Virginia, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Missouri). A few states have implemented policies to ensure salary parity for teachers regardless of work setting (Alabama, Arkansas, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Oklahoma).

Make resources and technical assistance available to improve the content of early education services in community-based child care programs. A few states offer on-going, targeted support to help community-based programs meet pre-kindergarten standards (e.g., Alabama and Missouri).

Provide resources and technical assistance to improve the quality of settings for children too young to be eligible for pre-kindergarten. A small number of states direct a portion of pre-kindergarten funding to improve the quality of infant and toddler care (Illinois has an 11% set-aside within the pre-kindergarten funding stream).

Link policies to enhance program quality across pre-kindergarten and child care. Many state policymakers are interested in improving quality in child care and expanding pre-kindergarten but these efforts are not effectively linked. Tiered quality rating systems, which exist in 32 states, could be designed to help community-based providers meet pre-kindergarten standards.

Collect data and evaluate program quality across settings to continuously improve performance. Program evaluation is especially important to ensure that all settings are meeting the readiness goals for children. While most states collect some descriptive data, few states use program quality and child outcome data to offer assistance in improving program quality across all settings.

1. Schumacher, R., Ewen, D., Hart, K., & Lombardi, J. (2005). *All together now: State experiences in using community-based child care to provide pre-kindergarten*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. (http://www.clasp.org/publications/all_together_now.pdf)
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