



The California Preschool Study

As state and local education leaders examine strategies to address achievement shortfalls, expanding public funding for preschool programs is often cited as one potential approach to raising student achievement. As a continuation to the “Getting Down to Facts” studies, in 2008 the RAND Corporation released the third in a series of four interconnected phases of the California Preschool Study. This study examines achievement gaps in early elementary grades, the adequacy of preschool education currently provided, and what efficiencies or additional resources may contribute to early care and education (ECE).

The purpose in summarizing these findings of the first three phases of the study is to provide school leaders with a better context for understanding the ways local districts/COEs can play a meaningful role in the planning and provision of high-quality preschool services. The fourth phase of the study is expected to be released in mid to late 2008. This project was requested by the California Governor’s Committee on Education Excellence, the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Speaker of the California State Assembly and the President pro Tempore of the California State Senate.

Phase one: Who is ahead and who is behind? Gaps in school readiness and student achievement in the early grades for California’s children

This first phase of the study examines student achievement in the early elementary grades and the potential of preschool to improve student outcomes. Existing achievement gaps were studied and identified to focus on the adequacy of the publicly funded early care and education system in California. School districts that are considering an investment in preschool and are curious about the short and long term effects of a high-quality program may find the conclusions of this study helpful when making local decisions.

Although the percentage of students proficient in English-language arts and mathematics has risen from 2003-2007, there are still substantial percentages of students falling short. California Standards Test data for all second and third graders show many students are not proficient in key skills: two-fifths of students tested in math and two-thirds of students tested in English-language arts. Certain subgroups of students have even larger readiness and achievement gaps. The authors of the study demonstrate patterns of differences between groups of students do not suddenly appear in second grade, when CSTs are first administered, but have roots in early childhood.

A comparison of preschool programs from other states is included in this phase of the study and can be found at <http://www.rand.org>. Program quality is listed as an integral component of preschools that appear to have a favorable effect on school readiness; performance on academic testing in the early grades; generate sustained effects on academic achievement into the middle school years; reduce special education use, grade repetition and increase rates of high school graduation. In addition, several traditionally low performing groups of students in the early elementary grades demonstrate significant benefits from preschool participation.

Although the findings of this study suggest high-quality preschool programs may narrow existing achievement and readiness gaps, the favorable effects from preschool programs are not likely to be

significant enough to greatly reduce the large achievement shortfalls between group differences. To achieve the goal of full proficiency for all students, the researchers recommend that preschool be considered along with other strategies for raising student performance.

Phase two: Early care and education in the golden state: Publically funded programs serving California's preschool-age children

The state of California has been a long time supporter of publically financed ECE for children one and two years prior to kindergarten entry. The delivery systems are complex and serve the dual goals of promoting child development and covering the costs of child care for low-income families. Phase two of the California Preschool Study identifies ECE programs, program goals, funding mechanisms, children served and focuses on four case study counties: Los Angeles, Merced, San Diego and San Mateo.

Nearly \$2 billion of federal, state and local funds is spent annually in California to subsidize or provide free ECE services for preschool-age children. These services are delivered through 11 distinct programs, some of which vary greatly in program elements. In addition, other key funding streams support ECE program delivery including facilities investments and workforce development. The study's authors found administrative costs to be a nontrivial component of providing services under state contracts. Additionally, funding mechanisms in California provide little incentive for raising quality despite several reviews that suggest higher quality settings produce greater positive development results.

Targeted preschool programs for disadvantaged children do not necessarily identify and reach all children who are eligible for these programs. As of October 2006, 25 percent of eligible three-year olds and 53 percent of eligible four-year olds participated in subsidized, child development focused ECE programs. This estimate leaves behind 213,000 three-year olds and 134,000 four-year olds.

Monitoring the complexities of the ECE system as a whole may be challenging both for parents and policymakers. Given the different eligibility standards, program requirements, reimbursement rates, fiscal and administrative procedures and the current catalogue of programs cannot easily be coordinated. Standards of quality vary among publically funded child care and preschool programs. Questions remain if those investments are being utilized to achieve the greatest gains possible or if inefficiencies in the current system limit the beneficial effects high-quality ECE programs may have. If policymakers are interested in system reform, they may need to make choices that involve trade-offs between the potentially conflicting goals of early care and education programs in California.

Phase three: Prepared to learn: The nature of early care and education for preschool-age children in California

This third phase of the study collected and analyzed information regarding the nature and quality of ECE arrangements for preschool-aged children one and two years away from kindergarten. Existing data regarding the current use and quality of ECE programs in California data is limited. This hinders the ability of policymakers and the public to debate the merits of expanded preschool access and strategies for raising program quality in an informed manner. Researchers collected data from a representative sample of families including three- and four-year olds and identified their nonparental care arrangements through telephone surveys. Follow-up interviews were conducted with a smaller sample of those families and if the child was in a center-based care arrangement, researchers visited the center and recorded indicators of program quality through direct observation.

The use of center-based program is now the norm for California children – 59 percent of preschool-age children participate in a public and/or private program. However, not all groups of children participate at the same level. RAND researchers discovered that the groups of children with the largest gaps in school readiness and later school achievement are the least likely to participate in high-quality center-based programs that will help them succeed in kindergarten and beyond. Underserved groups include Latinos,

children whose mothers have low education, children whose parents are linguistically isolated, and those families with low income. As socio-economic levels rise, so does the use of center-based ECE.

Program quality in center-based ECE varies considerably – both within structural elements such as teacher qualifications and group sizes and within process elements related to preparing children for school which may determine later school success. The largest shortfall occurs on the extent to which teachers promote higher-order thinking skills, provide quality feedback, and develop students' language skills. It is these process elements of program quality that may be the most difficult for parents to identify as they make decisions about center-based ECE providers. RAND researchers suggest, "Consideration must be given for how to best address the information gap that parents face regarding key quality dimensions as they attempt to make the best ECE choices for their preschool-age children."

Policymakers interested in reform may wish to consider expanding the use of center-based programs by underserved groups and raising the quality across structural and process elements for all programs. If incentives are considered, they need to focus on elements that are vital to preparing three- and four-year olds for kindergarten.

Considerations for board members

There is a full continuum of activities school boards and district/COE staff can pursue to support efforts to expand access to high-quality preschool programs. School boards are especially well positioned to be engaged in and provide leadership on statewide efforts to create, modify or expand access to and quality of early care and education. Boards may also play a critical role in local efforts to increase the supply and quality of ECE programs. School boards are elected to govern the community's schools and fulfill their important responsibility by:

- Setting the vision and direction for the district/COE;
- Establishing and maintaining an organizational structure that supports the district/COEs vision;
- Providing support to the superintendent and staff as they carry out the direction of the board;
- Ensuring accountability to the public for the performance of the community's schools;
- Providing community leadership as advocates for children, the school district/COE and public schools.

Through its governance role, the board has the ability to encourage and support efforts to expand access to high-quality preschool programs. There are a variety of general strategies by which school boards and districts can support efforts to expand access to high-quality preschool programs such as becoming more knowledgeable about preschool, advocating for high-quality programs, providing district support to existing programs, establishing formal partnerships with preschool programs in the community and implementing of expanding district/county run preschool programs.

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