POLICY Brief

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Early Childhood Education

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About This Series

Building Community Systems for Young Children is a series of reports and corresponding Policy Briefs designed to support the implementation of Proposition 10: The California Children and Families Act. Each installment is written by a team of experts and provides comprehensive and authoritative information on critical issues concerning young children and families in California.

This series has been edited by Neal Halfon, M.D., M.P.H., Ericka Shulman, M.P.P., Miles Hochstein, Ph.D., and Michael Shannon, M.A.

Experience and research have identified practices and conditions that contribute to quality early childhood education programs. This Policy Brief offers guidelines toward ensuring that current and new programs promote optimal cognitive and social development in young children.

This summary was prepared by Al Averbach of CPRC.

To obtain the full-length report, see page 4.

The convergence of three social factors makes the present particularly auspicious for rethinking child care and early childhood education in California: public recognition that early brain development and environmental factors influence learning and development; greater awareness that child care is necessary for parents to work; and welfare-reform policies that have brought into clear relief the limits of our disjointed, informal system of child care. The passage of Proposition 10, with its emphasis on early childhood development, enhances the prospects that child care and early education programs will be reexamined and integrated in new ways. The State Commission guidelines for a comprehensive and integrated program offer a framework for evaluating existing child care and early education programs and systems and for planning new coordinated and interwoven services.

Practically speaking, in the realm of early childhood development a distinction between caring for children and promoting cognitive and social skills isn't meaningful. The children of low-income parents most in need of subsidized day care are the same children who are at greatest risk of school failure, and thus most in need of early childhood education. Head Start is struggling to address the increased demand for full-time day care for its enrollees, as are other preschool programs. By the same token, children who receive subsidized day care need a cognitively stimulating, language-rich, and educational environment. Accordingly, although we focus primarily on evaluating strategies that include direct educational services to preschool-age children, we suggest that county Proposition 10 commissions and other policymakers consider establishing or revising programs and their funding streams to consolidate these two purposes. Consideration also needs to be given to working-poor families, most of whom are not eligible for Head Start or subsidized care.

Effects of Early Childhood Education

We have learned several things from research related to early childhood education.

- Children from low-income families begin school, on average, with substantially poorer cognitive skills than do children from middle- and upper-income families.
- Children's cognitive skills when they enter school predict fairly well their achievement in high school and their ultimate educational attainment.
- Low-income children are less likely than middle- and upper-income children to have access to an early childhood education program and quality day care.
- Early childhood education programs can have both short- and long-term benefits for low-income children.

Relative to children who aren't enrolled in early childhood education programs, enrolled children, on average, benefit in the following ways as they proceed through school: They have higher initial IQs; higher academic achievement, which is sometimes sustained several

years beyond the intervention; lower grade-retention rates; lower special education placement; higher high school graduation rates; and lower delinquency rates. Programs vary considerably, however, by whether such benefits are seen at all and whether they persist more than a year or two. One reviewer of program evaluation studies concluded that the magnitude of effects is roughly related to the program's intensity, breadth, and amount of involvement with children and their families.

► Quality counts.

The following program qualities have been associated with positive outcomes for children: overall quality (usually measured by many variables—e.g., curriculum, environment, teacher-child interactions); language-rich environments; sensitive teachers who develop close, supportive relationships with children; and child-focused communication between school and home. Studies suggest that these program qualities are fostered by teacher education (greater teacher formal education and early childhood education training), smaller class sizes and low child/teacher ratios, lower staff turnover, and higher teacher compensation.

► The nature of the instructional program affects learning and motivation.

The empirical evidence suggests that a strong emphasis on basic skills using didactic, teacher-directed methods can undermine children's motivation to learn, and that more child-centered approaches (giving children considerable choice and teaching basic skills in the context of personally meaningful, partly child-initiated activities) can promote learning without undermining motivation.

► Early childhood education can help diminish but cannot erase the effect of income differences on child outcomes.

Despite three decades of research showing generally positive effects, we have learned that early childhood education isn't a panacea for the negative effects of poverty on children's development. The outcomes of the well-known Perry Preschool Project, for example, were positive; relative to control children, Perry children had higher eighth-grade achievement levels, high school completion rates, and employment rates, and lower levels of juvenile crime, arrests, and teenage pregnancy. Nevertheless, over 30% of the graduates were arrested at least once by the time they were young adults and a third dropped out of high school. A number of studies show that although Head Start children obtain some skills and social advantages relative to nonparticipants, their cognitive skills are still substantially below those of middle-class children.

Evaluation of Existing Systems and Programs

Resources for child care and early childhood education include, but are not limited to, informal "babysitting," licensed child care centers, licensed and license-exempt family child care providers, Head Start programs, and public school preschool programs. No formal system ties these programs together. Consequently, local programs have to find funds from several sources, including state and federal resources that necessitate the management of differing contract and program requirements and enroll families based on different eligibility requirements. The state system for subsidized child care services and the regulation of licensed facilities is, moreover, entirely separate from and often not coordinated with early childhood education services. Such disarray makes it difficult for agencies, large and small, to blend funds from different sources.

The following is a brief overview of California's licensing standards for child care programs and the system of subsidized programs administered by the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. All are accessed differently, have different eligibility and enrollment criteria and program and documentation requirements, and are administered locally by various entities and nonprofit organizations.

Licensing Standards

The two types of license for child care facilities are regulated and overseen by CDSS. *Child care centers* typically are located outside the licensee's home and, within regulations, can care for or supervise virtually any number of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, or school-age children. Qualified teachers must have completed at least 12 units of early childhood education course work. *Family child care homes* are always operated in the licensee's home, provide a homelike environment, and can care for up to eight children, or 14 children with at least one assistant.

Sources and Administration of Funding

Since 1943, CDE has administered subsidized child care and development programs for qualifying low-income families. CDE does contract administration for child care programs for qualifying low-income families, stages II and III of CalWORKs child care, and state preschool (half-day) programs, and provides planning and technical assistance to contracting agencies, quality improvement activities, capacity development, and parent support services. According to the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), the state's proposed child care budget for 2000-01 is $2.6 billion. About half will go to fully funding child care for former or current CalWORKs clients, or both, in contrast to the limited funding proposed to serve working-poor families not enrolled in CalWORKs.

The LAO estimates that 383,000 children will receive full-time subsidized child care services through CDE and CDSS, and another 198,000 will participate in part-time programs. There also are federal and state funds for children with spe-

cial needs under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (An overview of California child care and preschool programs can be obtained from CDE by calling 916-442-5431.)

Integrating/Coordinating Systems and Programs

In recent years, many local efforts, legislative mandates, and funds have focused on restructuring the child care and early childhood education system into a coordinated and seamless one for parents and professionals. Collaboration and coordination of resources are increasingly emphasized in programs and funding streams. Local efforts demonstrate the power of collaboration and the possibilities for creating a user-friendly child care infrastructure. Two good examples are the Hathaway Family Resource Center, in northeast Los Angeles County, and Contra Costa County's merger of state and federal programs.

The *Hathaway Family Resource Center* strives to serve as a collaborative partner with other social service providers, educators, and religious and government agencies to provide families with child care services, subsidies, training, and parenting information. It was one of the founders of the Northeast Community Resource Coordinating Council, which now involves 46 organizations whose mission is to coordinate existing community services and efforts in northeast Los Angeles County and to bring new funding to their community. Hathaway has received a number of grants to serve as the lead agency to several programs. These include *Success By Six*, an initiative focused on children from prenatal to age 6, including quality child care. This initiative presents a tremendous opportunity to expand outreach efforts to child care providers and parents. Hathaway is also the site for organizing the *Family Child Care Provider Network*, whose efforts help provide ongoing training and support for neighborhood child care centers. (For more information, contact Pat Bowie, Executive Director of Hathaway Family Resource Center, at 323-257-8118, or e-mail them at HFRC@earthlink.net.)

Contra Costa County has merged federal and state children's programs and is the only county-government entity in California that provides state-subsidized child care and development and federal Head Start programs in directly operated centers. (For more information about this and other Head Start collaborations throughout California, contact Michael Zito, Coordinator of the California Head Start-State Collaboration Office, Child Development Division of the California Department of Education, at 916-323-9727, or e-mail him at mzito@cde.ca.gov.)

Key to the success of these coordinated systems are the leadership of the organizations and their funding sources, and their common understanding and commitment to shared decision making, community organizing and community building, and flexible allocation of resources.

Integrating and Coordinating Funding

Extant funds, described above, support early childhood education and child care only for families living in poverty or in which children are at risk of abuse and neglect. Proposition 10 provides us with a golden opportunity to look beyond our current funding disarray to create a unified, coordinated system of child care and development services for all families. It can lay the groundwork for universal preschool, bringing quality early childhood education to all children, not just to those families that fit the narrow eligibility requirements of current federal and state-funded programs.

Blending federal Head Start and state-funded programs is a modest beginning to laying the foundation for universal access to child care and development services. As in the Contra Costa model, the melding of federal Head Start and CDE child care resources provides opportunities to bring family resources, quality early childhood experiences, greater staff support, and increased salaries to local community-based early childhood programs. Many issues (e.g., income eligibility, contract requirements, administrative structures) make blending funding from these two sources difficult. But until California Education Code and federal Head Start regulations are changed, Proposition 10 funds could be used to support activities such as the following, since their absence often creates barriers to Head Start/CDE partnerships: (1) *attorneys* to develop interagency contracts for the various partners that meet the requirements of funding sources; (2) *experts in facilities financing and real estate*, *architects*, *general contractors*, and *janitorial crews*; (3) *human resources personnel* to help resolve personnel/staffing differences required in various contracts; (4) *start-up funding* to cover all expenses not covered by CDE and Head Start start-up allowances; (5) *information systems/databases* based on individual contract requirements so that fiscal monitoring and reporting is streamlined; (6) *evaluation/assessment systems* to ensure that all contract requirements are met; and (7) assistance in setting up *finance and accounting systems* that are based on various contract reporting requirements.

Resources to help design programs that integrate different funding streams are already available. For example, several offices in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have funded a training and technical assistance project called Quality in Linking Together (QUILT) (www.quilt.org). Its goal is to foster and support partnerships among child care, Head Start, prekindergarten, and other early education programs so as to increase the availability of quality, comprehensive, full-day/full-year care for children. QUILT services are available to those organizations that seek to blend Proposition 10, Head Start, and CDE funding.

Recommendations

Because California's population is diverse and there are many community-specific issues and concerns, we don't propose further specific activities to assist blending of funding streams. Instead, we offer the following guidelines for commissioners looking to implement quality early childhood education that will promote positive development in children:

- Give priority to meeting the needs of young children at risk for abuse and neglect and those living in poverty.
- Put into place mechanisms (e.g., regular program evaluation, technical assistance, access to research-based information about best practices) that will promote high-quality child care and educational programs.
- Increase compensation and fund other initiatives that promote a stable workforce of well-qualified and trained caregivers and teachers.
- Strengthen child care and early education by promoting professionalism in early childhood education.
- Promote the implementation of practices that research suggests are effective for children with disabilities and English language learners, with special attention to training and resources needed to meet their needs.
- Work toward developing a foundation for quality child care and development services for all families, and a system that doesn't isolate and stigmatize economically disadvantaged families. Lay the groundwork for universal access to quality early childhood education.
- Support statewide efforts to inform parents about the benefits and importance of good-quality early childhood experiences. Take advantage of local strengths and efforts to inform and organize parents around quality child care and development issues.
- Include parents and other community residents in the planning and evaluation of new programs.
- Support the efforts of local Head Start and CDE-funded agencies as they chart their course for a collaborative partnership that maximizes their specific funding streams and, most importantly, provides better access to families of young children.

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