

## **National Focus: Educational Leaders Helping Make Public Preschool Programs the Best They Can Be**

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### **Abstract**

Public preschool programs are expanding in many states as additional tax dollars are earmarked for their growth. While logic and intuition lead many people throughout the country to believe that preschool programs should “automatically” be beneficial for participating children, research has not supported this contention. Educational leaders must perform due diligence in understanding the factors that will likely make preschools *the best they can be* for each participating child. Educational leaders also need to effectively evaluate their preschool programs and based on the results, implement needed adjustments.

*Keywords:* public preschool programs, fadeout, educational leaders

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### **Context<sup>1</sup>**

As additional millions of taxpayers’ dollars flow in to support preschool programs in numerous states throughout the United States, it is crucial that educational leaders set the tone to ensure these programs provide maximum effectiveness in educating participating children. It is emotionally appealing and logical for educational leaders to assume that the earlier children start formal education and receive professional instruction, the better they will perform when entering kindergarten and throughout the K-12 cycle. However, after reviewing the best-evidence research in 2017 on publicly-funded preschool programs in the U.S., the author reached the following conclusion: “The effectiveness of these publicly-funded preschool programs on children has a *checkered history of success* when compared to similar children not in these programs, as measured by performance in kindergarten through high school” (Bartz, 2017, p. 1).

Educational leaders should not assume that more money for preschool programs will automatically result in improved effectiveness and needed benefits for children. They must

aggressively establish a climate for the pursuit of excellence in their district’s preschool program. Educational leaders should never underestimate the significant impact they can have on outcomes for programs such as preschool in their districts. Teachers, parents, and community members are influenced by an educational leader’s unwavering pursuit of excellence for a program such as preschool.

The enemy of publicly-funded preschool programs is *fadeout*. Fadeout represents the loss of the achievement gains made by children attending publicly-funded preschool programs—compared to similar students who did not participate in such programs—that dissipates or fades out by the conclusion of the second or third grade. In 2015, an evaluation of the State of Tennessee’s Voluntary PreKindergarten Program revealed that, in comparison to a similar group of children not participating; those experiencing the program had significantly higher achievement in literacy and mathematics upon entering kindergarten. By the end of second grade, however, the preschool participants’ achievement had “faded-out,” so that their advantage no longer existed. By the end of the third grade, those children *who did not attend* preschool programs had higher achievements than the participating children (Farran & Lipsey, 2015).

The good news is that, within the last year, several major studies indicate consistently positive impacts on children attending *high quality* publicly-funded preschool programs. They are: (1) significantly less likely to be placed in special education during the K-12 cycle; (2) more likely to graduate from high school; (3) less likely to repeat a grade level in the K-12 cycle; (4) increased economic self-sufficiency as adults, through greater labor force participation, higher incomes, and lower welfare usage; (5) reduced levels of criminal activity; (6) improvements in health-related indicators; and (7) economically a \$2 to \$4 return for every dollar invested.<sup>2</sup>

These positive results represent general trends of publicly-funded preschool programs and are most likely to occur in *high quality* programs. Simply having a publicly-funded preschool program, though, does not ensure these positive results for our young children. Educational leaders cannot assume state funded Pre-K programs are “automatically” effective. They must regularly measure their effectiveness (Barnett et al., 2018).

### **High Quality Preschool Programs**

The *whole child approach* is a broad-based program format for addressing the present needs of children while in preschool programs as well as needs for their effective development and performance in the K-12 cycle, and throughout their adulthood. The whole child approach emphasizes cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and creative skills; as well as children’s health and nutritional needs. This approach also includes children being actively engaged in learning, having “hands-on” activities, being challenged to do their best, and having a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate to specifically meet their needs provided by caring staff members in an environment in which the children *have fun*. Other specific emphases of the whole child approach are: (1) literacy (*language rich*), (2) mathematics, (3) science, (4) technology, (5) physical fitness, (6) psychomotor skills, and (7) cultural understanding (Candence Education, 2018).

The *targeted or skills-focused approach* is usually narrower in scope than the whole child approach and places more emphasis on literacy and mathematics readiness skills. A 2018 study found that the targeted approach was more effective than the whole child approach in literacy and mathematics for preschoolers regarding their readiness for kindergarten (Jenkins et al.,

2018). The targeted approach was also found to have no negative impact on non-cognitive skills such as social skills and emotional development. Whenever the whole child approach is used—as has often been the case because of state and federal funding requirements—it is logical to assume that the program should heavily emphasize literacy and mathematics readiness skills.

## **Maximizing the Effectiveness of Publicly-Funded Preschool Programs**

### **Staffing Issues**

**Training.** Teachers for preschool programs need to be trained through university-based bachelor's—and preferably master's—degree programs in early childhood education and development. This training should include content in the area of special education. Para-professionals (aides) need at least two years of formal training in early childhood education and development. University and community college-based programs must have up-to-date, state-of-the-art, and best-practice standards driving their early childhood curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Presently some states (e.g., Illinois) do not require any specific early childhood development training for para-professionals. In Illinois, individuals can even qualify for licensure as a para-professional with no college education if they attain a specific score on the mathematics and reading WorkKeys portions of the ACT.

**Mentoring.** Teachers, para-professionals, and other staff associated with program implementation need ongoing mentoring. The key to effective mentoring is the rapport and trusting relationship between the mentor and mentee, and the mentee's perception of the mentor's credibility. The mentor must provide psychological support, as well as specific expertise, in meeting the issues and concerns of the preschool staff member.

It is preferable for someone other than the staff member's supervisor to be the mentor because the staff member may want to share concerns and perspectives that pertain to the supervisor. The mentor should encourage the staff member to holistically reflect on issues and concerns in viewing how effectively children's needs are met. A special emphasis should be placed on the mentee examining causes for what works, and why; what does not work, and why; and what needs to be changed, and why? The mentor should guide the staff member in finding answers to these questions.

**Coaching.** Usually the staff member's supervisor will serve as the coach with the goal of helping her/him to better serve students' needs. Coaching assumes that clear expectations have been established for the preschool staff member through a job description and specific job expectations. Coaching provides feedback to the staff member that is specifically linked to job expectations.

Feedback to the preschool staff member should answer the question, "How am I doing?" Much of the feedback will be positive reinforcement for what the staff member has already effectively performed. When performance does not meet expectations, coaching takes place by the supervisor interacting collaboratively with the staff member in identifying ideas for improving performance. Coaching needs to identify what specific behavioral changes are needed and the assistance (including resources) that will be given to help the staff member effectively

meet expectations.

**Development.** Development pertains to staff members continuing to grow and expand their expertise while serving in preschool roles. It deals with staff members acquiring skills that they do not presently possess, but which are needed in order for them to continue to grow on the job and to provide improved services to children. A personalized learning approach through an individualized development plan should be established for each staff member that includes traditional face-to-face development through conferences, workshops, and on-the-job activities. Technology-delivered, competency-based professional learning programs that require measurable mastery of content (referred to as micro-credentialing) should also be utilized.

### **Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment (The CIA Connection)**

In a preschool program, there must be an interlocking connection between curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The curriculum is the content to be delivered to children, instruction means the processes (teaching practices) used to deliver the curriculum, and assessment that measures each child's progress in mastering the curriculum. The curriculum needs to be state-of-the-art, based on the most recent research standards; and address literacy, numeracy, psychomotor, social-emotional, and physical skills; as well as health and nutrition practices. Most importantly, the content delivered to children must match their specific developmental needs at that moment in time. The curriculum should guide instruction, materials, and activities used in preschool programs (Duncan et al., 2015).

Instruction should use the mastery approach and be based on an individual development plan for each child. This does not exclude whole group instruction, but emphasizes instruction that has the flexibility to be tailored to the needs of each child. Hands-on activities are extremely important, as is one-on-one instruction at specific times. A variety of institutional approaches should be used to ensure that the content (curriculum) delivered is based on children's needs.

Observing children's behaviors and performance daily, and making instructional adjustments based on these observations, are the cornerstones of meaningful formative assessment. An effective staff member may easily make over 100 of these instructional adjustments in a full-day preschool environment. Staff members must be extremely active observers and possess the knowledge and skills to make these adjustments.

Multiple measures are essential for assessments because children's performances at these early ages can vary significantly from week-to-week, and even day-to-day. The precision or reliability of such measures is a crucial issue, as is validity and potential test bias. At the start of the year, assessments must be used to identify the needs of each child and to establish baseline data for future formative, intermediate, and summative information in tracking his/her progress. This assessment data can also be used for program evaluation and accountability. Many measures will require performance assessments anchored in rubrics that are field-tested and for which staff members have comprehensive training.

### **Diverse Learners**

“If we can get typical kids in the room doing typical preschool behavior, then our special needs children will imitate it, and grow from what they see and hear!” (Bryant as cited in Zalaznick, 2017, p. 35). Public preschool programs must be inclusive for children with special

needs so that these children can also get a *head start* on their formal K-12 education. Special needs children should experience the complete spectrum of the curriculum, with special emphasis on movement and physical activities. Children will need periods of rest during each day, which is especially important in all-day programs. The integration of learners into the “mainstream” of activities, whose language is not the native language, is crucial to their overall development. Understandably, some instruction will initially be in the native language of these children, but many preschool activities are not native language dependent.

### **Parent Involvement Component**

School personnel may need to provide assistance to some parents in developing skills that will help them to maximize their contribution to the parent involvement aspect of preschool programs. Specifically:

***Parent self-image and identity:*** This represents program personnel assisting parents to be self-confident and empowering them to believe that they can make significant contributions to their children through their involvement.

***Locus of control:*** Since some parents may feel a sense of helplessness or that they can have little impact or control in the parent involvement process, school personnel must “lift them up” and show how they can make valuable contributions to their children’s education.

***Parenting development and maturity:*** This requires program personnel to provide information and insights that, if needed, show parents how they can continue to develop parenting skills over time and grow in this area.

There are other important aspects of parent involvement. They include: (1) working on their basic obligations to children and family; (2) establishing effective two-way communications; (3) developing involvement activities at school; (4) teaching effective learning activities to use at home; (5) providing involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy regarding the preschool program; and (6) utilizing collaboration with community organizations to help support the preschool program’s objectives and provide community resources to children and parents (Epstein, 2011).

### **Evaluation Using the CIPP Model**

According to Stufflebeam and Zhang (2016), in addition to state program evaluation requirements, a comprehensive evaluation of preschool programs addresses:

***Context:*** What are the specific assumptions on which the program is based? Are these assumptions logical and being effectively addressed through the delivery system? What are the specific purposes of the preschool program? For each purpose, what are the specific objectives that must be accomplished for the preschool program to be successful? (These objectives will anchor the following three evaluation phases.) Answers to these questions drive the data and information collected for this section.

**Inputs:** What are the resources required to effectively implement each of the objectives flowing from the purposes identified for the preschool program? How adequate are each of these resources for each objective? It is essential to identify any deficiencies that exist in resources that impact effective program implementation.

**Process:** For each objective, what are the key components of the delivery system used to implement the program? It is necessary to specifically list each component of the delivery system concerning each of the program's objectives and to determine the effectiveness of the delivery system for each objective.

**Products:** What are the outcomes or results of the program linked to the specific purposes, goals, and objectives identified in the context section of the evaluation process? This must include hard data based on pre- and post-testing for each child, as well as data anchored in the perceptions of staff, parents, and other stakeholders.

### **Accountability**

Programs must be conducted with due diligence, prudent use of resources, and efficient time usage of staff. Preschools funded by tax dollars need to constantly be cost conscious, but not at the expense of quality, to assure prudent implementation and create a positive image of effective management of funding sources.

A component of accountability includes an aggressive public information campaign to keep stakeholders and others up-to-date on the program's activities, accomplishments, and general news. Suspensions and expulsions have been unacceptably high in some programs. Staff members should be well-versed in proactive preventive measures to utilize with children to avoid behaviors from occurring that eventually lead to suspensions and expulsions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Preschool programs have the potential for significantly impacting participating children's futures in formal education, as well as their economic earning power and quality of life as adults. Educational leaders serving districts with preschool programs must make these programs the highest possible priority and do everything in their power to ensure that the programs provide maximum benefits to children. In order for this to occur, the fadeout effect (dissipation of initial achievement gains enjoyed at kindergarten within several years) must be overcome. Preschool programs must be regularly evaluated and the results used to make adjustments that will improve the program. Educational leaders conducting public preschool programs must consistently emphasize to program personnel the need to continually strive to improve these programs and ensure that they meet the needs of each child in a warm, nurturing, and caring environment. These educational leaders should also stay abreast of the cutting edge, best-evidence preschool research, and infuse practices flowing from this research into their preschool programs.

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**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Based in part on:

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the following references:

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<sup>3</sup> Specifics regarding training can be found at:

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