



Issues & Research » Human Services » A Q and A With Albert Wat of Pre-K Now

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A Q and A With Albert Wat of Pre-K Now: January 2010



Interview by Julie Poppe

State early childhood advisory councils are required by the federal Head Start Act of 2007 to develop a state plan for an early childhood data system. Some state systems are under development while other states are just beginning. Legislators can help play a role in shaping data systems in their states.

The Early Childhood Data Collaborative (ECDC) is a new consortium of national organizations convened to build state policymaker understanding and support of aligned early childhood data systems to improve child outcomes and system performance. ECDC partners are: Council of Chief State School Officers, Data Quality Campaign, National Center for Children in Poverty, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, and a campaign of the Pew Center on the States, Pre-K

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State Legislatures asked Albert Wat with Pre-K Now to describe what an early childhood data system is, and share some state strategies and lessons learned for legislators to consider.

SL: What is an early childhood data system and what does a good data system look like?

Albert Wat: Since the summer of 2009, the Early Childhood Data Collaborative has engaged a variety of people—program administrators, state and federal policymakers, researchers, advocates—to help determine what an early childhood data system should look like and be able to do. At its core, an early childhood data system should accomplish two things. First, it should collect high-quality information about young children (from birth to 5), the services and programs that serve them, and the environments in which they live. Second, it should enable early childhood education stakeholders to use data to make decisions at multiple levels (e.g., provider, community, state) to promote children's development within and beyond the first five years of life.

Several themes have recurred from our discussions with experts and the following are emerging as critical to an effective data system:

Tracking children's development holistically, across multiple domains (as opposed to a narrow focus on early reading and math skills, for example).

Linking children's development during the first five years with their progress in the K-12 system.

Determining gaps in access, quality, and outcomes among key demographic groups (e.g., by income, race, language).

Including key contextual factors at the program, home, and community levels that play a role in children's development.

Ensuring the quality of the data collected, privacy controls, and the appropriate uses of data.

SL: How does an early childhood data system improve child outcomes?

Wat: Let me give an example from the pre-K world. One highly-respected pre-K curriculum helps teachers create a culture of "plan, do, review" in their classrooms. Children are given the opportunity to "plan" or direct their own learning, "do" the activities, and "review" what happened, what they learned, and how they can improve in the future. To ensure early education programs are serving children effectively and have a systematic process for continuous improvement, practitioners and policymakers also need to follow this "plan, do, review" tenet.

But they can't do it well without an effective early childhood data system. For instance, a teacher needs data on how children in her class are developing in order to determine what part of her curriculum to "beef up" or which children need more intensive interventions. A program director needs data to target investments in professional development. State administrators need data to understand gaps in access to early education programs within the state or among families of different backgrounds. State policymakers need data to assess where early childhood education programs are falling short on quality to help make decisions about which improvement efforts to support through legislation or appropriations.

While state investments in early education programs, like pre-K, have increased dramatically in the past decade, few states have begun to exploit the power of data to support a "plan, do, review" culture. For example, there are more

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than 1.1 million children enrolled in state pre-K programs, and most states don't know enough about who these children are, where they are being served, the quality of instruction they receive, and the impact these programs have on children.

SL: What policy questions can early childhood data help answer for legislators?

Wat: As stewards of their states' resources, legislators are very interested in what difference early childhood investments are making in the lives of young children and families. As the ECDC continues to outreach to the early childhood community, it's clear that stakeholders across the board are interested in data about child outcomes, access to services, program quality, cost, and workforce development. There are also some overarching questions that cut across the above areas, which legislators want to know:

How well does the early childhood system support the development of young children at critical junctures within the first five years – at birth, during infancy, and before kindergarten entry?

Are there gaps in outcome, access and resources among children of different demographic backgrounds?

How is participation in early education programs associated with later student outcomes?

What program characteristics (e.g., quality standards, education requirements for personnel, funding) appear to be critical for improved children's outcomes?

Legislators need to keep in mind that children's developmental outcomes reflect the influences of not only the early childhood programs themselves, but a myriad of other factors (e.g. children's economic backgrounds, access to services). A comprehensive data system will give legislators information about these factors so that they can understand children's development or the performance of a program in a more informed context.

SL: Are there one or two states that have worked on data and any lessons learned to share with other state policymakers?

Wat: A few states, such as Maryland and Pennsylvania, have made more progress in developing and using early childhood data systems than their peers. The centerpiece of the Maryland system is the Maryland Model for School Readiness, which trains teachers to assess every entering kindergartner in public schools on seven dimensions of development—from language and literacy to social and personal development. The data from this process guide teachers' instruction, professional development activities, and communication with families. Because each child's kindergarten readiness data are tied to information about their enrollment in early education programs, the state is able to disaggregate the data by the type of program they participated in (e.g., Head Start, child care center, home-based care, state pre-k, etc.), which can then be used to inform program improvement efforts across these settings. The state is also beginning to understand how children's performance in MMSR predicts later success in school.

Pennsylvania has developed the Early Learning Network, which collects data about children, personnel and programs supported by the Office of Child Development and Early Learning, including state pre-K, child care, early intervention and the state's quality rating and improvement system. More specifically, data collected include child assessments, family demographics, health statistics, enrollment, program quality, teacher education levels—all tied to a unique child identifier. Because characteristics about children's families and program quality are part of the system, ELN is able to put child developmental outcomes in context, which allows for more informed improvement strategies.

The design and development of early childhood data systems should be guided by policy questions that are important to the early childhood field and policymakers. Whatever a state's data system looks like, states that are committed to this work should start with the key questions. Starting with the questions forces everyone to be selective and strategic about what data need to be collected. It is also an important reminder that the point of these systems is not to collect data for its own sake, but to use it to better serve young children.

Julie Poppe tracks pre-K issues for NCSL.

Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States, collaborates with advocates and policy makers to lead a movement for high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten for all three and four year olds. To contact Albert Wat, e-mail awat@pewtrusts.org.

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