

Everybody benefits, but poor kids benefit the most

By Dylan Matthews

[Sara Mead](#) is a senior associate partner at Bellwether Education Partners, and specializes in early childhood education issues, especially pre-K through third grade. You can read more about her policy prescriptions for early education in her report, "[A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education](#)," and on her blog, [Sara Mead's Policy Notebook](#). We talked about the problems with current government policies regarding early childhood education, and how they can be remedied.

When people like you and other early-ed people talk about high-quality preschool as opposed to normal or regular preschool or day care, what's the distinction, and why does it matter?

The distinction between what we call preschool and early childhood education versus just child care is that preschool or early childhood education is a program that has the specific goal of helping kids learn so that they're ready to succeed at school and beyond, whereas child care's something that's primarily supposed to help parents be able to work or go to school. And that doesn't mean that childcare can't be educational or that pre-K can't provide child care, but it's useful to think about what the purpose of the program is. So when we think, then, about what does it mean for preschool or child care to be high-quality, mostly it has to do with, and the research shows that this is what's important for kids, the quality of the interactions between the adults and the children in the childcare setting or the preschool setting.

What you really want to look for and see is three things. One is an emotionally warm and nurturing climate. That's something you want to see in either child care or preschool settings. The adults are caring for children, the children feel safe emotionally, they're supporting children's emotional development. That's probably the easiest thing to find in settings. The second thing you want to see is instructional quality, and that, instructional quality sounds a lot like teachers sitting at a desk, and that's not what we mean. What it really means to a large extent is that there are rich verbal interactions going on between adults and children, so there's lots of talking, the adults ask children questions, they're not questions that you can answer with a one word response, the children are being encouraged to talk and are also hearing rich language, and there's a lot of that going on.

Related to that is appropriate early literacy support. There are lots of literacy materials around, the teachers are using them, they're engaging children in pre-literacy in ways that are developmentally appropriate. To a lesser extent you also see some math concepts -- how many numbers are here, is that a square or a triangle -- and what color is this type things, as well as kids being exposed to concepts from other subjects, art, music, history and so forth.

The final thing in terms of dimensional quality involves classroom management and the quality of the setting. Is the classroom organized? How much time are the children spending in different types of activities? You don't want to see children wandering around aimlessly or large amounts of time being spent on things like transitions between activities, lining up to go to the bathroom and so forth. You want to see a classroom arrangement, and a teacher who organizes things so that they're getting more time doing rich educational activities.

The current policy framework seems to be Head Start and then a bunch of patchwork state programs. If you had to summarize the problems and shortcomings of this approach, or things it's doing well, what sort of things come to mind?

I would say there are problems in three dimensions. One is access. The percentage of children who are being served in programs that we would consider early childhood education or preschool is still a fairly small percentage relative to the need. Only about 35 percent of kids are served in either Head Start or pre-K. When you include parent-paid programs that number goes up closer to 60 or 70 percent for 4-year-olds. That is much lower for 3-year-olds. Of course, there's differences by income. Affluent and poor kids are more likely to be in pre-K, but kids who are from working-class families are much less likely to be in those settings. They frequently need the same kind of supports as lower-income students need to be ready for school.

The second dimension of the problem is around quality, that even places saying they're educational settings for kids, a lot of times they aren't, necessarily. And the biggest issue there is probably around teacher quality. As I was saying before, rich verbal interaction and support for language development are so central to what you want kids to be experiencing that teachers who don't have much in the way of education, they themselves may not have particularly strong language skills and, then, it's difficult for them to deliver that kind of support for kids in those settings.

The third set of problems is around coordination and alignment. As you mentioned, we do have this sort of ad hoc system where there's child-care programs, there's parent-paid programs, there's state pre-K programs, there's Head Start, and these programs aren't really coordinated with each other. They all have different eligibility requirements, they all have different funding levels and funding streams, they all have different quality standards. To some extent they have different goals, too.

Not only are those programs kind of a patchwork, but there's very little connection between them and the public education system. So even if a child has a good pre-K experience or a good experience in Head Start, the information about where the child is doesn't carry over to the kindergarten teacher, the curriculum may not be aligned, and so we're missing out on an opportunity to really power through children's development across that time frame by having all these gaps and disjunctures between different things.

That brings me to a point you've made in a lot of the reports you've written about this, which is that we should be considering pre-K as part of a sequence going to third grade and trying to integrate that more at a school district level. That would obviously be a very big policy move for the country, especially given how local district-level education policy is. What sort of steps do you think can be taken to move in that direction?

There's a mix of both policy steps and then there are things that need to happen at a grass-roots level. Policy steps are expanding access to pre-K because if only a tiny percentage of kids in the community are in pre-K, it's hard to do alignment between the pre-K and the kindergarten. Some other policy steps are supporting common quality standards across different programs. But a lot of this alignment is also just about what people at the local level are doing. In a lot of communities, the principals of the elementary schools don't know anything about where the children in schools are coming from, what the programs are in that community.

So just getting principals out to visit child-care centers, there are ways districts could create opportunities for pre-K teachers in the community to come in and take professional development programs with pre-K teachers in the school or with kindergarten teachers in the school, those types of activities. Data is another policy piece, of course, in terms of building data systems that can track where children are before schools. We have data systems in the K-12 phase, but if you're paying for pre-K or if you're paying for Head Start, you'd like that data to go into the same systems so you have a consistent record of where kids have been, and it doesn't just start when they're 5 years old.

Two states seem to stand out for their focus on early childhood, New Jersey and Oklahoma. Are those programs working at expanding access and providing high-quality education, and also given fiscal problems that can wreak havoc on a lot of social services in states, how sustainable are the funding models, and how replicable are the successes they've had?

Both the Oklahoma and New Jersey programs have evidence that they are effective. We have a study in Oklahoma that shows that children participating in the program are making significant earning gains above and beyond what they would otherwise make and that, Oklahoma's program is universal but we know from the data that we have that everybody benefits, but poor kids benefit the most. It's actually possible with universal pre-K in Oklahoma to improve learning for everyone while also moving to close the achievement gap. So that program seems to be working pretty well, it has a very high pickup rates, in terms of the number of 3- and 4-year-olds in the state participating. I think it's 90 percent, which is much higher than any other state.

New Jersey's program is only in these 31 very-high-poverty districts, but

in those districts it's a very high-quality program. New Jersey has actually done more than any place else to align that program with what's happening in the early elementary school grades and has in some districts made really important reforms in the kindergarten through elementary grades that try to retain the benefits of pre-K. Also we have data from New Jersey that shows that children in the average pre-K program are making substantial learning gains and that these gains are being sustained up through the end of first, and I believe we now have the data on second grade, but I may be misstating that. That's important because there is some argument about whether or not pre-K gains are sustained over time, and in New Jersey they seem to be sustaining them better than other places have.

The fiscal situation is tough. I don't think either the existing programs in Oklahoma or New Jersey are going to go anywhere. Oklahoma's program is part of their state school funding formula for public education, so you can't just cut pre-K. If you cut, all the schools in general get cut. But it's not like a separate pot of money that you can say, "Well, we're going to stop funding pre-K to help our budget situation." It's part of what school districts get for having kids.

In New Jersey, the Abbott pre-K was something that was mandated by the court in school finance litigation, and what Governor [Chris] Christie has said is that he recognizes the value of the existing program and is not intending to cut that, but New Jersey a few years ago passed legislation that was going to expand the program to many more kids, and because of the budget crisis, that's not happening. We're seeing that in a lot of cases. Over the past decade, there's been a dramatic increase in state spending on pre-K, a dramatic expansion of kids enrolled, and that basically isn't happening anywhere anymore because of the budget crises, and in some states we are starting to see cuts in those programs.

Even before the current crisis, it seemed like a tough road going for people trying to pass expansions. You had the ballot initiative in California that failed and things like that. Politically, how do you think state level or federal activists are going about or can go about pushing for these sorts of things? It seems like something where there's not an easy interest group constituency for it.

I think that's right, and in the past decade up to about 2007, I would say, the pre-K movement, which is a very, very savvy and strong advocacy machine, even though they don't have the same kind of powerful constituencies other people do, has been really effective in getting expansions, getting quality improvements in a lot of states. The funding, I think, more than doubled between 2002 and 2007, that states were spending on pre-K. There's been some really effective advocacy there. The biggest issue is just that this stuff is really, really expensive. Even though we have research showing that the long-term benefits outweigh the costs and that over the time these investments save taxpayers money, that doesn't change the fact that legislatures need to figure out how to pay for it today.

So finding money is difficult, and we have in our society an unwillingness to recognize that raising children is expensive but that it's something that benefits society, if all our children are raised in ways that maximize their potential, and we've been really unwilling to invest in kids. I think there's an attitude in our culture that treats children almost as another luxury consumer good for parents, and says, "Well, parents shouldn't have kids unless they can pay for them." As opposed to recognizing that these are people that we, as adults, because they're children, have an obligation to, but that at the same time supporting their healthy growth and development does yield dividends for everyone regardless of whether they're our children or not.

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