

Meeting Great Expectations: Integrating Early Education Program Standards in Child Care

By Rachel Schumacher, Kate Irish, and Joan Lombardi

For more than a decade, interest has grown in children's learning prior to entering school. In 1990, the National Education Goals Panel, created by the first President Bush and the 50 governors, set a goal that by the year 2000 all children would start school ready to learn. Research evidence has been mounting that the early years matter to children's later academic success. Backed by a booming economy in the mid- and late-1990s, a number of states invested in a wide range of early education initiatives. The call for education improvements has intensified with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, in which the federal government has raised expectations for all chil-

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dren's achievement, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This has, in turn, raised expectations that children in early care and education programs should achieve certain learning outcomes in order to be ready for school. However, child care policy and funding is often left out of this discussion. In order to achieve improved child outcomes, policymakers must invest in improved program standards in child care.

There is definite potential to improve the school readiness of young children by supporting increased program standards in child care. In a new report, *Meeting Great Expectations: Integrating Early Education Program Standards in Child Care*, CLASP examines three strategies in seven states that have integrated program standards into child care by directly tying standards to funding: the delivery of state pre-kindergarten (Georgia, New Jersey, and New York) and Head Start (Ohio, Oklahoma, and Oregon) in child care settings and the use of child care provider contracts

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This policy brief summarizes the 60-page report, *Meeting Great Expectations: Integrating Early Education Program Standards in Child Care*, by Rachel Schumacher, Kate Irish, and Joan Lombardi. To read the full report, visit the CLASP website (www.clasp.org) or call (202) 906-8000 to order a printed copy.

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that include required standards (California). We found evidence that these states are requiring participating child care providers to meet early education program standards that routinely exceed those required by state child care licensing rules. States are also providing additional monitoring, technical assistance, and varying levels of fiscal resources to help participating programs meet these standards. Such efforts can be

seen as advancing the goals of strengthening the early education component of children's care settings and developing early education programs that are more responsive to the needs of working parents. However, these initiatives need adequate fiscal resources to realize their full potential, since

states are dealing with serious declines in revenue.

Why Program Standards Matter

Leaders in the United States are engaged in a debate about how best to increase school readiness, improve children's performance in school, and reduce future costs to our society of children who do not succeed in school. This discussion has accelerated in response to passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which seeks to reduce the achievement gap for disadvantaged children in part by setting goals for minimum teacher qualifications and holding public schools accountable for standardized test scores. With NCLB requiring annual testing starting in the third grade, policymakers have become increasingly concerned with how to improve opportunities for learning earlier, even prior to children's entry into the school house door. Business leaders, concerned about the quality of the future workforce, have also called for greater investment in preschool. In addition, researchers have been able to document the potential long-term savings to taxpayers that early childhood programs with high-quality program standards have demonstrated. This concerted attention to young children's learning provides a tremendous opportunity to pro-

mote access to such programs for all children, especially for low-income children.

The best early childhood programs maintain strong program standards—that is, they ensure the conditions in which children are more likely to learn. However, most recent Administration and Congressional policy has focused more on setting high outcome standards (sometimes called early learning standards), which focus instead on what children are *expected* to learn. Much less attention has been paid to improving the standards for the type, intensity, and quality of early childhood programs or to helping programs and teachers meet such outcome goals. In fact, no minimum federal guidelines exist for quality in child care; instead, states each set their own basic licensing regulations to protect the health and safety of children.

Raising expectations for children's readiness without raising the quality of programs will do little to meet national education goals or to help children grow and learn. The National Research Council (NRC) finds that a young child's secure, responsive relationship with a teacher is predictive of the child's behavior and school achievement when the child is older.¹ Certain program standards—low teacher-child ratios, small group sizes, and increased teacher education

WHAT ARE PROGRAM STANDARDS?

By program standards, we mean requirements that early childhood programs have to ensure conditions in which children are more likely to learn. These include child group size, staff-child ratio, teacher education, required curriculum, and the nature and intensity of comprehensive services.

Others may use the term standards to describe:

Licensing Regulations—Basic health and safety requirements as determined by state rules for licensed providers.

Early Learning Standards/Outcomes—Expectations for what children should learn and be able to do by certain stages of development.

Each of these standards plays a key role in supporting children's development in early education. Licensing provides a basic foundation for health and safety of children, and program standards establish the preferred conditions of the early learning environment and teacher qualifications. Together these layers support and facilitate reaching the goals articulated in the early learning standards/outcomes.

levels—are associated with better early learning opportunities, because they help promote the conditions conducive to the positive teacher-child relationships so crucial for early development and learning.² Research cited in NRC’s *Eager to Learn* examined model programs with long-term effectiveness and “the following factors were found to be present in most programs:

- Curriculum content and learning processes that cultivate school-related skills and knowledge, with a heavy focus on language development,
- Qualified teaching staff who use reflective teaching practices aided by highly qualified supervisors,
- Low teacher-child ratios and small class sizes,
- Intense and coherent programming, and
- Collaborative relationships with parents.”³

In addition to these key program standards, research suggests a focus on comprehensive services is particularly important for disadvantaged children who have less access to health care and nutrition and whose families may need additional social services or help accessing them.⁴ Poor children are almost twice as likely to be reported in fair or poor health as non-poor children.⁵

However, there are inequities in access to center-based preschool

programs between low- and high-income families.⁶ Children of lower socioeconomic status (SES)⁷ begin school at a cognitive disadvantage, scoring lower on achievement tests in both reading and mathematics.⁸ Children from low-SES families are almost twice as likely to repeat kindergarten as children in other SES categories.⁹ These children are likely to have great difficulty meeting raised expectations for their school performance without early and sustained intervention.

Policymakers considering investing in early childhood programs that meet high standards should consider the long-term positive child outcomes and potential savings to taxpayers that have been suggested by research on exemplary programs, including the Abecedarian Project, Chicago’s Child-Parent Centers (CPC), and the Perry Preschool study. Cost-benefit analyses of the CPC initiative and Perry Preschool have estimated a \$7 return in improved child outcomes for disadvantaged children on every dollar invested.¹⁰ Each of these model programs included increased program standards and a component of comprehensive services for the children and families they served.

Why Child Care Matters

Child care—the care of children by someone other than a parent

—has become a fact of life for most young children in this country. Between 1970 and 2001, the percentage of employed mothers with children from birth to age five grew from 28 to 59 percent.¹¹ During the 1990s, welfare reform, the strong economy, and other factors resulted in a large increase in the number of low-income mothers in the workforce. As a result, more at-risk young children were spending time in out-of-home child care settings while their parents worked. With an increasing number of young children in care, many for long hours every week, child care has become the new opportunity to promote education and overall child development.¹² However, this opportunity has been largely overlooked.

Although all states have licensing requirements for formal child care providers, these regulations provide only a floor under which the health and safety of children in care may not fall. Such basic protections usually do not meet recommended program standards to enhance the quality of early learning experiences for children.

Other features of the child care market and the child care subsidy system in the United States present further challenges. Most child care is operated by private providers and paid for by parents on their own or with assistance from public subsidies.

Historically, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)—the major federal funding stream available for states to help parents pay for child care and to improve child care quality—has only included minimum protections for the health and safety of children, leaving specific program standards almost entirely up to states. Most states rely heavily on vouchers to distribute child care subsidies, which often means that child care providers care for a mix of both subsidized and unsubsidized children. Given the fact that a program may only have a few subsidized children in a class, it is difficult for a voucher system to provide a sufficient amount of additional resources to facilitate higher standards for programs that need a lot of assistance. Over the last few years many states have begun to reimburse providers of subsidized child care with higher payment levels if they already meet higher standards, but the vast majority of child care continues to be operated without program standards required upfront, and without the financing that can help assure they can meet high-quality standards.

Highlighted Strategies and States

State Pre-kindergarten Programs

Until the 1990s, most state pre-kindergarten initiatives were delivered in public schools

only. As states expanded their resources for universal pre-kindergarten initiatives, more states turned their attention to the child care centers where preschool children were already being served. More and more, states have concluded that they must build on the diversity of existing child care providers, rather than to try to absorb all these services into already overcrowded public schools—especially when the public is demanding smaller class sizes. This report focuses on three states—Georgia, New York, and New Jersey—with significant investments in state pre-kindergarten programs that rely on child care providers to reach more preschool children. For example, in 2002-2003, 62 percent of the children in the New Jersey Abbott districts' early childhood programs received these services in child care settings.¹³

Head Start Delivered in Child Care Settings

Over the past decade, 18 states have increased opportunities for poor children and families to access the early education, comprehensive services, and family support required under federal Head Start Program Performance Standards by investing state dollars in Head Start-modeled programs.¹⁴ In order to reach more poor children than federal dollars allowed, states have replicated Head Start stan-

dards in existing child care center facilities, often encouraging collaboration with federal grantees in the process. We examine two states with prominent models of state-funded Head Start programs (Ohio and Oregon) and one with an Early Head Start replication model for children from birth to age three and pregnant mothers (Oklahoma).¹⁵

State Contracts with Child Care Providers

A recent CLASP survey of state data demonstrated that, while almost half the states use direct contracting with providers in their child care subsidy systems, few do so expressly to meet early education program standards—and rarely on a statewide basis.¹⁶ However, 12 states reported contracting with child care providers that met program standards beyond state licensing requirements, and six states used contracts with family child care networks to stabilize and improve quality of care. California has done the most of any state to attach higher standards to their contracts with child care providers.

The Report's Findings

The full report examines how each of the six states with an early education program integrated standards and increased monitoring into their child care system. We compare the program standards governing all

providers, including child care partners, in the state pre-kindergarten and Head Start initiatives to the standards governing state child care licensing regulations. In each of the six states (Georgia, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Oregon), our review found that their early education (pre-kindergarten and Head Start) program standard requirements and oversight of integrated child care centers exceeded those of the basic state licensing rules. The study found:

- Smaller group sizes and better staff-child ratios are required of child care programs participating in the early education initiatives than those required in state child care licensing regulations.
- Significantly higher minimum teacher education qualifications for the early education programs than the state child care licensing rules, with the early education programs requiring at least an associate's degree or Child Development Associate credential, compared to minimum licensing requirements as low as a high school degree.
- Specific requirements for curriculum in early education programs, but not in any of the state child care licensing regulations.
- Federal Head Start Performance Standards, which call

for a specific scope and intensity of comprehensive services, are required in the early education programs modeled after Head Start, while the pre-kindergarten programs require some comprehensive standards but to a lesser extent. The state child care licensing regulations do not require any comprehensive services.

- Child care providers participating in the early education programs have additional monitoring processes for program content and standards, over and above the monitoring for state child care licensing regulations.

In addition, the report describes how California, as part of its mixed child care subsidy delivery system, uses contracts to improve the standards and performance of child care centers. California served 271,375 children in 2001 through contracts with providers for center-based care for low-income children, migrant child care, on-site campus care, special needs care, and afterschool care. California requires contract providers to meet more stringent requirements for staff-child ratio, group size, teacher education levels, comprehensive services, and monitoring than the state child care licensing standards.

A Case Study on Funding: How Georgia Pre-K Integrated Child Care

In general, higher program standards mean higher program costs. In order to take advantage of the early education opportunity presented by child care, policymakers must figure out ways to finance the cost of increasing program standards, monitoring, and technical assistance above the minimum licensing. To make these program standards viable for child care providers to meet—and affordable for parents—the increased costs must be covered by direct government funding tied to standards. Each of the study states address this differently. The Georgia Pre-K experience offers one clear example of how a state is layering early education funding and requirements for program standards onto the foundation of state licensed child care centers to deliver universal pre-kindergarten services to four-year-olds in child care settings.

In Georgia Pre-K, providers must meet basic licensing standards, as well as additional program standards, such as the ones described in this report. Approved providers are awarded \$8,000 in start-up funds and annual grants based on the projected number of children they will serve for 6.5 hours a day, for a school year. The rate per child

is graduated to provide more funding for classrooms with lead teachers who have higher education qualifications. Pre-K programs serving children eligible for CCDF child care subsidies may also receive those funds to extend services full-day, full-year. The Georgia Pre-K rate for care of low-income children is more generous and rewards higher teacher qualifications more significantly than does the statewide rates paid in the state child care subsidy program. For example, the combination of Pre-K and child care subsidy funds in a full-day, full-year Georgia Pre-K classroom with a four-year college degreed teacher is much higher per child (\$6,437) than the basic child care subsidy rate for similar hours of care in a non-Pre-K classroom (\$4,160).¹⁷ And, Georgia Pre-K classrooms serving at-risk children can also apply for funds for a Resource Coordinator to provide family support and screening services to at-risk children and families.¹⁸

Recommendations and Conclusion

Meeting Great Expectations makes the following specific policy and research recommendations:

1. States interested in integrating early education initiatives into child care should include three fundamental components:
 - require program standards above and beyond basic state licensing requirements,
 - provide additional funding at levels sufficient to support the cost of meeting higher program standards, and
 - provide additional technical assistance and monitoring to child care providers.

Integrating higher program standards into child care programs requires additional funding, particularly to improve compensation and to attract and retain teachers meeting higher education requirements. Additional training and technical assistance will be needed to help programs meet higher standards.
2. When developing program standards for early childhood initiatives, states should set minimum requirements for staff-child ratios and group sizes, teacher education, and curriculum, and should consider meeting the minimum recommendations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
3. When developing state standards for programs serving poor or disadvantaged children, states should address comprehensive service needs of children and families by modeling the required standards after the Head Start Program Performance Standards.
4. States should increase the use of provider contracts tied to higher standards through the child care subsidy system. While early education initiatives focus only on preschool-age children, using contracts has the added benefit of allowing states to improve the quality of services for children from birth through age 12. States should also explore using contracts to build networks of family child care providers as a mechanism to expand early learning opportunities beyond center-based programs and address the need for a diverse range of qualified providers.
5. The federal government and states should launch additional research projects to document and evaluate the development of state policy to integrate early education initiatives into child care settings. Questions should include:
 - What are the various strategies states are using to integrate education program standards into child care settings?
 - What are the cost implications of implementing each approach and helping programs achieve program standards?
 - What approach is working best to achieve educational outcomes for children?

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest barrier to integrating high program standards in child care is financial. States are experiencing the worst budget crises since World War II—with 46 states reporting revenues below forecasted levels as of January 2002. States are being forced to cut child care and early education programs—including the ones profiled in this report. The national economy and state budget woes mean that investments needed to improve program standards and the early learning environments for children may suffer, as many states are struggling to maintain basic services. However, research indicates that it will be more costly in the long run if we don't take better advantage of the “opportunity time” that children spend in child care to prepare them for the great expectations we have for them in school. Our nation should invest in a system that better integrates the care and education of young children, including those in families with need for full-day, full-year services. We should build on the promise of the state early education initiatives and new uses of child care contracts described in this report that have sought to integrate program standards in child care.

For full citations on resources used in the policy brief, please see the full report.

Endnotes

- 1 Bowman, B.T., Donovan, M.S., & Burns, M.S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, pp. 49-52.
- 2 Vandell, D.L., & Wolfe, B. (2000). *Child Care Quality: Does It Matter and Does It Need to Be Improved?* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Howes, C. (1997, July). Children's experiences in center-based child care as a function of teacher background and adult:child ratio. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 43(3), 404-425.
- 3 Bowman et al., 2001, pp. 128-143, citing Frede, E.C. (1998). Pre-school program quality in children in poverty. In W.S. Barnett & S.S. Boocock (Eds.), *Early Care and Education for Children in Poverty: Promises, Programs, and Long-Term Outcomes*. New York: SUNY.
- 4 Shonkoff, J.P., & Phillips, D.A. (Eds.). (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, National Academies Press.
- 5 Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *The Future of Children*, 2(2), 55-71.
- 6 Lee, V.E., & Burkam, D.T. (2002). *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- 7 Socioeconomic status is measured with a composite score that includes parents' reports of household income, parent education levels, and parent occupation. Lee & Burkam, 2002, p. 17.
- 8 Lee & Burkam, 2002.
- 9 Lee & Burkam, 2002, p. 30.
- 10 National Institute for Early Education Research. (2003). *Economic Benefits of Quality Preschool Education for American 4-year-olds*. Available at: <http://nieer.org/resources/facts/index.php?FastFactID=6>.
- 11 Smolensky, E., & Gootman, J.A. (Eds.). (2003). *Working Families and Growing Kids: Caring for Children and Adolescents*. Washington, DC: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, National Academies Press.
- 12 Lombardi, J. (2003). *Time to Care: Redesigning Child Care to Promote Education, Support Families, and Build Communities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- 13 Communication with Ellen Frede, July 2003. Over half of Georgia Pre-K providers are private, non-public school-based, and 64 percent of the children served in the New York state universal pre-kindergarten program were in child care settings. See full report for details.
- 14 Note that there are also many examples in states of federal-to-local funded Head Start programs that are partnering with child care providers meeting federal Head Start Program Performance Standards, but this report focuses on initiatives spearheaded by states.
- 15 The First Start program in Oklahoma was discontinued after we collected the initial data for this project.
- 16 See Schumacher, R., Irish, K., & Greenberg, M.H. (2003). *Untapped Potential? How States Use Contracts with Providers to Shore Up Child Care Choices for Low-Income Families*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.
- 17 Note that 11 Georgia counties are currently offering differential child care subsidy payment rates based on program quality, but the incentive to meet higher standards is not yet statewide. Since not all counties in the metro Atlanta region would be able to receive these higher payments, our example does not address them.
- 18 Note that the resource coordination services provided in Georgia Pre-K are not comparable to those required under Head Start Performance Standards.

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The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children. CLASP's child care and early education work

focuses on promoting policies that support both child development and the needs of low-income working parents and on expanding the availability of resources for child care and early education initiatives. CLASP examines the impact of welfare reform on child care needs; studies the

relationships between child care subsidy systems, the Head Start Program, pre-kindergarten efforts, and other early education initiatives; and explores how these systems can be responsive to the developmental needs of all children, including children with disabilities.

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