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TECHNICAL REPORT

Going to Scale with High-Quality Early Education

Choices and Consequences in
Universal Pre-Kindergarten Efforts

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Supported by the Early Childhood Funders' Collaborative



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SUMMARY

High-quality early childhood programs have been shown to produce broad, long-term societal benefits, including increased employment and associated tax revenue, reduced crime, and reduced dependency on social welfare systems. More individualized benefits for participating children and their families are also significant. In some cases, these benefits have far outweighed the up-front cost of the programs. This favorable balance of benefits to costs, new research on brain development, a desire to bring all children to academic proficiency, and deep concerns about social justice have led many states to move toward the provision of public, universal pre-kindergarten (pre-K) over the past decade.

States' drive for expanded care has been based on evidence from a number of well-funded, well-designed early childhood programs that showed strong positive impacts when rigorously evaluated. This strong base of evidence on the effects and effectiveness of high-quality early education programs, however, is not yet matched by equally solid information about how to effectively design, fund, and provide statewide systems of high-quality services for all participants. The effort to go to scale with high-quality programs is new, and policymakers and implementers find themselves without strong guidance on how to proceed.

This study describes efforts in eight states to create statewide systems of high-quality pre-K. It examines the policy choices involved in implementing pre-K in an environment of fiscal uncertainty, explores a variety of state efforts, and identifies significant policy and practice issues for the sector. The report findings provide valuable information for policymakers and other stakeholders who are seeking to ensure that scaled-up pre-K is of high quality.

The study addressed the following questions:

- What are the core implementation issues and policy choices facing states that are moving toward universal pre-K? How has the current fiscal climate affected these choices?
- How have states negotiated the consequences of their policy choices? What lessons might be learned from these negotiations?

- What are the effects of particular universal pre-K policy choices on other child populations, families, and communities?

The study focused on state-led programs providing public services intended to prepare children aged 3–4 for kindergarten. Literature on state implementation to date was supplemented by a review of the general early childhood literature supporting pre-K development and of policy studies in fields that might have an impact on the growth and sustainability of pre-K programs, particularly in the current fiscal climate. Forty interviews were conducted with representatives of state agencies responsible for program implementation, state chapters of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and a range of practitioner support entities in Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Washington.

FINDINGS

The majority of states currently invest in some form of public pre-K programming. However, programs vary notably from state to state. Programs range from full coverage (all children in an age range, usually 4-year-olds, although occasionally those aged 3–4, are eligible for services) to targeted interventions for limited populations of various ages (usually those who, as a group, have tended to perform least well on later educational assessments, such as poor urban and poor rural populations). Some states offer full-day options, but most offer part days. Some offer full-year programming, but most are part-year (usually corresponding to the K-12 academic year). Some tie benefits to the public assistance status of parents, while others are more flexible in their definitions of program eligibility. Some offer choices among public and private providers, while others locate programs only in public schools. Some provide comprehensive developmental services to children and families; others focus more directly on academic preparation for kindergarten.

Regardless of the type of program with which they were involved, however, our respondents identified two main challenges in implementing large-scale, high-quality, public pre-K: (1) the challenge of providing universal services, and (2) the challenge of providing comprehensive services. The following paragraphs discuss the issues of funding, auspice, access,

accountability, and staffing, which were cited by respondents as the core areas of negotiation in implementing state programs.

Funding

Fiscal necessity and the desire to integrate systems of childcare, education, and welfare have resulted (in many states) in heavy dependence on federal funding through the multiple funding streams of Head Start, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). These funding streams have different eligibility and reporting requirements and are politically uncertain. States are using these funds creatively, mostly to expand their programming through the inclusion of Head Start and childcare providers and provide important support for staff development. However, use of these streams also creates systemic complications, presses states in the direction of particular kinds of accountability, and has potentially negative implications for the participation of the working poor in publicly funded pre-K. Some states have had success at funding pre-K as a line item in state budgets or as an element of their school formulas, but such efforts still draw on federal dollars to supplement and intensify services. Respondents reported that the ability to balance and blend federal and state funding while maintaining program consistency will be a key challenge in future program development.

Auspice

Many states demonstrate strong and committed efforts to develop pre-K as a component of an integrated social service system for children and families. Respondents reported, however, that perceived competition between education and human services agencies for limited funding can undermine these integration efforts and put educational goals and those of welfare and childcare into conflict. Multiple and segregated data systems across implementing agencies also limit the extent to which programs' outcomes can be tracked, reported, effectively analyzed, and used to target improvements.

Access

"Universal pre-kindergarten" is usually a misnomer, since targeted programming (usually serving populations deemed to be most at risk of later

school failure, and often not even reaching all students within those groups) is the norm in most states. While states have ambitions of publicly funded programs that are voluntary and accessible to all age-eligible children, access to programming is limited both by funding constraints and by the contexts of particular state efforts. Even with targeted programs, respondents voiced concerns about the extent to which rural and minority children, and those with family incomes marginally above subsidy rates, are well served. States that have come closest to achieving universal access have done so by successfully integrating childcare and Head Start providers into the state pre-K system.

Accountability

The accountability movement provides structure and opportunity for states to address quality in program development; indeed, a number of states have established standards for pre-K and for infant and toddler care that are intended to be both rigorous and developmentally appropriate. However, respondents were concerned that the current strong focus on academic standards may also press states to artificially separate cognitive achievement from multidimensional child development and prioritize the cognitive in program design, implementation, and assessment. Respondents also noted that comprehensiveness of services – reflected in the extent to which states and districts offer wraparound childcare, transportation, and referral to or connection with other social services as part of pre-K programs – may also be limited by accountability pressures to focus on academic outcomes, with potentially negative implications for access and participation.

Staffing

The quality and stability of the pre-K workforce is a key issue for states, and one with which they struggle. High standards for staff are intended to support program quality, but funding to support teacher development and smooth degree trajectories is lacking in many states. Stakeholders express significant concern that incentives for teacher migration into public pre-K may limit the supply of quality staff in programs serving younger children.

CONCLUSIONS

Significant new practices are emerging across state pre-K programs in such areas as the development of standards, creative funding, professional development, technical assistance, and partnership with diverse providers. States are working to develop the quality of their programs and their ability to provide services to all children in the targeted age ranges. This study highlights the challenges faced in moving quality to scale within presently fragmented and multilayered systems of governance and programming, and argues for more rigorous examination of current efforts to identify promising practices, along with careful coordination of policymaking to ensure that large-scale public pre-K programs more fully echo the small-scale, high-quality interventions that inspired them.