



background

Report # 120

Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts

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Taking On School Failure Pays Off Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts Demonstrates Promise

The idea was to organize community partnerships across Pennsylvania that would create high-quality learning opportunities for young children who are the most at risk of failing in school that would place them solidly on the path to success. Five years later, evidence shows the public-private initiative, Pre-K Counts, is working.

Not only have children enrolled in the program made significant strides in acquiring the learning and social skills necessary for them to succeed in the classroom, but the percentage of those who qualify for being placed in special education classes is well below the average placement rate for their schools.

Pre-K Counts was created in 2004 based on decades of research on early childhood intervention. The focus is on building effective early care and education networks to prevent the progressive declines that studies suggest low-income children experience when denied the benefits of quality early learning experiences.

Most of the children who have participated improved in development and early learning skills ranging from language to classroom behavior, and they raised their competencies to age-appropriate levels or above by the time they entered kindergarten, according to an evaluation by the Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings (SPECES) team at the University of Pittsburgh and Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC.

The study also reports that the number of young children classified as developmentally delayed and eligible for early intervention services was

significantly reduced. About 21% of the children had such a classification when they entered their local Pre-K Counts program. By the time they left, only 8% were identified with delays.

"That is a dramatic increase in children's real-life functional skills," said Stephen J. Bagnato, Ed.D., professor of pediatrics and psychology at the University of Pittsburgh and director of SPECES for Pre-K Counts.

Bagnato said the evaluation leaves little doubt that Pre-K Counts drove such outcomes. "What the statistics clearly show is the gains that children make are beyond what you would expect based on maturation alone."

10,000 Children

Key elements of Pre-K Counts include ongoing mentoring of teachers, collaborative school-community leadership, ongoing evaluation, collaboration with human service agencies, creative options for parent participation, use of Keystone STARS program

Nearly 7,000 at-risk children who participated in Pre-K Counts had at least average age-expected learning competencies in spoken language, reading, writing, mathematics, daily living skills and classroom behavior when it came time for them to enter kindergarten.

quality standards and Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards (PAELS), and a requirement that programs integrate early care and education, Head Start, and Early Intervention.

The SPECES evaluation, funded by The Heinz Endowments, examined Pre-K Counts from 2005 to 2008, when more than 10,000 children participated in programs run by school-community partnerships in 21 school districts across the state. Those programs included 489 classrooms and more than 1,100 teachers.

Children were assessed when they entered the program and their progress when they left Pre-K Counts was measured and analyzed. Evaluators also compared their competencies with age-appropriate norms based on the Basic School Skills Inventory and other national indices.

Upon entering Pre-K Counts, one-third of the children were classified as

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at-risk or as developmentally delayed and qualifying for early intervention services from the county. The rest, about 67%, were performing in typical age-appropriate ranges. After participating in Pre-K Counts, 19% more students were performing in the typical range of performance.

More Competent Learners

According to the study, most children who took part in Pre-K Counts made significant progress toward achieving age-expected performance.

Nearly 7,000 children age-eligible to make the transition to kindergarten showed at least average age-expected learning competencies in spoken language, reading, writing, mathematics, daily living skills and classroom behavior. They also exceeded national norms in spoken language, writing, mathematics and classroom behavior.

When it was time to move on to kindergarten, the average child in Pre-K Counts met 80% of the early childhood success competencies in the Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards. For example, 87% attained competency in communicating ideas, experiences and feelings; 85% in demonstrating initiative and curiosity; 81% percent in self-regulation; 81% in listening and understanding skills; 78% in comprehending information from written or oral stories and texts; 76% in increasing their letter knowledge; and 73% in learning about numbers, numerical representation and simple numerical operations.

Many more Pre-K Counts children entered kindergarten equipped with the skills they need to succeed than would be expected in their schools.

"These kids were dramatically at-risk for failure in kindergarten," Dr. Bagnato said. "By the time 7,000 kids got to kindergarten, their independent

assessments showed that only 2.4% of them would qualify for being retained in grade or placed in special education classrooms. And the historic special education placement rate in all of these districts was in the range of 5% to 30%, with the average being 18%."

How much time children spent in the program mattered. Their participation ranged from 4 to 24 months. On average, initial functional progress was achieved only after a child spent at least 6.4 months in the program. In general, children who participated the longest gained the most.

Quality Matters As Well

Preliminary findings suggest several other program features appear to contribute to the children's success.

The study found that children in programs that raised overall quality to Keystone STARS levels 3-4 had better early learning outcomes than children enrolled in programs that had lower levels of quality and had only made negligible improvements.

Pre-K Counts also benefitted from policies that aligned assessment, curriculum, teaching, program quality and expected outcomes with state

and professional standards, such as PAELS, Keystone STARS, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale and National Association for the Education of Young Children standards.

The study also found that the mentoring of teachers and childcare providers through Keystone STARS enhanced teaching practices, program quality and children's progress.

An idea of how such features influence child outcomes was gained in a sub-study of 36 Pre-K Counts classrooms that examined teachers' instructional, management and other behaviors. In general, children who made the most significant gains in early learning skills had teachers who, compared to their colleagues, were more structured, responsive, interacted better with children, used praise more effectively, and had more positive strategies for dealing with issues such as inattentiveness and poor behavior. "What that tells us," Dr. Bagnato said, "is that if you follow the standards, and teachers are mentored on those standards, you get these kinds of positive changes and improvement in the overall effectiveness of teaching."

references

This article was largely based on the following publication:

Bagnato, S.J., Salaway, J., & Suen, H. (2009). Pre-K Counts in Pennsylvania for Youngsters' Early School Success: Authentic Outcomes for an Innovative Prevention and Promotion Initiative. Pittsburgh, PA: Early Childhood Partnerships, The Heinz Endowments. www.heinz.org/UserFiles/Library/SPECS%20for%20PKC%202009%20Final%20Research%20Report%20113009.pdf

The executive summary of Pre-K Counts in Pennsylvania for Youngsters' Early School Success: Authentic Outcomes for an Innovative Prevention and Promotion Initiative is available online at: www.uclid.org:8080/uclid/pdfs/ecp_specs_report.pdf

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