



## Closing The School Readiness Gap *Some Districts Embrace Early Education To Ready Children For School*

**S**ignificant numbers of American children, particularly those from low-income families, do not get quality early care and education that research shows can improve their chances of succeeding in school.

In Pennsylvania, The United Way of Allegheny County Early Childhood Initiative estimates that fewer than 45% of the 18,800 low-income children in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County receive child care, Head Start, or related early childhood services.

National estimates for poor children are similar, while as many as 73% of children from high-income families receive early childhood care and education.

The result is that too many children start school a step behind, opening a school readiness gap in classrooms and exposing school districts to higher remediation costs and failure rates.

In light of this dilemma, school districts are increasingly being looked upon to play a larger role in ensuring that quality early learning experiences are available to all. Most districts offer kindergarten, but few provide programs for younger children. Head Start, a federal early education program for low-income four-year-olds, has helped, but few other public programs are available for younger children, especially full-day programs that allow mothers to work.

While school districts may recog-

*For more information on the benefits of early childhood education see **background Report #14***

nize the need, creating new early childhood programs or broadening existing ones is a difficult job that requires schools to seek scarce funds, meet new sets of regulations, and rally the will of the community to support programs that traditionally were seen as falling outside the jurisdiction of public schools.

### **District Options**

Early care and education is not a new issue to many school districts. A few have been involved in comprehensive initiatives for years. Others have built more limited programs on their own and in collaboration with agencies in their communities. Still others have found ways to work more cooperatively with existing programs, such as Head Start, to help children enter kindergarten better prepared.

Some school districts, such as Farrell Area in Mercer County, take the lead in organizing and managing early care and education and operate many of the programs themselves.

Others, such as the Woodland Hills School District in Allegheny County, participate in early childhood initiatives managed by a community-based organization that also assumes fiduciary responsibilities.

### **Costs**

The cost of early childhood programs is not insignificant and often deters schools from becoming deeply involved early childhood education.

Startup costs are especially difficult in districts where money is the scarcest. Yet, financially-strapped districts are most likely to hold large populations of children who could benefit most from greater access to early learning.

Building costs, in particular, can chill a district's efforts to expand early childhood programs. Woodland Hills once considered converting a vacant school into a regional early childhood center, but the cost of renovating the building was considered too high.

"It all sounded great," said Superintendent Stanley Herman. "But we would have had to invest district dollars for capital improvements to the building. That was when we discovered the special zoning and the modifications needed to house children of that age. When I took the costs to the board, I was not encouraged to proceed."

### **Funding**

Funding for early childhood programs is one of the most difficult hurdles for school districts to clear. Support for early childhood initiatives is often a patchwork of public and private sources, some of which provide staff, sites, and services instead of cash.

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Some federal funds are available. Initiatives have tapped into federal Child Care and Development Block Grant money, used some Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds, and some have shifted Title I funds to programs for young children.

Despite these and other sources, public funding for early care and education falls short of meeting the demand. A recent Urban Institute study, for example, estimates that only about 48% of the potential child care needs of low-income families would be met even if states maximized the federal dollars available under welfare reform.<sup>1</sup>

**Private Initiatives**

The private sector increasingly is emerging as a critical source of support for early education initiative.

One of the most ambitious, the United Way of Allegheny County's Early Childhood Initiative, is raising \$59.4 million to establish or expand high-quality early care and education programs in needy communities.

By targeting 7,600 unserved children in 80 communities for early care and education services, the Initiative seeks to double the number of low-income children in the county who are receiving early childhood education. To do this, the United Way is supporting community-based collaborative initiatives woven from local providers, agencies, and school districts.

**Woodland Hills**

One Allegheny County school district set to benefit from the United Way Early Childhood Initiative is Woodland Hills, which was created nearly two decades ago through a federal court desegregation order.

The decline of steel and other industry has left its mark on several dis-

tricts that serve communities in the hard-bitten Monongahela River valley. Woodland Hills is one. In its three primary schools housing grades K-3, about 60% of the 1,823 students are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. Such a large population of low-income children has led to a serious school readiness problem and a high demand early education.

Under the local Early Childhood Initiative, two sites dedicated to early care and education will be opened within the district. The Initiative will fund, among other things, \$900,000 worth of building renovations for early learning classrooms which the district previously could not afford. Costs to the school district are limited mostly to the use of administrative staff.

**Farrell Area**

In 1983, the Farrell Area School District stitched together 64 funding sources to launch a "cradle to grave" education program, which includes a network of early care and education programs and called for \$200,000 in build-

ing renovations to open an early childhood center.

The school district contributed staff and funds and arranged capital improvement loans to cover the maintenance of facilities.

Public sources of support included the state Departments of Welfare, Education, and Health; federal departments, such as Health and Human Services; county agencies; and private sources, including hospitals, foundations, and local businesses. Some provided direct cash. Others, such as several county agencies, provided on-site staff.

But unlike most school districts, Farrell Area chose to coordinate the initiative itself.

"We hooked up families with agencies, or we set up our own centers," said former superintendent John Sava, who is now Vice President of Early Care and Education for the United Way of Allegheny County. "The school district itself is an academic institution first. But it can act as a facilitator."

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**references & notes**

*This report was based on the following publications:*

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<sup>1</sup> Long, S. & Clark, S. (1997). *The New Child Care Block Grant: State Funding Choices and Their Implications*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

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