



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Early Childhood Care & Education In Pennsylvania

Missed Opportunities

Wider access to quality early education urged

Pennsylvania's experience with early childhood care and education is marked by missed opportunities, according to a university collaborative studying early childhood issues.

Quality early education and child care – not simply babysitting – yields benefits for children ranging from better math and reading scores to less delinquency. But most programs across the state fail to offer young children the kind of quality environments that allow them to realize the full potential of early learning. And the shortage of quality programs comes at a time when more and more parents are in need of early childhood services, such as preschool or child care.

A series of studies by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative (UCPC) supports wider access to quality early childhood services across Pennsylvania.

"We have decades of science that tells us that it is quality that makes a difference in the outcomes of children," said Christina Groark, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development. "It is absolutely critical."

The findings, published in five reports, are based on six months of research by UCPC, a collaborative of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, the Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center, and the Center for Public Policy of Temple University. UCPC provides nonpartisan information on issues important to the well-being of children, youth, and families.

The UCPC reports recently pro-

vided the Governor's Early Childhood Care and Education Task Force with research-based evidence on which to base its recommendations to improve early childhood services in Pennsylvania. Gov. Mark Schweiker released the Task Force report and its recommendations on Oct. 15.

Rising Demand

Major changes within families are intensifying the need for quality early childhood care and education. The number of working mothers with young children has almost doubled since 1975. More children live in single-parent families today and their numbers are steadily climbing. Child poverty rates remain stubborn – in Pennsylvania, one in six children live in poverty – and significant gaps are seen in developmental outcomes of these children.

Two-thirds of Pennsylvania families have children in child care or an educational program on a regular

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weekly basis, with about 25% of children spending at least 35 hours per week in child care or a early education classroom, according to a UCPC survey of Pennsylvania families with young children.

But less than half of the programs these young children attend emphasize education. And poor children are less likely to attend a program with an educational focus that more affluent peers.

Quality Matters

Early care and education is associated with school achievement, less grade retention, higher graduation rates, fewer behavior problems at school, lower rates of crime and delinquency among adolescents, and higher employment rates when low-income children become adults.

But the benefits are only seen among high quality early childhood services defined by their use of well-educated teachers trained in early childhood, low child-

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teacher ratios, high standards, intensive approach to education, and other factors.

Unfortunately, such high-quality programs are the exception rather than the rule in Pennsylvania, according to a UCPC survey that measured the quality of 372 Head Start programs, preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, group child care homes, and legally unregulated/relative/neighbor care arrangements.

Fewer than 20% of these early childhood services were of a level of quality sufficient to produce the full benefits of early childhood education.

“The survey indicates that most child care settings in Pennsylvania are of mediocre quality, at best,” said Mark Greenberg, Ph.D., Director of the Prevention Research Center at Pennsylvania State University. “This is a clear signal, a warning that there is a great need to improve the quality of early childhood care and education to make sure that children are ready for school socially, emotionally and academically.”

Return On Investment

Quality early childhood services, on average, cost 10%-30% more than custodial care, according to the research. But the return on investment is substantial. The better outcomes associated with quality early childhood programs can lower special education, criminal justice, and other costs. In fact, quality early childhood programs have demonstrated financial benefits to society worth 4-7 times the total cost of operating a program.

“A lot of people are concerned about the cost of quality. As best as we could determine, the annual cost of quality early childhood care and educa-

tion is comparable to the average cost of public school elementary education,” said OCD’s Groark.

Teacher Supply Low

Finding well-educated teachers trained in early childhood who are willing to work in child care and preschool programs is a difficult assignment in Pennsylvania, a UCPC survey of higher education suggests.

In Pennsylvania, only 58% of preschool teachers, 39% of Head Start teachers, 22% of child care center teachers, and 18% of home-based providers have a bachelors degree in any

subject.

Also, more than half of college-educated teachers who teach children 5 years old and younger have a background in elementary education, not early childhood, which is better suited to their field.

One of the surest ways to improve the quality of a child care or early education service is to use teachers who are well educated and trained specifically for their field. One of the characteristics of mediocre and poor quality services is the lack of such people.

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references

This report and Reports 48-52 were based on a series of studies conducted by the Universities Children’s Policy Collaborative. The studies are covered in the following reports, which are available in the Internet.

- Benchmarking Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: The 2002 Pennsylvania Family Survey (Written by Center for Public Policy, Temple University). www.temple.edu/PPP/current_proj/proj14.htm.
- The State of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: The 2002 Higher Education Survey (Written by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development) www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm.
- A Baseline Report of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: The 2002 Early Care and Education Provider Survey (Written by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development). www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm.
- From Science to Policy: Research of Issues, Programs and Policies in Early Care and Education (Written by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development). www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm
- Pennsylvania Quality of Early Childhood Settings Study (Written by Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University). www.prevention.psu.edu/ECE.

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Children, Youth & Family background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), a program of the University Center for Social and Urban Research. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

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This report and others can be found on the Internet by visiting: www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/background.htm