



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Children, Youth & Family

background

Report # 52

Governor's Task Force On Early Childhood Care and Education

December 2002

Early Childhood Care & Education In Pennsylvania

A Time For Change

Access and quality rank high on Task Force list

Broader access to preschool and kindergarten, quality standards, and incentives to spur programs toward improving early childhood services are among the recommendations issued by a statewide task force commissioned by Gov. Mark Schweiker to examine early childhood care and education in Pennsylvania.

The recommendations of the Governor's Task Force on Early Care and Education address, among other issues, evidence that only a fraction of early childhood services offer the kind of quality environments that produce the full benefits early learning has to offer.

Evidence of the shortfall in quality, the benefits of early learning, profiles of providers, and other information was provided by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative (UCPC), which includes researchers from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, the Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center, and the Center for Public Policy of Temple University.

The Task Force was chaired by Marilyn Ware, Chairman of the Board of American Water Works Company, Inc. Family Communications' Fred Rogers served as Honorary Chair.

More Pennsylvania children than ever before are spending significant numbers of hours in early childhood services, particularly in child care. When the quality of these services is high, low-income children are more likely to enjoy outcomes such as better school achievement, less grade reten-

tion, higher graduation rates, and fewer behavior problems. Unfortunately, only 20% of early childhood services in the state are of a level of quality sufficient to produce those kinds of benefits, according to a UCPC quality survey.

The Task Force recommendations focused on two central issues: access to early care and education and the quality of those services.

Urging wider access for all children, the Task Force called on the state to establish a system and funding that would make it possible to offer child care, preschool, and kindergarten to all children. These would be significant steps, if taken. Pennsylvania, for example, does not fund preschool — one of only nine states in the nation that fail to do so. Money to expand kindergarten classes to full-day sessions for at-risk children is another one of the recommendations to broaden access.

Such services, however, are only

Related Reports

<i>Missed opportunities</i>	Report 47
<i>Early education is vital</i>	Report 48
<i>Quality is declining</i>	Report 49
<i>Demand is rising</i>	Report 50
<i>Quality teachers needed</i>	Report 51

as good as the learning environment they create. To help programs reach the high levels of quality needed to realize the full potential of early learning, the Task Force recommended several steps. For example, it called for developing the following:

- Research-based standards of excellence.
- An accountability system for state-funded or regulated early care and education services.
- A statewide system of financial incentives that support the efforts of early childhood providers to maintain the standards of excellence.
- A minimum level of experience and/or training prior to employment and ongoing professional development.
- A system of credentialing early care and education professionals and appropriately compensate them.

(Continued on back)

How The Task Force Suggests Improving Early Care & Education

Task Force urges state to broaden access and improve quality of early childhood services

Infants & Toddlers

The Task Force noted that despite "incremental steps" taken by the state to improve care for very young children, the quality of most child care across Pennsylvania is mediocre, at best. The Task Force recommended the state take a bigger step and develop a voluntary care system that not only accounts for children's health and safety, but offers higher quality care in developmentally-appropriate environments.

Preschool

Studies find that high quality preschool offers far ranging benefits, including a much greater chance of succeeding in school. Yet, Pennsylvania is one of only nine states that does not provide funding for preschool. The Task Force felt this must change and recommended that quality preschool be made available to all 3 and 4-year-olds and that funding begin with children who are at risk of failing in school.

Kindergarten

Pennsylvania does not require kindergarten. In fact, the compulsory school age is 8 years old. Most districts offer half-day sessions. But studies suggest students, particularly at-risk students, benefit from full-day classes. The Task Force recommended state funding for full-day kindergarten in districts whose students are most likely to benefit, and lowering the compulsory school age to 6 years old.

Quality Standards

Researchers report that only high quality services consistently produce the full range of benefits early learning has to offer. The Task Force recommended that research-based standards of excellence be adopted statewide and that these standards be supported by promoting best practices and continuous improvement, as well as developing a system of incentives to help programs reach higher levels of quality.

(Continued from front)

None of the recommendations are binding. But the Task Force and UCPC have done much of the legwork needed for reform by providing the research, background, framework, and priorities to create a new approach to early care and education in Pennsylvania.

And UCPC researchers found evidence that parents are willing to support such measures. For example, 88% percent of parents sampled across the state said they felt that early care and education was important enough to support with their tax dollars.

~

references

This report was based largely on the following studies conducted the by the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education and the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative.

- Early Care and Education: The Keystone of Pennsylvania's Future, pp. 22-32. (Written by the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education). <http://www.state.pa.us/papower/cwp/view.asp?a=3&q=431623>
- 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.

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.

OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, Ph.D.; Robert B. McCall, Ph.D.

background Editor: Jeffery Fraser, e-mail: jd.fraser@att.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, 400 N. Lexington Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15208; (412) 244-5447; fax: (412) 244-5440

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