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Report # 74

Blueprint For Improving Early Learning

July 2005

Blueprint for early learning emerges

Successful program identifies keys to promoting quality early learning

A blueprint for raising the quality of child care and giving low-income children early learning opportunities that improve their chances of succeeding in school is emerging from lessons learned from a western Pennsylvania early childhood project.

The dramatically-improved outcomes of children enrolled in the Early Childhood Initiative Demonstration Project (ECIDP) may have captured headlines, but it is the behind-the-scenes model that created high-quality learning environments from the proper mix of evidence-based planning, partnerships, training, technical assistance, and support that is likely to have the widest impact.

The high-quality early learning opportunities created in two low-income communities improved the school readiness of children, lowered the likelihood they would be held back a grade, and reduced special education enrollments.

The project demonstrated how critical quality early learning experiences are to children and underscored the importance of adopting sound behind-the-scene processes to create them.

Lessons learned are today informing efforts to design smaller-scale programs to raise the quality of early learning that can be more readily made available to other communities. The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), for example, is adapting several of those lessons to improve the quality of child care in five southwestern Pennsylvania counties under a state Department of Public Welfare grant.

“It wasn’t that long ago that people started putting together the brain

research and realized that quality child care can help a child and poor quality child care can actually hurt a child,” said Laurie Mulvey, OCD’s Director of Service Demonstrations. “We are now learning how we can achieve high-quality child care.”

Partnerships Built

ECIDP established high-quality early care and education programs for low-income children in the Allegheny County communities of Braddock and Wilksburg under the management of OCD and with financial support of The Howard Heinz Endowment and Richard King Mellon Foundation.

The program demonstrated how collaboration, careful planning, and a research-based approach to creating and sustaining quality learning opportunities can result in significantly better developmental outcomes for young children in low-income neighborhoods.

ECIDP was built on strong part-

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nerships among OCD and the two lead agencies, Heritage Health Foundation in Braddock and Hosanna House in Wilksburg, which allowed them to collaborate on solving problems and set a tone of cooperation that was essential to improving early care and education practices.

“You have to have mutual consent on how you follow through with the plan,” said Christina J. Groark, Ph.D., OCD Co-Director. “It can’t be imposed on someone.”

The partnership resulted in a program model that set clear goals and objectives and a course for achieving them. Professional development, curriculum, ways to include children with special needs, how to monitor quality, building partnerships with parents, financial accountability, and other issues were addressed in the process.

The benchmark of quality was for sites to earn National Association for the

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Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation.

ECIDP classrooms and family child care homes have quality scores in the top one percent in the state. Hosanna House is NAEYC accredited and two family child care homes are National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) accredited.

Extensive Services, Expert Help

A key characteristic of ECIDP was the extensive on-site services and supports offered each agency – including quality assessments, technical support, and training – that allowed them to examine their programs and take the steps necessary to improve them.

Assessing program quality was an ongoing exercise and a routine of examining the program with an eye toward improving were among the reasons the quality of the services rose steadily.

Expert help was other key ingredient. Each program was offered consultation and technical assistance in administration and learning environment.

On the administrative end, assistance was given on issues such as program evaluation, planning goals, developing policies and procedures, turnover and retention, getting parents involved, and developing a comprehensive quality assurance system.

Assistance related to the learning environment covered issues such as equipping, arranging, and maintaining classrooms; health and safety; building relationships between teachers and children; assessing children; working with children with special needs; and communicating with parents.

Customized Training

The program also showed that the training of those who work in the classrooms cannot be ignored and, for best results, should be tailored to the needs

of each classroom.

In ECIDP, classroom needs were identified through observation, discussions with teachers, and quality assessments. Directors and consultants then drafted a training plan that addressed those needs. Training was provided at each site, allowing consultants to more effectively help teachers apply lesson learned.

As a result, teachers and staff were able to quickly learn and use what they most needed to know to improve their particular classroom learning environment.

Other Support Given

Training and the assistance of experts were complemented by a range of other supports to help neighborhood programs create and sustain high-quality early care and education opportunities for children.

Classrooms were observed and feedback given by experts to improve curriculum and reinforce quality teaching. An early intervention assessment and referral process helped teachers deal with challenging classroom situations. Early intervention consultation and training was also offered to help teachers appropriately respond to challenging behaviors.

A partnership with the UCLID Center at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh provided a child assessment tool, training, and support so that pro-

grams could measure child outcomes and teachers could develop more individualized curriculum plans to help children reach their full potential. And a family child care component brought home-based programs into the overall project and built ties between centers and home-based programs and staff.

Lessons Applied

Many of the lessons learned in ECIDP are now being applied more widely to improve child care in Pennsylvania.

Elements of ECIDP have been folded into a new program to improve the quality of child care throughout Allegheny, Greene, Fayette, Washington, and Westmoreland Counties. As part of STARS TA, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development is providing technical assistance to child care providers in those counties under a grant awarded by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare's Keystone STARS program, which gives providers incentives to improve the quality of the care they offer.

STARS TA is intended to help a wide range of child care providers – from large centers to home-based providers – move up the Keystone STARS quality rating scale and, in turn, create more enriching early learning experiences for children.



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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 of Pittsburgh School of Education. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

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