

background

Report # 76

Strengthening Early Learning Supports (SELS) Project

July 2005

Brightening Futures With Early Learning

Project brings quality learning to young children in poor neighborhoods

In America's neediest neighborhoods, one of the most pressing challenges is giving young children high quality learning opportunities that increase their chances of success in school and later in life. While research shows us what effective early care and education programs are made of, poor communities often lack the resources and coordination needed to create them.

A western Pennsylvania project is changing that using public and private dollars, a research-based approach, existing services, and the strength of collaboration to create lasting high quality early learning opportunities in four of Allegheny County's neediest communities.

Child care quality in these communities is generally low. In school, children's reading and math skills are poor overall. Enrollment in school special education programs across the four communities is 61% higher than the county as a whole; drop-out rates, 280% higher.

The project's goals are ambitious:

- Improve literacy among low-income children.
- Improve their development and learning readiness.
- Give child care and early education providers the skills to more effectively help those children who have special needs.
- Raise the overall quality of child care in the neighborhoods.

To create conditions capable of achieving its goals, SELS is teaching parents and child care and early education providers proven strategies that

enhance learning and development, while offering them a range of supports to help them put those strategies to work for the benefit of young children. The approach relies on training, technical assistance, and incentives that promote quality.

Initial response has surpassed expectations. In the first six months, for example, demand for training on how to deal with children's challenging behaviors exceeded capacity and 88% of child care providers in the four neighborhoods were involved in efforts to improve the quality of their programs.

SELS, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and The Heinz Endowments, is also taking steps to make sure high quality early learning opportunities last beyond the 17-month project. These include using a "train the trainer" model and providing support and incentives to encourage ongoing child care improvements.

SELS, a short-time, intensive program is building a sturdy foundation for early learning in four of western Pennsylvania's neediest neighborhoods by focusing on literacy, children with special needs, school readiness, and raising the overall quality of child care.

Early Years Are Critical

The latest brain research and early childhood education studies suggest the most prudent approach to better child outcomes is to strengthen the early learning opportunities available to them. Scientists now know, for example, that the brain develops from the earliest moments of life and that experiences, nurturing, and positive relationships with parents, teachers, and other adults are highly influential to that development.

Studies also show that children do better in school, grade retention is lower, fewer of them need special education services, and rates of antisocial behavior and delinquency rates fall when they are exposed to high quality early learning experiences that include well-trained staff and warm, stimulating relationships.

Stronger Community Resources

SELS expects to reach more than 10,000 children in the Allegheny County

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municipalities of Braddock, McKees Rocks and Wilkinsburg, and Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood.

To improve learning opportunities, the project focuses on strengthening existing resources in the neighborhoods, such as eight family support centers, which are linked to one another through the Family Support Policy Board, the recipient of the SELS grant. These centers receive training and technical assistance from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), fiscal agent for SELS. Each community has a high-quality child care center to host the project.

SELS also helps the neighborhoods take advantage of state and federal early childhood care and education initiatives, such as Keystone STARS, Pennsylvania's child care quality program; PA Pathways, a statewide system of training; Early Intervention; and Service Pathways, a web-based system of special service coordination.

Literacy And Development

Many who work in early childhood programs enter the field with little training in how to help young children build a foundation in reading, a key to school success. Surveys suggest, however, that teachers want to be better trained in ways to promote literacy and low-income parents want greater emphasis placed on reading and school readiness.

A key part of SELS is pooling existing services to improve the early literacy competencies of parents, caregivers, and child care providers. Beginning With Books' Raising Readers clubs, for example, is a service used to help parents build a foundation for reading and writing by teaching them how to read with children, phonetic awareness, and other issues. Another is "Lullabies to Literacy," piloted by Family Communications, Inc., which helps parents and

caregivers nurture emergent literacy in infants and toddlers. Child care providers are shown how to improve early literacy practices and home visitors are trained to work with parents and children on literacy at homes.

Training parents and child care providers to promote child development and early learning skills is another key area. SELS, for example, surveys family support centers to identify specific needs and provides targeted training and technical assistance in child development and parent education. Special coaches are also dispatched to help providers improve skills helpful to promoting the development of the children in their care.

Responding To Special Needs

Most child care and early education programs are ill-equipped to meet the challenge of teaching and caring for children with special needs, particularly those with severe disabilities.

In the Pittsburgh area, 23% of providers offer no care at all for children with more limiting special needs, an OCD study reports. In Pennsylvania, 71% of providers say they have expelled or threatened to expel a child for aggressiveness in the past two years, according to a statewide survey. At the same time, 68% of providers across the state say they want more training on working with children with disabilities.

The SELS project works with existing services to keep these children in child care and to improve their early learning opportunities. Existing

services provided by several community agencies and organizations are marshaled to help identify children with special needs, eliminate barriers to service, connect children and families to appropriate services, and teach parents and providers strategies that enhance the development and early education of these children.

Raising Child Care Quality

Although studies show high-quality early childhood programs clearly promote literacy and school readiness, most child care programs in Pennsylvania are rated only "fair" or poorer. In the Pittsburgh area, a sample of 70 centers and homes found only 14% offered high-quality care.

In less than six months, SELS managed to get most child care providers in the four neighborhoods involved in the state's Keystone STARS, which offers incentives to raise the quality of their programs and maintain it at higher levels. Before SELS, only eight of the 123 neighborhood child care providers were enrolled in the state quality improvement program.

"If we fast-forward to the future and see 123 providers in these communities all involved with Keystone STARS, all targeted toward early literacy, early learning, and high quality care there will be a very big improvement in the learning opportunities children have before they reach kindergarten," said Laurie Mulvey, OCD's Director of Service Demonstrations.

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