

READINESS TO LEARN

Universal Access to Voluntary Preschool

Universal access to voluntary preschool is only one aspect of the larger goal of having children enter school ready to learn and having schools prepared to properly serve them. However, it is the one currently most talked about. It is arguably the most expensive component, and the one that delegates at the 2003 LWVC Convention wished to have addressed in the study.

School Readiness

What is school readiness? In a 2004 publication prepared by RAND for First 5-LA, the Los Angeles County Proposition 10 Commission, the definition reads:

“What does it mean to say that children are ‘ready’ for school? It means that children have developed social, mental, and physical skills before starting school that prepare them for classroom learning. They enter school ready and eager to learn.

“School readiness has other dimensions: Schools must be ready for children, and families and communities must provide needed supports and services.

“School readiness is important for children, for their families, and for society at large. Children who are ready to learn when they begin school:

- learn more quickly
- are more engaged in school and learning
- are more likely to stay in school and graduate
- have a greater chance of success in the workplace later in life.

“In addition, children who succeed in their early school years have more self confidence, higher self esteem, and a lower chance of being involved in crime or violence.”

In the same report, the 1997 National Education Goals Panel highlighted the following recipe for school readiness:

Key Ingredients for School Readiness

Children’s readiness for school

- physical well-being and motor development
- social and emotional development
- approaches to learning
- language development
- cognition (such as reading and numbers) and general knowledge

Schools’ readiness for children

- a smooth transition between home and school
- continuity between early care, education programs, and elementary school
- a student-centered environment focused on helping children learn

- a commitment to the success of every child
- approaches that have been shown to raise achievement for each student
- a willingness to alter practices and programs if they do not benefit students
- establishment of student access to services and support in the community

Family and community support and services that contribute to children’s readiness for school success

- access to high quality and developmentally appropriate early care and education experiences
- access by parents to training and support that allows them to be their child’s first teacher and promotes healthy, functioning families
- prenatal care, nutrition, physical activity, and health care that children need to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies and to maintain mental alertness.

While all of these ingredients are important, not all, such as prenatal care, health care and nutrition, are within the scope of this study. However, they are check points to keep in mind as Leagues study the educational components of school readiness.

Universal access to full day preschool on a voluntary basis is a recommendation of the Master Plan for Education in California, a goal of First 5 California (the Prop. 10 Commission), and part of the plans of most County First 5 Commissions across the state. It has also been endorsed by the California School Boards Association and a notice is posted on their Web site. While the goal sounds simple, it is much more difficult to implement.

“Although no constitutional guarantee or statutory commitment has previously existed for California’s preschool-age children, our state has a profound interest in making available to all families who desire them the early education opportunities that support a child’s emotional, social, physical, linguistic and cognitive development... Early childhood education and development in pre-kindergarten settings can provide the socialization and coping skills, and the developing literacy and numeracy skills, that lead to these successes.”²²

At the end of the 2003-04 legislative session, AB 712 (a Master Plan bill), previously AB 56, was passed. It would require a study of the cost of universal access to preschool and form a committee to create a workforce development plan for early care and education through age eight. There is no funding source defined in this bill, and the language makes clear that the committee shall operate only to the extent that non-general fund moneys are made available. The bill has been sent to the governor for signature.

Currently, just 47 percent of the 1.17 million preschool age children are enrolled in preschool programs, many of which are unaccredited with very little control of quality. A state-funded and operated program would have standards, qualified teachers, curriculum guidelines, and should provide a quality introduction to education for young children.

In an effort to have young children ready to learn when they start school, care should be taken that these programs are also developmentally appropriate and not just early kindergarten. The social and emotional development should be considered, large as well as small muscle skills, creative and imaginative play, along with the pre-math and pre-literacy skills they need to be academically successful. These concerns are expressed by voices in the materials presented by the Preschool for All organization, as well as First 5.

²² Master Plan, page 10

However, there are many unknowns. As the proposal is for the program to be a voluntary one, there is no way to predict what enrollment would be, as can be done with the K-12 population. Therefore, it is impossible to predict what the total cost would be when fully implemented. There is also no way to predict how many teachers would be needed and how they would be trained. While space might not be a problem in declining enrollment districts, in crowded inner city schools and in fast growing parts of the state where enrollment is outpacing school construction, it (space) could be a problem.

Another unknown is how this program would be phased in and who would be included until it is large enough to reach every child. The Master Plan recommendation calls for including all children in the two years before kindergarten, while Preschool California, a private nonprofit promoting this idea, only calls for four-year-olds. The First 5 Commission of Los Angeles County, closest to implementation of any proposal studied, calls for funding first going to schools scoring in the lowest 20 percent on the California API report card. Other counties have different standards.

Participation Rates

No similar program of the magnitude of that being proposed for California has ever been tried anywhere in the United States. Georgia has a universal access to preschool program that is funded by their state lottery, but their enrollment is much smaller than California, and the program is only ten years old, so no longitudinal study has been made. Currently 55 percent of the children are being served. New Jersey is under court order to provide preschool in their lowest performing districts, but the program is just now being implemented and serves 33 percent of the New Jersey's eligible children. New York currently serves 25 percent of their four year old children in a program started in 1997, and Oklahoma is serving 63 percent of four year olds in a school based program made available by declining enrollment and much unused school space. Texas has a target program that serves 43 percent of the disadvantaged children. Florida has passed legislation to have a program in place by 2005. Legislation is under consideration in other states. While an ideal program is seen as one that would serve three- and four-year-old children, due to cost constraints, all of these serve primarily four-year-olds. Except for First 5 proposals, there is nothing actually pending in California, so what we are talking about is a concept for California.²³

The trend seems to be growing. Currently 42 states and the District of Columbia have some type of state supported preschool, most of them targeted programs for low income or low performance schools or districts. Only Georgia and Oklahoma are approaching true universal access.

According to the data on the Preschool and Child Care Enrollment in California site of the California Research Bureau of the California State Library (<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/04/03/04-003.pdf>), there are 1,166,112 children in California between the ages of 3 and 5. Of these, 550,234 are currently enrolled in preschool part-day or full-day, or about 47 percent.

According to various research reviewed for this study, about 70 percent of eligible children participate when offered a free preschool experience. This figure is also reflected in the experience of other states currently offering programs.

Paul Miller of Kidango at www.earlyeducation.org has considered the costs. In current dollars, the cost is about \$42.00 per child per day for 180 days, a normal school year, or an annual cost of \$7,560. To bring

²³ Data from Los Angeles Universal Preschool Master Plan

the total enrollment to 70 percent, 384,817 additional students would need to be served, at a cost of about \$2.9 billion. There would be additional costs to bring the state preschools and Head Start sites up to the \$42.00 a day level. Head Start sites are funded at different levels depending on whether they are run by school districts, county offices of education, or private nonprofit organizations, so these costs are not easily gauged at this time. Another unknown is how many of these sites would choose to participate in the program at all. Current thinking is that full implementation would be well over \$3 billion new money in current dollars.

A Review of Three Controlled Studies

There is much that is being accepted as “common knowledge.” Children who attend preschool:

- are less likely to need special education or need to be held back a grade
- score higher on standardized test in reading and math
- are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to drop out
- are less likely to be involved in juvenile crime or become teen mothers (because they stay in school).

While this sounds like common sense, the research that is used to back these statements comes mostly from three very controlled studies: The High Point/Perry Preschool program in Michigan, the Carolina Abecedarian Project and Chicago’s Child/Parent Centers. *Investing in Our Children: What we Know and Don’t Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions*, published by RAND in 1998, looked at ten interventions. For purposes of this study guide, the focus will be on the three that are preschool age interventions, as well as the examples discussed by Preschool California. Each of these programs was different in important ways, but all were limited, and each structured in a way that included a control group for comparative purposes.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan is the most reported and most famous. There were a total of 58 students enrolled from 1962 to 1967 in five small waves, with a control group of 63. Most students entered the program at three years of age and participated for two and a half hours a day for two years, while 13 entered as four-year olds with only one year of full participation. In addition to the preschool experience, each family was visited at home by the teacher for 90 minutes every week. The program ran on the school year. All teachers were fully credentialed with extra training in special education or early childhood development. Families were selected on the basis of socioeconomic factors, children in families who qualified were given an I.Q. test (Stanford-Binet) and those admitted had scores of under 85. The in-class student-teacher ratio was six to one, one teacher for every six children. Support services followed the children as they transitioned into the primary grades.

These children were followed and interviewed annually until they were 11, then again at ages 14, 15, 19 and 27. They had a higher high school graduation rate than the control group, higher achievement scores on tests along the way, less time spent in special education classrooms, and a small number more attended some sort of postsecondary education. Other positive outcomes included a lower arrest rate, higher earnings at age 27, less public assistance, and a lower teen birth rate among the girls in the study.

The Carolina Abecedarian project is very different, but one that is also quoted by those advocating universal access to a voluntary preschool. The project, based at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center of the University of North Carolina, started in 1972 with a goal of preventing developmental delays and promoting social and academic strengths for children entering school for

economically disadvantaged children. One of the significant differences in this program is that children are selected soon after birth and placed in a high quality, center-based program for the infant and toddler years, as well as preschool.

For the study, children were selected from referrals based on a “High-Risk Index,” based on parent’s education, income, intelligence and antisocial behavior. There were 111 children selected and assigned on a random basis to either the program or the control group. The children were 98 percent African American. Their mothers were mostly young, around 20 years of age, and predominantly single with first children. This was a year round, center-based intervention, with a teacher-student ratio of one to three in the infant and toddler program and one to six in the preschool. Children also received medical services at the center. A home resource teacher was assigned to the program and visited families every other week, bringing projects for the parents to do with their children. This part of the intervention extended through the primary grades, with continuing home visits and assistance for parents in helping their children in school.

I.Q. scores were significantly higher at both the entrance to kindergarten and at eight years of age. While the difference was smaller at age 12, it was still significant. By age 15 there was still a difference, but it was no longer statistically significant. However, scores on reading and mathematics tests remained significant through age 15. The lower enrollment in special education classes and lower rates of grade retention followed.

The largest fully-evaluated program is the Chicago Child Parent Centers. This program, started in 1967 in 11 Chicago public schools and serving economically disadvantaged children ages 3-5, was funded from federal Chapter I (now Title I) funds. Their focus is on reading and language skills. It is a half-day program, which provides comprehensive services, including health care, social services, free breakfast and lunch at school, and parent involvement. In 1978, with additional state funding, the program was expanded to include full-day kindergarten and services through the third grade.

Outcomes are being followed by the Longitudinal Study of Children at Risk, a study of the adjustment of low income, minority students to school. This is not a full experimental study, but allows comparison of the results of 1,150 students in the program with 389 students in comparable low income areas with a full-day kindergarten program. The cohort evaluated were those who finished kindergarten in the spring of 1986. At the time of the most recent follow up evaluation, these children were 14 years old. About 75 percent could be contacted for the evaluation. Some had two or three years of intervention, while those who were in schools that extended to third grade had six years of intervention.

These programs were on elementary school campus locations and closely coordinated with the schools. Adult to child ratio was 1 to 8 for the preschool and 1 to 12 for the kindergarten program. Class sizes were 17 and 25. Class size for the control group was about 30. At age nine those who had participated in the intervention scored significantly higher in reading and math and experienced fewer grade retentions. By age 14, there were still significant differences in math scores and many fewer special education placements. Children who had participated in both the preschool and primary programs had higher scores than those who participated in only one part of the program.

The first two of these three studies were highly controlled, using a limited population, a control group which was closely matched but received either no or lesser services, and ran for a limited amount of time. Neither was sustainable after the study resources were removed. Furthermore, these programs and the Chicago program were much more than preschool. They had a strong parental involvement component, provided health care, nutrition counseling, and concerned themselves with the social and emotional growth

of the child and family. All were at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, mostly African American, with young, single-parent mothers who had less than a high school education.

While these interventions had measurably positive results and were very cost effective, they were aimed at a very small population—the largest study was Chicago. We have found no research data to prove what could happen on a larger scale and with more limited family support. Nor have we found research that evaluates what happens when we move up the economic scale a level or two to those families who make too much money to qualify for the current State Preschool programs or Head Start, but not enough to afford a quality private preschool.

Head Start is the largest intervention by far. It was created in 1965 and has served well over 15 million students. While there have been many studies over the years, there is no one standard, accepted evaluation of the Head Start program. There is no control group to use for comparison; the program has changed many times during its almost 40 years and implementation has varied in different areas, depending on who is operating the program; and funding and offerings may be different, depending on whether a program is operated by private, nonprofit or a school district. According to the RAND report, no attempts have been made to do a full controlled evaluation.

The Los Angeles Universal Preschool Master Plan has studied all of these programs. Current plans are to open the first programs in Los Angeles County in June 2005 in the most underserved parts of the county. Current programs are able to serve 49 percent of the four-year-old population in licensed programs. The goal is to be able to serve 70 percent of the children within 10 years. This is similar to the plan outlined in AB 56, now AB 712, with a more ambitious timeline.