



WYOMING LEGISLATIVE SERVICE OFFICE

Research Memo

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Re: Early Childhood Education

QUESTIONS

1. What have other states adopted in terms of early childhood education programs?
2. What types of programs does Wyoming have in terms of early childhood education?
3. What have been the overall results of early childhood education programs and how are these programs assessed?

ANSWERS

BACKGROUND

Generally speaking, early childhood education is a term that refers to educational programs and strategies geared toward children from birth to the age of eight, though birth through age five (or before kindergarten) is what most programs are designed for in this context. This time period is widely considered the most vulnerable and crucial stage of a person's life. The term often refers to preschool or infant/child care programs.

A wide variety of approaches can be taken for early childhood education programs and can include full day kindergarten, developmental preschools, regular preschools, as well as more specific local programs. Early childhood education programs can also vary in terms of how comprehensive they are in terms of integrating these programs into K-12 education policy. According to Getting Ready, Findings from the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, it is well established that most programs for early childhood education are designed to look at a child's readiness to learn in five general domains:

- **Physical well-being** (this covers such factors as health status, growth, and disabilities; gross and fine motor skills; and conditions before and after birth);
- **Social and emotional development** (social development refers to the children's ability to interact with others and their capacity of self regulation. Emotional development includes children's perceptions of themselves, their ability to understand other people's feelings, and the ability to interpret and express their own feelings);
- **Approaches to learning** (This area refers to children's inclination to use skills and knowledge. Key parts of this area include enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence on tasks);
- **Language development** (This area includes communication, which includes listening, speaking, and vocabulary; and emergent literacy, which includes print awareness, story sense, early writing, and the connection of letters to sound); and
- **Cognition and general knowledge** (This area generally refers to thinking and problem solving, as well and knowledge about particular objects and the way the world works. Mathematics, abstract thought, and imagination are included here).

1. **The last 10 years have seen tremendous growth in early childhood education programs across the United States, which has allowed for many more preschool children to enroll in early learning opportunities. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have some type of state funded, state-wide, program for early childhood education. These programs vary widely in development and scope and are dependent on individual characteristics of each state's education system. States may also use some Title I funding, as well as funding provided by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, for additional early childhood education programs in their state. In addition, the federally funded Head Start program promotes school readiness of children ages birth to age five for low-income families. The Head Start program is in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. There are also many private, for-profit, local or regional programs which provide a variety of early childhood education services in all states, but access to these programs varies, as does the amount, and quality, of education provided by these different programs.**

Recently, the federal government has provided additional funding for early childhood education by making Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Fund grants available to states. The program was started in 2011 with \$500 million available for grants. There were a total of 37 states that applied for the first round of grants with 9 states receiving the funds (California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington). Money was provided to states to create proposals to improve early learning by coordinating existing programs, evaluating and rating program quality, and increasing access to high quality programs, especially in the case of high need students. In December 2012, a second round of winners was announced with 5 additional states receiving an additional \$133 million in funding (Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin).

2. **Wyoming is one of 11 states that does not have a state funded, state-wide, program for early childhood education. These states are: Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. Wyoming does have a number of programs that are aimed at supporting early childhood education but these efforts are led by different entities which have limited knowledge of one another's strategies and goals. The University of Wyoming (Early Care and Education Center), community colleges, and school districts have preschool programs, some of which are licensed through the Department of Family Services (DFS). There are numerous private for-profit preschools and childcare facilities that provide academic instruction and are licensed by DFS. Many of the preschools in Wyoming, licensed or non-licensed, pursue accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Twelve schools in Wyoming are funded with TANF dollars through DFS, though the funding and administration of the program are through the Wyoming Department of Education. In addition, school districts may use a portion of their Title I money for early education. There are several districts that have subsidized preschools. There are a number of developmental preschools administered and funded through the Department of Health. The Wyoming Head Start program is a federally funded program which is located in numerous cities and town around the state.**

The Wyoming Early Childhood State Advisory Council, which was created in 2010, is a collaboration of a number of individuals from different disciplines with the mission to serve Wyoming children and families by facilitating statewide collaboration, evaluating the early childhood system, and making recommendations to the governor, lawmakers, and state agencies. The Early Intervention Council focuses on children with special needs and services.

3. **Overall, the data shows that early childhood education efforts are very successful in helping young children in future educational attainment and career success. It has been shown that individuals who were enrolled in a quality preschool program were more likely to graduate from high school, own homes, and have longer marriages. In addition, studies have found that children in quality preschool programs are less likely to repeat grades, need special education, or get into future trouble with the law. There is still more to learn in the area of early childhood education but how to properly assess preschool children for their strengths and weaknesses is just as important. The process of assessing what young children know and what they can do poses particular challenges because these skills cannot be tested in the same fashion as older students. To complicate things further the knowledge and skills individual preschoolers bring to their classrooms can vary widely. Shrinking this preschool school readiness gap is an important area that needs to be improved because it has been shown**

that once this gap is present; it is most likely to remain throughout school. In other words, once a student is behind, they are likely to stay behind in terms of school achievement. Early childhood education has been shown to help reduce this gap.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, states choose to assess kindergarten readiness for a number of purposes, but these include:

- Tracking gains in the state's kindergarten population;
- Comparing readiness across different school districts and schools;
- Connecting readiness data forward to later school performance or backwards to understand the impact of early childhood investments.

This information may also assist parents in better understanding a child's capabilities in order to provide additional support at home, and teachers to alter curriculum or provide more individualized instruction. In addition, schools may use this information to track the impact of curricular or training decisions and the allocation of resources.

The difficulty with early childhood education assessment is that these children cannot be tested in the same manner as older students. Furthermore, younger children develop at different rates and arrive at school with different knowledge and skill levels. The Council of Chief State School Officers Moving Forward with Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Efforts report cited six principles that kindergarten readiness assessment efforts should adhere to, these are:

- **Use multiple tools for multiple purposes** (a single assessment instrument cannot, and should not, be used to meet all of the child, instructional, policy, programmatic, and accountability purposes a state or program may have);
- **Address multiple developmental domains and diverse cultural contexts** (kindergarten assessment must go beyond just measuring cognitive and literacy skills; focus on a broad range of child developmental domains; and recognize children's language, culture, and special learning needs);
- **Align with early learning guidelines and common core standards** (Kindergarten assessments should be as rich and multifaceted as state early learning guidelines and should also be aligned with common core state standards for kindergarten students);
- **Collect information from multiple sources** (a comprehensive kindergarten assessment should include information from previous early childhood placements, families, and community informants.);
- **Implement in a systems-based approach** (In order to effectively aid teachers in their instruction, monitor student progress, communicate the learning needs of children in a state or community, and guide program planning, kindergarten assessments must be implemented within a comprehensive system of supports for teachers, families, and programs); and
- **Avoid inappropriate use of assessment information** (specifically including high-stakes decisions, labeling children, restricting kindergarten entry, and predicting children's future academic and life success)

One of the biggest challenges in early childhood education is coordination between all of the different providers and assessing how successful these programs are at preparing children for kindergarten. The use of proper assessment tools will assist states in identifying which programs and strategies are most effective in terms of early childhood education. Most states, including Wyoming, do not have well integrated early childhood education systems that allow for seamless transitions into the K-12 school system. This means these programs are also not designed in conjunction with statewide missions or goals on early childhood education which can result in duplication of efforts and may create inefficiencies. The identification of the most effective early childhood education programs, proper child school readiness assessment, and coordinating and unifying the goals and missions of the various early childhood education programs would serve to further enhance the education of preschool children in Wyoming and other states.

If you need anything further, please contact LSO Research at 777-7881.