

Charge

To the Missouri Panel on School Readiness: Focus on Pre-Kindergarten Education From the Missouri Coordinating Board for Early Childhood

Introduction

Research consistently demonstrates that early school success depends on children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being. The extent to which young children participate in quality early education and child care programs, enjoy the support of nurturing families, and have access to health and social services impacts on their development, preparation for school, and later academic performance. These "conditions" are precursors to the school success of all children. Not all children have this foundation for school success, however, making their needs for supportive programs and services even more essential. If it is accepted that families, public officials, and educators want children to enter school prepared to succeed, the challenge for Missouri is to determine the best path to this goal.

The Challenge

As a state, Missouri has devoted considerable time and resources to supporting the well-being of its youngest citizens. Many communities have made similar commitments. Yet more remains to be done if all of the state's young children are to enter school prepared to succeed. Towards this end, in May 2004, the Coordinating Board for Early Childhood [Coordinating Board] was established in statute. The Governor confirmed his 17 appointees in May 2007, and the Coordinating Board has moved forward to establish itself as a force for change.

The Coordinating Board has identified a number of challenges that need to be addressed if the State's commitment to young children, birth through five, is to be fulfilled. Specifically, the state needs to:

- ⑧ Reach consensus on what it means for children to be ready for school;
- ⑧ Create a framework of policies and practices that will guide and coordinate current and future investments in developmental and educational programs for young children;
- ⑧ Ensure that public investments are used effectively to achieve the goal of school readiness.
- ⑧ Understand how schools, community-based early learning providers, social services, and health providers currently serve the educational and developmental needs of young children, birth to the start of kindergarten;
- ⑧ Identify the means by which schools and community-based providers can most effectively collaborate with each other, with families, and with other support services to ensure children's school readiness;
- ⑧ Ensure that Missouri's early care and education programs provide high quality learning experiences.

Within this policy and practice context, enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act and other pressures on the educational system have resulted in focused attention on student performance in the early grades. Predictably, this attention has shed a spotlight on children's readiness to succeed when they enter kindergarten. Presently, Missouri is

investing millions in a variety of school-based and community-based programs for children from birth through age five. Not unlike other states across the nation, increasing numbers of school districts are providing pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programs for three and four year olds, expanding the number and range of programs available to young children and their families. Hundreds of Head Start agencies, family child care providers, and nonprofit and for-profit early programs and organizations also are serving children from birth through age five. The educational and developmental quality of these programs varies considerably, however. Consequently, many of these programs do not contribute effectively to children's readiness for school, depressing a critical time of learning for young children and undermining the State's efforts to build a successful economic future for individuals, communities, and the state overall.

In response to these circumstances, the Coordinating Board is convening the Missouri Panel on School Readiness: Focus on Pre-Kindergarten Education [Pre-K Panel], a broad-based group of individuals from across the State, to examine early care and education for preschoolers in Missouri and make recommendations on strategic next steps.

The Charge

The Pre-K Panel is being convened to provide advice and counsel to the Coordinating Board regarding how to: (1) build on the State's current investments in early care and education programs for preschoolers and (2) seize new opportunities to create a strong network of programs backed by policies that will ensure the State's publicly funded programs for this age group consistently promote children's school readiness. In light of the State's changing landscape, the Coordinating Board's charge to the Pre-K Panel intentionally targets the education of preschoolers and recognizes that the Pre-K Panel's recommendations will need to be considered in the context of the Coordinating Board's responsibilities for coordination of the full array of programs and services serving children from birth through age five.

Specifically, the Pre-K Panel is charged with making recommendations regarding the six questions listed below. In responding to these questions, the Pre-K Panel should consider the impact of its recommendations for Missouri's broader early care and education system.

- What should be the purpose for the State's publicly funded pre-k?
- Who should be served with public funds? Should the State's publicly funded pre-k programs target three- and four-year olds or only four-year olds?
- Should publicly funded pre-kindergarten serve only children identified as at-risk for school success or should these programs be universally available to families on a voluntary basis?
- Should all publicly funded pre-k programs be required to meet similar standards? If so, what areas should be addressed by these standards?
- Which programs serving preschoolers should be qualified to offer publicly funded pre-k?
- How should oversight for Missouri's pre-k programs be structured in order to ensure accountability for the State's investments?