

PRE-K IN CONTEXT: AN ISSUE FOR CONSIDERATION¹

PREPARED FOR THE MISSOURI PANEL ON SCHOOL READINESS: FOCUS ON PRE-KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

The Missouri Panel on School Readiness has been charged to focus on prekindergarten education (pre-k). Pre-k is one component of a system of early childhood programs and services that support young children's school readiness in Missouri. A primary issue inherently linked to the decisions of the panel is how the implementation of a pre-k system might affect the broader scope of early childhood programs supporting school readiness.

The Context

- ✎ A child's readiness to enter school prepared for success begins prenatally and is influenced by an array of biological, relationship, and contextual factors from birth to school entry.¹
- ✎ Pre-k is one opportunity on this continuum.
- ✎ Additional opportunities include community-based early childhood programs, which typically:
 - Serve children from infancy through school-age
 - Operate on a "full-day, full-year" basis
 - Support learning, growth, and development throughout the child's day
 - Struggle with the inadequate financing of family pay, child care subsidies, and low public expectations
 - Strive to improve program quality, given adequate supports and incentives
- ✎ The outcome of a pre-k experience is contingent on the quality of the pre-k program as well as the quality and nature of the full scope of a child's preceding and concurrent experiences.

Challenges

While it is beyond the charge of the Pre-K Panel to address the full array of early childhood programs in Missouri, considering pre-k in isolation of the broader early childhood context risks unintended consequences, in particular, on early care and education programs that impact school readiness during a child's first five years.^{2, 3, 4, 5} A primary challenge involves potential impacts if state-funded pre-k is established as a separate, stand-alone initiative.

Unintended consequences may include:

- ✎ *Reduction in the availability of community programs* due to the migration of "pre-k"-aged children from community programs to state-funded pre-k.

The migration of older preschoolers to a state-funded pre-k program has the potential to negatively impact the enrollment of current birth to five programs, which can impact the budgets (and subsequently, the availability) of community programs. This has the potential to result in a reduction in access to early childhood services that can support school readiness prior to pre-k, as well as an increase in transitions for families as children age in and out of programs serving limited age ranges.

- ✎ *Reduction in the availability of infant/toddler programs.*

Many early childhood programs serve children from infancy through school-age. State licensing rules and accreditation guidelines for these programs allow more preschoolers than infants and toddlers per adult. As a result, preschool-aged children are more economical to serve, and often absorb the higher cost of infants and toddlers in a program's overall budget. A reduction in a program's ratio of preschoolers to infants and toddlers has the potential to destabilize tight budgets and reduce

¹ Authored by Valeri Lane, with thanks to Stacie Goffin, Kathy Thornburg, Stacey Owsley, Sue Stepleton, Carol Scott, and Vicki Vance for their input.

availability of infant/toddler care – a population that is already underserved and for whom quality of programming is critical to later child outcomes.⁶

- ✍ *Reduction in quality in existing community programs, due to the migration of educated early childhood teachers to state-funded pre-k.*

For the past decade, incentives (e.g., Head Start standards, accreditation criteria, child care block grant dollars) have led to increased support for the education of early childhood teachers. Many community programs benefiting from the enhanced quality associated with educated staff cannot compete with the salaries and benefits typically available through pre-k programs. The migration of educated staff to state-funded pre-k has the potential to reduce quality to the large numbers of children served in community programs.

- ✍ *Increase in overall cost, due to inefficiencies in duplicative systems.*

Although the need is not universal, early childhood programs of all kinds and types are inextricably linked to the needs of working parents. Pre-k programs built outside consideration of these needs may lead to parallel and duplicative systems, resulting in an overall increase in cost. Such costs may arise from the need for:

- Full-day services to meet the extended time requirements of working parents.
- Transportation to alternative settings if pre-k programs do not offer a full-day option.
- Additional facilities and administrative structures if pre-k is established as a separate, stand-alone system.

Opportunities

With strategic thinking about what is best for the children of Missouri, the Pre-K Panel has the opportunity to consider pre-k within the context of existing programs and services, rendering efficiencies that optimize opportunities for children and families and leverage additional positive impact of public dollars.

Intentional consideration of pre-k within the scope of community programs supporting school readiness offers the potential to:

- ✍ *Build a partnership that brings the best of public education and the early childhood community forward with a shared focus on what is best for Missouri's children.*
- ✍ *Positively impact early childhood opportunities for children on the path to school readiness regardless of their age on the birth-to-five continuum. The trend to higher standards in pre-k classrooms can have a positive effect on quality across programs and ages.*
- ✍ *Reduce duplication of services and facilities by building on the existing infrastructure of community programs. The infusion of pre-k funds into community programs where standards of quality can be met eliminates the need for parallel and duplicative services. Costs associated with enhancing quality in community programs can be less than full-scale start-up of stand-alone pre-k programs.*
- ✍ *Reduce transitions for children and parents. Pre-k programs operating within the context of full-day, birth-to-five services eliminate the need to transport children of working parents, allow siblings to be served at the same site, and encourage parent connections with their child's program through continuity.*
- ✍ *Educate the public about Missouri's priority for and the importance of quality throughout early childhood. Increased awareness of the importance of quality can lead to demand for high quality in all early childhood programs. This market demand can positively impact children's readiness for school across the birth-to-five age continuum.*

"It is widely recognized that the path to our nation's future prosperity and security begins with the

*well-being of all our children. To this end, one of the most important tasks facing policymakers is to choose wisely among strategies that address the needs of our youngest children and their families.”*⁷

¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² *Common vision, different paths: Five states' journeys toward comprehensive prenatal-to-five systems*. (2007). ZERO TO THREE and Pre-K Now. Retrieved May 12, 2008 from http://www.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/Common_Vision_Different_Paths_Final.pdf?docID=4521

³ Lombardi, J., et al. (2004). Building bridges from prekindergarten to infants and toddlers: A preliminary look at issues in four states. ZERO TO THREE Policy Center and the Trust for Early Education. Retrieved May 12, 2008 from <http://www.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/BuildingBridges.pdf?docID=1721>

⁴ Morrissey, T.W., & Warner, M.E. (2007). Why early care and education deserves as much attention, or more, than prekindergarten alone. *Applied Developmental Science*, 11 (2), 57-70. Retrieved May 12, 2008 from <http://government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/pdf/ADS%20final%20ss.pdf>

⁵ Schulman, K., & Blank, H. (2007). *A center piece of the pre-k puzzle: Providing state prekindergarten in child care centers*. National Women's Law Center. Retrieved May 12, 2008 from <http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/NWLCPreKReport2007.pdf>

⁶ Honig, A. S. (2002). *Research on quality in infant-toddler programs*. (ERIC Digest No. EDO-PS-02-19) Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. Retrieved May 14, 2008 from <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eeearchive/digests/2002/honig02.pdf>

⁷ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2007). *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children*. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>