Pre-K as a School Turnaround Strategy

June 2011

Across the nation, state and local school systems, recognizing the strong and growing evidence of pre-kindergarten's effectiveness in closing achievement gaps and improving school performance,[1] are implementing early learning programs as part of their education reform efforts. In low-performing districts, pre-k has emerged as a promising turnaround strategy, reaching children before they become low-achieving middle and high school students. As members of Congress discuss reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), they can look to these initiatives to see how strategic use of limited funds for proven early education programs can raise student achievement, and to identify opportunities for smart federal investment.

Why High-Quality Pre-K?

High-quality pre-kindergarten is the first step in comprehensive education reform. Students who have this experience are better prepared to achieve at higher levels. Rigorous, independent research proves that quality pre-k can:

- Reduce grade repetition among first graders by 30 percent after one year of enrollment and 50 percent after two years.[a]
- Save school districts about $3,700 per child over the course of the K-12 years.[b]
- Return more than $7 for every dollar invested.[c]

The evidence is clear and compelling: pre-k multiplies the impact of other reforms. Early investment is the best investment.

---

[a] Ellen Frede et al., "The Apples Blossom: Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) Preliminary Results through 2nd Grade Interim Report," (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2009).

[b] Clive R. Belfield and Heather Schwartz, "The Economic Consequences of Early Childhood Education on the School System," (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2006).

[c] A.J. Reynolds et al., "Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24 (2002): 267-303.

In 2009, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Congress created a competitive grant program, Race to the Top (RTTT), to encourage and support innovative education reform efforts in states. At that time, though early education was only an optional component of RTTT, two of the winning states, Florida and Tennessee, included strong pre-k proposals in their 2010 applications as a strategy to increase student achievement.[2] In 2011, the importance of pre-k in federal school improvement efforts was elevated by a new $500 million investment in the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge, a one-time competitive grant program to increase access to and quality of early education programs, particularly for low-income and at-risk children.[3] The growing prominence of early learning in RTTT clearly demonstrates policy makers' emerging understanding of pre-k's vital role in education reform and strengthens the case for bolstering sustainable provisions for early education in the ESEA.

This brief highlights five local efforts—in Whitley County, KY; Pittsburgh, PA; St. Charles, MO; Guilford County, NC; and Fresno County, CA—to improve school performance and raise achievement for our nation's most at-risk students, often using federal resources to support existing state and local investments in early learning. Smart education reformers in these communities have embraced pre-k because they understand that the alternative—helping children catch up in later grades—is both more costly and less effective.[4] Using these local initiatives as models, federal leaders can further encourage districts and states to include pre-k in their turnaround efforts by taking specific steps toward integrating early education in the ESEA. (See Recommendations on page 6.)

**Larry L. Powell, Superintendent,
Fresno County Office of Education**

Our kids can't wait to learn … and it is more expensive to delay. Despite budget shortfalls, nothing will keep us from moving forward with this important endeavor and implementing our action plan to ensure quality preschool for all four year olds in our county.

Kentucky: A Pre-K Success Story – 20 Years of Gains

In Whitley County, pre-k is a key component of an ongoing 20-year effort to improve student achievement. In 1989, the state took over the rural district because its local high school dropout rate was about three times the state average.[5] In 1991, then-Superintendent Lonnie Anderson committed to "building a stronger foundation through preschool," raising third-grade reading proficiency and improving students' algebra skills in later grades, among other efforts.[6]

Today, Whitley is among the top 10 percent of districts on the Kentucky Core Content Test and has lowered its dropout rate from nearly 7 percent to less than 1 percent.[7] "We were one of the worst districts in the state, but getting our children ready for school through pre-k and with technology – it's made a world of difference," said Delmar Mahan, chairman of the Whitley County school board.[8]

Pre-K Efforts at a Glance:
- In 1996, the district began offering pre-k to all four year olds and all eligible three year olds on a voluntary basis. In 2005, it expanded the program from four to five days. Currently, the program offers six and a half hours of pre-k per day for a full school year.[9]
- The county combines funding from state, local and federal sources to maintain full-day pre-k for all. In 2009-10, the school board allocated more than $150,000 from the local general fund, but the program also benefited from federal stimulus funding, which provided $375,000.[10]
- Whitley's pre-k curriculum adheres to both the state's early childhood and federal Head Start standards to ensure instruction is developmentally appropriate.[11]
- In 2005, the district raised its kindergarten exit criteria in response to the high number of former pre-k students meeting first-grade entry requirements halfway through kindergarten. "We've had to raise the bar in kindergarten because kids were coming in ready to jump over it," said former superintendent Anderson.[12]

Pennsylvania: "Excellence for All" Begins with Excellent Pre-K

In 2006, with the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) failing to meet academic performance targets set out under federal and state laws, then-Superintendent Mark Roosevelt released the Excellence for All reform agenda. This roadmap for improving student achievement included expanding access to high-quality pre-k.[13] Since then, the percentage of students proficient in reading by the end of third grade has risen from 49 percent to 62 percent. In 2009, the district made adequate yearly progress for the first time in its history.[14]

Pre-K Efforts at a Glance:
- By 2009, three years after the launch of Excellence for All, the district served 2,200 three and four year olds.
- The following year, the program added 300 children, and the district also created an Early Head Start program to provide support services to infants and toddlers.[15]
- The district's pre-k curriculum is aligned with state early learning standards and incorporates creative arts, science and social studies.[16]
- The program combines funds from multiple sources. Federal Head Start dollars, which account for 55 percent of pre-k funding, are blended with resources from the state's Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program, Accountability Block Grant and Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, the state pre-k program. This strategic funding approach allows PPS to offer a pre-k experience that meets the highest state learning and Head Start performance standards.[17]

**Delmar Mahan, Chairman,
Whitley County Board of Education**

We were one of the worst districts in the state, but getting our children ready for school through pre-k and with technology – it's made a world of difference.

Missouri: District Improvement Plan Includes "Support for Pre-K"

When the school district of the City of St. Charles, just outside St. Louis, submitted to the State Board of Education its five-year Comprehensive School Improvement Plan in 2008, strengthening support for pre-k children was listed among its goals.[18] The district tapped federal stimulus funding to launch a new early education program in 2010.[19]

Pre-K Efforts at a Glance:

- In the fall of 2010, the district, which has a student body of 5,200,[20] began serving 60 children in part-day pre-k at two elementary schools.[21]
- The pre-k program, which employs a teacher with a master's degree and a certified aide in each classroom, boasts a 7.5:1 student-to-adult ratio[22] and is designed to meet the Missouri Early Childhood standards and prepare all students for kindergarten.[23]
- Despite potential cuts in state support, the school board unanimously approved funding to expand pre-k to all six of the district's elementary schools for the 2011-12 school year. The board used federal stimulus money to cover start-up expenses and allocated a portion of existing Title I funds to provide services for the most academically at-risk children.[24]
- The district is eager to further expand pre-k should additional federal funds become available.[25]

North Carolina: School Improvement Grant Calls for "Pre-K Rigor"

In 2010, Guilford County Schools was awarded $2 million in federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds to turn around Oak Hill Elementary,[26] a high-poverty school where 97 percent of students receive free or reduced-price meals.[27] The school district, which serves more than 71,000 children,[28] had failed to make expected growth and adequate yearly progress in four of the five preceding years. The school's reform strategy, as articulated in its SIG application, included "increased rigor in the pre-k curriculum" in order to close achievement gaps as early as possible.

Pre-K Efforts at a Glance:

- In formulating its school reform plan, the district selected the Tools of the Mind curriculum, described as "a research-based early childhood program that builds strong foundations for school success in preschool and kindergarten children by promoting their intentional and self-regulated learning."[29]
- Previous rigorous research of Tools of the Mind found that the curriculum improved children's self-regulation skills, which were related to their achievement in early literacy and mathematics.[30]
- In 2010, Oak Hill began to encourage collaboration among pre-k and kindergarten teachers to promote greater alignment between the two grades and cultivate early student success,[31] and in fall 2011, the school will launch Tools of the Mind.[32]

**Donna Towers, Member,
City of St. Charles School Board**

We're either going to pay the cost on the front end and get kids into preschool programs or we're going to pay on the back end because they are at risk.

California: Superintendent Unifies Pre-K Stakeholders

With a largely poor population and nearly 70 percent of third graders not reaching proficiency in English-Language Arts,[33] the need for reform in Fresno County was high.[34] In 2007, Superintendent Larry L. Powell and the Fresno County Office of Education (FCOE) resolved to improve academic achievement by enhancing early learning opportunities that would help children enter school with the skills they need to succeed. Officials, motivated by the recognition that pre-k can help break the cycle of poverty and develop a stronger workforce, worked with the county's 34 school districts and a range of community stakeholders to develop a school readiness plan, the Voluntary Preschool Master Plan.[35]

Pre-K Efforts at a Glance:

- The master plan set an ambitious goal to expand access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate pre-k to all four year olds, using a curriculum aligned with kindergarten.[36] The proposal prioritizes for expansion those communities with both low-performing elementary schools and a shortage of pre-k access.[37]

- County leaders stress that high-quality pre-k "plays a pivotal role in supporting current and future economic growth by increasing school readiness and improving K-12 outcomes."[38]

- FCOE is implementing a pilot Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) to drive high-quality instruction in pre-k classrooms. The district is using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System to assess the extent to which the QRIS improves teacher practices; preliminary results show that teachers' instructional practice is improving.[39]

Recommendations

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) offers a critical opportunity for federal policy makers to provide support for the kinds of research-based reforms that these and other communities are embracing. To that end, Congress should consider the following recommendations:

- **Designate high-quality pre-k as an option for turning around low-performing schools.**
  Guidelines for School Improvement Grants that were funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act identify full-day kindergarten and high-quality pre-k as "permissible" approaches for "transformation" schools. Pre-K Now recommends that any funds designated to turn around struggling schools explicitly include funding for comprehensive pre-k-through-third grade strategies. This approach should include opportunities for teachers to collaborate across grade levels on sharing student performance data, planning common professional development and creating aligned and developmentally appropriate curricula and standards.

- **Recognize high-quality early education as an eligible use of funds designated to extend learning time.**
  The current guidelines for Race to the Top funds and the administration's blueprint for ESEA reauthorization mention "extended learning time" and "increased learning time" as turnaround strategies. A reauthorized ESEA should explicitly designate high-quality programs for three and four year olds and full-day kindergarten programs as strategies to extend learning time.

- **Support the ability of effective charter schools to offer high-quality pre-k programs.**
  Pre-K Now recommends that the definition of charter schools in the ESEA be updated to make clear that "elementary and secondary education" means pre-k-12 education. The charter school grant program could also be designed to elicit assurances from state grantees that pre-k programs are eligible recipients of federal charter school subgrants.

Endnotes

1   Albert Wat, "The Case for Pre-K in Education Reform: A Summary of Program Evaluation Findings," (Washington: Pew Center on the States, 2010).

2   See: "Florida's Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding," (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 223-24; "Tennessee: Race to the Top Application," (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 150-54.

3   "Press Release: Obama Administration Announces $500 Million for Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge," (2011).

4   Flavio Cunha and James J. Heckman, "The Technology of Skill Formation," *The American Economic Review* 97, no. 2 (2007).

5   Personal Communication with Sulia Douglas, Early Childhood Liaison, Whitley County Schools, 2011.

6   "Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Perspectives Special Report," (2010), http://www.prichardcommittee.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=GIkwagc160o%3d&tabid=31488.

7   Personal Communication with Sulia Douglas, Early Childhood Liaison, Whitley County Schools.

8   "Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Perspectives Special Report."

9   Personal Communication with Sulia Douglas, Early Childhood Liaison, Whitley County Schools.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 "Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Perspectives Special Report."

13 "Excellence for All Reform Agenda, a Four Year Comprehensive Framework for Improvement," http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/1431106514449180/lib/1431106514449180/efappt5-12-06.pdf.

14 "Pittsburgh Public Schools Excellence for All Reform Agenda," http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/14311071716911330/blank/browse.asp?a=383&bmdrn=2000&bcob=0&c=63246&14311071716911330Nav=l&NodeID=5368.

15 See: "Pittsburgh Public Schools Early Childhood Program Annual Report, 2008-2009," (2009), http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/14311051510156797/blank/browse.asp?a=383&BMDRN=2000&BCOB=0&c=62818&14311051510156797Nav=l&NodeID=5162; "Pittsburgh Public Schools Early Childhood Program Annual Report, 2009-2010," (2010), http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/14311051510156797/blank/browse.asp?a=383&BMDRN=2000&BCOB=0&c=62818&14311051510156797Nav=l&NodeID=5162.

16 "Pittsburgh Public Schools Early Childhood Program Annual Report, 2009-2010."

17 Ibid.

18 "School District of the City of St. Charles Comprehensive School Improvement Plan 2008-2013," (2008).

19 Personal Communication with Danielle Tormala, Associate Superintendent Curriculum/Instruction, St. Charles School District, 2011.

20 "Finance Report, 2006-2010," http://dese.mo.gov/planning/profile/SF092090.html.

21 Brian Flinchpaugh, "St. Charles School District to Expand Early Childhood Program,"(2010), http://www.stltoday.com/suburban-journals/stcharles/education/article_cac62474-bddd-5e27-92de-90a34b58d63b.html.

22 Personal Communication with Danielle Tormala, Associate Superintendent Curriculum/Instruction, St. Charles School District.

23 "St. Charles School District Home Page," http://www.stcharles.k12.mo.us/.

24 Flinchpaugh, "St. Charles School District to Expand Early Childhood Program."

25 Personal Communication with Danielle Tormala, Associate Superintendent Curriculum/Instruction, St. Charles School District.

26 "U.S. Department of Education School Improvement Grant Awarded Tier I and Tier II Schools," (2010).

27 "Guilford County Schools, Local Education Agency Application for 1003(G) Funding, School Improvement Grant (SIG) Funds, Tier I and Tier II Schools," (2010).

28 "Guilford County Schools Website- About GCS," http://www.guilford.k12.nc.us/education/school/school.php?sectionid=33758.

29 "Appendix B. Guilford County Schools, Local Education Agency Application for 1003(G) Funding, School Improvement Grant (SIG) Funds, Tier I and Tier II Schools," (2010).

30 Adele Diamond et al., "Preschool Program Improves Cognitive Control," *Science* 318, no. 5855 (2007).

31 Personal Communication with Patrice Faison, Principal, Oak Hill Elementary School, April 20, 2011.

32 Personal Communication with Linda Olinger, Director, Pre-K Family Resource Center, Guilford County Schools, 2011.

33 "California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR), Fresno County, All Students," (2011).

34 Karen Hill Scott, "Fresno County Voluntary Preschool Master Plan," (2008), 3.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 1-12.

37 Ibid., 2.

38 B.; Ramos Brown, R., "The Economic Impact of the Early Care and Education Industry in Fresno County," (2007), 52.

39 Personal Communication with Wilma Hashimoto, Associate Director, Fresno County Office of Education, Early Care and Education/Local Planning Council 2011; Personal Communication with Debbie Roberts, Early Childhood Program Administrator, Fresno County Office of Education, 2011.

Acknowledgements

Pre-K in Education Reform

High-quality pre-kindergarten is the first step
in education reform. A vast body of research
demonstrates that early learning programs develop
children's cognitive, social-emotional and physical
readiness for success in school. This solid foundation
is proven to contribute to higher literacy and math
attainment, lower grade retention, reduced remedial
and special education needs and increased high school
graduation rates.

When students have a high-quality pre-k experience,
they are better prepared and motivated to achieve at
higher levels, multiplying the impact of other reforms.
The alternative – helping children catch up in later
grades – is both more costly and less effective. The
evidence is clear and compelling: Successful school
improvement plans, like a child's development, benefit
most from investments made in the critical early years.

The Pew Center on the States is a division of The Pew Charitable Trusts
that identifies and advances effective solutions to critical issues facing
states. Pew is a nonprofit organization that applies a rigorous, analytical
approach to improve public policy, inform the public and stimulate civic life.

www.pewcenteronthestates.org

THE PEW

CENTER ON THE STATES