

Early Education Commission

*A community leadership collaborative supporting the
United Way's goal of ensuring children are ready for school*



United Way of
Metropolitan Atlanta

Research Abstract

Title: “PK-3 Education: Programs and Practices that Work in Children’s First Decade,”
Foundation for Child Development, FCD Working Paper: Advancing PK-3, No.
Six

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Abstract

As defined in this working paper, PK-3 *programs* are planned interventions that begin during any of the five years of a child’s life before kindergarten and which continue up to third grade. These extended early interventions may include center-based education, instructional supports, family services and community outreach. The most comprehensive programs include all elements. PK-3 *practices* are defined as specific elements or components, such as reduced class sizes, teaching practices and parent involvement activities.

PK-3 programs began in the 1960s, but have been somewhat eclipsed by the attention given to Head Start and other preschool-only programs. The rationale for PK-3 initiatives lies in the realization that studies of preschool programs have indicated that, for some outcomes, effects fade with time. It is theorized that continuation of programs into the primary grades will both help prevent fading effects of early interventions and make transitions more successful. Key principles of PK-3 are continuity (consistency in time in learning environments), organization (structural features to increase quality), instruction (coordination of curriculum & teaching practices), and family support services.

Several extended intervention programs have successfully provided preschool and school-age services to economically disadvantaged children and families. Some of the best known include: Carolina Abecedarian Project, Head Start/Follow Through, the Chicago Child-Parent Center and Expansion Program, and the National Head Start/Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project. Components of these programs are reviewed in the Working Paper, along with excerpts from research studies conducted at various times on each of the programs, some of which show statistically significant positive results.

In its conclusion, the Foundation’s Working Paper states that there is “growing empirical support for PK-3 programs and practices.” Each of the four programs reviewed showed evidence of positive effects on children’s schooling and development. Economic analysis shows the return to

society at large ranging from \$4-\$10 per dollar invested. Linked to better school performance in third grade for participating children were these elements: preschool, reduced class sizes, teacher background and training, the quality of teacher-child relationship, parent involvement and school stability.

While the Working Paper acknowledges that integration of all PK-3 practices may not be possible or reasonable everywhere, it cites these elements of successful programs that could be emphasized separately or in combination for positive effects:

- Preschool programs focusing on language-based school readiness skills
- Reduced class sizes or additional aides to facilitate individual attention in early grades
- Promotion of parent involvement/support which promotes commitment to the child's education and promotes parents' personal growth
- School continuity and stability, with programs that do not "presume that intervention at any stage of development alone can prevent children from future under-achievement"

Four major recommendations are offered with specific strategies included in each:

- Disseminate PK-3 programs and practices based on key principles of effectiveness;
- Use evidence on cost effectiveness to better prioritize funding of PK-3 programs;
- Educate policy makers and administrators about the advantages of PK-3 programs;
- Develop new funding mechanisms for establishing PK-3 programs.

In October, 2008, the Foundation released a new position paper, "AMERICA'S VANISHING POTENTIAL: *The Case for PreK-3rd Education*."

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