

Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning Response to the Georgia Study of Early Care and Education March 2010

Introduction

- Nationally renowned researchers from the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted a statewide study of quality across licensed child care centers and Georgia's Pre-K programs using nationally validated instruments.¹ The goals of the study were to 1) provide information that would help Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) understand the range of quality and the different types of services individual child care and Georgia's Pre-K programs offer, 2) illuminate areas where strategic investments could improve quality, and 3) provide baseline data from which to measure improvements. Research continually confirms the relationship between quality and improved outcomes for children and their families.
- The lead researchers from the study commend DECAL for asking hard questions related to the quality of early learning environments and maintaining a commitment to quality even during these tough economic times. In these economic times, it would be easier to assume that licensing standards ensure quality or that the standards used to monitor quality in the state's nationally recognized Pre-K program suffice. Yet, if DECAL is going to make strategic, calculated investments that benefit all of Georgia's children and families, it is important to know where the state, on average, stands in achieving the best possible early learning environments. This study provides scientific evidence for where further investments are needed while also showing areas of strength.
- The study was conducted independent of DECAL. DECAL funded the study, but staff participation was limited to providing information, such as a list of the eligible population, pertinent licensing rules and quality standards, needed by the researchers. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality; staff from DECAL did not participate in data collection nor were they privy to the identity of providers and programs who participated.

Research Basis

- The study utilizes a representative sample. In other words, the results from this study can be generalized to the population of child care providers and Georgia's Pre-K programs.
- The researchers used common observational tools that measure varying aspects of quality and can be used to compare results from this study with studies from other states.
- The lead researchers of the study, Dr. Kelly Maxwell, Dr. Diane Early and Dr. Donna Bryant, have over 50 years of combined experience in conceptualizing, observing, measuring and analyzing

¹ The sample includes 173 randomly selected licensed child care centers and Georgia's Pre-K programs. The authors report that a "sample size of 173 was determined to have an adequate balance of precision and feasibility." Programs exempt from licensing are not included in the sample of child care providers, and non Georgia's Pre-K programs are not included in the Pre-K sample. Family child care providers are not included in this study but are currently part of an additional study that will be completed in 2010.

early childhood quality. The expertise they bring to a research project such as this will provide invaluable information to Georgia's early childhood community and all those concerned with providing the state's children with the highest possible care.

Results

The findings are divided across two separate reports: Child Care Center findings and Georgia's Pre-K findings. The following section highlights many of these findings and indicates current or future initiatives that will, if needed, address the findings.

Child Care Center Findings

- Utilizing various measures, the study found that the overall quality in child care centers is medium to low. However, in areas such as ratios, group sizes and hours in training relating to professional development, many child care centers in Georgia exceed the minimum licensing requirements.
 - **The findings related to quality in child care centers confirm both the need for licensing changes and the feasibility in making those changes. Beginning in 2008, DECAL has been revising licensing requirements every quarter and continues to upgrade standards. For example, over the last two years, DECAL has raised minimum credentials related to family child care providers, center directors and Pre-K assistant teachers as well as raising core health and safety requirements.**
 - **DECAL provides numerous incentives to help providers achieve higher levels of education and higher credentials. For example, the recently developed FIRST program provides a financial incentive for early childhood teachers to receive a first credential.**
 - **DECAL has also made substantial changes to the resource and referral (R&R) system. The R&R system provides parents with information related to child care, conducts trainings to providers across the state, and works directly in child care centers conducting hands-on technical assistance.**
 - **DECAL is making changes to the way that child care centers are monitored. Consultants have caseloads that require less travel and are more focused on the rules that impact children the most. Thus, consultants are now more available to work directly with providers.**
 - **In 2009, DECAL received federal stimulus dollars through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. DECAL is utilizing these funds to improve the quality of child care in Georgia through a variety of projects.**
- The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) was used to measure the global quality in infant toddler classrooms. The instrument utilizes a 1-7 scale, with higher scores indicating higher quality. For this study, the average ITERS-R score was a 2.74. Two thirds of the infant toddler classrooms would be considered low quality. Only five percent of infant toddler classrooms would be considered high quality.
 - **The findings related to infant toddler care are alarming. These findings indicate that many infants and toddlers are not in environments that stimulate active learning needed at this young age. Therefore, stimulus dollars are being directed to infant toddler care in Georgia. The stimulus dollars are creating a network of specialists to work with infant toddler classrooms across the state and conduct specific training related to the care of infants and toddlers. The infrastructure that is being built will**

yield systemic changes and will improve the overall quality in infant toddler care across the state.

- The overall quality in preschool classrooms (non Georgia's Pre-K) is higher than the overall quality in infant toddler classrooms. However, there are a high percentage of preschool classrooms (non Georgia's Pre-K) that fall into the "low" quality range. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) was used to measure the overall quality of these preschool classrooms. Like the ITERS-R, the instrument utilizes a 1-7 scale, with higher scores indicating higher quality. The average ECERS-R score was a 3.39, with one third of preschool classrooms (non Georgia's Pre-K) considered low quality. As found with infant toddler classrooms, only five percent of preschool classrooms would be considered high quality.
 - **Though not as alarming as the findings related to infant toddler care, these results indicate a need for quality improvement. Stimulus dollars are being used to fund a new initiative that will provide on-site technical assistance and direct training to over 600 programs in Georgia who have demonstrated the greatest need meeting licensing compliance and basic measures of quality. These are programs that have not been able to maintain a minimum level of compliance with licensing standards over an extended period of time. This project specifically targets programs that receive subsidy funds to serve socio-economically disadvantaged children.**
 - **DECAL is in the process of reviewing the current alignment of all learning standards, birth through third grade. This alignment review will provide all educators, birth through third grade, with the necessary tools to implement learning objectives with the greatest impacts.**
- A separate instrument (the Language and Literacy Environment Scale of the Early Learning and Literacy Classroom Observation [ELLCO]) that measures support for children's language and literacy development in early childhood classrooms was also used in the study. This instrument measures how programs create environments conducive for language development, utilize appropriate literacy materials, and provide print and early writing opportunities. The findings from the study indicate that most of the preschool classrooms (non Georgia's Pre-K) have less than what would be considered basic practice supporting children's language and literacy skills in the aforementioned areas.
 - **The researchers recommend that the state increase the amount of professional development resources available to programs. DECAL has been developing a Professional Development Registry that will debut during the first half of 2010. This registry will help DECAL target areas of need for additional professional development, such as language and literacy training, across the state.**
 - **Second, DECAL has been developing additional training modules that focus specifically on areas that improve the quality of early learning environments. While such modules have been available for Georgia's Pre-K teachers, these will now be tailored for preschool (non Georgia's Pre-K) classes.**
- The study reports that almost all of the programs met or exceeded the licensing requirements for group size and ratio of children per adult. In addition, about one-third of infant toddler teachers and one half of preschool teachers participated in more than the required hours of professional development in the past year. Most programs report using a curriculum in their program and providing a range of services and support to the families of children they serve.

Georgia's Pre-K Findings

- Results for Georgia's Pre-K classrooms are divided between Pre-K classrooms located in child care centers and Pre-K classrooms located in public schools. In public schools, only Georgia's Pre-K classrooms were observed. In the overall study, the response rate for public schools (84%) is 36 percentage points higher than the response rate for child care centers (48%). Both response rates are acceptable for this type of research study. However, it is important to note that the study was not designed to compare Georgia's Pre-K in public schools and private child care centers. To make such comparisons, a different sampling frame would have been utilized. Furthermore, the difference in response rates makes such comparisons in the current study fallacious.
- The average ECERS-R score for Georgia's Pre-K classrooms housed in child care centers was a 4.16 and for classrooms in public schools was a 3.74. The results from these classroom observations found that 83% of classrooms in child care centers and 89% of classrooms in local school systems were considered medium quality. 15% of programs housed in child care centers were considered high quality. It is important to note that the instrument used in gauging these quality scores focuses on aspects of the physical environment such as playground space and furnishings. Because many elementary schools were not constructed specifically for four year olds, it is harder for classrooms in public schools to score high on the physical environment items of this measure.
 - **These findings suggest that more advanced measures of quality should be incorporated. The ECERS-R averages are higher than the preschool classrooms that are non Georgia's Pre-K. This indicates that the overall quality in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms is higher than that of the preschool (non Georgia's Pre-K) classrooms. However, these findings also suggest that improvements can be made.**
 - **Over the past two years, DECAL has revamped the probation process for programs that continually fail to meet Georgia's Pre-K quality standards. Programs who continue to fail to meet these standards are no longer funded.**
 - **Stimulus dollars are being used to improve the quality of Pre-K environments and instruction. Stimulus initiatives include providing vital material upgrades for Pre-K providers and creating new professional development tools that incorporate the latest technology with best practices related to children's learning.**
 - **DECAL is in the process of reviewing the current alignment of all learning standards, birth through third grade. This will better connect Pre-K standards to their birth to three and early elementary counterparts. This alignment review will ultimately provide Georgia's Pre-K teachers with better tools to connect the Pre-K experience to children's later academic achievement.**
- The ELLCO measures literacy support in classrooms. The instrument utilizes a scale of 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater language and literacy support. The average ELLCO score for Georgia's Pre-K classrooms in child care centers is 3.2 and for Georgia's Pre-K classrooms in school systems is 3.4. They indicate that most Georgia's Pre-K classrooms are rated as having "basic" practice in supporting children's language and literacy skills. These scores are higher than the scores in preschool (non Georgia's Pre-K) programs.
 - **Though language and literacy has been a focus of the professional development offered to Georgia's Pre-K teachers, DECAL is currently revising training modules to include the most current research related to children's language acquisition.**

- **DECAL is participating in a pilot program cosponsored by the Atlanta Speech School. This pilot program began in the 2009-2010 school year with plans to expand in subsequent years and offers teachers intensive training and coaching related to language and literacy skills.**
- The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) measures teacher-child interactions related to children’s learning.² The study finds that Georgia’s Pre-K classrooms score high in emotional support and classroom organization, and low with instructional support. These results indicate that, on average, Georgia’s Pre-K classrooms are warm, exciting places for four year olds, but opportunities for appropriate learning are not maximized. These results trend similarly to national studies of other Pre-K programs.
 - **Overall, findings from these observations suggest that Georgia’s Pre-K classrooms are meeting basic quality needs but are not taking learning opportunities to higher levels.**
 - **DECAL is currently revising the Pre-K monitoring process to reflect higher standards of instructional quality. All Georgia’s Pre-K program consultants have been trained on using the CLASS as a technical assistance tool. Beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, DECAL will utilize the CLASS to monitor programs. This will ensure that all classrooms are receiving professional development specifically related to improving teacher instruction and providing the highest level of instructional quality.**
 - **Use of the CLASS will also help DECAL measure improvement as professional development and monitoring protocols are being revised.**
- The authors of the study note that Georgia’s Pre-K teachers and directors have qualifications that meet national standards. In addition, most programs receive professional development that exceeds program and licensing requirements. Georgia’s Pre-K programs also provide numerous supports for families of children enrolled in the program, such as the Resource Coordinator Grant.
- Comparisons are made between the Pre-K program in Georgia and the Pre-K program in Oklahoma. The program in both states is universal (open to all children regardless of family income) and both serve a large percentage of their four-year-old population. In key quality areas, the program in Oklahoma receives higher scores. Underscoring that point, however, is the fact that the total per child expenditure in Georgia is only 57% of that in Oklahoma.
 - Overall, the authors conclude that “Georgia’s Pre-K program has many strengths that form a strong foundation from which to work.”³ However, they also note that improving the quality of Georgia’s Pre-K program will require additional investments. As previously noted, DECAL is using stimulus dollars in several projects that will improve the quality of Georgia’s Pre-K environments and instruction.

² There are ten distinct dimensions measured in the CLASS, organized into three separate domains. The Emotional Support Domain measures whether or not the classroom is a positive nurturing environment for children. The Classroom Organization Domain measures the ways that teachers manage children’s behavior and consistently engage children in learning activities, as well as the formats teachers use in instruction. The Instructional Support Domain measures the quality of the environment with regards to language use, especially looking at teachers’ ability to develop students’ higher-order language skills.

³ Maxwell, K.L., Early, D.M., Bryant, D., Kraus, S., Hume, K., & Crawford, G. (2009). *Georgia study of early care and education: Findings from Georgia’s Pre-K Program*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, FPG Child Development Institute. (pg.26).

- Findings from the study related to Georgia’s Pre-K are not unique to Georgia. As states expand their Pre-K programs, there are always challenges related to ensuring quality while serving additional children. Georgia serves a large number of children (82,000) in a unique public-private partnership model. A strength of the model is that the program is able to serve more children; a challenge is ensuring that educational experiences are consistent throughout the state. Results from the study reflect this challenge.

Conclusion

- Previous research links the quality of early learning environments to later child outcomes. Therefore, it is important that all early learning environments across the state are of the highest quality.
- DECAL is committed to improving the quality of early learning environments across Georgia. While some of the results from this study are disheartening, it is important to know there are many initiatives in place to address the findings from this study and strategically target the areas where the most improvement is needed. That being said, low child care quality is a problem that can only be remedied when all partners (providers, policymakers and, most importantly, parents) support efforts that can ensure that every child in Georgia who enters an early learning environment is guaranteed a quality experience that enhances, not hinders, his or her future educational endeavors.
- Full copies of the report and the executive summaries can be located at www.decals.ga.gov.
- Additional information about the instruments used in this study can be found at:
 - www.classobservation.com (CLASS)
 - www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers/ (ITERS and ECERS)
 - <http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/smith-ellco/index.htm> (ELLCO)