



**early developments** Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

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*Child & Family Policy*

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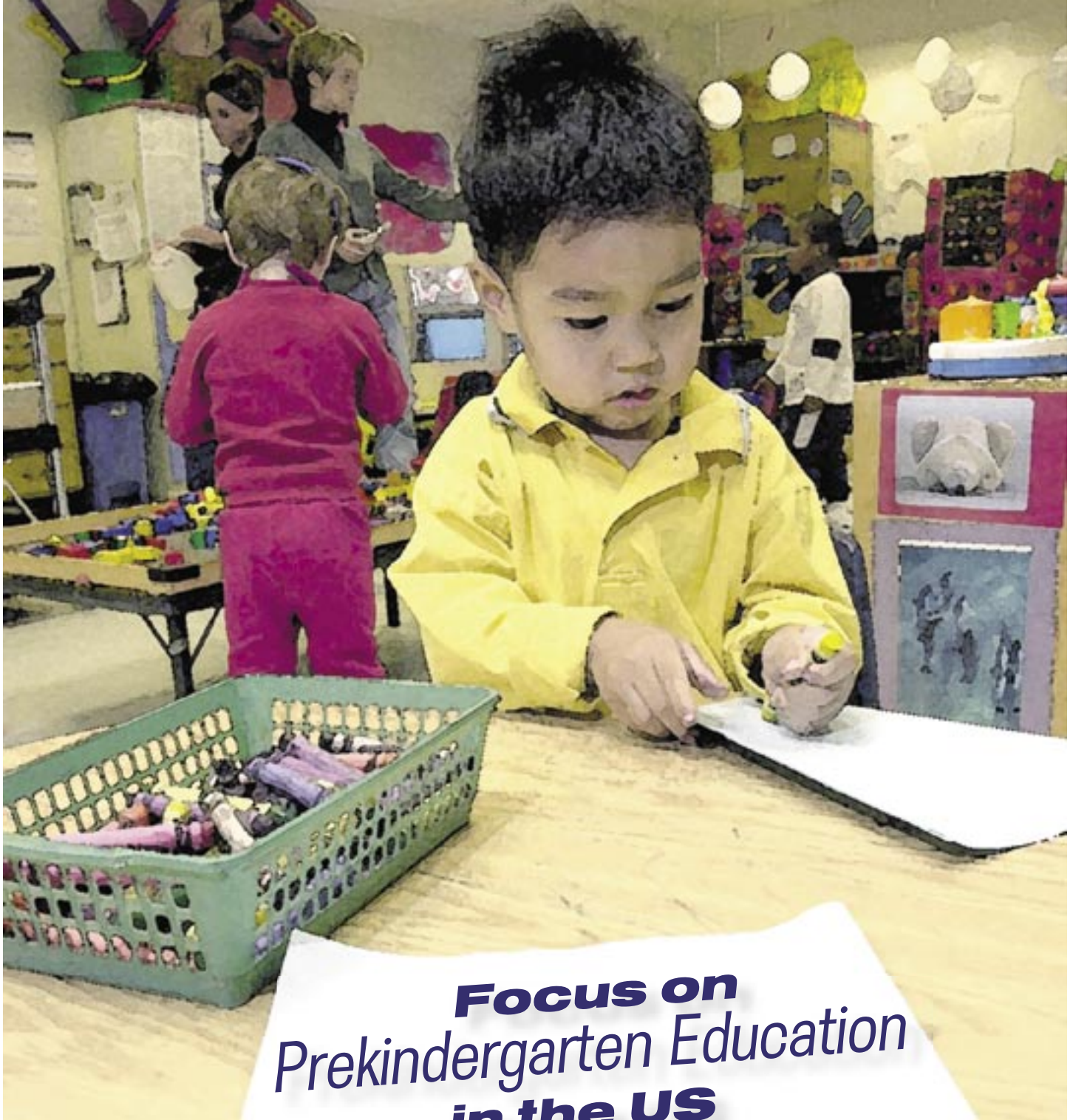
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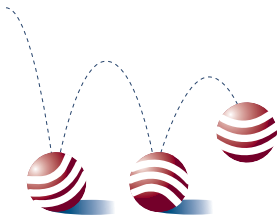
NCEDL Publications



## **Focus on Prekindergarten Education in the US**

**W**ITH MORE MOTHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN entering the workforce and a growing recognition of the importance of early learning experiences in preparing children for school, the American public and educators alike are focusing on the need for high-quality prekindergarten programs for 4-year-olds. Many other countries already offer universal prekindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. In the US, federal and state governments have been reluctant to assume responsibility for educating children prior to school entry into kindergarten, but that appears to be changing. At least 42 states currently offer some type of prekindergarten program, and a few such as Georgia, Oklahoma and New York are moving towards a voluntary prekindergarten program for *all* 4-year-olds.

Adding import to this national trend is the passage of President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002 ([www.NoChildLeftBehind.gov](http://www.NoChildLeftBehind.gov)). This law seeks to ensure that public schools are teaching students what they need to know to be successful in life. It also draws attention to the need to prepare children for academic success before they start formal schooling. In response to this new educational policy agenda, FPG has launched two major initiatives—the NCEDL Multi-State Prekindergarten Study and a National Prekindergarten Center (NPC) to assist states in the development of high-quality prekindergarten programs.



### NCEDL Multi-State Study

**A**CROSS THE COUNTRY, states are rapidly expanding school-linked prekindergarten programs at a cost exceeding \$2.9 billion. Although these efforts are commendable, states are launching these programs without basic knowledge about the nature of prekindergarten policies and services or of the implications of decisions about the basic design of the programs. The National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL), housed at FPG, seeks to close this information gap through a multi-state study of prekindergarten services.

“It’s amazing how little is known about these programs,” says Donna Bryant, co-director of the study along with Richard Clifford. “Does it matter if there’s a lot of reading in these programs, if it’s full-day or half-day? These are the kinds of things states should know.”

“Some states have conducted individual studies of prekindergarten services, but each study uses different measures, so we can’t compare results across states.” Clifford adds, “While there have been major national studies of Head Start, child care and early intervention, there has not been a single large-scale, multi-state study of prekindergarten services. Given the amount of state and federal money going into these programs, the need for such a study is urgent.”

NCEDL’s Multi-State Prekindergarten Study has two primary purposes: 1) to describe the variations of experiences for children in prekindergarten and the impact of these variations on children’s basic development, and 2) to examine the degree to which the prekindergarten experiences prepare children for kindergarten and early schooling.

Primary questions being researched include the education and experience of teachers and teacher assistants in school-linked prekindergarten programs; the nature and distribution of practices in areas such as literacy, math and teacher-child relationships; how quality and practices vary as a function of child and teacher characteristics and classroom and program variables; and whether children’s outcomes can be predicted by their experiences in prekindergarten programs.

Prior to launching the study, NCEDL conducted a survey of state-level personnel in every state and the nation’s capital to learn about state-funded and other school-related prekindergarten services, class size, ratios, teacher education and other structural features. Based on that survey, NCEDL selected six states for the larger study—California, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, New York and Ohio.

Twenty-four data collectors, four in each state, have been trained and sent into the field armed with questionnaires and assessment materials. They have visited 240 preschool classes, 40 picked at random in each state. Four children in each classroom, also picked at random, are being followed. Researchers are currently conducting the second round of data collection on these children as they move from the prekindergarten classes into kindergarten. Data collection will be complete in May 2003.

In addition to assessing classrooms teachers and students, FPG Fellow Oscar Barbarin (also on the faculty of the UNC-CH School of Social Work) is leading a part of the study examining the child’s home environment. Researchers are conducting one-on-one interviews with parents to find out about family activities, parent attitudes toward education and the school and childrearing practices.

The NCEDL researchers would like to follow the children into the first and second grade, and are currently seeking additional funds to support this work. Collecting data as the children move from the prekindergarten classes into kindergarten and beyond will be difficult with the children scattering out to different schools.

NCEDL is a collaborative effort of researchers at FPG working with colleagues at the University of Virginia under the direction of Bob Pianta and at the University of California at Los Angeles under the direction of Carollee Howes. Other key researchers at FPG include Senior Scientist Peg Burchinal and Scientist Diane Early.





## National Prekindergarten Center

**U**P TO THE PRESENT, states and local school districts have been launching prekindergarten programs with little technical assistance. No single organization provides research-based information to help guide prekindergarten policies and practices. To help fill this need, FPG has started planning a National Prekindergarten Center (NPC) with a one-year grant from the Foundation for Child Development.

“We envision our mission as helping local, state and federal leaders develop and implement high quality universal prekindergarten programs through our research, policy analysis, technical assistance and communications,” says Kelly Maxwell, who co-directs the center with Dick Clifford. Maxwell directed North Carolina’s statewide school readiness assessment and co-directs the evaluation of North Carolina’s Smart Start early childhood initiative.

High-quality prekindergarten programs are being launched not only in the public schools, but also Head Start centers, and community-based childcare centers. Many states are using classrooms in all three types of programs to provide prekindergarten services.”

The National Prekindergarten Center will be housed at FPG, but will partner with various organizations that address prekindergarten issues. “For us to be effective, we will need to develop strategic partnerships across the country,” Clifford says. “For example, NCEDL and NPC are working together with Steve Barnett at the National Institute for Early Education Research to study the cost of state prekindergarten programs. The burning question for most policymakers is, ‘How much will a prekindergarten program cost?’ Yet there is little information about the true cost of

prekindergarten. We hope to gather the information needed to help states understand the real cost of providing high quality prekindergarten services for children.”

In addition to finance, NPC will focus its long-term efforts on governance and professional development. Governance concerns the respective roles of federal, state and local governments in administering prekindergarten programs. “Simply put, the question is ‘Who’s in charge of what?’” Clifford says. “For K-12 education, state and local governments are primarily responsible for educating their children, with the federal government providing some support and technical assistance. In the prekindergarten arena, the roles are still unclear.”

Professional development addresses the shortage of qualified teachers in prekindergarten programs. It is estimated that less than half of the current teachers of 3- and 4-year-olds in this country have a BA degree. “Research has shown that highly qualified teachers conduct more enriching classes,” Maxwell says. “States will have to work very hard to train a sufficient number of teachers to meet the growing prekindergarten needs.”

As NPC ends its planning year, Clifford and Maxwell are seeking additional funding from the Foundation for Child Development and other funding sources. NPC is already involved in research and policy work and will begin offering technical assistance during 2003. “We’re excited about the new opportunities and working relationships that we’ve developed during this planning year and are looking forward to NPC becoming fully operational,” Clifford says. |ed|

### For more information

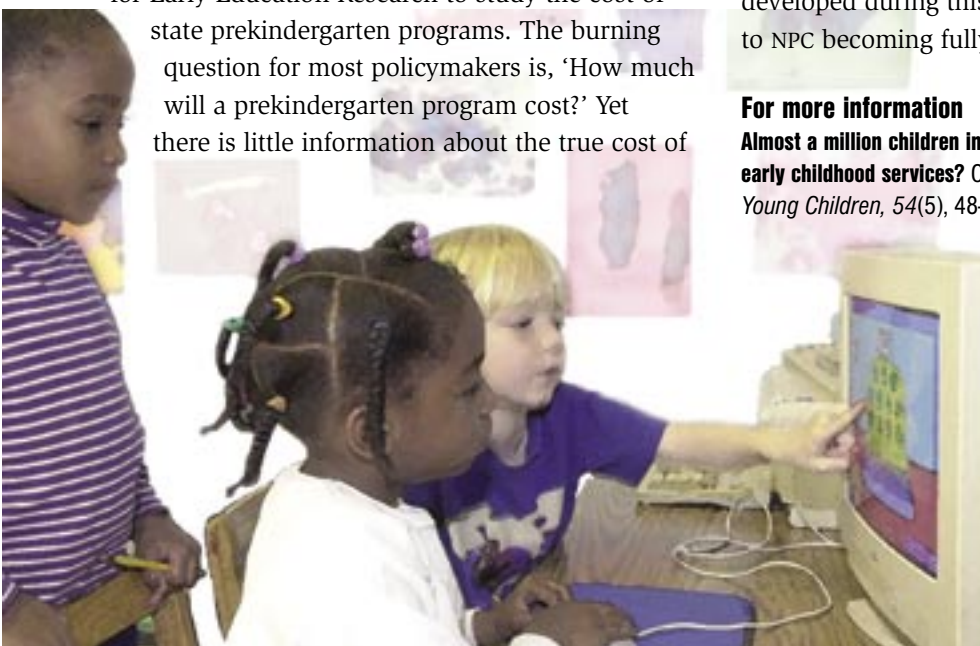
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### Education for four-year-olds: State Initiatives.

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### The missing support infrastructure in early childhood.

Gallagher, J. J., & Clifford, R. M. (2000). *Early Childhood Research & Practice* (2)1. [Available only online at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu>]



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**Parents' perceptions of their children's child care: A cross-national comparison.** Cryer, D., Tietze, W., & Wessels, H. (2002). *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(2), 258-277.

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FPG Child Development Institute

CB 8185, UNC-CH  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8185

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