



early developments Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

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pre-Kindergarten

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at Issue

by Don Bailey Director, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

AS A 5-YEAR-OLD IN 1955, I DID NOT ATTEND KINDERGARTEN. I was living in a small town in South Carolina, which like many other states at that time did not have kindergarten programs available for all children. The first public kindergartens in the U.S. opened in the late 1800s, but it was not until the 1970s that kindergarten became widely available for all children. The growth of kindergartens was fueled in part by Sputnik and concerns about how the U.S. could keep ahead of other countries, and in part by concerns over the success of poor children in school.

The establishment of public school kindergarten was not without controversy. Many people felt that children did not need to be in school that young, and that it was the family's responsibility to raise and care for children until age 6.

And there was controversy over what might happen in kindergarten classes. Many were concerned that kindergarten would become too academic and that schools would not be sensitive to the developmental needs of young children.

Despite these concerns, today it is routinely accepted that all children will attend kindergarten and all schools will provide kindergarten.

Now in 2001, these same issues have appeared again, but the focus has shifted to younger children. Three primary factors have caused new attention to preschool education:

- First, there are concerns about the poor to mediocre quality of many childcare programs. Research showing that quality is important for all children has led some to argue that the only way to insure quality at a national level is to provide a comprehensive program of services for all young children.

Should public schools take an active role in providing pre-K services and if so, for whom?

- Second, in numerous surveys teachers report that a substantial proportion of children experience significant problems in the transition to kindergarten.
- And finally, the failure of many children to learn to read, the achievement gap between white children and children of color, and continued evidence of school failure for many children from low-income families have resulted in a call for increased attention to early education as one way to promote later school success for all children.

Although the majority of 3- and 4-year olds in the U.S. are in some type of out-of-home care setting, these settings vary widely in terms of quality and affordability. They include private, public and for-profit programs.

At issue today is whether public schools should take an active role in providing pre-K services, and if so, for whom? Almost every state is examining seriously this question. In the process, of course, the same issues that were discussed in the context of kindergarten are now being discussed in the context of pre-K.

- Is this a proper role for public schools?
- Will it mean that pre-K programs will shift to have more of an academic focus?
- What will be the source of funding for these programs?
- What will be the impact on the private child care community?
- Are pre-K programs really effective in promoting later school success?

In reality, many public schools are already in the business of pre-K education. A recent survey conducted by Gitanjali Saluja and Dick Clifford >



pre-K at Issue



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here at FPG found that 42 states are currently funding some type of pre-K program through the public schools.

A variety of different models are being used, including state-funded Head Start programs (18 states), universal pre-K for all children (2 states), and pre-K for at-risk children (26 states).

This is an exciting time, an opportunity for all of us to think broadly about the needs of young children and their families.

No state has pre-K currently available for all children, although Georgia and New York are moving in this direction.

During the next decade, this issue will receive tremendous attention in the context of school reform, standards and accountability. In North Carolina, for example, a recent court ruling stated that public schools must provide for the education of all at-risk 4-year-olds in order to maximize their success in kindergarten and beyond.

In this issue of *Early Developments* we highlight some recent studies addressing this issue. Among these include a recent assessment of the skills of entering kindergartners in North Carolina; a description of how five states established pre-K programs and what other states might learn from this process; a study of preschool programs for children with disabilities; and a survey of state early childhood coordinators regarding readiness assessment.

Although some of these issues will be discussed at the national level, most of the action will be within individual states. As state legislators begin to weigh the costs and benefits of such programs, there will be an important need for data to help inform policy decisions.

In recognition of this need for information, FPG is committed to a program of work that helps provide the best data for policy makers. This includes information about state policies and funding possibilities, program models and characteristics, the status of children during and after pre-K programs and the transition to kindergarten.

For those of us in the early childhood field, this is an exciting time, an opportunity for all of us to think broadly about the needs of young children and their families. What will programs and services for young children look like in ten years? One thing is for sure. With all of the attention currently being paid to this issue, things are likely to change dramatically over the next few years.

Hopefully through research and thoughtful consideration, the next decade will result in more equitable access for all children and their families to high-quality, appropriate care and educational opportunities.

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