

A RETURN ON INVESTMENT: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

SUMMARY PAGE

Preschool teachers provide critical early learning experiences for a child. This is true at all levels of education, but especially true during the early years when the brain experiences tremendous growth. Preschool teachers provide young children with the developmentally appropriate learning experiences by applying their knowledge of early learning research to best meet the individual needs of students in their classrooms. High quality preschool programs have high quality teachers, and the quality of both pre-service and in-service training is of particular importance in the teacher's knowledge of child development, significant correlates to developmental outcomes for children.

Pre-service Education

Quality preschool teachers have a pre-service education including a minimum of a bachelors degree and full teaching licensure. Nationwide, nearly 90% of teachers in public schools have BA degrees compared to 26% of Head Start teachers and anywhere from 31-47% of child care teachers.

Inadequate In-service Training

The Council of Chief State School Officer's policy statement on early childhood and family education states that preparation and continued professional development of early childhood educators, with the norm of three to six hours of training per year is inadequate. Teachers need continued professional development opportunities to retain and to enhance their knowledge and skills.

The *2003 State Preschool Yearbook* published by the National Institute on Early Education Research (NIEER) found that only 22 states met the minimum average requirement of 15-clock hours of professional development annually for their state preschool programs.

Quality Professional Development

The Center for the Study of Social Policy recommends a minimum level of in-service training at 25 clock hours/Continuing Education Units (CEUs) per year of ongoing professional development for teachers **and** assistants in early care and education settings.

Essential components of effective in-service training include multiple opportunities to apply research knowledge to classroom practice, continuous program of study, expert mentoring, individualized delivery, and immediate feedback.

The Carolina Abecedarian Project and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, both model programs that found positive impacts of the preschool programs into adulthood, provide intensive in-service training for their preschool teachers. The High/Scope Foundation found effective in-service trainings include the following elements: teachers are actively involved in multiple sessions, a curriculum model provides teachers with both theoretical and practical application; classroom visits by trainers who provide immediate feedback to teachers; and opportunities for participants to reflect on their learning and share their experiences with others.

No Child Left Behind

There are professional development provisions within NCLB for early educators, including, the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development (ECPED) Program, Early Reading First Grants, and Title I funds.

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By Jinhee Lee
Council of Chief State School Officers

An investment in the professional knowledge of a teacher is ultimately an investment in children's education. This is true at all levels of education, but especially true during the early years when the brain experiences tremendous growth. Preschool teachers provide critical early learning experiences for a child. They provide young children with the developmentally appropriate learning experiences by applying their knowledge of early learning research to best meet the individual needs of students in their classrooms. Placing a preschool teacher in the classroom with pre-service education including a minimum of a bachelor's degree and full teaching licensure is the first step to providing a highly qualified teacher. The appropriate pre-service education should be continued with quality in-service training and professional development.

Like their K-12 colleagues, preschool teachers must keep abreast of new research on effective classroom practices as well as tools with which they can evaluate their own teaching practice. In-service training can provide teachers with opportunities to hone their skills and craft. However, not all programs that are labeled in-service or professional development are considered equally effective. Research shows that professional development programs that produce positive results are intensive, continuous, and individualized.

The Council of Chief State School Officer's policy statement on early childhood and family education states the Council's commitment to ensure that "every child has the opportunity for high quality, universal early care and education at age 3 and 4," including a high quality preschool program. The central component of a high quality preschool program is a well-qualified and highly



motivated program staff, with teaching and learning rooted in research-based practices, particularly those that promote early literacy experiences to prepare children for school. While professional development programs are an effective way to build teachers' knowledge about current research on effective teaching practices, CCSSO's policy statement concludes that the preparation and continued professional development of early childhood educators, with the norm of three to six hours of training per year is inadequate. Teachers need continued professional development opportunities to retain and to enhance their knowledge and skills.

High quality preschool programs have high quality teachers, and the quality of both pre-service and in-service training is of particular importance in the teacher's knowledge of child development, significant correlates to developmental outcomes for children. From birth through age five, children's brains develop at a rapid rate and this forms the critical foundation upon which subsequent development builds.¹ It is important for teachers to provide the appropriate stimuli and learning environments for young children. Preschool teachers with college degrees have been found to be more effective because they expose children to larger vocabularies, are better at constructing individual lesson plans and finding solu-

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tions to challenges in the classroom. According to the National Research Council's Report entitled *Eager to Learn*, the minimum standard for teachers of 3 and 4 year olds should be a 4-year college degree in addition to specialized training in early childhood education.² The education requirements for early childhood teachers vary across settings, state by state, and Rhode Island is the only state that requires a bachelor's degree for teachers in all early education programs. Nationwide, nearly 90% of preschool teachers in public schools have BA degrees compared to 26% of Head Start teachers and anywhere from 31-47% of child care teachers.³ While there is a wide array of teacher educational attainment across early childhood settings, an overwhelming majority of preschool teachers in public schools have college degrees.

The role of professional development or in-service training is to continually hone and build upon the skills of the teacher. According the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation, "continuous, collaborative learning to inform practice is a hallmark of a professional in any field... Well-prepared candidates' practice is influenced by knowledgeable, reflective, and critical perspectives."⁴ While it is generally recognized that professional development for teachers is important, there is a specific need for improved professional development in early education. According to *Eager to Learn*, "[t]here is a

great disjunction between what is optimal pedagogically for children's learning and development and the level of preparation that currently typifies early childhood educators."⁵ The report also recommends that in order to have a high-quality teaching force, there should be a significant public investment in the professional development of current and new teachers.

While research suggests in-service training can produce benefits for students, the term professional development is not clearly defined or articulated in the education field. Professional development can refer to a single workshop lasting several hours or to a multi-session training program that focuses on several topics. Added to this ambiguity, early childhood educators have had a historic struggle for professional recognition and may have had professional development that has been seen as ineffective and unrelated to classroom practice.⁶

Schools and districts can provide in-service professional development that meets the needs of the practitioner. The delivery of training must be uniquely suited to the participants, and professional training programs should be embedded in the teacher's job description and take place during the regular school schedule. The research on professional development identifies common elements and practices that contribute to effective teaching practices. Quality professional development is sustained over a period of time providing multiple opportunities for teachers to bridge research to practices and to evaluate the results of teaching and learning. Several researchers have found that essential components of effective training include opportunities to apply knowledge, continuous program of study, expert mentoring, individualized delivery, and immediate feedback.⁷ The High/

¹ Bowman, Barbara T., M.Suzanne Donovan, M.Susan Burns. (2000). *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² Barnett, Steven W. (2003, March). *Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

³ *Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications*, p. 2.

⁴ NAEYC's Standard 5: Becoming a Professional in Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation: Initial Licensure Programs.

⁵ *Eager to Learn*, p. 13.

⁶ Helterbran, Valerie R. & Beatrice S. Fennimore. (2004). Collaborate Early Childhood Development: Building from a Base of Teacher Investigation. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 31(4), 267-271.

Scope Foundation recommends that in order for teachers to positively effect children's long-term development, teachers need the support of systematic in-service training and supportive curriculum supervision.⁸

The amount of time recommended for optimal in-service training varies. In the *State of Preschool: 2003 State Preschool Yearbook* published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, each state is ranked and rated on its state preschool program based on access, quality, and resources. One of the ten items on the quality standards checklist is the benchmark for required teacher in-service training. Pre-kindergarten programs were rated based on a minimum requirement of 15 clock hours professional development annually. The 15-hour benchmark was set because research found that teachers with at least 15 hours of annual professional development had appropriate, positive, and engaged interactions with their students.⁹ The *2003 State Preschool Yearbook* found that only 22 states met this minimum standard. The Center for the Study of Social Policy also finds that formal in-service requirements are critical to keeping teachers aware and knowledgeable about current early education practice. They recommend a minimum level of in-service training at 25-clock hours/ Continuing Education Units (CEUs) per year of ongoing professional development for teachers and assistant teachers. This level professional development requires a substantial investment. The Center for the Study of Social Policy, for example, recommends that states fund a minimum of \$800 per early childhood professional.

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Professional development has been demonstrated to be an important component of effective preschool programs. Two examples are the Carolina Abecedarian Project conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, both model preschool programs that found positive impacts of the programs into adulthood. Intensive in-service training for the Abecedarian and Perry preschool teachers was considered an important component of each of the programs. The Abecedarian program provided constant, intensive training and supervision by curriculum experts and others, with training emphasizing developmentally appropriate language development. The High/Scope Perry Preschool teachers were regularly observed and evaluated, and research and curriculum specialists provided training and feedback to the teachers. Both programs found that the children who participated in their programs had a higher rate of high school completion, were less likely to be placed in special education, and had a lower rate of grade retention.

From 1989-1992, the High/Scope Foundation conducted an evaluation of its Training of Trainers (ToT) program, a large-scale systematic in-service training of early practitioners. Since its

⁷ *Eager to Learn*, p. 274.

⁸ Schweinhart, Lawrence. (2003, April 26). *Benefits, Costs, and Explanation of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

⁹ Whitebook, Marcy, Carollee Howes & Deborah Phillips. (1990). *Who Cares? Child Care Teachers and the Quality of Care in America*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

inception, the program has endorsed 13,000 trainers who have trained 32,500 teachers working with 325,000 children annually. The study of ToT concluded that in-service training improves program quality. This intensive ToT program involves 210 hours of training over 35 days with the cost of the training ranging between \$6000 and \$6500 per participant. ToT was found to be effective because of the following elements: teachers are actively involved in multiple sessions, a curriculum model provides teachers with both theoretical and practical application; classroom visits by trainers who provide immediate feedback to teachers; and opportunities for participants to reflect on their learning and share their experiences with others. In a study of the program, the children in the High/Scope programs significantly outscored those in comparison programs on measures of emotional, social, cognitive, and motor development.

With new accountability demands of No Child Left Behind, preschool teachers are beginning to feel the pressure of preparing young children with the academic skills necessary to succeed in the primary and later grades. Improved professional development is one way preschool teachers can help children to prepare to meet the accountability provisions of NCLB in subsequent grades.

There are professional development provisions within NCLB for early educators, including, the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development (ECPED) Program, Early Reading First Grants, and Title I funds. ECPED is a competitive grant that funds partnerships between a professional development provider for early educators and one or more public agency that serves low-income children in high-need communities from birth through kindergarten entry. Funds from Early Reading First grants can also be used for providing professional development. Under Early Reading First, the purpose of professional development is to provide teacher training on scientifically based early language and reading development to build preschool age children's oral and written language understanding and knowledge. Finally, under Title I funding, school districts may use Title I funds for preschool education costs including staff positions and professional development.

Professional teachers are continuous learners. Effective teachers are reflective practitioners who bridge research and classroom practice in order to meet the needs of individual students. Quality preschool programs must have quality teachers, because for many children, preschool is their first exposure to a learning environment. They need developmentally appropriate programs in order to foster and nurture their growth during critical formative years. To promote a well-trained staff, schools and districts should provide continuous and intensive professional development that provide the necessary supports for the teacher, including opportunities for learning, reflection, and mentoring. An investment in professional development for preschool teachers has a direct impact on the quality of young children's education and learning outcomes.

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