

## Universal Pre-K: What We Know, What We Need

By Valora Washington

s the value of early childhood education becomes more evident and more widely accepted, a growing number of states and cities in the United States have invested in public pre-kindergarten. Today, 42 states and the District of Columbia are serving about 1.4 million children, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

That is a promising development, but let's also consider a sobering reality: Even at the present rate of progress, NIEER says it will take "decades to serve just 50 percent of four-year-olds in state-funded pre-K programs." Unfortunately, nationwide access to free pre-K remains only a dream for too many families: Only

29 percent of the nation's four-year-olds and about 5 percent of three-year-olds are currently enrolled in state-funded pre-K.

In Virginia, the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), established in 1995, is serving about 18,250 children who would otherwise lack access to pre-K. However, while VPI enrollment is steadily increasing, it still only reaches 18 percent of the state's four-year-olds. That percentage may increase in 2017, according to NIEER, as new eligibility requirements go into effect, including eligibility for all families at 200 percent or below the poverty line.

The National Association for the Education of Young



Children (NAEYC) defines pre-K as "a distinct group of programs designed specifically to make sure that preschoolers are ready for kindergarten and will be succeeding in school by third grade," and specifies three key characteristics: (1) high program standards, (2) serve four-year-olds, and sometimes also three-year-olds, and (3) focus on school readiness.

As encouraging as it is to see more children attending pre-K and more teachers preparing to lead pre-K, there are still some key questions about the quality standards of pre-K settings. Meaningful universal pre-K presumes that there should also be universal minimum standards for learning. NIEER measures the nation's pre-K programs against the following ten minimum standards, emphasizing that these are not measures of excellence but rather minimal competencies:

- 1. Comprehensive early learning standards at the state or jurisdictional level
- 2. A bachelor's degree for lead pre-K teachers
- 3. Specialized early childhood training for lead pre-K teachers
- 4. A Child Development Associate (CDA®) credential, administered by the Council for Professional Recognition, for assistant pre-K teachers
- 5. Participation by teachers in a substantial number of hours of professional development
- 6. Maximum class size of 20 or fewer
- 7. Staff-to-child ratio of 1:10 or less
- 8. Children receive screening, referral and support services for vision, hearing, dental, health and other support areas
- 9. Children are provided meals and/or snacks
- 10. Systems hold individual classrooms accountable and monitor to ensure quality standards are being met

In 2015, NIEER found only seven states in full compliance with these 10 standards; with teacher qualifications often among the greatest areas of vulnerability. Although programs are hiring teachers with specialized training, only about 60 percent require lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree, and only about 37 percent require assistant teachers to hold a CDA credential, although that percentage has risen significantly from 24 percent in 2002.

Keeping in mind that we view these standards as preliminary benchmarks, I suggest that the most promising figure here is the very high degree of specialized training required for pre-K teachers. Because early childhood education includes the period from birth to third grade, it would be very tempting to transfer a promising second-grade teacher to a pre-K setting. But the requirements of that setting are different than those of a successful second-grade classroom. The pre-K setting calls for age-appropriate emphasis on a safe and healthy learning environment; on the full physical, cognitive, and social well-being of the child; and on learning opportunities uniquely suited for very young learners.

Professional preparation to work with young children requires specialized competencies, knowledge and skill. As a timetested expression of these competencies, the CDA uses national, federal and state-based early childhood experts and its own expertise to regularly update its training materials and credentialing requirements. As a result, national organizations such as NIEER and NAEYC promote the CDA as the "best first step" for those working with our very youngest students.

Among the CDA competencies that teachers use to create a successful learning environment for three- or four-year-olds, a very strong knowledge of child development is also a must. Some of what teachers should know about preschoolers includes the children's:

- Physical capacity and motor skills, including the ability to spot and address developmental delays;
- Communications skills and capacity to learn about safety and incorporate safety skills into their activities;
- Pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills, which teachers can address and advance (again including the ability to spot and address developmental delays); and,
- Social and empathic skills, which are such a focal point for learning and development at these ages.

This knowledge can also assist a teacher with daily practical knowledge, such as ordering and arranging supplies, preparing the pre-K setting with different learning areas and social spaces, and planning indoor and outdoor learning among other factors. It also helps to know how these skills and developmental milestones overlap and reinforce one another to aid in a child's current and future success in school.

For example, a focus on children's emergent literacy supports and is also supported by their development in a pre-K setting.

Particularly for dual language learners, the acts of speaking and listening in conversation can simultaneously sharpen their ear for vowel and consonant sounds, aid in grammar and syntax proficiency, and teach thoughtful listening and exchange. Make-believe and unstructured play also offer chances to apply conversation skills to the problems and rewards of social life, offering students the opportunity to "use their words" to share, take turns and even to experience and resolve conflicts. These activities help children lengthen their attention spans; learn how their words can persuade, inform or resolve conflict; and connect language with the self-regulation and coping skills needed for getting along in the world.

Hands-on play is another vital element in emergent

literacy and numeracy development during this development stage. Far from "just playing" all day, students in successful pre-K programs are actually learning by doing all day. From gardening to blocks to coloring to painting, many eye-to-hand types

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of play build valuable pathways to the pattern recognition, inquiry skills, and composition abilities children will need for language arts, math, advanced arts and science.

The pre-K classroom should be organized, inviting, and rich in reading and numeracy cues without being overly controlling. NAEYC's guidelines for pre-K literacy encourage "rich teacher talk" that models listening and offers students new words and understandings through conversation, and integrated, content-focused activities that enable children to practice their oral, critical thinking and emergent writing abilities.

In addition, we at the Council for Professional Recognition also emphasize that the classroom environment itself is an instructor through CDA candidate preparation. For example, simply by labeling objects in the room with words and shapes, a teacher can prepare their children to "learn on the go." Let's say all the chairs are labeled "chair" and a different color shape for each table. As chairs are used all day long, they change position. At the end of the day, the teacher can ask students to "put all the blue circle chairs at the blue circle table" and "the red triangle chairs at the red triangle table." Students who know their shapes but not all colors can help, while those who

know color but not shapes can help. The teachers get help with clean-up for the next day. Win-win!

## **The New York Example**

New York City's brand-new Pre-K for All initiative offers insight into the big lift needed to offer free, universal all-day pre-kindergarten. Before the program, 58,000 children attended pre-kindergarten in the city, about 20,000 of them in full-day programs. Within two years, the program has achieved high enrollment across every community, with the highest participation among low-income families.

Getting it off the ground came with a range of challenges. New York City had to address professional requirements in

hiring and assessing lead teachers, assistant teachers and paraprofessionals; clarify standards for on-site support for leaders and teachers; plan resources; and coordinate guidance from 100 instructional coordinators and 125 social workers.

The program also called for significant investments in new spaces, programming and oversight across more than a dozen city agencies. In the first year of expansion, New York City opened new sites, recruited and developed new teachers, conducted rigorous multi-agency quality and safety inspections, and reached out extensively to families to encourage enrollment. These early wins demonstrate that, in New York, pre-K is gaining traction and improving each year.

## **What We Know We Need**

It may seem obvious, but all the expenditures, equipment and theories in the world can only be helpful to preschoolers in the hands of qualified teachers. As someone who has advocated for the needs of young children under age five for all of my career, I'm encouraged by the progress being made so far.■

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