

An Exchange Trend Report

Update on Child Care in the Public Schools

by Roger Neugebauer

Some topics generate more heat than others. When I mentioned in *ExchangeEveryDay* that *Child Care Information Exchange* would be running a status report on child care in the public schools, we were inundated with hundreds of messages from early childhood professionals expressing their strong views on the subject.

This high interest is not surprising. Preschool programs operated by the public schools are the fastest growing segment of the early childhood market. Anne Mitchell estimates that state funding of Pre-K programs has risen from \$25 million in 1970 to nearly \$2 billion in 2000 (Mitchell). In 1975, public schools operated 3.2% of all child care programs in the USA (Coelen). By 2000, public schools were operating 22% of all centers (Wilson Marketing Group).

Today, all but a handful of states have state-funded Pre-K programs. The Wilson Marketing Group provides these examples of state activity in 2002 . . .

■ **California** provided over \$313 million for preschool initiatives through its State Preschool Program. In addition, Proposition 10 enacted in 1999 will provide over \$500 million per year for early childhood development. Los Angeles County voted to dedicate \$100 million towards universal Pre-K over a five year period.

■ **Georgia** uses proceeds from its state lottery to provide over \$255 million for universal full-day preschool for four year olds, regardless of family income.

■ **New York** funded two Pre-K programs to the tune of \$255 million. One is the 30-year-old Experimental Pre-K program and the other is the Universal Pre-K program, enacted in 1999 to provide half-day Pre-K services for four year olds.

■ **Illinois** provides funding of more than \$184 million for early childhood education to at-risk children through the Pre-K portion of its Early Childhood Block Grant and its state supplement to Head Start. Starting in 2003 the state will start funding six pilot sites in its Illinois Preschool program, a ten year effort aimed at establishing universal preschool for all three and four year olds.

With the public schools taking an increasing role in the provision of preschool services, a number of issues arise:

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD . . .

Betty Caldwell, University of Arkansas at Little Rock (and one of first early childhood leaders to advocate for putting preschool programs in the public schools): *I see this as perhaps the most positive trend within education of the latter part of the 20th century. It means that public education finally recognizes the necessity of considering pre-first grade education as a legitimate branch of the education tree and not simply as an annoying weed growing in the shade of the tree. Also it means that public education will begin to define itself in terms more appropriate for modern life styles rather than in a way that fits the agrarian society we were 150 years ago — schools beginning in September (after harvest) and ending in June (so the kids could help in the field). Furthermore, the involvement of public education with young children and their families will force education to be more accepting of its poor relation — day care. When young children are in school, the school day and year has to be adjusted to their needs for simultaneous care.*

Joan Lombardi, early childhood education specialist, Alexandria, VA: *I think the role of the public schools in early education has changed over the years. It is no longer only an issue of whether the schools will actually operate preschool programs or not. More and more states are investing in Pre-K, but allowing those services to be delivered by a range of organizations including schools, Head Start programs, and community-based child care programs. This should help bring more resources into the system and improve standards. Beyond operating programs, there is also a need for linkages between the community-based early education providers and the schools to ensure continuity in curriculum, qualified staff, parent involvement, and other services.*

Lynn White, National Child Care Association, Conyers, GA: *Early education and care in the United States exists within a very delicate "ecology" system. The ecology has evolved in order to keep fees affordable for working families. In practice, four year olds "subsidize" the care of infants and toddlers, keeping rates for this age group affordable to more parents. If four year olds are in public programs, that subsidy is no longer available and a center/school has no choice but to raise rates or close its doors to a community that needs infant and toddler care. In addition, this would eliminate any choice parents may have had for education and care of four year olds and older.*

Population Served

In the 1980s when public schools were just starting to be involved in the preschool arena, they primarily focused on “at-risk” four year olds. However, as involvement in early childhood increased it also expanded into serving a broader spectrum of four year olds and then three year olds. Many states are now starting to explore the concept of “universal” preschool (although definitions of this goal vary widely). A survey of *Exchange Panel of 300* members found that public schools in nearly half (48%) of their communities were still only serving “children with special needs.” However, 45% of the panel members reported that public school preschools were available to all four year olds in their communities; 21% to all three year olds; and 8% to all infants and toddlers.

Hours of Operation

By and large public school preschools operate in the “school mode,” being open only during school hours. While public schools are increasingly recognizing the need to expand hours of operation, when *Panel of 300* members were asked if early childhood services offered by public schools in their communities were open for hours and days that meet the needs of working parents, only 13% answered in the affirmative. Only 7% reported that public school preschools in their communities were open in the summer.

Collaboration/Competition

Not surprisingly, a concern in the early childhood community is that as public schools increase their provision of preschool services, this will be at the expense of current providers of these services. In fact, 31% of *Panel of 300* members indicated that “public schools provide moderate competition for the users of our services,” and 9% indicated that schools offered “serious competition.” In communities where public schools are most active in the provision of Pre-K services, competitive effects can be dramatic. For example, in a South Carolina study of

the impact of public school programs in Greenville County, 77% of community centers reported losing an average of 44% of their four year old enrollments (South Carolina Child Care Association).

Part of the concern is that public schools are able to offer services at much lower fees than centers in the community can. In 40% of the communities *Panel of 300* members indicated that preschool services offered by public schools in their communities were free to parents.

A recent trend in state Pre-K legislation is to encourage or require school districts to contract with existing providers in the community for the provision of preschool services. According to *Panel of 300* members, the proportion of school districts that operate all the early childhood services that they fund is about the same as those that have the authority to contract these services out to the community. However, panel members indicate that half those districts that

have the authority to contract out services “rarely do.”

Quality

Inevitably, the issue of quality enters into these debates. Providers of community services tend to question whether public schools are equipped or motivated to provide quality services; while public school officials suggest one reason they don’t contract services out is that the quality of existing services is so low.

While there is much heat about this issue, there is very little hard evidence. The most recent nationwide research on quality of care, the 1995 *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers* study, did find that “seven in ten centers are providing mediocre care” (Helburn).” However, the study did not include enough preschools operated by public schools in its sample to be able to make any quality comparisons. More recently, a study of the first year of the

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Anne Mitchell, Early Childhood Policy Research, Climax, NY: *This is definitely a trend that is continuing. The growth curve is very steep. The fact that the Pew Trusts have made universal preschool a singular goal of their funding is pushing the trend. So is the CED stance. I think the states to watch are Maryland (just committed funds and rhetoric to universal preschool); also, California and Florida. Actually, all the bigger states are likely to grow their programs and move to universal preschool (probably after the economy improves some). A new trend is cities taking it upon themselves to launch universal preschool, e.g., Los Angeles, Houston (an interesting business/civic partnership with child care leaders), and those that have done it for a while, like Chicago.*

Louise Stoney, Alliance for Childhood Finance, Averill Park, NY: *I see public Pre-K initiatives as an opportunity — not a threat. Opposing these initiatives is shooting ourselves in the foot. Instead, we should embrace them and tell our policy makers “of course we need early ed dollars in the system, and to meet family needs those dollars need to flow to a wide range of programs — in schools as well as community- and home-based programs.” We need to see Pre-K as a funding stream not a discreet program that has to run through the schools.*

We need to embrace quality standards and encourage policy makers to link public school dollars to standards that require the ECE programs that participate (whether they are in schools or community-based) to have teachers with ECE or child development training or education, classes with appropriate ratios, child-centered curricula, etc. We should not shy away from standards and accountability — we should insist on it. In this way, we are not only holding all ECE providers — including the schools — accountable for good quality programs, we are showing parents that early education is about quality staff, good ratios, etc. — and those conditions can occur in a variety of settings.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD . . .

Deborah Hampton, Ecumenical Child Care Network, Chicago, IL: *I am worried that community services will be cut. Because public schools can render services at a lower rate, it may decrease the need for community-based programs in churches, neighborhood centers, Head Start, etc. Because many of the employees of the community-based services live in the community, they are realistically aware of the problems, needs, and concerns of parents. Their services, in many cases, reach far beyond those of public schools. I like the way the city of Chicago has instituted a partnership with public schools and community-based programs. Many of the Pre-K services are in churches, city colleges, and neighborhood centers along with the public school. This gives parents a choice of services. It also gives the public school a healthy alliance with the community.*

Patricia King, Child and Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut, New London, CT: *Providing a program that is 2 to 2-1/2 hours in length is a logistical nightmare for parents. Fragmenting a child's day with before- and after-preschool programming is not in the best interest of the children. Their day should have the least number of transitions possible. And, since preschool children develop skills in all domains while engaged in all sorts of activities, curriculum should be developed with respect to this and not crammed into a 2 to 2-1/2 hour program.*

Alan Berlin, Southern Oregon Child and Family Council, Central Point, OR: *Public schools are struggling with existing resources to provide adequate services to the K-12 population. Current providers of 0-5 services have skills and experience that should not be lost as society considers broadening public school involvement in preschool education. The opportunity/threat of public school involvement in ECE has run head first into enormous state budget problems across the country.*

Yasmina Vinci, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies: *I consider the movement to "universal Pre-K" to be the train that has left the station. The main driver for this is the education reform embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act. That is, if schools are going to be held accountable for the child's performance in the 3rd grade, folks in education are beginning to think that maybe learning does in fact start real early. So we have the old early childhood troops who have been beating that drum, strengthened by all the brain development research, in the same camp as the ed people, with a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. I am hoping that the ECE community will be able to shape what that looks like, community by community and state by state, so that this new "thing" is good for the kids and good for the families and preserves parental choice.*

Helen Blank, Children's Defense Fund, Washington, DC: *I see the role of public schools in early childhood increasing in the future for two reasons. First, with the strong focus on testing and accountability, schools are going to want to ensure that the children that come to kindergarten have a strong start. Second, schools may find that they increasingly need to respond to the needs of parents who work outside the home. Oklahoma, for example, now provides state funding for universal prekindergarten if local school districts come up with their contribution. These programs are for the most part located in public schools. On the other hand, I do believe that as early childhood evolves, it will continue to include a diverse delivery system.*

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Art Stellar, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, MI: *Financial reductions in some state educational budgets will dampen the enthusiasm for adding pre-kindergarten to public schools, but the effect will not be sufficient to stop this pattern. In fact, as some local school systems have suggested cutbacks in existing early childhood programs, parents have brought political pressure to bear. In a few situations, parents and/or community groups have raised funds for preschool programs. Funds for preschool in some form will come even in these hard economic times. Los Angeles County voters approved a tax referendum for preschool this year. Florida voters, likewise, approved a statewide referendum to establish universal pre-kindergartens.*

Elanna S. Yalow, Knowledge Learning Corporation, San Rafael, CA: *Families currently have a variety of options available to them when selecting an early childhood program for their child. Parents can choose from religious-based programs, settings with a certain educational focus, programs with an enhanced ratio of caregiver to child, home-based programs, etc. Child care centers, particularly those in the private sector, must attract and retain families, and thus they typically strive to be very family-focused by providing the services that families want and need. Under the pre-defined and static structure of most school districts, families would lose many of these types of choices . . . [In addition] early childhood education teachers currently have a variety of choices in settings in which to apply their expertise and preferences, and many may appreciate opportunities to express creativity and apply their experience in ways that may not be available within a school district.*

Rose Gabriel, Gabriel and Associates, Kennesaw, GA: *The state of Georgia has a free Pre-K program paid for by our lottery funds. I've done work in the public schools and child care centers as a consultant. I found that most of the child care centers do a better job than the public schools. The child care centers have a better understanding of early education and what is developmentally appropriate. Public schools seem to have expectations that are inappropriate for four-year-old children.*

Linda Lovett, Active Learning, Riverside, CA: *With higher interest in public Pre-K for all four year olds, I believe that public schools will show higher interest in the delivery of universal preschool. In our experience during the last four years (with a direct contract for state preschool with the California Department of Education), our low income parents tell us they are treated with more dignity and respect in our private program. They also state they feel more welcome and empowered. We believe this is true since they volunteer at least three hours per month (and more) in the classroom. Along with kindergarten readiness, our underlying mission is to help prepare families to assume an advocacy role for their child in public school. Many of our parents are Spanish speaking and typically would not challenge the educational system. Unfortunately, our district is not particularly user friendly to second language families with little or no first language support. However, our parents are not only transitioning, but are becoming very involved in leadership roles such as PTA, Parent Site Councils, and other volunteer roles. They often come back and tell us, "It's just not the same. It's like they don't want us."*

New York State Universal Prekindergarten program by Cornell University found that school district classrooms for four year olds were by and large following developmentally appropriate practices (Lekies & Cochran).

In the Final Analysis

A nearly unanimous consensus among those surveyed for this Trend Report is that public schools will become increasingly active in the provision of early childhood services. There is also some degree of consensus that in future initiatives there will be increasing emphasis on providing services in a way that meets the needs of families, and on collaborating with existing services in the community.

A possible precursor of what is to come is First 5 LA, an initiative approved by the voters of Los Angeles County to “optimize the development and well-being of all children, from the prenatal stage until their fifth birthday by increasing resources, ensuring access to services, and improving the abilities of families, communities, and providers of services.” This ambitious project, headed by Evelyn Martinez, is not adding another piece to the patchwork

of services that already exists, but is investing its energies first in formulating a comprehensive plan that addresses the needs of all families in the county and utilizes the assets of all providers in the county. The model that develops may provide a direction for other communities to follow.

Clearly, at present, the public schools earn mixed marks in the early childhood arena — they are not often meeting the needs of working families, and in many places they are not doing a good job of collaborating. However, it would appear that it would be in the best interests of all members of the early childhood community, not to try to stop this trend, but rather to help shape it, community by community, in a way that best meets the needs of children and families.

Resources/References

The quotes from early childhood leaders in this article represent only a fraction of the feedback for this Trend Report. For a more complete report on leaders' views, go to the “Free Resources from Exchange” section of our web site www.ChildCareExchange.com.

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VIEWS FROM THE FIELD . . .

Dwayne A. Dennis, KCMC Child Development Services, Kansas City, MO: *Public school teachers may not be prepared to work with preschool children. A 1998 nationally representative survey found that 78% of kindergarten teachers have professional credentials in elementary education, not in early childhood education. Without specialized training in early childhood education theories, practices, and research, elementary school teachers may not equate professional preschool practices — more individualized activities with time for children to develop their interests and abilities at their own pace — with real teaching.*

Susan Vessels, Community Coordinated Child Care, Louisville, KY: *If you are interested in an example of how NOT to combine these two services, Louisville is a prime example. As the school system offers more early childhood programs, the child care industry becomes weaker and weaker. The five-year-old kindergartners were closely followed by the four-year-old Pre-K kids into the public school system, now being joined by the threes — leaving child care providers to try to keep the economic boat afloat with only infants and toddlers. The superintendent of schools frequently states that he wants all children three and up to be in the school system. Attempts at collaborations have been dismal failures with the child care industry coming out on the bottom.*