

League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces

A Vision for Universal Preschool Education

By Edward Zigler, Walter S. Gilliam, and Stephanie M. Jones

Summary Report by Roberta Gran

In the Introduction Edward Zigler states that the basis for this book comes from 40 years of research in the field of applied developmental psychology. It is written in an effort to effect support for and constructive improvement in universal preschool education.

Education ministries in many countries control the education system, but education in America is primarily the responsibility of state and local governments, and this has created a wide difference in not only the level of preparedness for kindergarten but the quality of preschool programs.

In this book the authors present their model as an achievable goal for a program that will meet the needs for school readiness, the ultimate objective for a preschool program, in all children.

School Readiness

As is known about how children learn, the body of research, the understanding of early childhood teachers and parents, learning standards based on the *Head Start Child Outcomes Framework* have been determined to be acceptable and appropriate expectations for preschool programs. The elements in this framework are: language development, literacy, mathematics, science, creative arts, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and physical health and development. These offer a well-prepared starting point from which states can develop their own programs and goals for their systems and be better prepared to map out their K-12 program expectation.

A clear definition of school readiness and outcomes measurements are important because they eliminate duplication of effort by policy makers, and states can benefit by the body of knowledge from the research for their own planning.

The whole child approach is appealing to many of those involved in the education and well-being of a child, from teachers and administrators to parents and state and policy makers. The ecological view of school readiness encompasses child, family and school issues. A useful definition of school readiness must by necessity involve many aspects in a child's life. A solid definition of readiness will help to prepare the design of preschool curricula, learn how to evaluate how successful a program is, and achieve the goal of readiness for school.

In the whole child approach, the authors believe that cognitive tasks, although important for what children need as they grow and learn, they also need to master physical and motor skills, to learn healthy emotional communication skills, and to acquire the motivation and eagerness to achieve new tasks that demand new skills. Intelligence does not develop independently. They make clear that they do not discount the importance of pre-literacy or early math abilities, but the strictly academic approach to teaching in pre-K programs they believe is shortsighted and perhaps damaging to children's future chances. They believe it is important to focus on 1) the cognitive and early academic skills needed as a base on which to build later skills; 2) the social-emotional skills needed to be an effective learner; 3) the physical and mental health of a child that

influences his or her ability to do well in any of these domains, and 4) the “environment of relationships: within which children construct their worlds.

Economic Returns

The research clearly proves that quality early school preparation is a win-win investment in our family, community, state and national well-being. Children do better throughout school life, there are far fewer dropouts, criminal and pregnancy rates go down substantially, there are fewer tax dollars going to health care, many more go on to college and complete it, they achieve a higher income status and are more involved in community. These reduce public cost which could better be used for the education of our children and the improvement of their quality of life.

The challenge for the future is how the principles based on scientific research and evidence on early education can best be used to meet the needs of children and families. Scientific data supports the benefits of a wide variety of programs. Clear guidelines indicate what makes early education programs effective. They must be well organized, focused on promoting readiness, be able to employ and retain well-trained staff, and offer comprehensive services. The concerns between targeting limited resources to the most disadvantaged children and providing a coherent system for all will be with us for a while, but focusing on the above principles will help to achieve a better balance between the two. As more resources are allocated to expanding programs for early education, the evidence of the benefits will be indisputable.

The Need for Universal Prekindergarten for Children in Poverty has been proven and has convinced scholars and policy makers of the validity of the findings. However funding for disadvantaged children remains sparse at best. Non-poor children continue to have greater access to quality preschool programs, and the most at-risk children are most likely not to participate in preschool programs. Although federal and state subsidies have greatly improved access to programs, low income children are still very much under served and under-enrolled.

The authors go on to point out that since it began as part of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty, Head Start has achieved remarkable results. However, due to lack of current funding, the more than 900,000 preschoolers Head Start serves annually are only about 50-60% of those eligible. There is a big difference among states as to how many are served and the requirements that must be met to attend. The targeting approach used is also a factor in which children are eligible. Today, the need for universal access to high quality preschool programs is critical, and with so many mothers in the work force, these children are not being properly prepared for K-12.

Research demonstrates that family income is associated with cognitive development, educational achievement and social behavior from the earliest years and increase as they increase as the child grows. Other adverse effects are decreased intelligence scores and vocabulary, poor social development such as low self esteem, underachievement and anti-social behavior. Findings from model programs for poor children have definitively shown an increase in all of the above characteristics. Clearly, early education that includes the full range of academic, social, and health needs of low-income children are vital to their success in school and in life in general.

For children not living in poverty, the evidence shows that family income and maternal education are not guarantees of school readiness even though these children are not considered “at risk.” They need the same rich language and literary experiences, introduction to math concepts, and skills learned in arts and interactive play to prepare for school. But it has become

evident that they too are ill-prepared for school, due in part to poor child care environments and parents who are both working and unable to devote energy, as well as overly academic programs that leave the children devoid of good physical and mental health and age-appropriate social and emotional traits to thrive in a school setting.

Program Quality, Intensity and Duration are the focus of several chapters in that they address the content of effective programs. Quality is important because those children in high quality programs show better developmental outcomes. Quality programs enhance school readiness, particularly for children in at risk environments.

Intensity is defined as the amount of the program children receive on a daily basis, and duration is defined as the amount of time they attend a program. Effectiveness depends on how much of the integral ingredients such as stimulating interaction with adults, other children, and classroom materials that encourage learning they have. The more intensity and the longer the duration, the more of these ingredients they have. Little is known about the degree of intensity needed to be of benefit to preschoolers; but it is known that children in full-day kindergarten scored significantly higher than half-day participants on school readiness indicators.

To provide the quality needed to support development and school readiness, the recommendations are:

- Be led by a teacher with a bachelor's degree or higher including specialized training in early childhood education, and an assistant teacher with at least a CDA credential or associate's degree in early education.
- Have a system of continuous in-service training for all staff
- Be led by teachers who are compensated at a rate competitive with elementary teachers with the same level of training, experience and work hours
- Have no more than 10 preschoolers per teacher or assistant teacher, and few if children with special needs are in the class.
- Have full-day and two-year program options
- Implement a curriculum with empirically demonstrated effectiveness in increasing readiness
- Have a clear plan for parental involvement
- Have a monitoring system in place that includes on-site observation of the quality of education and care, with results used for tangible quality-enhancement efforts
- Have funding levels adequate to support high quality programs.

As regards parent involvement, although as in the Head Start programs, it has been shown to be beneficial to the learning capability of the children, the authors suggest that more research be conducted in the context of state-funded programs. Programs like Head Start, even though they have been developed and used exclusively with low-income parents, are a great opportunity to

link policy and research in a more unified way. The authors pose the question “of how the meaning of maximum feasible participation may differ for universal prekindergartens and the broader array of families they serve.” The research to date does not provide a clear answer to this question. There are too many variables such as the socioeconomic and cultural makeup of local preschool populations, and the preferences of individual communities to determine which practices currently work best. However the authors do provide questions that form a framework for researches and policy makers to build on the Head Start model.

It was notable to me that the first statement in their section on professional development is that children should receive early education experiences in a caring environment. They believe that state-sponsored pre-K will be available to all 4 year olds by the end of this decade. But the challenge will be to begin and maintain high-quality programs. At the center will be creating a pool of highly qualified teachers, and it will be necessary to define exactly what that means since many believe that pre-K teachers should be as well educated as elementary teachers. The American Federation of Teachers recommend that all Pre-K teachers have a BA. Today we would need over 185,000 lead teachers for a universal, voluntary pre-K program to be accessible to all four-year-olds, and in many states there is a serious shortage. In recent research taken, four states allowed teachers with an associate’s degree and eight required a Child Development Associate credential. Requiring all teachers to have a BA in early childhood education must mean developing a strategy for mobilizing quickly to meet this demand.

Strategies they suggest for promoting a highly qualified teacher work force are:

1. Credit-bearing in-service training for current preschool teachers who do not yet have a BA
6. Mentorship and Technical Assistance Programs
7. Accessibility such as distance learning, or holding classes at nontraditional times.
8. Faculty training, such as efforts to support faculty in pre-service training programs.

In Chapter 10 the authors describe the School of the 21st Century as a “comprehensive approach to the provision of several programs and services to families and children from birth to 12 years of age” that was begun to develop a system for child care and early education, both of which should be synergistic and are not at this time. The School of the 21st Century incorporates both, but also includes outreach services such as home visits, outreach to family and other child care providers; information and referrals for needed services, and health, mental health, and nutrition education. Societal changes, the increase in divorce rates, high mobility, the large number of children living in poverty, the increase in the number of children from low-income immigrant families, and lack of social capital over the past 4 decades have demonstrated a serious need for such services as those provided by the 21st C Schools. One solution is to tap into the already existing public school infrastructure, much of which is used only part of the day and ¾ of a year.

There is widespread opposition to this for various reasons, some of which are overburden of space and personnel, social issues and economic limitations. In the long run however, experience with the 21st C Schools has proven that it is both feasible and beneficial for all concerned by parent fees for child care, which would provide extra income for public schools, encourage school readiness, and help older students coming up through the process maintain continuity and maintain better academic standing, not to mention the relief of working parents.

In Chapter 11, the authors say that when Head Start was begun fewer than half of the states offered compulsory kindergarten and only in some districts. For many children school started at first grade, when they were 6 or 7 years old. Now Head Start has proven that its programs are

successful, and they have become the standard for services for at-risk children. Enrollment more than doubled between 1989 and 2003, but the program only serves about half of the target population. The authors believe that Head Start will never grow to meet the needs of all children below the poverty line.

The reasons for this are that Head Start is and always has been politically vulnerable. President George W. Bush initiated a campaign to “dissemble” Head Start’s components and leave it up to the states to initiate their own programs. The debates between liberals and conservatives will continue and Head Start will continue to be caught in the middle.

Head Start is not a perfect program, and one problem is the limited eligibility criteria between those who are just below the income requirement and those just above. The consensus is that children who learn in a heterogeneous environment benefit, but the issue will continue to raise its horny head. This problem at least is being raised and dealt with at the state level, and the authors believe that eventually all children will have access to public preschool.

The three possible roles that Head Start could play in a well-rounded universal preschool environment are: services to families and children before the age of three to ward off accumulated developmental risks; health and social support services so that children who are at risk reach their academic potential; and children with special educational needs.

The authors go on to write about Head Start’s history and how it has evolved. It started through the efforts of Sargent Shriver, President Johnson’s chief strategist in the antipoverty effort to enable poor adults to gain economic and political parity; but he soon realized that half of the poor population was children and that in order to break the cycle of poverty, they must be better prepared to enter school along with more advantaged children. This idea of early education was unprecedented, as was the concept of the whole child, which also evolved at this time. Head Start began with a bang as the government threw money at the program, even though there were those who wanted to start with a pilot project and grow slowly. As a result, problems occurred with structure and implementation. Fortunately, the program has evolved into a smoother more seamless program, thanks to the heady body of research and the experts who have lead the way, being mindful of the changing demographic, social and political forces that have prompted adjustments in direction. It is important that Head Start agencies in every state be an integral part in state preschool planning or these and other reasons.

In Chapter 11, the authors reiterate the scope of research, knowledge and evidence they’ve presented to make the case for those features of a model universal preschool system that they believe are necessary to prepare children for school. Their model is comprehensive and provides continuity through their future school years. They emphasize the importance of care for infants and toddlers. For preschool for children three and four, they review the information about the importance of duration, location, class size and teacher/child ratios, teacher qualification, program content, transition services, and assessment.

Their objective is to inspire local, state and federal entities to set their own goals and take action to bring about universal prekindergarten. Head Start, Early Head Start, PAT, and 21C have all demonstrated that their model is possible for large-scale implementation.

The public and political will is so forceful that now is the time to strike while the fire is hot. Now is the time, as the authors say, “to create a national model, one that states can use in their planning to ensure that their programs are of sufficient intensity, breadth, and quality to enable

all children to achieve school readiness.” They conclude by stating that the political and public will for universal preschool is stronger than ever, and powerful advocates have joined the movement. Now is the time to create a national model for states to use in their planning to ensure their programs are of sufficient intensity, breadth, and quality to prepare children for school.

The final chapter is a brief summary and, also briefly, the recommendation headlines defined throughout the book. They are:

1. Defining school readiness
2. Curriculum
3. Comprehensive services
4. Parent involvement
5. Duration and Intensity
6. Settings and Collaboration
7. Quality
8. Program Accountability and Monitoring
9. Work Force Development
10. Funding