



D IN THESE TIMES

Yet in the long run, Head Start and other preschool programs turn out to pay off in better school performance, even if it can't be measured by grades or test scores. Researchers speculate that the programs work because they provide poor kids with a more positive introduction to learning than they usually get in kindergarten, where high class sizes and low expectations are the norm for most low-income children.

The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies speculated that because preschool graduates entered school with "positive attitudes toward classroom activities and were able to learn and do the school work...[their] positive attitudes toward school were reinforced, they felt competent. In all probability, their teachers treated them as such. Once set in motion, success tended to breed success." In other words, kids may not be smarter or get better grades as a result of preschool, but they learn to like school, to meet basic course assignments and to persevere to graduation.

Not surprisingly, the best preschool programs of the past and present employ well-trained teachers. They all have low child-to-staff ratios, ensuring that children get sufficient guidance and attention from adults. While curricula vary, successful programs feature activities that indulge children's own initiatives and creativity rather than academic exercises rigidly controlled by teachers. Perhaps most important, programs that work involve parents in a significant way.

Head Start is the model for a family-focused program. Even conservatives like it, because it seeks not to replace parents as primary educators of their children, but to help them better fill that role. Head Start had a mandate to involve parents at every level, as staff members and volunteers and in determining local program goals.

According to a 1985 report to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), that mandate has been met. Fully a third of Head Start staff are the parents of present or past Head Start students, and "many Head Start parents attribute improved employment and educational status and elevated personal aspirations to Head Start involvement," the HHS study found.

Cutting corners: Predictably, although there is a consensus about the key elements of a quality preschool program, many early childhood education programs try to cut corners and stretch scarce program dollars by skimping on those quality standards.

"It is senseless to cite evidence from exemplary, high-quality programs and then to enact a program with low spending, low ratios, low salaries and inadequate teacher preparation," says University of California-Berkeley economist W. Norton Grubb. Yet that's exactly what many states and school districts are doing. Texas, which sponsors pre-kindergarten programs for poor and non-English-speaking four-year-olds, allows ratios of one teacher for 22 children—more than twice the ratio recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and far above the 1-to-6 ratio of the Perry Preschool program. New Jersey allows 25 four-year-olds per teacher, while Maine sets no limit.

Few programs require the intensive outreach to parents that Head Start and the model preschool experiments of the '60s did. Programs run by school districts come in for particular criticism, especially for blacks, for neglecting to involve parents. Minority children and parents, such critics note, are often poorly treated in existing public-school programs. School-based child development programs will become an "incubator for inequality," the National Black Child Development Institute warns, unless administrators are forced to involve parents in meaningful ways.

For children whose first language isn't English—a growing target of early childhood education efforts in California and Texas—there is real danger in programs that neglect parents, says bilingual education expert Lily Wong Fillmore. "There is a 'prestige differential' between the language kids use at home and English, which is taught in school. Learning English in preschool at age four can make kids reject their own language, and in doing so they reject, and feel rejected by, their families." Only a family-centered program that promotes parent leadership can help children handle the emotional complexities of preschool bilingualism, Fillmore contends.

In some families—those in which the long-term effects of poverty are manifested in parents' emotional problems, drug or alcohol addiction, child neglect or abuse—early childhood programs are useless unless they involve parents as fully as children. "There's no way that any program can substitute for parent-

ing," Stanford University child welfare expert Michael Wald told a forum on early childhood development in Oakland last April. "We have to work with parents to help them give their children what they need." Yet only a relative handful of programs across the country are providing troubled families with the array of parent support and child development services that make a difference.

Implementing effective preschool programs can also get tangled in disagreement about government's role in providing child care. Bowing to the right, Vice President George Bush has opposed direct public subsidies to child-care programs, because they are believed to "discriminate" against families with a stay-at-home mother. But Bush favors Head Start expansion, because the half-day preschool program isn't intended to provide child care for working parents.

Yet half-day programs such as Head Start, or New York City's landmark public school program for four-year-olds, may wind up serving a limited pool of poor children, because poor parents who work need full-day child-care services. Bank Street College researchers Fern Marx and Anne Mitchell, who surveyed the nation's early childhood education scene in a recent report, were alarmed by the lack of coordination between new preschool initiatives and efforts to expand child-care services, "especially given the current push to get welfare mothers to work," says Mitchell.

In other words, legislators are designing mandatory work programs for welfare mothers while implementing half-

day preschool programs for their kids, most of whom, once their mothers work, will need full-day child care. No wonder people don't like government.

Damage control: The politics of preschool is best worked out on a local, not national, level. In Oakland, Calif., an initiative to expand early childhood programs for poor families is being spearheaded by the Urban Strategies Council, a non-profit research and advocacy group established in 1987 to combat "persistent poverty." With a working group of local child development professionals and an advisory committee that includes elected officials, educators and community and business leaders, the group laid out a blueprint to expand and improve existing programs, using federal, state, city and private sector funds.

Its approach is frankly pluralistic, attempting to build on a wide range of programs, from Head Start and public school centers to family day-care homes and for-profit child-care centers. It recommends tailoring some programs to better serve the working poor, and others specially designed for those on welfare. The group's recommendations have spurred action by county welfare and school officials. Perhaps most important, the process has fostered collaboration among programs that share a mission to serve low-income families but, thanks to time constraints or turf battles, rarely coordinate their efforts.

Likewise in Minneapolis, city leaders troubled by rising poverty amid a service economy boom are developing a strategy

Continued on page 22

Expanding Head Start: a first step in education reform

While George Bush and Michael Dukakis clash on most domestic policy issues, both have pledged to substantially expand the Head Start program, which currently reaches only one in six eligible children. While he's at it, the next president could also modernize the venerable War on Poverty program to outfit it for the '90s.

Head Start is still the model for family-focused preschool education and parent support programs for the poor. Yet little effort has been made to formally link it to other anti-poverty programs. Federal initiatives to put welfare mothers to work and to expand child-care funding are moving forward in isolation from Head Start. So are most school reform efforts, even though national studies by the Carnegie Foundation and the Committee for Economic Development have called for Head Start expansion as a first step in education reform.

One way to update the program is to expand its traditional half-day program to provide full-day services. Working poor parents can benefit from Head Start's family support services as much as welfare parents, but few use it because their children need full-day care. Offering full-day services would also make Head Start more relevant to welfare reform efforts. Right now, children's needs are often lost in the frenzy to put welfare mothers to work, and most programs pay for only the cheapest possible child care—ignoring the fact that the

same children are eligible for enriched programs like Head Start.

A push to expand Head Start should also place greater emphasis on developing ties with school districts and other child-development programs. Federal researchers examining the relationship between Head Start and state and local preschool programs last year more than once heard the question, "Oh, is the Head Start pro-

gram still around?" Some programs compete with Head Start for children. Not surprisingly, the study found that coordination with local child-development programs and school districts improved Head Start's overall effectiveness.

Improved coordination might also improve Head Start outreach, a problem in some areas. Traditional outreach efforts, administrators say, aren't reaching a critical group of ever-younger single mothers, many of them teens. Outside social service networks, many mothers turn responsibility for their children over to their mothers or grandmothers, who aren't found through usual outreach channels.

Some of those problems might be solved by lowering the age at which children can enter Head Start, which is currently set at three. Parents are easiest to reach and most interested in child care and social services when their children are first born, research shows, but those who can't find help often fall through the safety net permanently.

Serving younger children would allow Head Start to reach teen mothers, who are essentially left out of the program today. Unable to find child care, many teen mothers leave school and wind up on welfare. Full-day Head Start that could serve infants would be an invaluable resource in efforts to help families headed by teens, who make up a growing proportion of the poor today. —J.W.



Hispanic day-care center in Washington, D.C.

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