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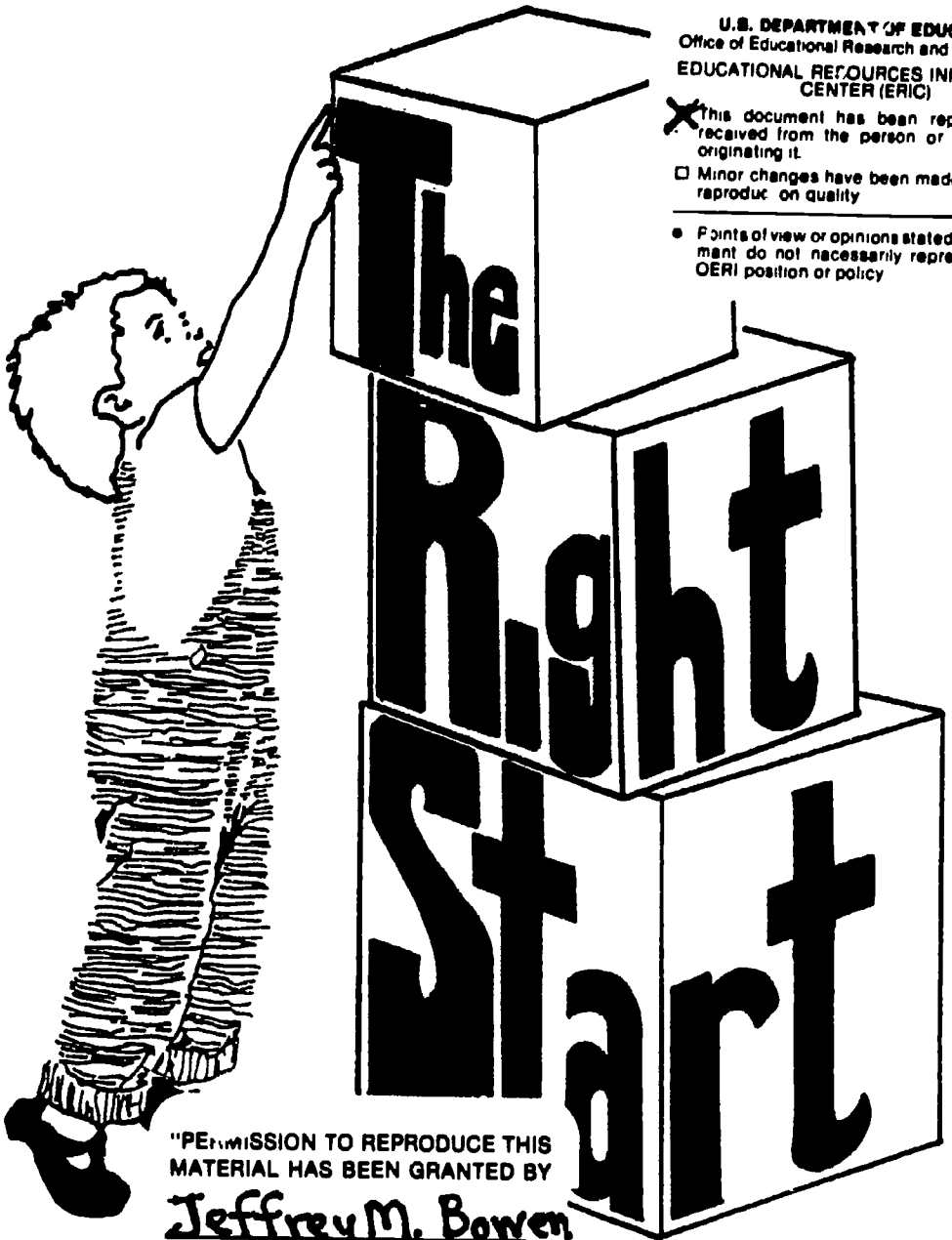
ABSTRACT

This position paper offers recommendations related to problems and promises of early childhood education in the public schools. Issues of particular concern to school boards in the state of New York are considered. A summary of recommendations and introductory background information are followed by a section that focuses on child care and the public schools. The second section discusses expanded preschool and kindergarten instruction in terms of instructional services for 3- to 5-year-olds, Project Head Start, the New York State Experimental Prekindergarten Program, the private sector preschool, and full-day kindergarten programs. The third, fourth, and fifth sections concern certification of early childhood personnel, regulatory authority for monitoring and evaluation, and prekindergarten for children with handicapping conditions. The paper calls for the exploration of new options that schools can use to serve the needs of children and families in the community. Schools should have the flexibility to enter into cooperative arrangements to provide child care and educational services for preschoolers, and to offer full-day kindergarten, if backed by full state funding. Thirty references are included. (RH)



Promises and Problems in Early Childhood Education

A Position Paper of the
NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

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The Right Start

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Summary of Recommendations

- Public school involvement is both a logical and practical way to increase availability of early educational or child care opportunities.
- School districts should be free to establish alternative methods of delivering or supporting day care programs if communities desire them.
- A concerted effort by schools, private providers, and public agencies, reinforced by strong financial support from the state, can improve the meeting of child care needs in New York State.
- Prekindergarten programs should not be mandated, but districts should have flexibility to offer prekindergarten programs with full state financial support and local access to a variety of funding streams.
- To encourage greater equity in provision of early childhood education, state-funded prekindergarten programs should be expanded to reach children in all areas of the state where need is shown.
- Whether they are half day or full day, kindergarten programs should use time more efficiently. Districts must have flexibility in choosing and developing programs to meet community needs. If resources are available, an option for half-day or full-day should be offered.
- A separate certification for teachers of early childhood education should be established, incorporating a baccalaureate of coursework and supervised practice uniquely suited to the educational needs and demands of preschool age children.
- Qualifications for certification of all day care personnel should be established by the Department of Social Services in conjunction with the State Education Department.
- The process of certifying day care personnel should include more stringent screening procedures and more emphasis on child development courses and in-service training.
- Assisted by interagency cooperation with regard to regulatory control at the state level, school districts should have the flexibility to establish cooperative arrangements for combined prekindergarten and day care programs in the school facility.
- More information about and standards for private prekindergarten programs are needed to ensure consistent quality statewide.
- The State Education Department should become more involved in monitoring and evaluating educational programming in all preschools and day care programs. However, recognizing that the Department of Social Services has well established mechanisms to evaluate the custodial aspects of such programs, there should be a cooperative interagency effort to explore effective monitoring and accountability.
- Early childhood program providers should be encouraged to build their programs on curriculum that teaches children to be good learn-

ers and how to work with adults who are not members of their families.

- It is time to consider seriously legislative proposals to shift the responsibility for coordinating the educational programs of preschool children with handicapping conditions, age 3 through 5, from the family courts to the public schools, backed by full state funding.
- Early screening and intervention on behalf of children with handicapping conditions should be expanded.
- School districts should not be required to run their own preschool special education programs, but rather should only be responsible for providing suitable placement for 3- to 5-year-old children with handicapping conditions identified by the local committee on the handicapped (COH).
- The State Education Department should have the statutory authority to develop criteria for licensing the prekindergarten handicapped programs from which placements are chosen. This criteria should include site visitation as well as educational evaluations of the child.
- If school districts are to become more responsible for coordinating early education programs for children with handicapping conditions, legislators must help solve problems of overburdened committees on the handicapped (COH's) and difficulties in obtaining affordable insurance.

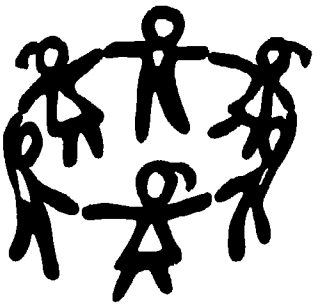
Introduction

In recent years, demographic, economic, and attitudinal shifts in American society have increased and broadened the social demand for child care services and early education programs for preschool-age children. Economic pressures on two-parent families, growth in the number of single parent households, and shifting attitudes about career and family roles for women have increased the number of mothers in the labor force. Among married mothers, 64 percent with school-age children and 51 percent with preschool-age children work outside the home. For mothers who are the single parent, the percentage is even higher: 67 percent are in the labor force.

Another relevant demographic change is the growing number of children living in poverty. In 1983, one of every four children of preschool age lived in families with incomes below the poverty line ($10,178 for a family of four). In New York State, the incidence of poverty among families with school-age children more than doubled from 1970 to 1983. Only 20 percent of children whose families earn less than $15,000 a year receive a child care subsidy.

While demand may outpace availability for some time to come, programs in early childhood education are receiving strong affirmation from research. The evidence of benefits derived from preschool education is overwhelming. Findings from a study of New York's experimental prekindergarten program indicate that 4-year-olds who had preschool experience, compared to those who had not, were less likely to repeat a grade or be placed in special education classes for children with learning problems. Overall, the prekindergarten experience reduced by 30 percent the number of children who could have been expected to make less than normal progress. Some districts experienced up to a 50 percent reduction.

Further support for prekindergarten programs has been generated by the Ypsilanti Michigan Perry Preschool Project, a longitudinal study which followed 123 Head Start children from preschool to the age of 19, comparing subsequent performances and experiences of children who had a high quality preschool program to performances of children who had no preschool. Project analysts report that 67 percent of the students in the preschool group graduated from high school, while only one out of two in the group with no preschool attained this goal. Young people with preschool enrolled in job training or college at a rate of 38 percent versus 21 percent, and they were almost twice as likely as those with no preschool to be self-supporting—45 percent versus 25 percent. Also cited were a lower arrest rate, and a reduced tendency to become welfare recipients.



In addition to benefiting children, research shows that prekindergarten programs actually can save tax dollars. A cost benefit analysis of the Perry Preschool Program conducted by economists showed significant savings. While the program cost $4,818 per child in 1981 dollars, based on school, policy and welfare records, an estimated $3,100 per child was saved because students in the program required less remedial teaching and other social services. The benefits of the program, measured in reduced need for high cost special education services and increased projected lifetime earnings for children, returned 326 percent on investment. In other words, the participating children cost less to educate and eventually produce more for themselves and society. Moreover, the investigators in the Perry Preschool Project did not consider in their estimate of reduced costs of subsequent education the likelihood that the need for compensatory education would be reduced.

Recognizing these demographic trends and research findings, state legislatures across the nation have made child care and early childhood education significant areas of new legislative activity. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, at least 28 states have enacted early childhood initiatives in the last three years. New programs and those under consideration range from before and after school child care, and Head Start-inspired programs run by local community agencies, to full-day kindergartens and establishment of state panels to examine preschool and child care issues.

This paper discusses issues of particular concern to school boards. Recommendations are drawn from the observations of programs, current research, and prevailing educational philosophy. All members of the educational community are encouraged to consider the ideas presented here and to join the New York State School Boards Association in meeting the challenges to effective and equitable preschool programming.

Child Care and the Public Schools

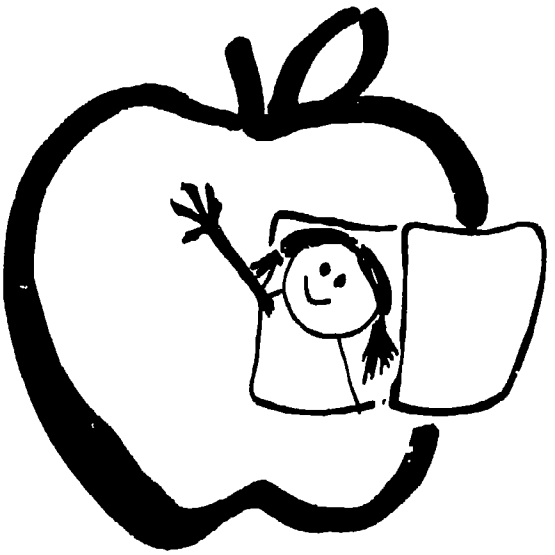
Child care or day care is traditionally an arrangement in which a child receives custodial care. Its primary goal is to provide a safe environment in which personal maintenance needs can be met. Prekindergarten, on the other hand, specifically addresses educational and social, as well as custodial needs. Developmentally-oriented, age-appropriate activities are designed to promote school readiness. Kindergarten is the facet of early childhood education for which public schools are already responsible. Students continue to develop their own styles of learning and social interaction, while being cared for in a nurturing environment.

Child care and early childhood education have been called both "natural allies" and "natural enemies." As allies, they can offer program coordination and continuity in an appropriate learning environment. As enemies, they can prevent logical connections between key contributions to a child's overall development.

The often adversarial relationship of day care versus early childhood education is an outgrowth of their origins. Day care has roots in the world of social services and is identified with care and protection for young children. Early childhood education, on the other hand, emphasizes an instructional purpose. To separate the two functions is to misunderstand both. An enormous body of research spanning several decades confirms that effectively caring for children is impossible without educating, and vice versa. To serve adequately the custodial, educational, and social needs of children and families, both components must be present. Making them consistent and compatible is a critical challenge shared by all early childhood program providers.

It is estimated that by 1990 the number of children under 6 years old needing child care will have increased to at least 10 million, a 25 percent increase from 1982. Public school involvement is both a logical and practical way to increase availability of early educational or child care opportunities. Many school districts have the resources to support their own day care programs. Others could coordinate and lend support to those services readily available. Public school involvement not only could help raise the standard of existing programs, but also could provide the continuity of services essential for attaining long-range educational goals. At present, continuity is missing because innumerable sponsoring agencies and primary schools do not coordinate their programs.

Districts should be free to establish alternative methods of delivering or supporting day care programs if their communities desire them. A Cornell University study has shown that 12 percent of schools now use their buildings to house day care programs.



This type of arrangement encourages cooperation and communication between the public school and day care provider, as well as with the parents. For parents who must bring more than one child to a school or day care situation, the single site concept is ideal.

A model school-age child care project in Merrick attests to the fact that partnership arrangements between schools and parents can result in successful after school programs. The service is basically self-supporting and therefore does not burden the taxpayer. Parents are charged up to $6 per day, and the school district pays for maintenance costs. Custodians' schedules are rearranged so that the rooms used from 2:30 to 6:00 p.m. each day are the last to be cleaned. Students who might otherwise be left unsupervised are engaged in constructive, organized activities in facilities that are already available.

In a cooperative effort, the New York State Departments of Education and Social Services recognized the heightened need for school-age child care by allocating $300,000 in seed money to help school districts develop before and after school programs. Grants of up to $10,000 were awarded on a competitive basis to provide funding for start-up costs from planning, rent, operations and equipment. The demand for services in New York State, however, was five times greater than the available funding: 150 districts applied for 30 grants.

The need for quality day care services is growing, and public school involvement is proving to be an important factor in whether that need will be met. A concerted effort by schools, private providers, and public agencies, reinforced by strong financial support from the state, can greatly improve the fulfillment of child care needs in New York State.

Expanded Preschool and Kindergarten Instruction

Instructional Services for 3- to 5-Year-Olds

The optimum age for children to begin formal schooling can be debated without ever getting closer to consensus. State compulsory education laws reflect a range from an entrance of 5 years of age in one state to 8 years of age in four others. New York shares a six-year entrance age with fifteen other states. In considering instructional programs to 3- to 5-year-olds, districts should take into account educational and environmental factors such as district characteristics, children's needs, demographics of the student population, enrollment projections, and state aid provisions, as well as parental opinions on readiness. Many parents, moreover, may not feel a 4-year-old is ready. Prekindergarten programs should not be mandated, but districts should have the flexibility to offer them, with full state financial support and local access to a variety of funding streams.

Project Head Start

The successful Head Start model studied in the Perry Preschool Project has been adapted throughout New York. The goal of Head Start is to help economically disadvantaged children begin formal schooling. Federally funded, Head Start is administered through regional offices and local Head Start agencies. Funds are allocated by the state and are distributed as competitive grants to local Head Start agencies. Generally, those who receive grants must provide 20 percent of program costs in cash or in kind.

In New York, during 1985, 24,000 children were served using $71 million in federal money matched by $17 million in local funds.

Head Start programs must provide educational, health, nutrition, social and family services. Flexibility in how local programs function is a key to their success. Local needs can be met in a variety of ways and agency collaboration is encouraged by Head Start policy.

Two highly successful Head Start programs in New York, Washington County Head Start and the Westchester Community Opportunity Program, Inc., share the element of cooperation with other agencies and can attribute much of their success to that element. In Washington County, close ties are maintained with the BOCES and local school district. In Westchester, day care with specific educational components is provided to Head Start children and others whose parents must pay a fee. The Community Opportunity Program of Westchester coordinates the mutually supporting programs of Head Start and day care to serve more than 1400 children across the county. The West-

chester Department of Social Services and the Child Care Council of Westchester, Inc., which manages the day care portion of the program, collaborate to offer a full spectrum of opportunities. Both the Washington and Westchester models can be adapted to many settings.

The State Education Department has encouraged Head Start to work with local education agencies. One result was a 1982 effort with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to develop a memorandum of mutual understanding to bring Head Start resources and local resources together. The built-in flexibility schools have in working with Head Start programs for the best use of resources is an important aspect of the agreement. The Washington County program relationship with the local district is based on the memorandum. As a result, Head Start, BOCES, and the district share resources and information for the benefit of the child. Parents are given information on their child which they may choose to give the district at kindergarten registration. In this way, better articulation and more attention to a child's needs are encouraged.

The New York State Experimental Prekindergarten Program

The New York State Experimental Prekindergarten Program, which celebrates its 20th year of operation in September 1986, has established guidelines that encourage parent and community involvement. Funded programs must include fully comprehensive social and health services aimed at helping families by providing linkage with public, private and voluntary agencies. In addition, they must be a developmentally-oriented program for a child with a strong parental involvement component.

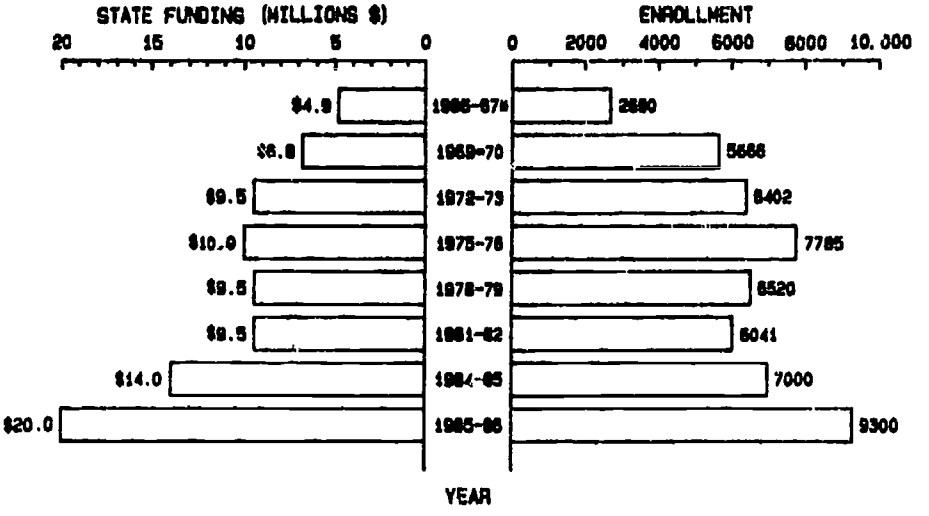
The program's "experimental" purpose is to examine the feasibility of public school-administered programs for 3- and 4- year-olds and the relative impact of a comprehensive developmental prekindergarten program on early elementary grades. Funding for the program has remained stable, with the greatest increase, $6 million, occurring from 1984-85 to 1985-86 (see Table I).

One experimental program in Elmira follows the county's Head Start model closely. It is run on the same schedule and employs a nurse and teachers hired by the district. Family and health service components are borrowed from the Head Start model.

Currently, New York State's Experimental Prekindergarten Program serves approximately 9,300 disadvantaged preschool-age children in 75 programs statewide. This number, however, represents only one-seventh of the total eligible population. To encourage equity in the field of early childhood education, state funded prekindergarten programs should be expanded to reach children in all areas of the state where need is shown.

TABLE I

NEW YORK STATE EXPERIMENTAL PREKINDERGARTEN
State Funding & Children Enrolled
1966-67 to 1985-86



*1966-67 does not include New York City Pre-K enrollment; funding was provided for parent education programs only.

As matters now stand, economically advantaged families are more likely to send their children to preschool programs. Statistics show that 70 percent of the 4-year-olds in families whose earnings exceed $25,000 per year are enrolled in a preschool program, compared to 37 percent in families with earnings of less than $15,000 per year.

There are additional reasons for a statewide prekindergarten program. First, children are growing up in smaller families and have less access to extended families. Thus, many children have fewer opportunities to interact with other children. Prekindergarten is a vehicle for providing greater access to peers. Second, concern for safety of young children who engage in free, outdoor play is widespread. They require more supervised and protected play areas such as those offered by prekindergarten. Through monitoring of safety factors, some of the fears for children's safety could be alleviated.

Private Sector Preschool

The private sector is a major entrepreneur of preschool programming. Nationally, 68 percent of children enrolled in prekindergarten/nursery programs are in private settings. Private, for-profit companies operate hundreds of centers throughout the country, and with tuitions ranging from $2,000 for nine-month, half-day programs to more than $3,000 for a year-round, all-day preschool.

Religiously affiliated preschools represent another large piece of the private preschool picture. Content and details of programs vary greatly. In New York, programs need neither accreditation nor charters. The result is a general lack of information on private providers. The private sector's efforts have motivated the public sector to take action. Stepped up activity in New York, South Carolina, California, Texas, and other states can be attributed partially to increased awareness of preschool needs through private program expansion. A lesson to be learned from the private sector is responsiveness to immediate needs of consumers. The competitive spirit in preschool programming may help it become the next major innovation in American education.

Full-Day Kindergarten Programs

The importance of kindergarten in the context of the elementary program is firmly established by research and experience. Yet the relative merit of full-day and half-day programs is an issue that continues to be raised. Much of the confusion arises from debate over hours spent rather than *how* the hours are spent, as well as developmental and family needs.

John Goodlad (1983) views the transition from preschool to first grade as a "soft spot" in education. At this level, there is little difference between children with preschool experiences and those without it. Across the board increases in days and hours can be "counter productive" if, he says, the time is not used well. Studies on educational productivity, notably those of Herbert Walberg, echo these sentiments. The issue of kindergarten is complicated by the fact that parental needs as well as children's must be served. The best way to serve both may differ from district to district.

Schools face an increased demand for full-day kindergartens. In 1983, New York City became the largest school system in the country to support full-day kindergarten in its elementary schools. One school district on Long Island surveyed its community and found a nearly three to one preference for full-day programs.

Yet, recent data show that in this state 446 or 61 percent of the districts offer kindergarten sessions of two-and-a-half to three hours, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. These serve 132,933 children or 82 percent of the kindergarten population. Only 280 districts or 38 percent of the New York State districts provide full-day kindergarten.

In the past, the function of kindergarten has been to provide children with their first school experience. Social rather than cognitive learning was emphasized. Today, however, this task is increasingly being carried out by preschool programs. For those students who have not been in preschool programs, kindergarten is quite a different experience.

To encourage equity in the field of early childhood education, state funded prekindergarten programs should be expanded to reach children in all areas of the state where need is shown.

As a result, kindergarten must assume a more demanding role. It must account for the widely diverse abilities and experiences that 5-year-olds bring to school today. It must provide individualized instruction according to each child's social and cognitive needs, as well as identify and remedy early deficiencies. In short, the new function of kindergarten requires more efficient use of time, whether it is a full-day or a traditional half-day kindergarten program. However, districts must have flexibility in choosing and developing programs to meet community needs. If resources are available, including increased funds for transportation, an option for half-day or full-day should be offered.

There is research data to support both full-and half-day concepts that offer quality educational programs. If the program is half-day, but many parents need day care services, districts should be able to make arrangements that would allow school facilities to be used for that purpose. Parents would pay the cost of the day care services provided after school. Flexibility on the part of school districts will help to ensure both appropriate learning environments for children and programming that is responsive to family needs.

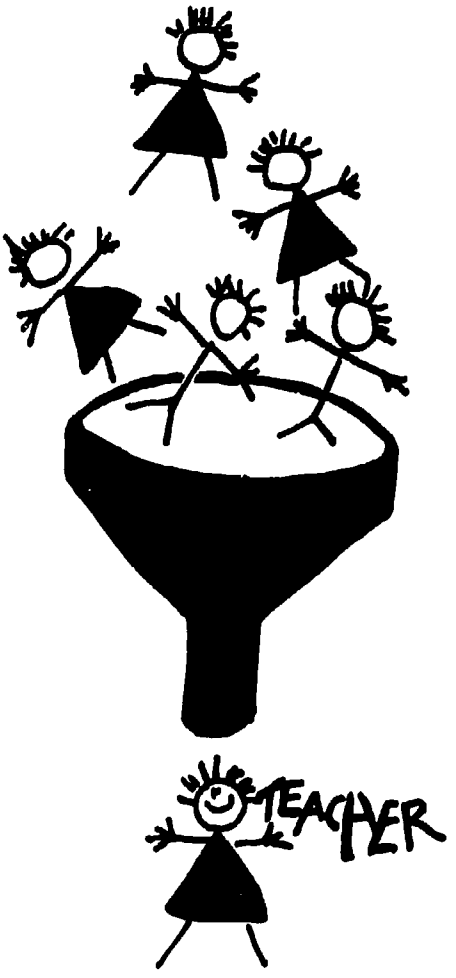
Certification of Early Childhood Personnel

Kindergarten and primary teachers are prepared in the education department's of four-year colleges and universities. These practitioners are expected to complete programs that lead to a bachelor's degree and to state certification. Day care and other early childhood personnel often are prepared within a child development tradition rather than an education tradition. Many are graduates of vocationally-oriented programs at two-year or community colleges or secondary schools. Frequently, day care practitioners have no formal preparation at all. Although certification is not a guarantee of quality, it is a measure of ability that should be required for those who work with preschoolers.

Minimum day care and preschool staff qualifications in New York State (excluding New York's experimental prekindergarten program) are currently set by the Department of Social Services. Each center must have on staff a person with specific child-related training. This person is responsible for developing, directing and supervising the daily activity programs for children. If the director does not possess the qualifications, another staff person must have the following qualifications:

1. in a center with fewer than 45 enrolled children, a full-time staff person must have either an associate of arts degree in a child-related area, or two years of college with 12 credits of child-related courses and one year of related supervisory experience; and
2. in a center with 45 or more enrolled children, a staff person must have two years of teaching experience in day, early childhood, or related educational programs along with a New York State teaching certificate or its equivalent in early childhood education. Group heads and assistants must have at least a high school diploma and experience in day care. Therefore, for each group of 45 children, only one staff member is required to be state certified, but at least there *is* specific state certification.

In contrast, for prekindergarten teachers there is *no certification.* A separate certification for teachers of early childhood education should be established, incorporating a baccalaureate of coursework and supervised practice uniquely suited to the educational needs and demands of preschool age children. This certification should be distinguished from the qualifications required for teaching in kindergarten or primary grades. Although tailored professional standards for prekindergarten teachers are needed, early childhood classrooms should not become "institutional" in nature. Paraprofessionals and



A separate certification for teachers of early childhood education should be established incorporating a baccalaureate of coursework and supervised practice uniquely suited to the educational needs and demands of preschool age children.

volunteers have proved an invaluable nurturing resource in Head Start programs and should remain.

The Department of Social Services, in conjunction with the State Education Department, should establish qualifications which all day care personnel would have to meet to be awarded certification. More stringent screening procedures should be implemented to prevent instances of sexual abuse. Training should be more demanding with emphasis on child development courses as well as expanded in-service training.

If this state is to move toward expanded services for preschool children, it should address not only the certification question at the state level, but also the potential advantages of interagency regulatory cooperation.

Regulatory Authority for Monitoring and Evaluation

State regulations create confusion for educators and day care providers about the boundaries of their responsibilities. For prekindergarten programs operated by public schools, regulations of the commissioner of education specify basic learning requirements. Also, the State Education Department provides extensive guidelines and recommendations relating to the 75 public prekindergartens now funded by the state under its longstanding experimental program.

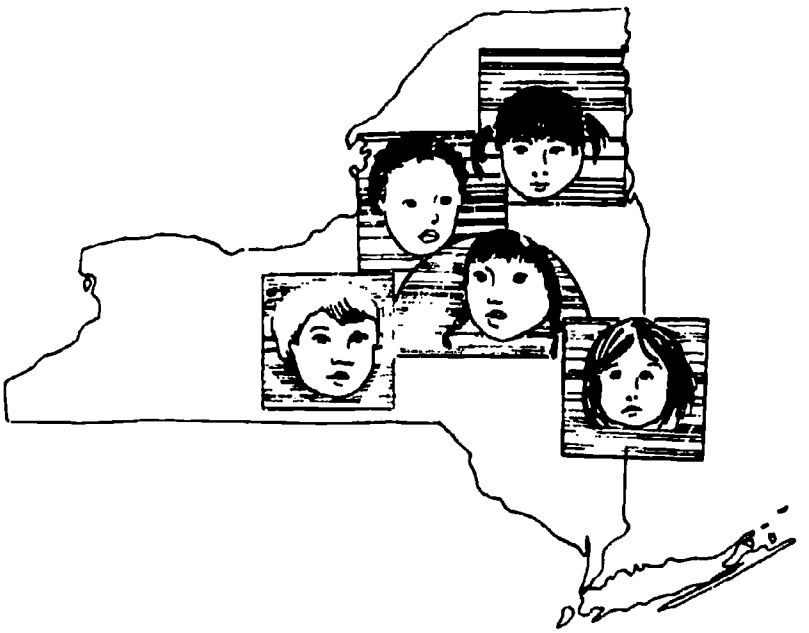
Private day care centers must be licensed and, therefore, are governed by the Department of Social Services. Social Service regulations cover such topics as admission, health services, transportation, staff/child ratios, sanitation, and physical plant. Certain educational program requirements are included. Each program, for example, "must be designed to influence a positive concept of self, and to enhance ... social, cognitive, and communication skills." Children in the program must be offered opportunities "for learning and self-expression."

Another category is that of *private* prekindergarten programs. These educational programs are widespread. In New York City alone, more than half of the children enrolled in prekindergarten are in privately operated programs. *Statewide, private programs are not regulated and can operate without accreditation or charter.* More information about and standards for private prekindergarten programs are needed to ensure consistent quality statewide.

The preceding comparisons provide a logical reason for State Education Department involvement in monitoring and evaluating educational programming in all preschool and day care programs. Furthermore, if a day care program includes mandatory educational strategies and content, then it is logical to permit the Education Department to address those parts of the program which are expressly educational. With its current obligations under the state prekindergarten program for 3- to 5-year-olds, the Department has built a strong track record in this area.

The Department of Social Services also has a well-established mechanism to evaluate custodial aspects of programs. A cooperative effort between these two departments is needed and possibilities for effective monitoring procedures to adequately address child care and educational components of programs should be explored.

As more state funding is provided for early child care, and as more children are placed in centers, concerns about program quality, consistency, and long-range benefits for society should be considered. Much of this concern is educational in nature. Researchers associ-



ated with the Perry Preschool Study and other scholars in early childhood education have stressed that not *all* early childhood programs guarantee long-term benefits. Say the Perry study authors, "There is no intrinsic value in a young child's leaving home for a few hours a day to join another adult and a group of children." Rather, the value must be measured by how well and how educationally the program is defined. Early childhood program providers should be encouraged to build their programs on a curriculum that teaches children how to be good learners and how to work with adults who are not members of their families. According to recent research, this approach shows the most educational promise.

Finally, new and growing cooperative arrangements between private day care providers, private prekindergartens and public school systems may atrophy unless regulations applicable to public schools are made compatible with day care programs that may be located physically in those schools. Collaboration between child care advocates and public educators can produce innovative advances in early childhood education. However, this will happen only if interagency cooperation at the state level paves the way, elevating program quality and standards, and ensuring that educationally related services are held educationally accountable.

Prekindergarten for Children with Handicapping Conditions

Child development specialists have established that human learning and development occur at their fastest rates in the years before a child enters school. Furthermore, research has shown that a child's intellectual capacity can be expanded through early environmental manipulation (Hunt, 1961), and that a child's experiences in the early years of life have a direct impact on subsequent development (Bloom, 1964). For the disadvantaged child or the child with handicapping conditions, these early years are even more crucial.

Research has shown that, given adequate resources, preschool programs for certain groups of children—notably the socially or economically disadvantaged and those with handicapping conditions—can help them overcome, at an early age, difficulties which might otherwise impede their educational progress. The difficulty in translating this truth into New York State public school programs is apparent by the inconsistent methods used to address the educational needs of young children with handicapping conditions.

More than 261,000 school-aged handicapped children now receive special educational services through a system based on school district coordination of services. Yet the proven concepts of this system—including diagnostic screening, parental accessibility, consistent application of available resources, and effective articulation of the child's program—are often neglected in the family court system currently used to place preschool-aged handicapped children.

Under this system, the parent is responsible for detecting a handicapping condition, finding appropriate services and defending the need for these services in court. In addition, the responsibility for determining appropriate educational services is in the hands of a judge who may have limited knowledge of the child or handicapping conditions.

The system is expensive. Since last year alone, there has been a 30 percent increase in family court ordered costs. This represents a $21 million increase in the cost of educational services without the benefit of required coordination with either the State Education Department or local districts. In comparison, the increase in excess cost aid for handicapped education (K-12) has been only 9.3 percent. Similarly, the increase for family court ordered costs compared to the increase in excess cost aid shows the same approximate three to one ratio for the years of 1979-80 to 1985-86. Family court ordered costs include transportation costs unrestricted by mandatory bidding, and costs of private programs delivering services which may not be necessary.

If the public schools rather than the family court took responsibility for placement of preschool children with handicapping conditions, the additional costs incurred by the Committee on the Handicapped (COH) to deal with preschool cases would be far less than the time and money for special services needed later on because of ill-conceived or poorly articulated early intervention programs. Ultimately, the same care and attention given placement of school-aged children also should be given to these preschoolers, with the expectation that the same benefits of cost effective and well-coordinated programs would be derived.

A child count done by the federal government in 1984 revealed that approximately 2.3 percent of children aged 3 to 5 nationwide were served by educational programs for handicapped children. The High/Scope Early Childhood Educational Research Foundation estimates that nearly three times that, or 6.8 percent, of 6- to 21-year-olds are served in such programs. One explanation for this disparity may be that exhibited behaviors in preschoolers are not always recognized as warranting special educational services. Consequently, early intervention based on these behaviors does not occur. Another possible explanation is that many conditions do not become evident until school age. To deal effectively with handicapping conditions in preschoolers, we must coordinate and expand early screening and intervention efforts.

It is time to consider seriously legislative proposals to shift the responsibility for coordinating the educational programs of school children with handicapping conditions, ages 3 to 5, from the family courts to the public schools, backed by full state funding.

Presently, in accordance with Section 236 of the Family Court Act and Section 4406 of the Education Law, parents of a child under 5-years-old with handicapping conditions may petition the family court in their county of residence for costs related to the child's program. Reimbursable costs include tuition, transportation, and maintenance of special education programs for the school year and summer months. This type of funding is available to all children as defined in Part 200 of the Commissioner's Regulations. The family court judge may issue an order to approve costs, which are then charged to the county. Upon individual review of the child's program by the commissioner of education, approval can be given for the State Education Department to reimburse the county for up to 50 percent of the amount ordered by the court. Services provided through the family court system are delivered by programs such as BOCES, United Cerebral Palsy, the Association for Retarded Children, Head Start, and day care centers.

The family court system continues to be the center of controversy. Parents find the petitioning process cumbersome. A series of steps must be followed for the pre-approval and approval process to be used. These steps may be altered, depending on local policies and procedures. Lengthy delays occur because many family courts wait

for a recommendation for the State Education Department before acting on a petition. Parents experience frustration when they are required to defend in court the need for services, or when appropriate services are unavailable or available only at a great distance from their homes. In addition, increasing costs for local government have prompted some counties to refuse to pay for services.

A lack of coordination of existing programs is yet another problem. Programs funded through the court system may not be integrated with other available services. A child's individual petition can involve a number of agencies and departments. This slows down processing and causes delays of funding.

During the past decade, approximately 70 bills have been introduced in the State Legislature to change the way preschool education for children with handicapping conditions is provided, but none has passed both houses. Although there is consensus on the need for change, agreement on the most effective and feasible alternative has not been reached. It makes sense to build upon the resources and administrative structures already established, including those within the State Education Department, local school district committees on the handicapped (COH), the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, and the Department of Health. As of 1983, 23 states required educational services for children under 5-years-old.

The Board of Regents and the State Education Department recommend that school districts, with full state funding, provide the necessary programming for all 3- to 5-year-old children with handicapping conditions. This undoubtedly would reduce difficulties for parents in gaining access to available programs. Not only would parents be more likely to seek services for their children, but program coordination problems would be alleviated. School districts should not be required to run their own preschool special education programs, but rather should only be responsible for providing suitable placement for 3- to 5-year-olds with handicapping conditions identified by the local Committee on the Handicapped (COH). Through the COH, the proper articulation of the child's program can be assured when he or she reached school age.

The advantages of this type of arrangement can be seen in district initiatives such as the Warwick Valley preschool program. The program began as a Title VIB grant in 1979 and, as a result of curtailment of those funds, is currently operating on funding streams available through the family court petitioning process. State guidelines for the education of school-age children with handicapping conditions are followed, including notification of district COH the individual education planning process, and handling of confidential records.

Goals of the program include: (1) identification of 2- to 5-year-old children with handicapping conditions; (2) placement of the child in

appropriate special educational services in the least restrictive environment; (3) involvement of parents in the educational process; (4) successful transition from the Warwick Valley preschool program to regular and special education programs in Warwick and its surrounding communities; and (5) development of an evaluative process to monitor the program's effectiveness in meeting the individual needs of students.

These goals are reached through a variety of mechanisms. A parent education project involves parents in biweekly workshops. The Task Force for Coordinated Services to Disabled Preschoolers, formed in 1982, links local school districts, Head Start, the county health department, private special education providers, the American Medical Association, and Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. Subcommittees of the task force meet regularly to review areas of specific concern. The concepts incorporated in the Warwick Valley program combine proven practices of education for school-age children with handicapping conditions, facets of Head Start Programs and local resources to effectively serve community needs.

In addition to local initiatives, efforts at the state level should be strengthened. The State Education Department should have the statutory authority to develop criteria for licensing the prekindergarten handicapped programs from which placements are chosen. This criteria should include site visitation as well as educational evaluations of the child.

Educational and developmental advantages of prekindergarten schooling for children with handicapping conditions can be strengthened by streamlined coordination. Early and periodic screening, linkages with the local committee on the handicapped, 100 percent state funding, and networking of existing programs and structures should be used. State monitoring and regulation of programs is essential. School districts, rather than the courts, should be the point of entry into the process. However, the funding of the technical support mechanisms mentioned here should be firmly in place first. Also, if districts are to bear the responsibilities discussed here, legislators must help solve problems of already overburdened committees on the handicapped and difficulties in obtaining affordable insurance. If districts are willing to consider these responsibilities to deliver better educational services, sensitivity to the tremendous problems which could undermine their efforts must be reflected in ensuing legislation.

With careful execution, early identification of handicapping conditions and intervention will successfully reduce need later on and create a smoother transition for children into their elementary school years.

Conclusion

Although distinctions may be drawn among the areas of child care, prekindergarten and kindergarten, they share the responsibility that nurturing a child requires. New options for schools to serve the needs of children and families as they function within the community must be explored. Schools should have the flexibility to enter into cooperative arrangements to provide child care and educational services for preschoolers, and to offer full-day kindergarten, if backed by full state funding.

Certification requirements for prekindergarten teachers require intensive review if they are to serve the same purpose of quality control as in other subject areas. The educational components of child care programs should be held to standards which, with cooperation from the Department of Social Services, are established by and made accountable to state educational authority. Also, more information about and standards for private prekindergarten programs are needed to ensure consistent quality statewide.

Prekindergarten education for children with handicapping conditions should follow proven practices found in already established regulations for school-age children. Head Start and local district initiatives provide successful models of coordination and delivery of services. A review and restructuring of the current family court process should incorporate the ideas of equity, program articulation, and community/agency linkages found in these models.

It is necessary to anticipate problems which may hamper continuing efforts. As public schools become more involved in preschool programming, serious questions of liability and controversy regarding collective bargaining provision may arise.

Finally, a question of equity exists. Currently some states, including New York, set criteria for public prekindergarten eligibility based on factors of economics and/or academic readiness. Many children are not served. Close attention should be paid to how the goal of equity is reached. Legislative consideration of potential problems will help avoid undermining valuable programs later and will encourage expansion and initiation of preschool programming in New York State.

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