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RAND STUDIES EXAMINE CALIFORNIA'S STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT GAP, SYSTEM OF PUBLICLY FUNDED PROGRAMS FOR PRESCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

California's publicly supported system of early care and education for preschool-age children is a patchwork of programs that frequently have divergent objectives, but improving both the quality and use of the services may be one way to narrow existing academic achievement gaps, according to two RAND Corporation studies issued today.

Researchers found that a sizeable number of California's students fall short of the state's proficiency standards in English-language arts and mathematics when assessed in second and third grade. The achievement shortfalls are largest for English learners, students whose parents have less than a high school education, black and Hispanic children, and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The same patterns of achievement differences were evident in other assessments researchers assembled to judge performance at earlier grades and on measures of school readiness when children entered kindergarten.

With achievement differences present at the starting gate, the RAND research team investigated the existing system of publicly supported care and education programs for children one or two years away from kindergarten. They documented 11 different federal, state and local programs that provided services for an estimated 255,000 3- and 4-year-olds during 2006, with most programs serving children from low-income families or with other risk factors.

About 80 percent of the 3- and 4-year-olds receiving subsidies are enrolled in programs focused on preparing them for elementary school rather than simply providing child care. But researchers found the quality is uncertain because some program requirements are below nationally recognized quality benchmarks and there is little incentive for providers to exceed minimum standards.

The remaining 20 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds are in publicly supported programs with even lower standards or are in unregulated license-exempt care, according to researchers.

The findings are among the first to be released from the California Preschool Study, a comprehensive analysis of California's publicly supported early childhood education efforts. The study was requested by state lawmakers to help them consider options for reforming or expanding preschool education.

"There's an educational achievement gap in California, with the same groups of children that start behind staying behind years after they enter elementary school," said Lynn Karoly, a RAND economist who heads the work. "Our project is intended to examine the role improved early childhood education may play in closing the gap."

The first of the new preschool reports examines the academic achievement gap among young elementary school students in California and surveys research about whether quality preschool programs can improve school readiness and boost academic performance during elementary school and beyond.

The second report provides a thorough description and critique of existing federal- and state-supported care and education programs available to 3- and 4-year-old children in California, including funding sources, the number of children served and program requirements.

Examining state achievement test results for 2007 as part of the first study, researchers found that 3 of 5 third graders did not achieve proficiency in English-language arts, while 2 of 5 students in the same grade did not achieve proficiency in mathematics.

Those averages mask substantial differences between groups. Among students in kindergarten through third grade, students who are English-language learners and students whose parents did not graduate from high school are the groups most likely to fall short of proficiency standards and lack recommended school readiness skills..

Nearly 70 percent of these students do not meet second-grade proficiency standards in English-language arts and about 85 percent do not meet third-grade standards. The shortfall in academic performance was also large for black and Hispanic students and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Even more-advantaged students often fall short of proficiency. About 30 percent of students whose parents have education beyond a college degree do not have the recommended skills in English-language arts by third grade.

There are many well-designed studies that show high-quality preschool programs serving children one or two years before kindergarten can improve school readiness and raise performance on academic achievement tests in the early elementary grades through middle school, according to the RAND report. Much of this evidence from other states is for programs serving the same groups of children in California with low academic performance.

Researchers concluded that expansion of high-quality preschool may help boost academic achievement among some student groups that frequently struggle in elementary school. However, they say less is known about the potential gains of high-quality preschool for the state's large number of English learners.

A more definitive answer about the likely effects of changes in preschool policy on the achievement gap will follow in the subsequent research on the project, which is examining differences in who currently participates in preschool programs and differences in preschool quality across the same groups of students where achievement shortfalls are so stark.

Among the other findings in the second report are:

- Researchers say that within the complicated array of programs, there are sometimes conflicting motivations for providing government-subsidized care to preschool-age children -- to promote child development and school readiness, particularly for at-risk children, and to provide affordable child care for low-income working families.
- Researchers estimated that about \$1.9 billion was spent on subsidizing early childhood care and education for preschool-aged children in California during the 2005-2006 fiscal year. Yet, fewer than half the 3- and 4-years-olds in California who are eligible for publicly funded preschool programs designed to prepare them for elementary school (e.g., Head Start or State Preschool) are served by those programs because of limited funding.
- The reimbursement structure of state-supported programs for preschool-age children provides little incentive for quality innovations because most providers do not receive additional funds when they exceed the government's minimum standards.
- Relatively little is known about the characteristics of the preschool-age children who receive subsidies because no such information is routinely collected. In addition, there is no systematic collection and reporting of information on the quality of subsidized care and education services.
- An estimated 5 to 10 percent of the money allocated to pay for subsidized care and education of preschool-age children goes unspent each year.

The two RAND studies are titled "Who Is Ahead and Who Is Behind? Gaps in School Readiness and Student Achievement in the Early Grades for California's Children" and "Early Care and Education in the Golden State: Publicly Funded Programs Serving California's Preschool-Age Children." Both reports are available at www.rand.org.

The California Preschool Study was requested by the California Governor's Committee on Education Excellence, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Speaker of the California Assembly and the President pro Tempore of the California State Senate.

Funding for the project is provided by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts through the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), The W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, and Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP).

The project has been guided by an Advisory Group of academic researchers, policy experts, and practitioners. Future studies from the project are expected to examine the use of early childhood education services among California's preschool-age children and the quality of

those experiences, as well as providing a comprehensive set of recommendations for state policymakers.

Other authors of the reports are Jill S. Cannon of the Public Policy Institute of California, Elaine Reardon of RAND and Michelle Cho of Competition Policy Associates.

The California Preschool Study is being conducted through RAND Labor and Population, which examines issues involving U.S. labor markets, the demographics of families and children, social welfare policy, the social and economic functioning of the elderly, and economic and social change in developing countries.

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