

PROGRAM INTENSITY

Supplementary Information Provided for Consideration of Florida's Universal Pre-Kindergarten Implementation

INTRODUCTION

Findings in research and beliefs about child welfare may vary, but the need for quality care is seldom disputed. However, the means by which the provision of care is delivered can often be a topic for debate. The implementation of Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) in Florida is a critical issue with critically tangible meaning for the lives of children and families. Research in this area and similar initiatives in other states can inform discussion as policymakers, key stakeholders, and community members prepare to make decisions on the logistics of UPK. What follows are general concepts and findings related to quality care and specifically the issue of program intensity.

Program intensity refers to the amount of time children spend in an individual program. Programs can be identified as part-day, full-day, or a variation of these. Part-day programs generally offer care from 8AM to noon. Full-day programs are those offering 6 or more hours of care per day. Six-hour programs generally follow a school-based schedule, operating from approximately 8AM to 2PM. Other full-day programs offer care for ten or more hours a day. The length of operating hours is determined by the service provider and varies by program. The needs of families who will potentially be served by a program help to determine the hours of operation. For example, Head Start programs typically offer a six-hour, full-day program with many providing wrap-around services to meet the needs of working families. Private providers offer extended hours of care and represent a large proportion of full-day programs, serving a large portion of Florida's families. Alternatively, many faith-based programs offer part-day programs meeting the needs of families not requiring full-time care. Variety in type of program, as well as program intensity, allows parents the opportunity to choose programs that best meet their needs.

A summation of the current research relevant to program intensity (i.e. length of day, part- or full-

year) presents a difficult task as there is not a substantial body of research targeting this variable of quality care. What can be gleaned from the research is knowledge about quality early care and education and basic principles for facilitating care. From a systems perspective, program intensity may impact multiple levels of the pre-kindergarten system. For example, the child, family, early childhood educator, program, community service providers, and the funding stream may all be impacted to some degree by the intensity of services. All implications must therefore be considered before determination of program intensity is made.

MEETING CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Children thrive in environments that are consistent and reliable. Further, the intensity and length of participation in a program does matter a great deal to children's development. In early care and education research and programming, these concepts are referred to as consistency of care. Children learn through exploration and play, but require a secure base from which to explore. For young children, the secure base is their relationship with a trusted caregiver. Over time, children must have stable relationships for optimal development, physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

The argument can be made that the hours spent beyond the part-day are largely devoted to eating and sleeping. But it can also be said that those hours are important to the development of healthy eating habits and nurturing relationships, particularly for children who have been exposed to inconsistent and unstable environments. Further, if wrap-around services are planned for, children in need will receive extended hours of care involving additional planned learning activities and opportunities for consistent relationships. Regardless of program intensity, it is critical that early childhood educators observe children's development and expand their learning. In a part-day or six-hour day scenario, wrap-around services enable early childhood educators to spend consistent time with

children, plan individually for children, and engage in multiple activities for learning and development with minimal transitions and disruptions from daily routines.

MEETING FAMILY NEEDS

Many state pre-kindergarten initiatives are structured to provide part-day/part-year programs. This puts an additional burden on working families to locate alternate care for the remainder of the workday and additional means for transporting children to child care from pre-kindergarten. Alternatively, families who provide care for the child in the home may feel better served by part-day programs that offer transportation home for the remainder of the day to be spent with a parent or in a family care situation. Thus, transportation is an exceedingly important issue for consideration.

For many parents, pre-kindergarten may be the family's first contact with a formal learning system. Early childhood educators have a responsibility to inform, educate, and involve parents in their child's early education experiences. Additionally, parents must have confidence that their children are receiving optimal care and education, and feel secure about their child's well-being during hours of care. If parents must find multiple resources for care, communication becomes increasingly difficult and a disconnect between families and children's education may occur. If a part-day program is offered, it is imperative that wrap-around services be available to meet the needs of working families .

QUALITY OF CARE

Consideration of early childhood educator expertise is significant on many levels. Early childhood educator expertise and knowledge about child development is critical to children's learning and care. For this reason, workforce development is a fundamental issue related to program intensity. To hire and retain staff with training in child development, literacy and language acquisition, observation and assessment, cultural diversity, developmentally appropriate practices, special needs, and parental involvement requires competitive wages and job stability. For this purpose, it is difficult to hire and retain quality staff in early care and education and it is important to recognize that one model may not serve the professional needs of the field. Current part-day programs may have success hiring and retaining quality staff because the schedule supports the needs and interests of a portion of early childhood educators in the workforce. However, this

may not translate for universal applications because a 4-hour program does not provide adequate compensation for early childhood educators seeking full-time career opportunities.

A LOOK AT GENERAL PROGRAMMING

As depicted in an example provided by the National Network for Child Care, most half- and full-day programs offer the same services for the early portion of the day.

Part-day Classroom-AM

8:30 Arrival-quiet or free play
9:00 Group time
9:15 Snack
9:30 Free choice/activity centers
11:15 Story time
11:30 Outside play
12:00 Dismissal

Full-Day Classroom- AM

8:30 Arrival-quiet or free play
9:00 Group time
9:15 Snack
9:30 Free choice/activity centers
11:15 Story time
11:30 Outside play
12:00 Lunch

High quality care can be delivered in either scenario. Consideration must be given to children's care noontime and beyond if a part-day program is selected. For part-day programs, wrap-around services become critically important to meeting the needs of children and families who require full-day care options.

STATE PRE-KINDERGARTEN INITIATIVES

Some states are addressing the issue affecting children and families by providing full-day/full-year programs, while others are coordinating resources to create the essence of full-day/full-year programs. As of 1998, Massachusetts and Connecticut were the only two states to fund and require programs to provide full-day/full-year programs to at least a portion of their families. In an example of states' efforts to coordinate resources for children and families, Maine promotes partnerships between Head Start and child care that allow programs to offer a full-day schedule. This is accomplished by the decision for Head Start and child care offices to merge into a single agency and by allocating priority to partnerships in distributing child care funds.