Investing in Universal Preschool: The Promise and the Challenge

Work by RAND researchers in the late 1990s that assessed well-designed targeted early childhood intervention programs showed that they yielded benefits to both children and society as a whole—benefits that outweighed the costs of the programs themselves. Ongoing RAND research and other research have confirmed and extended these findings.

One of the more prevalent types of early childhood initiatives is states pressing for “universal” preschool programs to extend the benefits of preschool programs one or two years before school entry to all children under age 5. Currently, 40 states offer some form of preschool program, although only Oklahoma’s and Georgia’s programs are available to all children who want to enroll. But what has been the experience of such initiatives aimed at universal rather than targeted populations? Do they yield benefits when they “scale up” and are such programs implementable? Recent RAND studies are looking at these fundamental questions.

The Promise: Benefits Can Scale Up for Universal Programs

A new RAND study addresses the first question, looking at what the costs and benefits would be from a state’s perspective for a high-quality, universal preschool program in California—a part-day, voluntary program enrolling all 4-year-olds. Researchers inferred a set of potential benefits for a one-year, high-quality program by using the results of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, or CPC. The CPC program is a large-scale, publicly funded, half-day program serving disadvantaged children that has been operating for over 30 years. Based on evaluations, the CPC has yielded a range of statistically significant, meaningful effects, including less use of special education, greater likelihood of high school completion, and lower crime. And based on research, every dollar invested in this targeted program yields more than seven dollars in benefits.

After adjusting the CPC results to make them comparable to a statewide program in California, researchers found the California program would yield a return of more than 2 1/2 dollars for every dollar invested; moreover, assuming a 70 percent participation rate in the program, each annual cohort of children served would generate $2.7 billion in net present value benefits to California society. When more and less conservative assumptions are used, the study finds that California would gain at least $2 for every $1 invested and possibly more than $4.

The Challenge: Implementing Universal Programs Is Difficult

While the promise of statewide programs is clear, achieving it can be challenging, according to another RAND study that looks at the issues of ramping up systems of high-quality preschool services to the state level.

The study—which interviewed a range of actors involved in setting up statewide programs in eight states and reviewed the literature on implementation—found that states face funding, auspice, access, accountability, and staffing challenges.

Implementing universal programs at the state level requires integrating systems of childcare, education, and welfare. For most states, this means

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What does the existing literature tell us about program quality?

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Interview

Getting Inside the “Black Box” of Quality

As a RAND senior economist, Dr. Lynn Karoly has investigated the economics of human capital investments in early childhood and beyond, including a recent study of universal preschool education. She has made numerous presentations based on the research she has conducted at RAND before academic and policy audiences, including testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means, and the Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Government Reform and Oversight. She has a Ph.D. from Yale University.

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features to get at the quality issue. In a few cases, we have rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of program design features, but often we have to rely on expert opinion and comparisons of effects across model programs based on variation in program features.

**Given these limitations, what kind of guidance does the literature provide on this question?**

There seems to be evidence that programs with better-trained caregivers are more effective. For center-based programs, this may take the form of a lead teacher with a college degree as opposed to no degree. For home visiting programs, researchers have found stronger impacts when services are provided by a nurse as opposed to a paraprofessional or lay professional.

**Is there any more guidance from the literature?**

Yes. For center-based programs, evidence suggests that programs are more successful when they have smaller child-to-staff ratios. And there is some evidence that more intensive programs are associated with better outcomes, but, unfortunately, not enough to indicate the optimal number of program hours and how they might vary with child risk characteristics. One might expect that some minimum level of program hours is required to have any benefit, but that as hours increase, returns increase at a diminishing rate.

**What can policymakers and providers considering early childhood intervention programs do to make programs effective?**

Well, they can try to incorporate some of the features described above into their program design. Another option is to adopt one of the proven program models described in the literature that have achieved proven benefits, such as the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, or CPC. Several of these programs already operate on a large scale or are being replicated on a larger scale.

**Given how important this issue is, what do we need to do?**

We know that high-quality evaluations over many years helped us to better understand and quantify the impact early intervention programs can have. We need to do the same thing on the quality side, pursuing rigorous evaluations of effective program features so that we can get inside the “black box” of quality.

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**Investing in Universal Preschool**

depending strongly on federal funding, since the public will to mobilize alternative state funding is limited. Unfortunately, federal funds come through multiple funding streams, and these streams have different eligibility and reporting requirements and are politically uncertain. Multiple funding streams confuse regulatory practices and can exacerbate tension between education and human service departments involved in state pre-kindergarten.

Access to programming is limited both by funding constraints and by the contexts of particular state efforts. Targeted programming for at-risk children is the norm, given budget limitations. However, even within such programs, minorities and the working poor are not always well represented, particularly where programs do not effectively incorporate public schools, childcare centers, and Head Start providers.

And while the accountability movement provides an opportunity for states to support quality, it may also press them to artificially separate cognitive achievement from multidimensional child development and to prioritize the cognitive. Finally, high standards for staff are an important quality feature in state programs, but funding to support teacher development and smooth degree trajectories is lacking in many states.

**Going to Scale: Where Do We Stand?**

State efforts to design and implement universal pre-kindergarten programs reflect energy and innovation, and state actors are clearly working to develop the quality of their programs and their ability to provide services to all children in the targeted age ranges. However, significant concerns remain about the ability of these programs to serve their intended purpose when taken to scale. More rigorous examination of current efforts is needed to identify promising practices, and policymaking must be carefully coordinated to ensure that large-scale public pre-kindergarten programs more fully echo the small-scale, high-quality interventions that inspired them.

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**The Promising Practices Network (PPN)** is a user-friendly website that provides evidence-based information on child, youth, and family policy. RAND operates the site, and child and family-serving organizations provide oversight for the project. Site content is organized around three major areas: Proven and Promising Programs, Research in Brief, and Strengthening Service Delivery.

**Visit the Promising Practices Network:**

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