

Connecting all children to high-quality early care and education: Promising strategies from the international community ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Full article PDF ^[2]

DESCRIPTION

High-quality early care and education (ECE) provides an important foundation for young children's success in school and in life. Yet, in the United States, fewer than two out of three children between the ages of 3 and 6 (61%) are enrolled in center-based ECE programs (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics [FIFCFS], 2015). Moreover, children from low-income families are much less likely to receive formal early care and education than their counterparts in more affluent families—72% of families with incomes of at least twice the poverty rate participate in ECE, compared with 45% of families with incomes below the poverty level (FIFCFS, 2015). Participation in ECE in the United States also varies by race/ethnicity; for example, 52% of Hispanic children are enrolled in center-based care compared with 63% of White/non-Hispanic children (FIFCFS, 2015). Federal and state programs attempt to address these discrepancies, but large numbers of children eligible for these programs remain unserved. For instance, in the 2013–14 program year, the federal Head Start program enrolled only 34% of children in poverty (Child Trends Databank, 2015). This report focuses on center-based care, but it is important to note that a significant number of parents may use “family, friend, or neighbor” care or licensed family child care providers. Far less is known about the quality of family child care, as more research is focused on center-based programs. One issue faced by researchers in the field is how to define and measure quality in home-based settings.

American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted a scan of efforts to improve access to quality ECE for low-income, minority families in other countries that might inform learning and practice in the U.S. context. Because many other countries have higher participation rates in formal ECE programs than the United States, we expected that such a scan could identify successful strategies that could be applicable in the United States.

In this report we focus on access to and participation in formal ECE systems and government-run or government-approved (licensed) ECE services. National and international research has consistently found that such care is more stable, has higher quality, and better prepares children for subsequent enrollment in school (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, Greenberg, & Loeb, 2016). Government agencies and programs usually encourage mothers seeking child care to enroll their children in formal child care. However, we realize that there is high-quality “informal” care and that many parents have good reasons to use such care (Bryson, Brewer, Sibiet, & Butt, 2012; Melhuish, 2015). Also, there are government programs that seek to support providers of family child care and other informal care options to increase the quality of the care they provide and the training of the staff they employ (California Department of Education Child Development Division, 2009). We acknowledge that our focus on formal center-based child care in this paper restricts the generalizability of our findings, which is an important limitation of this project.

Although the quality of formal ECE services varies across and within the countries included in this report, quality standards are typically high and quality is comparable with high-quality programs in the United States. Access and utilization are the primary foci for this report. The original research plan for this exploratory study included several topic areas that are not explicitly featured in this report. These include the role of parent engagement, how countries define and improve program quality, the use of informal care (e.g., kin and kith care), and the ECE workforce. Some of these (e.g., workforce and parent engagement issues) are discussed as part of other topics. For others (e.g., informal care and variation in program quality) we did not find relevant comparative international literature or informants who were able to make crossnational comparisons.

This report provides a summary of findings from this initial scan. Those findings are interspersed with observations from a July 2016 gathering of experts from Europe and the United States at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in Princeton, New Jersey. The report concludes with recommendations for policy and program development and for further research activities.

Throughout the report, we also include referrals to specific programs and resources that provide additional context for our findings.

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