# PREpared for success [US] [1]

**Author:** Paulson, Amanda
**Source:** The Christian Science Monitor
**Format:** Article
**Publication Date:** 30 Apr 2002

AVAILABILITY
Text below

EXCERPTS:

DENVER - Tucked in among fast-food joints and dime stores in a suburban strip mall, Kids in Action would hardly seem a standard-bearer for the future of child care.

Most of the workers have only a high school education, if that. Children can go outside to play &em; in a tiny fenced space that is filled with soft gravel. The big excitement at playtime comes when a garbage truck lifts up a dumpster next door. Some of the 60-odd enrolled students spend more than 40 hours a week, from infancy till they enter kindergarten, entirely in this small facility.

Still, Kids in Action, which largely serves low-income children, is reason for hope.

One of dozens of centers receiving help from Educare Colorado, an early-childhood-education advocacy group, the center has already come a long way in the two years she's been working with it, says Toni LaTronica, an Educare site coach. Many of the staff have been trained to integrate education into everything they do, and Ms. LaTronica has helped the center adopt a respected curriculum that focuses on learning through play. Activities are now planned as learning opportunities, and artwork and books dot the classroom.

"Their classroom-environment scores have gone from inadequate to a good-to-excellent range," says LaTronica.

What's happening at Kids in Action indicates a growing effort around the United States to ensure that all children have basic abilities &em; ones that are often taken for granted &em; before they ever set foot in a public school classroom. In Colorado, for instance, kindergarten teachers surveyed by Educare Colorado reported that 40 percent of new students couldn't name simple shapes, recognize the difference between letters and numbers, or count to 20.

The initiatives are coming from any number of constituencies: Laura Bush, the first lady and a former librarian, has promoted early-learning skills. President Bush recently unveiled a proposal to strengthen Head Start by better aligning its goals with those in K-12 classes. Teachers unions have begun calling for universal preschool. And a growing body of brain research is lending scientific weight to the perception that a child's earliest years are crucial to learning.

The reason for the unprecedented level of attention is simple. Spurred by demands for better performance in K-12 classes, educators are homing in on the advantage held by children who have attended preschool or whose parents have emphasized education at home &em; an edge that can profoundly affect performance on state-mandated tests.

"The standards-based accountability movement has been a very painful thing for K-12 educators to go through, but it's the best thing that's ever happened to early childhood [education]," adds Gerrit Westervelt, president of Educare Colorado. "By quantifying, and making real, and giving form and shape to achievement issues in K-12, it raises the bar for school readiness."

Americans have long held that formal education shouldn't begin until about age 5 &em; and that, until then, parents are largely responsible for what kids learn. But consensus is growing that without early experiences that stimulate them, children may start school at a disadvantage. "We need to recognize that if all children can access high-quality programs, they'll do better in school, and we'll do better as a society," says Alan Simpson, a spokesman for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Those at Educare Colorado have settled on a few strategies to improve both the quality of child care and access to top-notch programs, including assessing and rating providers; convincing the state to link its subsidies to a provider's ratings; and getting information to parents about how they can give their children learning opportunities, as well as how to judge quality child care.

Mr. Westervelt hopes the rating system will boost the quality of facilities. "In my judgment, it's the consumer-information piece which creates demand and public support, which politicians need in order to take action to build the financing system," he says.

Early-childhood education advocates agree that uncertainty about what a good learning environment should look like can be a big barrier. But experts say the most important, and frequently neglected, things are often very simple, and can be easily integrated into games and play:

exposure to varied vocabulary, letting children tell stories, encouraging curiosity.

Joanne Brady, director of the Center for Children and Families at the Education Development Center in Newton, Mass., offers an example: Four children, after noticing a post office on a walk, decided to create their own. Their teacher encouraged them, providing a mock post office and videotaping the drama.

Soon, the toddlers were correcting each other: "No, if you give me the letter, you have to give me the money." The teacher helped them talk about what happens in a post office &em; what a stamp is, for instance, and how much money it represents. "You have a discussion about currency and equivalency, and soon there's play money and mathematics, and role definition, and then a bank springs up next to the post office," says Ms. Brady. "So learning does not have to be heavy-handed, but it does need to be intentional."

But access to quality programs is a tough issue. Unlike many European countries, the United States provides little public money for children before age 5. The federally funded Head Start program has received high praise, but is available only to families who meet federal poverty guidelines. That standard counts out millions of families who still struggle to meet basic needs.

While many laud President Bush's interest in early learning, critics note that he hasn't backed up his proposals with funding, and suggest that his goal to "leave no child behind" would be better served if he expanded Head Start eligibility. "[Of] our 500,000 kids [in Head Start] who enter kindergarten each year, the vast majority enter with the right skills," says Sarah Greene, executive director of the National Head Start Association. "But almost 4 million kids are entering kindergarten yearly."

Lately, a growing number of leaders, including American Federation of Teachers President Sandra Feldman and the Committee for Economic Development, an influential coalition of business and education leaders, have called for universal, publicly funded preschool. A few states, including Georgia, New York, and Oklahoma, are moving toward a universal pre-K system.

Westervelt would like to see a financing system that takes higher education's example &em; with scholarships, subsidies, tax credits, grants, and loans. Mr. Simpson of the NAEYC suggests that corporations, which he says cover about 1 percent of child-care costs, should take on more of the burden.

"We know what we need to do to improve quality," he says, "and we know we can't do it on the backs of parents and families. Everyone else who benefits &em; businesses, communities &em; needs to recognize that because we benefit, we need to contribute."

• E-mail paulsona@csps.com [2]

Coach pre-K teachers, win results

With child-care providers typically earning less than $8 an hour and receiving little or no training, research has shown that they often don't do enough to prepare children for school.

Still, several projects indicate that it's possible to improve their skills without a huge influx of resources.

Susan Landry, professor of pediatrics at the University of Texas, Houston, has been coaching pre-K teachers using a method she originally developed to help low-income parents improve interactions with their children. The adults are taught to say "roll me the ball," rather than "give it to me," for instance.

After one year in a center whose teachers received this coaching, low-income children who previously had scored in about the 15th or 20th percentile entered kindergarten at the 50th percentile, on par with kids from more advantaged backgrounds, Dr. Landry says.

"Even in classrooms where teachers don't have a high educational background, you can get this gain," she adds. "The teachers are really like sponges for information."

In Pittsburgh, Pa., the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI), a privately funded project to enhance opportunities for youngsters in low-income communities, saw similar results, according to evaluator Stephen Bagneto, a professor of pediatrics and psychology at the University of Pittsburgh and the Children's Hospital there.

Working with 1,350 kids in 25 communities, the ECI focused on key child-care issues: improving parental involvement, linking with school districts, and encouraging the best learning practices. In addition, all the ECI classrooms received about two hours a week of mentorship.

The results were striking. When the children entered kindergarten, they were far ahead of what the statistics would have predicted. In districts where an average of 28 percent of the children were being held back a grade, only 2 percent of the ECI children were held back. And compared with an overall special education rate of 25 percent, less than 1 percent of the ECI kids were placed in special education, Dr. Bagneto says.

In addition, 18 percent of the children, when they began, exhibited behavioral problems severe enough to merit a mental-health diagnosis. By the time all these children entered school &em; after three years in the ECI &em; their behavior and social skills were normal.

Like Landry, Bagneto emphasizes that the mentorship was one of the key factors. "Our speculation is, if we didn't have that, we wouldn't have these outcomes at all," he says, noting that only 20 percent of the child-care providers had bachelor's degrees.

Preschool facts

In France, Italy, and Belgium, 95 to 99 percent of children ages 3 to 5 attend preschool, most in public programs. Other countries with a high percentage of children in preschool are Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, Greece, and the Netherlands.

In the United States ...

• 66 percent of 5-year-olds, 36 percent of 4-year-olds, and 14 percent of 3-year-olds are enrolled in public preschool.

• 43 states and the District of Columbia offer state-financed prekindergarten for some children, up from about 10 states in 1980. State spending for such programs totals $2 billion annually.

• In more than a quarter of the states, the average cost of center care for a 4-year-old in an urban area is at least twice as much as the cost of public-college tuition.

• Child-care workers watch over children for an average of $7.86 per hour. Preschool teachers fare only slightly better at $9.66 an hour &em; or about the same as hairdressers earn.

Sources: General Accounting Office, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Children's Defense Fund, US Department of Labor

Reprinted from The Christian Science Monitor
**Region:** United States [3]
**Tags:** poverty [4]
pre-school [5]

---