

Quality gaps highlighted in early child education [US]^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

WASHINGTON - Millions of preschool children receive care from poorly paid child-care workers and many states impose few standards on what children should learn by age 6, said a special report released Monday by Education Week.

In addition, states spend nearly \$2 billion a year on pre-kindergarten programs, but "only a fraction of children in need appear to be receiving services," said Kathryn Doherty, project director of Quality Counts.

The analysis, the sixth in a series of report cards on public education, also found large gaps in state's efforts to pay for and monitor the quality of early childhood schooling.

For instance, less than 2 percent of 4-year-olds in Alabama attend state-financed pre-kindergarten, compared with more than half of all 4-year-olds in neighboring Georgia.

And although 11.9 million, or about 60 percent, of kids 5 or younger get care outside the home, child care is what the report's authors call a "non-system" in which the pay and qualifications of workers remain low.

The average child-care worker earns \$15,430, about the same as a parking-lot attendant. A growing body of research has linked quality early schooling to later academic success.

The University of North Carolina's Abecedarian experiment, for instance, followed more than 100 poor children from birth to adulthood. Researchers found that children who had been assigned to a high-quality, all-day preschool run by the university had higher IQ, reading and math scores than counterparts who had not attended the school.

And recent study in Montgomery County, Md., an affluent, diverse Washington, D.C., suburb, found that 71 percent of children from poor or immigrant families mastered the fundamentals of reading after a year in all-day kindergarten compared with 54 percent of their counterparts in half-day kindergarten.

But the Quality Counts report found that just eight states and the District of Columbia require school districts to provide full-day kindergarten.

The states are: Alabama, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and West Virginia.

Although most states have standards that detail what elementary school students should know in each grade, just 19 states and the District of Columbia have set out similar expectations for kindergarten, the report said.

And only 15 states and D.C. have set standards for pre-kindergarten students.

More than half of the states target their pre-K programs to youngsters from low-income families, but three, Georgia, New York and Oklahoma, are starting pre-kindergarten for any 4-year-old whose parents want it, regardless of family income.

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