

Back to the dark ages for preschool: The crippling consequences of a disappearing data source ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Despite a growing chorus of champions for better early education for America's children -- from military leaders to Ben Bernanke to an official from the Reagan Administration -- a piece of our country's early education infrastructure is about to fall away.

For 10 years, the National Institute for Early Education Research, a non-partisan research center at Rutgers University, has taken painstaking effort to gather data on publicly funded preschool from all 50 states and Washington, D.C. The institute, known as NIEER, publishes the results in a series of reports known as the State of Preschool Yearbooks, the only source in the country for data on which states are funding pre-K, how much those states are spending per pupil, what percentage of three- and four-year-olds are served, what ages of children are eligible, what training and credentials are expected of their teachers, and more.

Each spring, data from these yearbooks spark headlines on preschool funding and disparities in access -- news that would otherwise be invisible to the general public and elected officials. This spring, for example, analysis of NIEER's data showed that state funding for pre-K decreased by almost \$60 million in 2010-2011 when adjusted for inflation, a second straight year of decline. While pre-K is often left out of education stories, NIEER's yearbooks provide journalists with an annual release of data that helps shine a spotlight on trends in early education.

But this year may be the last for the preschool yearbooks.

Until now, the Pew Charitable Trusts have provided the vast majority of the funding. Since the first yearbook in 2002, Pew has donated \$5 million for the yearbooks over 10 years. But last year, Pew stopped funding preschool advocacy and research, saying that it had never intended to continue making grants beyond a decade. W. Steven Barnett, NIEER's director, says he has inquired about new funding sources from other philanthropies, but to no avail. It's not entirely clear why other philanthropies aren't stepping up, but when it comes to early childhood programs, charities often prefer to pay for direct services to children instead of research or policy initiatives. The unintended consequence will be less accurate data on how many children are enrolled in each state, which states are decreasing funding, and where inequity is rising in children's access to high-quality pre-K.

The likely loss of the preschool yearbooks is becoming increasingly worrisome to many of us who follow trends in early education. The void comes at a bad time. Although education and brain research continues to show the benefits of high-quality early learning programs, public dollars for expanding access to good preschools are drying up in many states, and federal initiatives, such as Promise Neighborhoods and Head Start, are poised to lose funding if the budget sequesters go through or if austerity budgeting arrives without protections for programs targeting children and low-income families.

Without good pre-K data, people will be left in the dark, unable to compare how well their states stack up in funding good early childhood programs. The result will stunt our chances for better policy-making in education.

Unlike in K-12 education, the U.S. Department of Education does not require states to report on preschool. The U.S. Census collects some data in its American Community Survey, but the survey questions are not designed well enough to provide answers on how many children in this country are served in publicly funded programs, let alone how many children are in preschool or preschool-like settings, period. And it doesn't address questions of state and federal expenditures per pupil, data that are critical to telling the story of whether children get a well-rounded, age-appropriate learning experience. Aside from NIEER, no other group is doing the hard work of sorting through how programs are designed in each state and which pools of public funds are paying for them, let alone making that information visible and meaningful to the rest of us.

The idea behind the yearbooks, Barnett said, was "to create an archived data set that would be consistent across the states." By making the information available to all, he explained, reporters and policymakers who wanted data would not have to call all 50 states, "and state officials could provide information that was comparable to what was provided by the state next door." NIEER, which is advised by experts on early childhood education from around the country, sought to halt the spread of misinformation about which states were offering good pre-K programs and enrolling high numbers of children, and which ones weren't.

Before the days of the yearbooks, Barnett said, researchers around the country "worried that people would draw the wrong conclusions" about equity, access or the impact of high-quality pre-K because the data were misleading and incomplete. Leaders around the country had no idea that Oklahoma was a leader in high-quality, universal pre-K, for example, until the institute provided its state-by-state

comparisons.

The value of the yearbooks became even clearer to me and my colleagues at the New America Foundation this year as we embarked on a project to expand our Federal Education Budget Project to include pre-K data. The budget project started in 2008 with a focus on K-12 education, providing information by state and by school district on per-pupil expenditures, demographics, achievement test data and more. With 39 states now funding pre-K programs, the federal government running the Head Start program, and many public schools offering pre-K classes or contracting with community-based providers to offer pre-K, the database was long overdue for the inclusion of pre-K data on enrollment and funding.

Gathering data from each of our country's nearly 14,000 school districts was not practical, but we were able to gather data from those states that track data by school district. The problem was, some of these data arrived in cryptic formats with no context, making it virtually impossible to detect which pre-K programs were, say, half-day versus full-day programs, or which ones served both three- and four-year-old children, instead of just four-year-olds. To make sense of the data and to ensure that we were comparing apples to apples as much as possible, we relied and continue to rely heavily on the NIEER yearbooks. In addition, our state-level data are based on NIEER's research. (For more information about the pre-K expansion of this database, see *Counting Kids and Tracking Funds in Pre-K and Kindergarten: Falling Short at the Local Level*.)

The NIEER yearbook project is run by three staff members who are involved in contacting officials in every state, keeping up with new data coming from those states, and making sure data do not include duplicates (a daunting task when some children are enrolled in Head Start, special education programs and funded by state dollars at the same time). Tracking trends in legislation and new programs -- or cuts to programs -- is also part of the work, as is presenting ratings on which states meet NIEER's defined benchmarks for quality. Since the federal government has no control over pre-K programs (aside from Head Start), there is wide variation in how states define pre-K. The appendices of the yearbooks are treasure troves of information on such details.

NIEER did win a \$1.4 million federal grant last month to help schools identify and measure how well children fare in early learning programs -- but that's an endeavor separate from the preschool yearbooks. To deal with the loss of yearbook funding, Barnett says NIEER is already designing ways to automate its data collection from each state, which may save several hundred thousand dollars. But the task of making the yearbook data meaningful -- providing narrative and context to explain changes in each state and in the state of preschool funding nationally -- is not something that can be easily automated. Journalists under deadlines -- not to mention elected officials and other policy makers -- need that context to provide accurate reports.

It will require an investment of a half-million dollars a year, Barnett estimates, to publish the yearbook and continue its communications work, including the customized video and press releases for each of the 50 states, as well as Spanish-language outreach. "We would love to expand to include kindergarten and child care," Barnett says, but expansion is just a pipe dream at the moment.

Unless new funders come through for NIEER soon, the strength of the preschool yearbooks will diminish, leaving a huge hole in preschool advocacy, research and policy analysis on early education around the country. Early childhood programs -- often seen as a luxury or "add-on" -- are already vulnerable to budget cuts. Without good data, the picture of how early education is funded and which children are enrolled, will only get cloudier -- and prospects for including pre-K in the full system of public education will only get worse.

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