

Georgia pre-K effective but "medium" quality, study finds ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Georgia's pre-K program continues to provide a medium-quality education, according to a recent study of the program's effectiveness.

But participating children also showed significant growth in literacy, math, general knowledge and behavior.

The Georgia General Assembly authorized a multiyear evaluation of the pre-K program in 2011. The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning has received results from the first year of the \$1.8 million study by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina. Researchers measured the skills of 509 children enrolled in pre-K during the 2011-12 school year, focusing on classroom quality and children's outcomes. They also observed a random sample of 100 pre-K classrooms.

Overall, the study results were positive. In many areas, children progressed at a faster rate than might be expected for normal developmental growth.

"The work we've been doing around teacher-child interactions is paying off," said Bobby Cagle, the department's commissioner.

"Instructional improvements and emotional support teachers provide children in the classroom is improving."

On the other hand, he acknowledged that the state isn't satisfied with the "medium" level of quality. In response, the department plans to put more emphasis on environmental factors such as hand-washing and to provide better support to English-language learners, among other improvements.

The study highlighted factors that seemed to affect variations in quality.

Pre-K classrooms in public schools performed better in some areas than those run by private providers such as day cares. The public school pre-K classrooms were also more likely to have certified teachers and white students, the study noted.

Children in classrooms with English-language learners made more progress with language skills than children in classrooms where all the students were native English speakers. Generally, students also performed better if their teachers had more experience teaching pre-K.

"The importance of that is the opportunity to really incentivize pre-K" by paying those teachers a comparable salary to other public school teachers, said Pat Willis, executive director of the advocacy group Voices for Georgia's Children.

The UNC researchers made few specific recommendations, but they did call for reducing pre-K class sizes to at least the same ratios used by Head Start, which has 17 to 20 students per class.

Cagle said, "I'm pretty firmly convinced ... that the thing we can do that will affect quality the quickest is to reduce class size."

Georgia pre-K class sizes were increased from 20 to 22 during the year of the study as the state tried to cut costs. The state also dropped 20 days from the pre-K school year in 2011, effectively reducing pay for pre-K teachers and causing many of them to leave for jobs teaching in higher grades.

Willis said she thinks these factors likely contributed to the "medium" quality rating that the UNC study identified.

It's the same rating Georgia pre-K earned during a previous 2008-09 evaluation by the same researchers. Since the first study, Georgia pre-K scores actually dropped a bit in the areas of global quality and interactions between teachers and children.

But the 2011 UNC study happened at a low point, just after budget cuts. Since then, part of the pre-K school days have been restored, and Gov. Nathan Deal's 2014 budget would restore the remainder. Cagle said he has been talking with Deal's office about bringing class sizes down again.

"All the experts tell us having these larger class sizes really does diminish the effect we have with these children," he said. "It makes me wonder, given the positive things (the UNC study) identified that children were achieving, what the difference would have been had we had a class size of 20 or below and a full 180-day schedule."

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Other studies

The department is expecting drafts soon from several other studies related to its oversight of day care centers, Cagle said. Both were funded by federal money earmarked for state advisory councils.

In one of the studies, UNC is examining Georgia's system for identifying which day cares are non-compliant with state rules and how state staff are used to administer the program.

For the second study, the state hired retired Penn State professor Richard Fiene to evaluate the validity of Georgia's approach to monitoring and licensing child care facilities. "He's the national expert in this," Cagle said.

Fiene will be determining whether Georgia has correctly identified the most important factors for protecting child health and safety. These are weighted more heavily on inspections.

Cagle said preliminary conversations indicate the state's approach is accurate for day care centers but might be improved for regulating family home day cares.

Both studies are scheduled for completion by the end of May.

In related efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education, the Department of Early Care and Learning has proposed learning and development standards for infants through 5-year-olds. This is part of an effort to better prepare children for kindergarten by aligning their early learning experiences with performance standards used in Georgia public schools.

Pre-K teachers and directors, infant/toddler teachers and directors, college professors and kindergarten teachers were among those who helped draft the standards, which are available online for public comment through the end of March.

Several studies that formed the groundwork for the new standards found that the old day care learning guidelines needed more focus on pre-literacy, while pre-K standards needed more focus on relationships with adults and other children. The review also found that some pre-K standards were no harder than those for 3-year-olds, while some kindergarten expectations were much more difficult than those for pre-K.

Susan Adams, assistant commissioner for Georgia pre-K, said these inconsistencies were ironed out in the new standards.

Once the standards are finalized, probably in June, the state will plan teacher training during the 2013-14 school year and teachers will be expected to start using them in the classroom by the following year, Adams said.

She said her department is also working with Georgia Public Broadcasting on demonstration videos and webinars to help teachers, parents, pediatricians and others visualize how to use the new standards.

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