



**BUILDING LOCAL SYSTEMS TO
SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**



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Parents and policy-makers have embraced the idea that early learning experiences lay the foundation for children's success in school and in life. As a result, most states are expanding funding for early learning programs, including efforts in several states to ensure universal access to such programs.

Most state-funded pre-kindergarten programs either limit their services to at-risk children or give priority to at-risk and low-income children. However, as these programs go to scale, it becomes evident that many of the most at-risk children are not participating. This report summarizes Illinois Action for Children's work over the past 5 years to identify who is not participating in Illinois' Preschool for All program, why not, and what can be done about it.

Illinois' state pre-kindergarten program began in 1985, and funding has grown significantly almost every year since then. In 2006, the governor and state legislature established the goal of universal access, re-naming the program Preschool for All. Illinois, then, is an ideal state to look at issues involved in going to scale. Action for Children's work has addressed the following questions:

Are significant numbers of at-risk children left out of the expanding state pre-kindergarten programs?

- *Why are they left out?*

What could local communities do to reach them?

- *Local answers*
- *State policy answers*

Community Planning Toolbox

In the "Toolbox" document which accompanies this report, Illinois Action for Children lays out the process it has developed for working with local communities to answer the those questions. A leadership group in each community has looked at community need via existing demographic data sources and door-to-door surveys. Likewise it has looked at community assets by analyzing existing data and holding focus groups.

The communities in which Action for Children has worked are vastly different. As expected, culture and family incomes play important roles in how parents view their options for early education and care. But in communities with similar cultures and incomes, opportunities varied enormously. Very low income communities in Chicago tend to have public libraries, park programs, Head Start programs, and health clinics around which program expansion can be built. Equally low-income communities in the suburbs may have no library, no park services, and little public transportation. On the other hand, they may have a strong network of family child care providers who can take leadership. Thus, each local community can assess its situation using the Toolbox.

In spite of such variation, Action for Children has found some common conditions across communities, arising from the growing importance of "school skills," the reality of preschoolers' developmental need for care as well as education, and variations in parents' work schedules.

School Skills

While young children have many physical and developmental needs, state pre-kindergarten programs are focused primarily on preparing them for school. These programs emphasize “school skills” – the social, language, and other cognitive skills that align with states’ learning standards. Children of professional parents begin learning school skills at birth. Their parents already speak Standard English, use a large vocabulary that includes abstract concepts as well as concrete descriptions, make use of books and writing in their everyday lives, and surround their children with tools and resources that will help them succeed in an information-based economy.

Low-income parents teach their children many critical skills, and while their children may equal or surpass professional’s children in certain social, moral, emotional, and other areas, they find school to be something of a “foreign country.” The rules are different, the words are different, and the teachers are hard to understand. Yet it is their school skills that will determine children’s future access to good jobs in our information-based world economy. Low-income children need the earliest possible start in learning the language and culture of school.

Children can get such a start in many settings, but in all cases they will need to be around adults who speak the language of school, and environments that structure activities around performing school skills, albeit in a developmentally appropriate manner. For three- and four-year-olds, only high quality classroom-based programs have been proven to create these conditions on a consistent, large scale basis. Therefore, state pre-kindergarten programs have been designed as classroom-based programs.

Child Development: Care and Education Intertwined

If school skills are so important, why not just build more classrooms and send children to public school at 2 or 3 years old? The answer to this question is obvious, but not always considered. Parents cannot “send” a preschooler to school. Somebody needs to take her and pick her up three hours later. In a moment we will discuss parents’ work schedules, but let’s consider this question from the child’s point of view.

For young children, care and education are not sharply differentiated. They are learning from their caregivers throughout their waking hours. Feeding a baby, for example, meets physical, social, cognitive, and emotional needs. For three- and four-year-olds, it is possible to dedicate some time to teaching pre-identified social and cognitive skills, but that learning will take root if it is integrated into his full day of care and education. Thus the family and community have an important role in early childhood education, even if the child is enrolled in a classroom-based program. Parents, child care providers, and community institutions all help when they support the child’s developing skills.

Parents’ Work Schedules

Almost half of all low-income working parents work non-traditional hours – nights, weekends, and changing shifts. These parents are not available to walk or drive a child to a part-day preschool experience. For them, family child care (both formal and informal) is the only accessible child care option. Family child care is probably the most important part of every community’s strategy to reach unserved, at-risk children.

Common Issues

Given the policy preference for classroom-based programs, combined with children’s need for care, and parent’s non-traditional work schedules, what choices do communities have?

1. In all communities, there is a significant opportunity to engage existing institutions and organizations in contributing to early childhood education. Parks, libraries, health clinics, provider associations, and other groups can focus on early childhood education, either as a supplement to classroom-based programs or as a substitute for such programs.

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2. Communities with full workday child care centers can help those centers build the capacity to meet the standards and receive the funding associated with state pre-kindergarten educational programming.
3. Communities can institute or expand part-day classroom-based state pre-kindergarten programs. Expansion will be most effective when combined with an outreach program directed to family child care providers and other residents who have been left out. The outreach program can include door-to-door canvassing and local discussion groups to engage hard-to-reach parents such as teen parents, grandparents caring for grandchildren, families without transportation, and others.

Specific Findings in Selected Communities

Illinois Action for Children engaged in community planning and program development in Chicago's south suburbs, including the low-income communities of Chicago Heights, Ford Heights, Markham and Robbins, and in Chicago's north-west side neighborhoods of Humboldt Park, West Town, Logan Square, and Avondale.

Are significant numbers of at-risk children left out of the expanding state pre-kindergarten programs?

• Why are they left out?

In Chicago, where early education program resources are as rich as anywhere in the country, approximately half of the low-income 3 and 4 year olds are not enrolled in Preschool for All or Head Start. In some suburbs, very few children are enrolled in such programs, because the programs do not exist. Markham, for example, has no Head Start program and had no Preschool for All program until this project started one. The reasons children are not participating vary by community, but the most important reasons for lack of participation in the selected communities are:

1. State and federal funding is still inadequate to meet the needs.
2. Children in family child care, including "family, friend and neighbor" care, are not likely to participate in classroom based programs.
3. Many small child care centers exist, but they have not competed successfully for Preschool for All funding, and do not have the capacity to write a proposal or to implement a program.
4. Communities lack classroom space in schools or centers.
5. Many parents have not enrolled their children because they lack information.

What can local communities do to reach unserved children?

Local communities can address each of the reasons listed above. Action for Children has worked with communities to take the following steps:

1. State and federal funding is still inadequate to meet the needs.
 - Community leadership groups have included state legislators, school-district officials, and mayors. These leaders advocated for state budget increases for Preschool for All.
2. Children in family child care, including "family, friend and neighbor" care, are not likely to participate in classroom based programs.
 - In response to this need, Action for Children developed its Community Connections "mixed-approach" that expands and coordinates children's care across multiple settings. Children already enrolled in formal or informal family child care homes are taken to a state pre-kindergarten classroom for a part-day pre-kindergarten program four days per week. On the fifth day, the pre-kindergarten teachers visit the family child care homes to coordinate curriculum, bring new resources, and discuss children's progress. Each family child care home is visited twice per month. Parents and providers attend monthly meetings and other events at the center, which also serves as a lending library for parents to exchange "Raising a Reader" books and materials. Implementation of this model has been quickest in areas

where family child care associations already exist. Enthusiasm spreads throughout the association, and providers explain the benefits to their peers. More than 300 children and 100 providers now participate in this program coordinated by 10 child care centers.

3. Many small child care centers exist, but they have not competed successfully for Preschool for All funding, and do not have the capacity to write a proposal or to implement a program. Yet children are growing up in those settings.

- Action for Children has begun to act as an intermediary organization for such centers. It receives funding on their behalf, and structures, for the child care center, a program of training, technical assistance, and community outreach in order to establish a successful program that meets Preschool for All standards. Action for Children currently works with 12 such centers.

4. Many communities lack classroom space in schools or centers.

- Advocating for capital development programs is a long term, but essential activity. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) have published an excellent policy brief outlining policy options. (Building Early Childhood Facilities, April, 2007)
- As an alternative, or a supplement, to classroom-based programs, communities can enlist existing institutions and programs in creating a set of services that will touch children and families at many points. For example, in certain Chicago neighborhoods, The Chicago Park District, with the help of local leadership groups, has instituted a fun, book-based curriculum in its preschool play camps. Also, the Chicago Public Library has established a preschool corner for parents and family child care providers to use, and local medical clinics have added reading corners with preschool books and games to their waiting rooms. A residential program for pregnant and parenting teens has scheduled regular reading sessions two nights per week and trained the teens on reading to their children. The Child Care Resource and Referral agency (Action for Children) has focused outreach, training, and provider resource programs in that area. While no single activity is likely to impact children's school success, the community hopes that multiple activities will add up to changes in parent behavior and in children's lives.

5. Many parents have not enrolled their children because they lack information.

- Parents in two Chicago communities have conducted door-to-door surveys to determine how many children are not enrolled in Preschool for All or Head Start, and why not. They conducted 500 surveys in Austin, an African-American community on the Chicago's west side, and 500 surveys in Logan Square, a Latino community on the northwest side. On the blocks surveyed, they found 172 three- and four-year-olds not enrolled in Austin, and 215 not enrolled in Logan Square. Many parents told the surveyors why they had not enrolled their children. Their answers included the following:

More than 20% of the parents of un-enrolled children in Austin, and more than 30% in Logan Square felt that preschool was not important, or that their 3 and 4 year olds were too young for school. Yet they were eager to discuss the subject with surveyors and expressed new interest in preschool programs as a result of the discussions. Clearly, community discussion of the importance of preschool is needed.

More than 20% of the parents of un-enrolled children in Austin had not enrolled their children because of misconceptions about cost (the program is free), or eligibility (everyone is eligible), or whether they would lose state child care assistance (they will not). Many parents in Logan Square had confused Preschool for All with child care assistance, and feared that they would need to give information about their immigration status, work, or income.

- As a result of these findings, Action for Children is developing on-going, long-term relationships with neighborhood organizations and parent groups to conduct outreach, parent education, and needs identification.

Next Steps: Building Local Systems

While increased state and federal resources are urgently needed to achieve the goal of Preschool for All, the Community Connections project has demonstrated that significant assets exist in every community, and that those assets can be enlisted today to improve early childhood education, and to advocate for increased resources. Some immediate steps to

transform local assets into local systems include:

1. Form on-going data-gathering and service coordination councils at the neighborhood level. Outreach and training dollars from the state Child Care Resource and Referral system and from the state pre-kindergarten system could be focused on supporting such systems in high need neighborhoods. Functions would include:
 - On-going data gathering through personal surveys, interviews, and focus groups
 - Personalized outreach to parents of young children, including discussion groups on the importance of preschool
 - Coordinated training and support networks for education and care providers
 - Public policy advocacy to support programs that work, and meet local needs
2. Develop models of intermediary organization support in delivering Preschool for All services.
 - Formalize the Action for Children model that supports child care center capacity-building
 - Promote the Action for Children “mixed-approach” model that brings children from child care homes into centers or schools for part-day classroom experiences
 - Experiment with new models that leverage the resources of family child care associations, parks, libraries, and other community assets

Conclusion

Preschool children are highly dependent on family and community for their care throughout the day. If preschool education is to reach the children who need it most, it will have to adapt to their families' schedules and coordinate with their existing support systems. This requirement is also an opportunity to involve family and community in extending children's learning throughout the day. An outreach, planning, and service coordination project – “Community Connections” – can achieve these goals in ways that are unique for each community.



community connections

ready for school, ready for anything

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