



## **Quality Matters to Florida's Emerging School Readiness System**

**Madelaine M. Cosgrove, Ed.D.  
Associate Director for School Readiness**

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- **Quantity of information, global economy, and social changes are demanding a more knowledgeable workforce and community thus placing increasing expectation for our children and youth, for our schools, and for our teachers who care and educate our children.**
- **If we are to achieve new outcomes, we must make changes in the way we have “always done things.”**
- **Leveling the playing field and closing the readiness gap between poor children and their more affluent peers is especially important when the K-12 system holds *ALL* students to high academic standards.**
- **New strategies and tools are needed that will result in achieving these desired outcomes. A key question becomes, “What can we do to increase the likelihood that what we do differently will result in outcomes we desire and expect?”**
- **Just as the business community searches for ways to improve quality as a primary strategy for achieving new outcomes, improving quality is also a linchpin in school readiness if we are to achieve the nation's and state's first education goal to ensure all children come to school ready to learn, *leaving no child behind*.**
- **The issue of quality in early childhood care and education has many dimensions, including political and social dimensions, not all of which lend themselves to research and analysis.**
- **Research can, however, play an important role in identifying and developing best practice by providing information about consequences of program features, environments, curriculum, and instructional and caring strategies and behaviors.**

## **WHY IS IMPROVING QUALITY A KEY TO ACHIEVING DESIRED GOALS?**

- **Research findings over the past 25 years (see *Eager to Learn* for the most recent synthesis of this research) suggest that children have far greater capacities for learning than previously believed, and call into question simplistic conceptions of “developmentally appropriate” practice. They highlight the importance of individual differences in children, their past experiences, and their present learning and caring environments.**
- **According to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (1993), adults born in poverty who attended high quality preschool programs at ages 3 and 4 had fewer criminal arrests, higher earnings and property wealth, and greater commitment to marriage than those who did not. Over participants lifetimes, an estimated \$7.16 was saved for every dollar invested.**
- **Although research findings can inform the many components of what we call a “school readiness system”, three conclusions are supported by studies related to quality:**
  1. **Based on studies conducted across the nation, the majority of children in childcare do not have access to the level of quality recommended by childcare professionals. If Florida wants all its children to be ready for school, it must improve the quality of childcare experiences available to *all* children in our state.**
  2. **Current studies document that poor quality early care and learning services have negative effects on children’s readiness for school, on their development during school, and on their future success in life.**
  3. **There is a direct link between the cost of services and the quality of care received.**
- **Improving quality relies on our ability to use at least 4 “levers for change”:**
  1. ***Using what we have learned about human learning and development* over the past 30 years to alter current practice, aligning what we do in classrooms more closely to what is now known.**
  2. ***Making concerted efforts to bring and keep better prepared and trained caregivers and teachers into early learning and care classrooms* by targeting other infrastructure systems that make-up the larger school readiness system (e.g., regulatory and licensing systems; funding, compensation, and incentives systems; and preparation, training, professional development, and retention systems).**
  3. ***Raising awareness* among families and the public about the importance of quality in early childhood programs and services and the link between early care and learning and future performance in school and in life.**
  4. ***Focusing policies* related to funding, human capital, and regulatory system improvement toward quality of childcare experiences available in this state.**

## WHAT IS QUALITY?

- **Several overlapping research bases have examined the effects of various program features and quality on the learning and development of children from a broad cross-section of society. These research studies were carefully and stringently reviewed by the National Research Council and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement and presented in two final reports: *Eager to Learn* ( 2001) and *Neurons to Neighborhoods* (2000).**
- **From these careful reviews and synthesis of empirically based research findings, seven features of quality were identified. They included:**
  1. **Cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth all requiring active attention in the preschool years.**
  2. **Social competence and school achievement are influenced by the quality of early teacher-child relationships and by teachers' attentiveness to how the child approaches learning.**
  3. **Both class size and adult-child ratios are correlated with great program effects:**
    - (a) **low adult-child ratios are associated with more extensive teacher-child interaction, more individualization, and less restrictive and controlling teacher behavior.**
    - (b) **smaller group size is associated with more child initiations and more opportunities for teachers to work on extending language and encouraging and supporting exploration and problem-solving.**
  4. **While no single curriculum or approach can be identified as “best”, children who attend well-planned, high quality early childhood programs, in which curriculum aims are specified and integrated across domains, tend to learn more and are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal schooling.**
  5. **Young children living in circumstances that place them at greater risk of school failure – including poverty, low level of maternal education, maternal depression, and other factors that can limit their access to opportunities and resources needed to enhance learning and development – are much more likely to succeed in school if they attend well-planned, high-quality early childhood programs.**
  6. **The professional development of teachers is related to the quality of early childhood programs, and program quality predicts developmental outcomes for children.**
  7. **Programs found to be highly effective in the United States and exemplary programs abroad actively engage teachers and provide high-quality supervision.**

## HOW DO WE KNOW QUALITY MATTERS?

- The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, UCLA, and Yale University jointly carried out the second phase of the *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers Study*. This study, begun in 1993, was designed to examine the influence of typical center-based childcare on children's development during their preschool years and then subsequently as they moved into the formal elementary education system. The study used a stratified random sample of 401 full-day childcare centers, half for-profit and half nonprofit, in regions in four states – California, Connecticut, Colorado and North Carolina.
- The first phase of the study (1995) documented that the quality of childcare occurring in these typical settings was well below what the early childhood profession recognizes as high quality.
- The first phase of this study also found that children in lower quality classrooms scored lower on measures of cognitive and social development even after taking into consideration background factors known to be related to children's development.

The most recent report followed children from the first study through the end of the second grade, four years after their initial contact with them, and when they were nearing the end of their next-to-the-last year in childcare. Phase two findings include:

- High-quality childcare is an important element in achieving the national goal of having all children ready for school. The *Cost Quality and Outcomes (1999)* study documents that the quality of children's experiences in typical childcare centers affects their development and their readiness for school. Children who attended higher quality care centers performed better on measures of both cognitive skills and social skills.
- The quality of childcare experienced by children before they entered school continued to affect their development at least through kindergarten and in many cases through the end of the second grade.
- Children who have traditionally been at-risk of not doing well in school were affected more by the quality of childcare experiences than other children.
- Children who attended childcare with *higher quality classroom practices* had better cognitive development through early elementary school.
- Children who had *closer relationships* with their childcare teachers had better classroom behavior and social skills through early elementary school.

The Education Commission of the States (July 2000) cited the following findings about the importance and quality of childcare:

1. The National Institute of Child Health and Development Early Child Care Research Network (1999) found that lower-quality childcare – as measured by child-staff ratios, group size, and teacher training and education – has been found to be related to higher incidence of problem behaviors and lower school readiness.

2. **The 1995 *Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study* and the Families and Work Institute’s 1994 “Study of Children and Family Child Care and Relative Care”, found that 40% of the infant/toddler programs included in the study were of poor enough quality to endanger health, safety, and/or development; only 12% provided developmentally appropriate care. For childcare of all ages, approximately 12% of centers are estimated to be of less than minimal quality and *only* 14% are rated good. For family-based childcare, 34% of the programs are rated poor and only 9% rated good.**
3. **Staff turnover – a factor closely linked to quality – averages about one-third, or three times higher than other industries (Center for the Study of Child Care Workforce (CSCCW), “Worthy Work, Unlivable Wages: The National Child Care Staffing Study”, 1998).**
4. **Staff compensation – also linked to quality and to turnover – is lower than in occupations such as parking lot attendant, fast food server. The average childcare worker earns \$7.00 an hour, with about one-third earning minimum wage; even experienced providers with baccalaureate degrees typically earn only about \$10.00 per hour. Less than one-third receive any health benefits, and even fewer have pension plans (CSCCW).**

### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THESE QUALITY-FOCUSED STUDIES?**

Recommendations from these studies include:

1. **Give equal attention to children’s social/emotional development and academic advancement.**
2. **Judge school readiness initiatives not only on the basis of their effectiveness in improving the performance of the children they reach, but also on the extent to which progress is made in reducing the significant disparities in the skills of young children with differing backgrounds.**
3. **Make significant new investments to address the nation’s seriously inadequate capacity for addressing young children’s mental health needs as well as early intervention efforts.**
4. **Improve the quality of preparation, training, and ongoing professional development of those who work with young children.**
5. **Create high-quality early care environments. Improving early literacy outcomes for at-risk children demands that we bring research and practice together to create standards, design curricula, and produce and put into use teacher-friendly resources and materials – creating a tool-kit from which teachers can select the right tool for the right task at the right time.**
6. **Fund efforts to develop, design, field test, and evaluate curricula that incorporate what is known about learning and thinking in the early years coupled with developing companion assessment tools and teacher tools.**
7. **Develop program standards for early childhood programs and monitor their implementation.**

- 8. Develop content standards along with mechanisms to assess their alignment with current scientific understanding of children's learning.**
- 9. Develop a single career ladder for early childhood teachers, with differentiated pay levels.**
- 10. Build alliances with families and communities to:**
  - (a) cultivate complementary and mutually reinforcing environments for young children at home and in out-of-home settings;**
  - (b) advance understanding of what it takes to improve the odds of positive outcomes for all children, especially those most vulnerable; and**
  - (c) determine the most cost-effective strategies for achieving well-defined goals.**
- 11. Implement a broad empirically-based research agenda focusing on**
  - (a) problems of practice;**
  - (b) ways to provide more helpful structures, curricula, and methods for at-risk children; and**
  - (c) advancing the state of the art of assessment – in classrooms, for diagnostic purposes, and for assessing program quality.**

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