



PRESCHOOL PUSH

Districts use public-private partnerships
to expand preschool programs

Glenn Cook

A student at Sprouts Farm and Forest Kindergarten raises her hand to speak before going outside on a frigid winter morning.

It's 8:30 a.m. on the next-to-the-last day in January, and Christine Heer and Lisa Henderson are planning the morning's activities. The night before, an unexpected snowfall dumped six inches of fresh powder onto the frigid New England ground, forcing the co-founders of the Sprouts Farm and Forest Kindergarten to improvise their lesson for the 3- to 6-year-olds arriving soon.

"You never know what you're going to get around here during the winter," says Heer, pointing to the covered fields that make up the Tangerini's Spring Street Farm near Millis, Massachusetts, a bedroom community outside Boston. "It might just have to be a day of playing in the snow."

And that, Heer and Henderson say, is just fine. With two teachers with master's degrees and only 19 students, the three-year-old school is a nature-immersive program that focuses on exploration and child-led play. And it is at one end of the spectrum of early childhood education, a tangled hodgepodge of public and private programs that serve our nation's youngest learners from birth until they enter first grade.

"In this space, our kids have an opportunity to experience everything on this farm," Henderson says. "They are able to hear and see and interact with people on the farm. They do actual farm chores. They learn how to be comfortable with themselves and their peers, even when conflict arises. It's genuine. It's real and it gives them the power to learn."

EXPANSION AND BARRIERS

More than a half century after Head Start was initiated, questions persist about how to best serve young children,

as policymakers, parents, and school leaders wrestle with the question, "When should a child's formal education begin?" A growing research base shows that high-quality pre-k programs have both short- and long-term benefits for students, but bringing those programs to scale remains challenging due to long-standing questions over funding and teacher quality.

"Over time, we've seen a real shift in thinking from a lot of skepticism about early childhood to a much broader public and parent awareness about the importance of early learning and development," says Sara Mead, an analyst with Bellwether Education Partners who studies early childhood issues. "Implementation is the key, and implementing well is hard, because there are some big barriers out there."

Many early childhood programs, like individual schools and districts, reflect the socioeconomic realities of their communities. In urban centers and areas where poverty is high, public schools have taken a larger role in educating pre-k students thanks to a mix of local, state, and federal funding.

While kindergarten has been greatly expanded across the U.S., with many school districts moving from half-day to full-day offerings, the same cannot be said yet for pre-k programs that serve 3- and 4-year-olds. Today, only the District of Columbia and three of the 43 states with publicly funded preschools serve more than 70 percent of eligible 4-year-olds. Government spending on pre-k only returned to pre-2008 recession levels this year.

Valora Washington, CEO of the Council for Professional Recognition, has worked in the early childhood and child



Students in a preschool classroom at John Adams Elementary School (left and right) in Alexandria, Virginia, participate in a lesson on what it's like to work at a Home Depot. Center photo: A student at Sprouts Farm listens to his teacher before going outside to play in several inches of fresh snow.

welfare fields for more than two decades. She says part of the problem is that the system of care is “a muddle in people’s minds.”

“We don’t have an organized system of early childhood education in this country because it happens through private child care, in schools, and in homes,” says Washington, whose organization provides professional development to early childhood educators. “We haven’t decided to invest money in prevention because we seem to love to throw money at fixing things. We don’t have a development mentality. We have a remediation mentality.”

Marcy Whitebook agrees. The founder and director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California at Berkeley believes early childhood education should cost more than K-12, rather than the other way around.

“We’re going over a 19th century bridge here in terms of how we think,” she says. “Inequity to access in education opportunities is visible in early childhood. The majority of early childhood options are private pay, so income determines what the kids get. That is backwards. Schools need to be leaders by saying early childhood is an essential part of what we do and we’re going to treat it as such.”

That’s a tough sell in communities such as St. Joseph, Missouri, where K-12 enrollment has declined from more than 16,000 students to 11,200 over the past two decades. By the start of 2018-19, the district will close four elementary schools and one high school to cut costs, eliminating space for early childhood classrooms.

“No one in education, including myself, doesn’t believe that an emphasis on early childhood prepares students for success by third grade, but it comes down to a philosophical difference between what should and should not be funded as a K-12 institution,” says Superintendent Robert Newhart. “We have the trick of answering the question, ‘Where do you draw the line?’”

Newhart is frustrated by the state’s declining commitment to early childhood funding. Like many states, Missouri poured money into pre-k programs in the early 2000s, only to pull back following the 2008 recession. Local districts had to cover the shortfall, which has been difficult given St. Joseph’s enrollment decline.

Since last fall, district leaders have debated whether to continue with site-based or center-based pre-k. Both come with costs attached that the district can’t make up, so Newhart and others have reached out to community organizations such as the United Way and private funders.

“Every time we make a change at the state level and in federal programs, it costs money and time, and we’ve had a lot of changes over the past several years,” Newhart says. “I think we can find a balance, and most communities do, but we’re in such a unique situation with everything that’s gone on here that we’re having to make a sales pitch to get the funding to meet the needs of this community in early childhood.”

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Public-private partnerships around early childhood are in



A student at Sprouts Farm and Forest examines a corn husk (center) while a John Adams student rings up a “purchase” on her cash register (left). Right: Teacher Christine Heer listens to a student share about her morning in the snow.

PHOTO CREDIT: GLENN COOK

vogue, as states like Georgia and Virginia and cities like Boston, Chicago, and New York push large-scale and universal pre-k programs. And their efforts to do so have been boosted by research that support high-quality early childhood interventions.

In separate reports released in November, the American Educational Research Association and the Rand Corporation note that high-quality programs can lead to improved graduation rates while cutting back on the number of students retained or placed in special education. Then, in late January, the National Institutes of Health published a study touting the effectiveness of an intensive early childhood program at Chicago's Child-Parent Center.

Over a 30-year period, researchers followed two groups of children—one enrolled at the center; the other from randomly selected early childhood intervention programs—and found that those who took part in the center's field trips and focused reading and math instruction were more likely to get a college degree than their peers who did not.

The key to these success stories is teacher training and curriculum alignment, observers say. Without both, chances for success are slim.

Boston, which started its highly regarded universal pre-k initiative in 2005, is expanding into community-based programs, with teachers in those centers receiving extensive training. The district, one of the top urban performers in the country, attributes its success partly to a rigorous "scope and sequence" curriculum and the city's long-standing commitment to early childhood.

Now, using federal grant funds, the district is trying to address something many thought previously was untouchable: How private centers teach young children. And they are doing so by using a financial carrot: Once teachers complete the training, they will be paid at the starting salary rate for a Boston Public Schools teacher — more than \$50,000 a year.

"Some of the best and worst teaching occurs in community-based programs, because there's more variance in the types of programs out there than there are in schools," says Jason Sachs, who has run the district's early childhood effort since its inception. "If you let market forces drive the quality of programs you have, it doesn't work. It's a bad design and you get what you pay for."

EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY

Back at Sprouts Farm and Forest, Heer wonders aloud why more public-private partnerships haven't existed. She has reached out to schools in Millis and nearby Dover and is working with a post-master's cohort at the University of

Massachusetts on ways to make pre-k programs more effective in small communities.

More than 400 miles to the southwest, in Alexandria, Virginia, a group of pre-k students is learning what it's like to work at Home Depot. The setting is a classroom at John Adams Elementary School, and teacher Dawn Blingman apologizes for not being able to carry on a conversation amid the jumping and the squealing.

On the walls are lists and pictures of various tools. With plastic hammers, a large cardboard box representing a house, and a cashier toiling away at a toy cash register, the group of 4-year-olds wearing the familiar orange aprons seems to be having a grand time.

"It's the first day of the unit," Blingman says. "They're a little excited."

Michelle Smith-Howard, coordinator of Alexandria's City-wide Early Childhood Programs, sees this type of work every day in the schools. Thanks to the Virginia Preschool Initiative, a state program that started in 2010, Alexandria has been able to expand the number of pre-k eligible children it serves.

Alexandria uses a mixed delivery model, with the district sharing early childhood responsibilities with three nonprofit organizations and one for-profit center. Licensed teachers who work in the centers receive the same salary those employed by the district. The state provides just over \$3,000 per student, with a 100 percent required local community match, but the city and school district are investing \$11,000 per pre-k student this year.

The money, Smith-Howard believes, is well spent. When a 4-year-old is enrolled in pre-k, she says, the district sees significant improvement in student readiness for school. In addition to the nonprofit, center-based sites, the city also has established 13 play groups for parents who don't want to enroll their children in a pre-k program.

"What's nice about this is it's not the school system trying to do it all, it's the early childhood community. It's a team approach that is very collaborative," Smith-Howard says. "We are able to determine what we want early childhood to be for the city of Alexandria, and we know we have to get buy in. That's the best and most logical way for us to be effective."

Glenn Cook (glenncook117@gmail.com), a contributing editor to American School Board Journal, is a freelance writer and photographer in Northern Virginia.