

Interim Report on Act 11 Prekindergarten Education Study: Key Findings

In October, 2018, the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE), in consultation with the Agency of Human Services (AHS), contracted with Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) to conduct a study of state-funded prekindergarten (preK) education in Vermont. The purpose of the preK study is to provide Vermont with information regarding how to more effectively and efficiently provide state-funded, universal preK education. Below, we summarize key findings from the study's March 2019 interim report. The report's findings were informed by 13 interviews with state-level stakeholders and a review of the research literature related to preK education.

Delivery Models

- Most state-level stakeholders supported the state's mixed-delivery system for its promotion of caregiver choice, convenience, enrollment capacity, and cross-sector collaboration. Despite these positive factors, concerns emerged about misperceptions and mistrust between public and private providers and about the cross-sector applicability of regulations.
- Experts have commended mixed-delivery systems for their potential to expand caregiver options, reduce child transitions, and raise quality through broader participation in rating systems. Yet others have raised concerns about inequities between public and private settings, based in part on the notion that public settings will attract and retain the best teachers via superior salaries and benefits.

Funding Models

- In interviews, some stakeholders discussed concerns about the distribution of public funds to private providers. Others pointed to possible inequities in the amount of funding provided to public vs. private programs.
- In general, experts have pointed to K–12 funding formulas as the best option to provide consistent and adequate financial support for preK programs. States with mixed-delivery systems that rely on K–12 formulas to support preK have set guidelines to promote the equitable distribution of funds between public and private providers.
- Pay for Success is a relatively new method for funding preventative programs, such as early childhood education. The model has been used in Utah and Chicago to fund government-sponsored preschool programs.

Access and Dosage

- Interviewees expressed mixed viewpoints regarding criteria for preK enrollment eligibility. Some wanted to maintain a universal program, while others suggested that Vermont prioritize participation and/or dosage for under-resourced children.
- Many stakeholders said that the program should consider offering more than 10 hours per week. Participants hypothesized that increased hours would lead to improved outcomes for students, higher levels of participation among low- and middle-income families, and simpler transportation arrangements for caregivers.

Access and Dosage (continued)

- Studies have documented improved school readiness skills among children attending both universal and targeted preK programs. Research suggests that children from a range of family income levels can benefit from preK participation, but low-income children tend to benefit more.
- The relationship between weekly hours of preK and child outcomes is not entirely clear. Some studies have found a positive relationship between full-day programs and child outcomes, while others have suggested there may be little difference in effects associated with full-day vs. part-day programs.
- In general, the literature suggests that children who attend preschool or center-based care for two years make greater academic gains—at least in the short term—compared to children who only attend for one year.

Quality

- Many stakeholders were concerned that variation in teacher standards across settings could lead to inequitable experiences for preK students. Further, several interviewees requested additional clarification and guidance regarding the requirement that a licensed teacher be “present” in private centers during the 10 designated-preK hours.
- Other stakeholder recommendations included simplifying the STep Ahead and Recognition System (STARS) and offering accessible professional development opportunities for non-public programs.
- The research literature suggests that structural quality features of preK programs—such as small class sizes and low child-teacher ratios—are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for ensuring preK quality. Instead, studies find that efforts to improve process quality—especially through instructional supports such as providing feedback and scaffolding learning activities—are more likely to benefit children.
- In general, research conducted over the past 15 years has found no or limited relationships between early childhood educators’ credentials and child outcomes.

Administration

- Many—but not all—stakeholders supported the idea of administering Act 166 through a single agency. In contrast, some viewed joint administration as an asset to Vermont’s mixed-delivery system, based on its inclusion of multiple perspectives regarding preK policies and facilitation of cross-agency data sharing.
- Several interviewees recommend that Vermont centralize preK contracting and payments at the state level, while taking steps to maintain opportunities for communication and collaboration between local-level public and private settings.
- Some stakeholders suggested shifting responsibility for preK delivery and oversight to the regional level.
- The research literature suggests there is not a single best practice or model for administering preK and early childhood programs. Although no “one size fits all” approach exists, researchers and experts have identified benefits to consolidating early childhood initiatives at the state level, either within an existing agency or through the creation of a new agency.