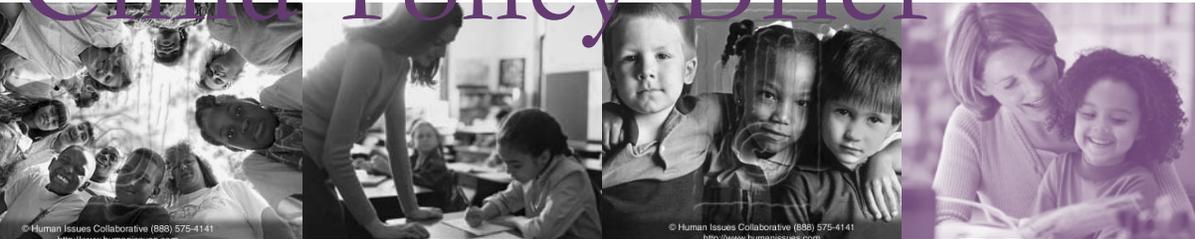


Child Policy Brief



Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education

Issue

Parental involvement in their children's prekindergarten is associated with improved academic success, at least in low-income families. The Georgia Prekindergarten program currently directs providers to offer some opportunities for parents to be involved. Providing more opportunities may further increase parental involvement and children's academic success.

What is Parental Involvement?

Parents can be involved in their children's education in many ways, both at home and at school, through:

1. Nurturing and sensitive childrearing – this is in addition to the basics of providing good nutrition, exercise, etc.
2. Parent-school communication, which includes parent-teacher conferences, phone conversations with school staff, information sent home with children, and informal conversations while dropping off or picking up children.
3. Volunteering in the classroom or for special activities such as field trips.
4. Learning at home, which occurs when parents reinforce classroom activities or educational strategies.
5. Decision making, which entails participation in parent-teacher organizations [PTOs], policy councils, etc.

Communities that practice community collaboration by transforming schools into community centers provide additional opportunities for parental involvement in their child's education.

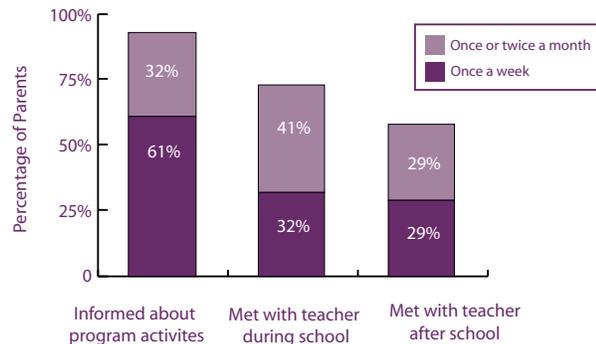
Parental Involvement in the Georgia Prekindergarten Program

Guidelines for the Georgia Prekindergarten state that, "Parents should be encouraged to volunteer their time, talents, and experiences in the classroom." In addition, two parent-teacher

conferences per year are required to discuss the child's growth and development.

In a 1996 Georgia State University survey, 93% of parents reported that they were informed regularly about their child's Georgia Pre-K program. More than 70% said that they regularly met with their child's teachers. Two-thirds (67%) indicated that they engaged at home in learning activities recommended by Pre-K staff, and 61% reported that they spent more time with their children as a result of the prekindergarten program.

GA Pre-K Parental Involvement



Why is Parental Involvement Good?

Most scientific research on parental involvement has focused on school-age children. This research consistently shows that parental involvement, both at home and at school, is associated with higher academic achievement. Several experimental studies have demonstrated that increases in parental involvement in elementary and middle school lead to increases in achievement.

Research on prekindergarten children has predominantly focused on low-income, ethnic minority families enrolled in Head Start or Head Start-like programs. According to these studies, parental involvement at home and at school boosts program effectiveness and promotes all aspects of school readiness, including math and language skills, motivation, and social skills.

Long-Term Effects of Parental Involvement: The Chicago Longitudinal Study

The effects of parental involvement in prekindergarten can be long lasting. A rigorous evaluation of a program in the Chicago public schools called the Child-Parent Centers [CPC] has shown positive effects of the prekindergarten program on low-income children's achievement and behavior that persisted through adolescence. These included reduced special education placements, grade retentions, school dropouts and juvenile delinquency.

CPC emphasized parental outreach and support. Parental involvement in school was one pathway for the program's positive effects:

- Parent involvement in prekindergarten and kindergarten was associated with greater reading achievement and less grade retention through at least 8th grade.
- Parents who participated in the prekindergarten program were more likely to be involved in elementary school.
- The more years that parents were involved in elementary school, the more successful their children were.

Thus, encouraging parental involvement during prekindergarten can serve as a gateway to involvement during the child's elementary years, which contributes to success in middle school and beyond.

Researchers estimate that CPC saved taxpayers about \$4 and participants about \$7 per dollar invested in the program. Like Head Start, the CPC targets low-income families and provides extensive parental outreach and support – going beyond the levels currently offered in most Georgia Prekindergarten programs.

Head Start: A Model for Involving Parents

Head Start, the federal early childhood program, can serve as a model for involving low-income parents. In addition to welcoming parents into the centers and meeting with them regularly, Head Start programs must provide active parental outreach and support, including home visits, and opportunities for decision-making in program and policy development. Head Start centers are also mandated to provide volunteer and paid opportunities for parents.

These steps have been effective at involving parents. According to the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), a national study sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, 89% of Head Start parents receive home visitors, 79% attend teacher conferences, 71% volunteer in the classroom, 57% attend parent workshops, 51% help with field trips and other special events, and 33% participate in program decision-making at least once a year. FACES reports that the vast majority of Head Start parents are also very involved at home, regularly reading stories, playing counting games, teaching numbers and letters, etc.

Despite their high levels of involvement, Head Start parents also report barriers. The most frequently cited are parents' work schedules and childcare arrangements for their other children. These barriers are not unique to low-income families.

Interviews with middle class prekindergarten parents conducted by researchers at the Yale Center in Child Development and Social Policy also found that parents reported work schedules and childcare arrangements as the largest barriers to their involvement. These findings highlight the need for programs' commitment to and flexibility in providing opportunities for parent involvement.

Recommendations

Parental involvement during prekindergarten can promote children's school readiness and is associated with higher academic achievement and fewer behavior problems through adolescence, at least in low-income families. It can also lead to greater parental involvement in elementary school, which is associated with higher achievement for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Georgia Prekindergarten Program provides some opportunities for parental involvement, and parents take advantage of these opportunities. The program also provides some funding to sites through competitive grants to support parental involvement.

Georgia can learn from Head Start and other model early childhood programs how to further encourage parental involvement in the Georgia Prekindergarten program. The success of Head Start and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers demonstrates the potential of incorporating high expectations for parent involvement into the core mission of prekindergarten programs.

The Georgia Prekindergarten Program should consider:

- Strengthening the emphasis on parent involvement in the program guidelines
- Providing more detailed guidelines of how sites are expected to encourage parents' involvement
- Providing more institutional support for sites' parental outreach efforts

Taking such steps will further enhance the Georgia Prekindergarten Program's existing success in promoting school readiness and future achievement for all Georgia's children.

*For more information on parental involvement, please contact Dr. Chris Henrich of GSU's Department of Psychology at (404) 651-0704 or Dr. Monica Herk of GSU's Child Policy Initiative at (404) 651-1540. Research on the Georgia Prekindergarten conducted at Georgia State University: Basile, K. C., & Henry, G. T. (1996). *Quality and effectiveness of pre-kindergarten programs in Georgia: Parental perspectives*. Atlanta, GA: Georgia Council for School Performance. Report and other resources available online: <http://www.arc.gsu.edu/csp/default.htm#pubs>*