

# JULY 2015



## THIS ISSUE:

|                                                      |     |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Pre-K.....                                           | 1   |
| Building Strong<br>Early Childhood<br>Programs ..... | 2   |
| High Quality Preschool -<br>Curriculum.....          | 2-3 |
| Supporting the<br>Growth.....                        | 3-5 |
| Skills Iowa and<br>WritetoLearn.....                 | 5   |
| Quotes.....                                          | 5   |
| Questions to Consider...6                            |     |

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT BOOSTER Pre-K

An e-newsletter provided by Iowa School Finance Information Services (ISFIS)

Most education circles acknowledge that a four-year-old in today's society is well served by attending preschool. Schools districts and state policy makers are struggling, however, to ensure that the gains made in the earliest years of education are then supported and best built upon through the primary elementary years. Although states across the country have embraced providing high quality early childhood education as a path to increasing student outcomes, the long term benefits of these programs have not yet been fully realized.

Multiple long term studies have shown that there are a myriad of positive benefits to providing high quality preschool. The Perry Preschool Project out of Michigan, the Abecedarian Project run by UNC- Chapel Hill, and others all point to the same conclusions. Preschool is key to ensuring that all students have the best chance for success through their academic careers. Graduates of high quality preschool programs are 25% less likely to drop out of school before completing high school, are 50% less likely to be placed in special education, and 70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime. ([www.highscope.org/perrypreschoolstudy](http://www.highscope.org/perrypreschoolstudy)). The Perry Preschool Project's 40 year review showed that for every dollar invested in early childhood education, between \$8 and \$17 are saved in long term costs.

Consider what Jim Heckman, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, professor at the University of Chicago, and an early childhood learning advocate has to say about early childhood education. On his [website](#) he states, "Improving the economy, strengthening the middle class and reducing the deficit are national priorities. Solving these challenges starts with investing in America's greatest resource: its people. Quality early learning and development programs for disadvantaged children can foster valuable skills, strengthen our workforce, grow our economy and reduce social spending."

As we move into this continuum of Prekindergarten through secondary schooling in public education, we must ensure quality at every level and seamless transitions from home to school, grade to grade, building to building, and graduation to post-secondary and the workforce. When this happens, the real potential of public education will be realized. We believe the whole of each level plus seamless transitions is far greater than the sum of the parts. Our focus today will be on what high quality preschool education might include, but as you well know, best practice at all levels must permeate the system.

A brief review of current research shows two major threads regarding the long-term impact of preschool: the importance of the quality of preschool (one of the points made by Professor Heckman), and the ways that quality preschool connect to later schooling.

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## BUILDING STRONG EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

### Attendance

The first step in ensuring that students receive the best education in their early years is to get them there. Often, parents and guardians see preschool and kindergarten as “not quite school,” and many attendance centers struggle to maintain student’s consistent presence. Because families do not see the academic side of schooling in the first years of education (we’ll come to the question of curriculum in a moment), they often do not see the issue with missing school days. In turn, this can leave an indelible mark on students as they continue through their school careers with the impression schooling is not as important as other activities. This can lead to a pattern of long term chronic absence. Fighting this perception among families through family education programs is one step in ensuring long term student attendance. Some school districts in Iowa like Des Moines Public Schools and others across the country, such as the Los Angeles Unified School District, have gone so far as to employ attendance specialists that travel to homes and work with families to stress how important active attendance is in early years (NPR article) . The Iowa Legislature helped by passing a law that parents of students enrolling in the statewide voluntary preschool program are required to abide by the attendance rules of the school district (HF 351 enacted in the 2013 Legislative Session.)

Not only do some early childhood classrooms struggle with attendance, there is also a sharp disparity in preschool enrollment along socioeconomic status lines. High income students, who often already have a stronger base for their educational careers than their low income counterparts, are significantly more likely to be enrolled in preschool; nearly 56% of eligible preschool students compared to only 40% of low income students are enrolled in preschool. Further, preschool enrollment is lower among 3- and 4-year-olds whose parents have lower levels of education attainment themselves (as reported in an overview of the Quality Counts 2015 report). These numbers show that thus far, early education tends to replicate some of our most basic societal inequalities. Recognition of this challenge should help schools create a sense of urgency in focusing their enrollment efforts. This is not to say that schools should only include low income students- we know from research that all children show long terms benefits from access to universal prekindergarten ([Preschool Education and It’s Lasting Effects, 2008](#)).

### HIGH QUALITY PRESCHOOL- CURRICULUM

The upward trend in preschool funding and enrollment over the past decade has shown that schools and families are starting to truly recognize the value of early childhood learning- but what do schools do with students once they get in the door? Finding a high quality curriculum that meets both academic and social emotional needs of students is key to ensuring that students get lasting benefit from their preschool experience.

**Daily routine-** Having a daily routine provides grounding for students and teachers, allowing young children to feel confident over the course of their day. This allows the students to be more comfortable in their space and more open to learning from new activities. Some things to consider: How much time should each activity take? What is the best order of the day’s activities? Are there opportunities for students to interact with new toys? How will you introduce changes?

**Free play and large motor experiences-** The opportunity for free play (or choice time/ work time/ etc., depending on the curriculum) is key to students’ academic and social emotional development. As students interact with their peers they develop problem solving skills. Adept teachers can bring academic content seamlessly into their conversations, grounding their academic understandings in the real world. Some things to consider: Who supervises various areas? How will students be encouraged to try new things? What areas are most popular? Is there enough space?

**Structured group time (large and small)-** Structured group times provide two important levels of instruction for students. First, these are ideal times for direct instruction, so teachers can ensure that all students are getting a strong basis in academic content as well as practicing fine motor skills. Second, and more importantly, these are key times to develop classroom norms that inform students’ behavior throughout their academic careers. Some things to consider: Is there a space large enough for the class to meet as a whole? Should the small groups have independent projects? Who leads each of the groups? When does this fit in the routine?

**Social-emotional components-** As mentioned above, two of the most important aspects of preschool are routine and peer interaction. Following this, it is imperative that teachers and volunteers have a set routine for dealing with the day-to-day scuffles that arise when young children are learning how to be citizens of their classroom and the world. By having a strong social emotional curriculum and routine, teachers are able to show students the most effective problem solving methods and bring order to the class.

**Assessment-** Understanding youngest students' abilities and where they struggle can become a minefield for teachers if they don't have a structure through which to understand pre-academic skills. When selecting a curriculum, it is imperative that administrators and teachers see how that curriculum aligns with the Iowa early learning standards as well as the early elementary Iowa Core Standards and how the curriculum assesses progress toward those standards. Administrators and teachers should also consider the method and timing of assessment- Iowa provides access to, and requires the use of, the GOLD assessment system, (Iowa Code 279.60). However, how often and effectively that assessment is used (outside of the basic information gathering and a few other requirements) is up to the local teachers and administrators. As in K-12, it's not giving the assessment that's valuable, but rather what educators do with the results and how they change instructional practice that makes the biggest difference in student progress.

## SUPPORTING THE GROWTH THAT IS CREATED IN THE EARLIEST YEARS

### System wide considerations

Anyone that works in schools or follows the research of school improvement knows that the dedicated work of individual teachers in their classrooms is the first key to student progress, but it is not the only consideration. In order to ensure that all students are receiving the best possible education, there must also be a structure in place for leadership within and across programs in schools as well as in the state of Iowa.

Leadership is second only to teaching in ensuring student success ([How Leadership Influences Student Learning, Wallace Foundation](#)). Effective leadership structures include high quality professional development for teachers to ensure that every teacher is highly skilled in their field and able to provide high quality instruction. As schools provide voluntary preschool services and school leaders add these services to the never-ending list of things for which they're responsible, it's important that this responsibility not be seen as just one more thing, but rather a critical element that contributes to student success for many years to come. For example, recent studies have shown that many preschool classrooms face the same pitfalls when it comes to quality of instruction: most classes demonstrated moderate to high quality emotional support and classroom organization, but struggled with instructional support. Knowing that this broad trend exists across preschools, state and district level officials can work to create professional development programs that address these issues in early childhood classrooms.

### Transition to kindergarten support

Having built a strong foundation through clear curricular choices, adept teachers and strong leadership, it is then up to school districts to continue to develop young students throughout their early elementary education, building on the bedrock of skills from the first years. However, this is a facet that may be lost, as preschool classrooms are often not housed in the primary elementary building or as preschool teachers aren't directly included with other elementary teachers in collaboration and adult learning, leading to disjointed experiences for students at a time when consistency is key. Teachers and school leaders can support student transition between preschool and Kindergarten on two levels: through educational supports and social-emotional transition supports.

**Social-Emotional Transition-** As anyone who has spent any time around a young child knows, transitioning from one activity to another (let alone from one school to another!) can be a major upheaval. Preparing students for the transition to summer and to their new school setting can help alleviate the stress that comes along with any kind of major change. Schools and teachers do this by taking students to see their new buildings (and classrooms if possible), as well as doing small and large group lessons about the differences and similarities of their current classrooms and what next year will be like. Teachers should also engage parents in these conversations, so that children are getting similar messages from both school and home.

**Educational Transition-** Although the educational transition may seem more difficult between preschool and kindergarten, it doesn't have to be. Providing joint training to preschool and kindergarten teachers, districts can smooth the move from preschool to kindergarten into a clean evolution, rather than the abrupt shift that sometimes happens now. Some possible steps to consider:

- Training on the use of portfolios (so that preschool teachers know what to include and kindergarten teachers know what they're looking at)
- Aligning assessments between preschool and kindergarten to better evaluate any summer loss\*

- Evaluating preschool standards and curriculum to ensure they mesh with kindergarten standards
- Preschool and kindergarten (and other elementary) teachers study and problem solve together the level of student skills and learning and how to improve instruction related to improving student outcomes.

\*A note on the Iowa FAST/IGDI and TIER systems- the Iowa Department of Education offers access to these assessments for early childhood teachers, but does not require their use (districts may select other progress monitoring assessments) nor do they necessarily encourage cross training between preschool and kindergarten teachers. So, like many initiatives in education in Iowa, the Department of Education provides a strong basis, but it is up to school leadership to ensure that they are fully and well implemented.

## **Funding, funding, funding**

All of these programmatic ideals have one thing in common: they cost time and money. So, it is important to consider where Iowa ranks as compared to other states, in terms of preschool funding as well as both short and long term outcomes for students. The reality of these are staggering- in a recent Quality Counts survey, Iowa ranked in the top 10 for access to preschool and preschool funding, at the middle of the pack for school finance, overall score, yet below that in K-12 achievement- so, what gives? The reality is stark: if schools are not financially supported throughout the preschool- 12 continuum, the positive outcomes from the early years quickly diminish.

By looking at the states that have higher overall scores than Iowa, some trends emerge between preschool and overall school funding. Connecticut and Wyoming, the two states that have scores in the top ten for both preschool and K-12, both have higher levels of school funding than Iowa, and Connecticut has a significantly higher score on “Chances for Success.” The only state that has a top ten overall score with a low preschool rank is Vermont, which falls in the top five for overall funding. This points to the importance of providing financial support to schools in ensuring a healthy school system, and how critical that is to building on preschool successes.

Another important angle to consider is the potential of preschool to alleviate the impact of socioeconomic status on student outcomes. Once again, inadequate funding may be the culprit which explains why some of the academic benefits of early childhood education may not be playing out in the long run. Across the country, revenues for the highest poverty school districts are 10% lower per student than low poverty districts, and this is true in Iowa as well. Iowa puts very limited state funding toward high poverty schools (via at-risk weighting), but doesn’t equalize the difference of what it is estimated to cost to educate a low-income student to the same standards expected in our high income communities. According to The Education Trust’s 2015 report on Funding Gaps, in Iowa, just under half of most school districts’ funding comes from state aid and districts with the highest percentage of students in poverty receive less total state and local funding than other districts (almost 5% less on a per pupil basis and almost 10% less per low income student when controlling for the actual cost of educating at-risk students). A funding formula which provides resources for quality preschool is a good start. Absent investments along the way, it is no surprise that inequalities in educational opportunities continue.

There is no magic bullet to improving education in Iowa- it’s not STEM, STEAM, School-to-Work, Preschool, or any other initiative on the list that has come through in the past hundred years. The only way to build a solid education system (and even to properly implement any of the aforementioned initiatives successfully) is through long term, high quality learning opportunities for both students and adults, a rich curriculum that recognizes the academic needs of the students who will be engaging with it, excellent instruction, and the use of data to plan instruction and provide program evaluation. All of this isn’t possible without intentional planning.

Iowa does relatively well in terms of preschool access and funding, but it is doing well in a category that is struggling nationally. Continued delivery of the promising results from the initial push for early childhood education in overall reading comprehension, social success, and long term economic development, will require both local and state commitment throughout students’ entire educational experience. Today’s four-year-olds are counting on us.

## Further Reading:

Funding Gaps 2015

<http://edtrust.org/resource/funding-gaps-2015/>

A Playbook for the Youngest Learners

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/01/08/a-playbook-for-the-youngest-learners.html>

Initiatives from Preschool to Third Grade: Early Learning Primer

<http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf>

Early- Childhood Education in the U.S.: An Analysis

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/qc/2015/early-childhood-education-in-the-us.html>

EdWeek's 2015 Quality Counts Report and Rankings

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2015/01/08/>

National Conference of State Legislatures New Research: Early Education as Economic Investment

<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/new-research-early-education-as-economic-investme.aspx>

## SKILLS IOWA AND WRITETOLEARN™ CORNER

### Skills Iowa and MTSS

Learn how Stephanie Mohorne, Director of Professional Development at Waterloo Community School District, and the staff at Lincoln Elementary used Skills Iowa data through the MTSS process to get off the SINA list. [School Improvement Webinar: Using Data to Move Forward](#). If you're interested in learning more about Skills Iowa, contact Susie Olesen ([susie@skillsiowa.org](mailto:susie@skillsiowa.org) or 641-745-5284) or Josie Gerrietts ([josie@skillsiowa.org](mailto:josie@skillsiowa.org) or 515-229-9808).

### WritetoLearn™

Like most things, writing takes practice if students are to become proficient. The problem in being assigned enough practice is that responding to student writing takes hours and hours of teacher time. To address this road block, ISFIS offers WritetoLearn™, a remarkable program for students in Grades 4-12 that scores student writing electronically and aligns student and teacher feedback to the Iowa Core writing standards or the 6 Traits of Writing. This program offers students practice in essay writing, as well as summary writing which positively impacts not only writing skills but also reading comprehension. If you are interested in learning more about WritetoLearn™, watch this quick video or contact Susie Olesen ([susie@skillsiowa.org](mailto:susie@skillsiowa.org) or 641-745-5284) or Josie Gerrietts ([josie@skillsiowa.org](mailto:josie@skillsiowa.org) or 515-229-9808).

## QUOTES

“In early childhood you may lay the foundation of poverty or riches, industry of idleness, good or evil, by the habits to which you train your children. Teach them right habits then, and their future life is safe.”

- Lydia Sigourney

“The first five years have so much to do with how the next 80 turn out.”

- Bill Gates

“If you don't put money into early education and prevention, you'll just put money into something else later.”

– Kris Perry

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FROM THIS ISSUE:

*Many of these questions are relevant to all grades, not just early elementary.*

How are administrators supporting teachers in creating positive beginning of the year transitions for students?

What initial assessments are being administered to students? How are teachers using this data?

What does a successful first month look like in our school? Can it be improved this year?

How are we engaging young students and their families in the idea of the importance of attendance?

***If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics,  
please contact Susie Olesen at [susie.olesen@isfis.net](mailto:susie.olesen@isfis.net).***

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