Core Function: Preschool/Early Learning

Effective Practice — Provide children with quality early learning opportunities

Overview: High quality early educational experiences have been shown to significantly improve educational outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Pre-K and early grade teachers need specialized training to support children's development, and many experts are recommending that teachers from both levels receive joint training and engage in collaborative planning. Schools need to be aware of the incoming educational experiences of their kindergarten students to better understand their needs so that teachers can plan instruction accordingly. Curriculum and instructional plans should align with early learning standards, and cross-grade instructional planning can help students with key transitions between grade levels. High quality early learning opportunities should address all domains of development, and teachers should engage in regular, two-way communication with families that focuses on ways families and schools can work together as a team to promote children's learning.

Evaluate Your Practice: What types of training/education do pre-K through Grade 3 teachers need to effectively promote young children's development? What types of educational practices can provide young children with high quality learning opportunities?

Introduction

Participation in high-quality pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs can improve academic, behavioral, social–emotional, and cognitive outcomes for children with varying backgrounds, including those growing up within economically disadvantaged environments (e.g., Andrews, Jargowsky, & Kuhne, 2012; Barnett, 2008; Camilli et al., 2010; Karoly & Bigelow, 2005; Reynolds et al., 2007). Research has shown that attending a high-quality preschool can improve future test scores and attendance and can reduce grade-level retention and special education placements for children who may be at risk for academic challenges in elementary school (Andrews et al., 2012; Barnett, 2008; Reynolds, 1993; Reynolds et al., 2007). Long-term benefits of attending a high-quality pre-K program include higher rates of high school graduation, increased likelihood of attending college, and greater lifetime earnings (Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010; Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005; Reynolds & Ou, 2011; Reynolds & Temple, 2008). However, some research has also determined that some of these benefits for children may not persist into 3rd grade (e.g., Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Li et al., 2012; Lipsey, Farran, & Hofer, 2015; Puma et al., 2012). Without additional and continuous supports as children progress through the elementary grades, the benefits of high quality early learning experiences may not be sustained sufficiently to help children at risk for poorer academic outcomes meet learning challenges. This brief summarizes the existing research which addresses the necessary training of pre-K and other early child educators and the types of programs and practices that are effective in promoting early childhood development that sets the stage for children's future academic success.

What types of training/education do pre-K through Grade 3 teachers need to effectively promote young children's development?

Specialized training in early childhood education or child development is an important component of quality early education (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2012). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood as birth through age eight (NAEYC, 2009). Early childhood training is essential for all teachers working with children within this age range in order to understand their developmental needs and provide continuous supports as they progress through the early elementary grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Young children's learning and development clearly depend on the educational qualifications of their teach-

ers. Research reveals that specialized training in early childhood development is linked with improved classroom quality and academic and social child outcomes (Barnett, 2003; Pianta, 1997); in addition, teachers with specialized training are better able to support children's healthy development and their school readiness (Bueno & Darling-Hammond, 2010). This research has led the NAEYC to recommend that all early childhood teachers have specialized training in early childhood education or child development so that they are aware of the unique needs and learning trajectories of young children (Hyson, 2003). This specialized training should result in teachers who have a strong identification and involvement in the field of early childhood education, are aware of and uphold ethical guidelines and professional standards, engage in continuous collaborative learning to inform practice, and are capable of advocating for children and the profession (NAEYC, 2009). Many policy experts are also recommending that pre-K and K-3 teachers receive joint teacher preparation and engage in collaborative planning wherever possible (e.g., Shore, 2009).

What types of educational practices can provide young children with high quality learning opportunities?

Schools identify children's early learning experiences prior to school entry. While federal policies require the collection of data about children's early learning experiences (Early Childhood Data Collaborative, 2013), these data are often not compiled at the school level, giving educators an incomplete picture about children's early learning prior to school entry. It is important for principals and teachers to know about students' early learning experiences prior to school entry, including whether, what types, and the extent of experiences in pre-K and other formal early learning settings (Bornfreund & Severns, 2010). A number of national experts recommend the creation and use of a unique child identifier—a single non-duplicated number that is assigned to and remains with a child throughout participation in early learning programs and services and across key databases (Data Quality Campaign, 2006). This unique identifier allows stakeholders to obtain a complete picture of the formal services and early learning opportunities the child has accessed across systems. Further, the Early Childhood Data Collaborative (2011) advocates linking early childhood data with K-12 and other key data systems to better understand relationships among early learning opportunities and later outcomes. These linked systems can

provide two-way communication between early childhood education programs and K-12 programs so that early childhood education programs can determine how children progress once they exit these programs, and K-12 programs can tailor instruction to meet individual children's needs when they arrive at school (Early Childhood Data Collaborative, 2011). These linked systems can also provide coordination of services with other providers and help with referrals to other programs.

Schools and pre-K instructional teams design curriculum and instructional plans to align with the state's early learning standards. Across states and in many districts, separate standards govern early childhood programs serving children under age five and children attending early elementary school (Snow, 2012). Almost all studies and policy articles, however, advocate for the alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, and environments across pre-K to Grades K-3 as a successful approach for providing effective education to students in the early years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Most policy experts call for both vertical (across grade levels) and horizontal (within grade levels) alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment. For example, many states that have adopted Common Core State Standards have chosen to also align their early learning standards with these standards (Guernsey, Bornfreund, McCann, & Williams, 2014).

Examples of alignment across grades include Montgomery County Maryland, which created a P-12 curriculum framework, and supported alignment by developing instructional guides for all grade levels which included sample lesson plans that aligned with the curriculum framework and state standards (Marietta, 2010). Some researchers have noted that many children experience discontinuities as they progress from preschool through 3rd grade, particularly when transitioning from preschool to kindergarten, including a reduction in free-choice time and more whole-group instruction (New, Palsha, & Ritchie, 2009). FirstSchool, an initiative to promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger and more diverse population, provides an example of a P-3 model that utilizes a curriculum framework to stress the continuity of student learning goals and professional learning communities that emphasize cross-grade instructional planning (New et al., 2009). In fact, the policy literature "suggests that prekindergarten and K-3 teachers should receive

joint teacher preparation and engage collaboratively in planning" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 11).

Schools and pre-K instructional teams use activities that stimulate child development in all domains. Young children's development occurs across multiple domains (Payton et al., 2008), and early learning opportunities that support the whole child lay the foundation for successful learning throughout that child's life. Scott-Little, Kagan, and Frelow (2006) summarize research on the importance of early learning environments that support each of the five domains of development: 1) physical development (e.g., large gross motor and small fine motor skills); 2) social/emotional development (e.g., emotional support and secure relationships); 3) approaches to learning (e.g., ways children become engaged in learning through curiosity, creativity, independence, cooperativeness, and persistence); 4) language and literacy (e.g., communicating effectively and having emergent literacy experiences); and 5) cognitive development (e.g., cognition and general knowledge that result from participating in a rich learning setting with skilled and appropriate adult intervention). Daily stimulation in each of these domains is critical because "young children's development is strongly interconnected, with positive outcomes in one area relying on development in other domains" (NAEYC & NAECS-SDE, 2002).

Schools and pre-K instructional teams meet with families regularly to engage in two-way communication regarding children's development outside the classroom. Research shows that family engagement and involvement provides a number of benefits for young children academically and socially, including literacy and math skills (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Van Voorhis et al. (2013) examined nearly 100 family involvement studies and concluded that when given direction, families from diverse backgrounds can become more involved with their children's learning at home and at school, and this increased engagement can lead to both academic and social improvements. For teachers, families' knowledge of a child's development outside the classroom, their home experiences, and their community engagements is valuable to provide a whole picture of the child and to inform instruction with that child inside the classroom (Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, & Community Engagement, 2014). To effectively engage the families of their students, teachers need to both create a welcoming environment and

consider the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of these families (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009). Scheduling regular in person meetings (minimum of two per year) and maintaining ongoing two-way communication are critical so that teachers and parents can form partnerships that foster children's classroom success (Steen, 2011).

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
The school has a system in place for determining the nature and extent of early learning opportunities each student has accessed prior to school entry.
All pre-K teachers have specialized education in early childhood education or child development.
Pre-K Instructional Teams design the curriculum to be aligned with the state early learning standards and align instructional plans to the curriculum.
All pre-K teachers ensure that all students are involved in activities each day that are designed to stimulate development in all domains: social/emotional, physical, approaches to learning, language, and cognitive development.
All pre-K teachers meet with family members (parents or guardians) formally at least two times a year to engage in two-way communication regarding students' cognitive, social/emotional, and physical development outside the classroom.

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