



The Answer Sheet

A School Survival Guide for Parents (And Everyone Else)

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D.C. reaches pre-school milestone

By Valerie Strauss

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By HyeSook Chung

Today in Washington D.C. there are enough preschool and Pre-K slots for every 3- and 4-year-old child seeking a spot. This is a milestone worth applauding -- but the next phase is more daunting. We now must work to ensure that all children not only have access to free preschool and Pre-K in their neighborhood, but that the early education they receive is of the highest quality.

D.C. officials have in recent years worked to expand access to early education for all children. While Mayor Vincent Gray was chairman of the D.C. Council, he spearheaded legislation mandating universal Pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-old children by 2014.

According to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, there were enough slots this year among traditional public and charter schools, community-based organizations participating in the Child Care Subsidy Program, and private providers to provide services (child care or pre-k) to every child seeking services ages 3 or 4.

But the fact is that early education in the District is still a very mixed bag. Despite the vast expansion of slots, too many children across our city are still entering kindergarten unprepared. Research tells us that if children are behind by the end of the third grade, they may never catch up, no matter how much we spend on remediation.

One undeniable factor is "teacher effectiveness." In K-12 education, this has become a very loaded term, which the Gates Foundation is spending millions to define. But teacher effectiveness is just as important in the early education community -- and is potentially more complex.

For one thing, we don't have "objective" measures of quality like test scores. Thankfully, in this achievement-obsessed era, we still don't subject children ages 3 and 4 to standardized tests. Assessments must be rooted in observation, which is by definition subjective.

Ongoing professional development is equally important in early education, but it is sorely lacking. Early childhood teachers must be warm, attentive and nurturing, but they also need to be well-versed in the latest research-backed curricula as well as health and safety guidelines.

Currently, most centers close for a few days a year for teacher training. But the District's Pre-K legislation requires lead teachers in early childhood classrooms to have an associate's degree in a related field and be enrolled in a B.A. program by 2014. It's ambitious, especially considering that fewer than one in three early childhood professionals at centers in the District have a B.A. and many of the rest lack the necessary pre-requisites, including proficiency in English.

Our early childhood teachers absolutely need and deserve our support to increase their skills, but their employers are understandably concerned that they may not be able to retain their staff after higher education. We have heard from center directors who worry that their teachers may seek more lucrative employment — as kindergarten teachers! In Washington D.C., the median salary for a teacher with a Child Development Associate credential working at a child care center is \$23,200, barely above the federal poverty level for a family of four. It's not surprising that 45 percent of centers in the city report losing staff every year.

There are a couple of innovative approaches in the District worth noting that may help address these challenges. One is a scholarship program called T.E.A.C.H. Based on a national model, the scholarship requires employers and teachers to sign a one-year contract, including a raise, and for both to bear a part of the tuition.

The second is an assessment tool by the D.C.-based [AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation](#) called Quality Indicators. AppleTree just received a federal grant to pilot this set of criteria that would create some consistency around how early childhood teachers are given feedback so that they can improve their effectiveness in the classroom. The tool rates them in more than 20 areas, including student engagement, relevant instruction, time management and classroom organization.

The Pre-K legislation is a start, but to ensure quality in early education, we need more ideas and investments like these coupled with clear benchmarks to measure our progress – including how children who complete Pre-K perform in later grades. If we have learned anything from decades of K-12 education reform, there are no easy answers. We need to follow data and best practices to know what works, but we also need to get to work right away. Our children are counting on us to get this right.

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