



Early Learning: Unintended Consequences of the Push to Close the Gap by Increasing Quality

Public education in the United States continues to be marked by persistent disparities in test scores, high school completion rates, and college enrollment rates based on factors such as students' household income, race/ethnicity, and gender. These achievement gaps are already in evidence before children begin school.¹ Students that are assessed as not ready for kindergarten are disproportionately from the same groups as those that are at risk of low performance at school.² Strong evidence links early literacy, mathematics, and social skills with later school performance.³

But there is also good news: A growing body of evidence suggests that children's early learning opportunities can promote later academic achievement.⁴ Thus state and federal efforts to close the achievement gap have zeroed in on closing the school readiness gap. Early learning and school readiness have attracted unprecedented national attention as policymakers seek to address the achievement gap by expanding access to high-quality early education (box 1).

Research that points to the value of early learning programs also emphasizes the importance of quality.⁵ At-risk children who participate in high-quality childcare and pre-kindergarten can

overcome risk factors, make accelerated progress in development, and enter kindergarten ready to learn. Quality of early learning programming has been defined in multiple ways but is consistently understood to improve cognitive development, communication skills, and social-emotional and peer outcomes.⁶ Indicators of quality typically include child-teacher ratios, teacher qualifications and professional development, health and safety practices, evidence-based and standards-aligned curriculum, and family engagement.

Are federal and state efforts to expand access paying off? Unfortunately, early evidence suggests that the public-private market is not expanding access to high-quality child care for students that need it most. While recent policy has focused on increasing the supply of high-quality programs, obstacles to increasing the demand for such programs remain to be addressed. To gain an understanding of why that is, it is necessary to first explore how policy has sought to identify and support quality programs in early childhood education.

The Landscape of Early Learning

American early education is a complex, fractured landscape composed of many

In the face of strong evidence that high-quality pre-kindergarten programs can play an outsized role in closing the achievement gap, state and federal policymakers have responded with bold moves to increase access to quality early learning. Persistent gaps in the quality of provider programs suggest that new approaches may be in order.

by Phil Sirinides

Box 1. National and State Investment in Early Childhood Education

States have made notable efforts to ramp up spending on early childhood education. For example, in 2014 New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and legislative leaders agreed to spend a little over \$1.5 billion over five years, or about \$340 million a year, on free full-day classes for four-year-olds. The vast majority of fiscal 2015 funding, \$300 million, is allocated to New York City. Utah and Hawaii made first-time investments of \$3 million each to establish pre-K programs in fiscal 2014–15.

The US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services co-funded preschool block grants totaling \$226 million in 2014. These grants went to 18 states and are expected to serve over 18,000 children in the first year. States could apply for two types of grants: development or expansion grants. Development grants targeted states that serve less than 10 percent of four-year-olds and had not previously received Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants. The grant focuses on high-quality preschool programs that serve children in one or more high-need communities. States were allowed to apply up to 35 percent of the award for state-level infrastructure and quality improvement. Expansion grants went to states that serve 10 percent or more of four-year olds or have received RTT-ELC grants. The grant allowed states to apply up to 5 percent of the award for state-level infrastructure and quality improvements. The program emphasized serving children in two or more high-need communities.

Sources: US Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/preschooldevelopmentgrants/index.html>; Bruce Atchison and Emily Workman, State Pre-K Funding: 2014–15 Fiscal Year, (Denver: Education Commission of the States, January 2015), <http://www.ecs.org/clearing-house/01/16/97/11697.pdf>.



disparate programs and services. It involves public, private, and business contributions, along with tuition.⁷ It is common for independent service providers to combine program features and braid sources of funding. State and federal programs have moved to increase flexibility in funding and program management strategies. As a result, complex partnerships have formed in which schools and community providers work together.

The mixed-service, mixed-funding landscape encompasses child care, private preschool, district preschool, Head Start, early intervention, and home-visiting services, for example. It is a difficult context for education policymakers as they contemplate expansion of policies and programs relating to early childhood education. To address these realities and counter the perceived decline in quality of child care facilities, states have been working on broad initiatives to improve the quality and access of early learning across multiple settings, and particularly since the US Congress passed the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant program in 2011. Most states have established quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to monitor and support evidence-based standards that have been directly or indirectly linked to improved child outcomes. A QRIS is a voluntary, tiered rating system for systematically assessing quality, supporting continuous improvement, and informing families about their choices in child care (box 2).

Through QRIS, states have been trying to improve the supply of quality care by defining and monitoring standards for quality, creating a path for quality improvement, and investing in incentives and technical assistance to motivate providers (see map). Programs typically receive financial incentives for earning high ratings and enrolling more high-needs children.

In developing such programs, states clearly intend to direct more at-risk children to high-quality programs by providing families with reliable information they can use when selecting early childhood services. In theory, the supply of higher quality care will rise to meet demand, as families gain access to ratings and choose high-quality services and as new entrepreneurs step up to supply this care. Conversely, the supply of low-quality care is expected to decline as a function of decreasing demand.

Yet this is not what is happening. In states with mature, fully implemented QRIS, the quasi-public-private market for quality child care is not operating efficiently.⁸ Instead, the child care market remains bifurcated between high-quality and low-quality providers, with strong demand for both.

The Challenge of Supply and Demand

In many states with mature QRIS, data suggest that after years of increased participation, the supply of high-quality child care has reached a saturation point and stagnated. Furthermore, advocates and policymakers have noticed that the supply of low-quality services may actually increase concomitantly as licensed providers self-select into two groups: those participating in the voluntary QRIS programs and those that don't. If true and unchecked, separate markets for early learning services may remain entrenched. State officials must be alert to trends in provider QRIS participation that exhibit such a sorting, with the higher-quality cohort receiving increased state funds, and the second cohort continuing to serve the same children with diminishing resources. States must consider how investments in quality may not always translate to increased access and may have the perverse consequence of decreasing access to quality.

How could this be? First survey research of families suggests that limited enrollment in high-quality services is not always a problem of limited supply.⁹ While there are often waiting lists at high-quality centers, in many instances, the same is true for many low-quality or nonparticipating centers. For example, Georgia was one of the first states to offer universal pre-kindergarten and yet enrolls 58 percent of its four-year-olds. Pennsylvania has a 12-year-old QRIS, with provider participation hovering above 50 percent for several years. It is against this backdrop that many state systems are expanding pre-kindergarten and QRIS.

Second, insufficient demand due to lack of consumer information may be constraining access to high-quality early learning. Moderate increases in the supply of low-cost, high-quality early learning thus cannot translate into greater access as long as there are low-cost, low-quality options.

To increase the take-up rate for children who are most at risk, state and local efforts should

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Box 2. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

In most states, QRIS were originally developed for licensed center-based, family-based child care, but more recently they have been expanded to include a broad range of early childcare and education programs such as license-exempt child care providers; public school-age, pre-kindergarten, home-based infant and early childhood services; and/or Head Start programs. QRIS award quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards that typically encompass five elements: standards, accountability measures, program and practitioner outreach and support, financial incentives, and parent/consumer education efforts.

focus not only on the supply of high-quality services but on repairing the market separation in early learning. State and local public education leaders should consider the following strategies to address this mismatch between supply and demand.

Strategy 1: Increase Demand for Quality

Nationally, families perceive they have fewer early learning options than they actually do, and many believe they can't afford quality.¹⁰ States and communities can develop new strategies for engaging families and sharing information around availability, affordability, and benefits of quality early learning. Most states with QRIS are developing strategies to communicate with families about their options. To be effective, these strategies must recognize that families that typically choose low-cost, low-quality environments have relied on word of mouth and personal connections to make child care arrangements, not websites or published material. As such, communications must be responsive and representative of diverse families concerns and values concerning early childhood. Local schools may be well positioned to engage families with young children in a conversation about available options. State strategies could also consider other ways to motivate demand, as Minnesota does by offering tax credits to families that choose high-quality programs.

Strategy 2: Build Capacity for Local Quality Improvement

Improving the quality of an individual early learning provider's program requires a significant investment of time, money, and expertise. Not only do providers face low demand for making difficult improvements, but they lack the resources and capacity for making those changes. State QRIS provide a range of supports, but state and local education agencies can also assist independent programs through shared teacher training and proactive planning around the transition to kindergarten. Through partnerships between public schools and private early learning providers, schools can build capacity for quality improvement. It is also important that these efforts focus on more providers than simply the motivated ones who are already accessing support through existing initiatives.

Strategy 3: Universal Access to High-Quality Early Learning

There is reason to suspect that the quasi-public-private market alone cannot provide universal quality, even with strong family engagement and considerable effort to build capacity. A third policy option to consider: supplying high-quality service that is free or low cost. This course would likely achieve the goal

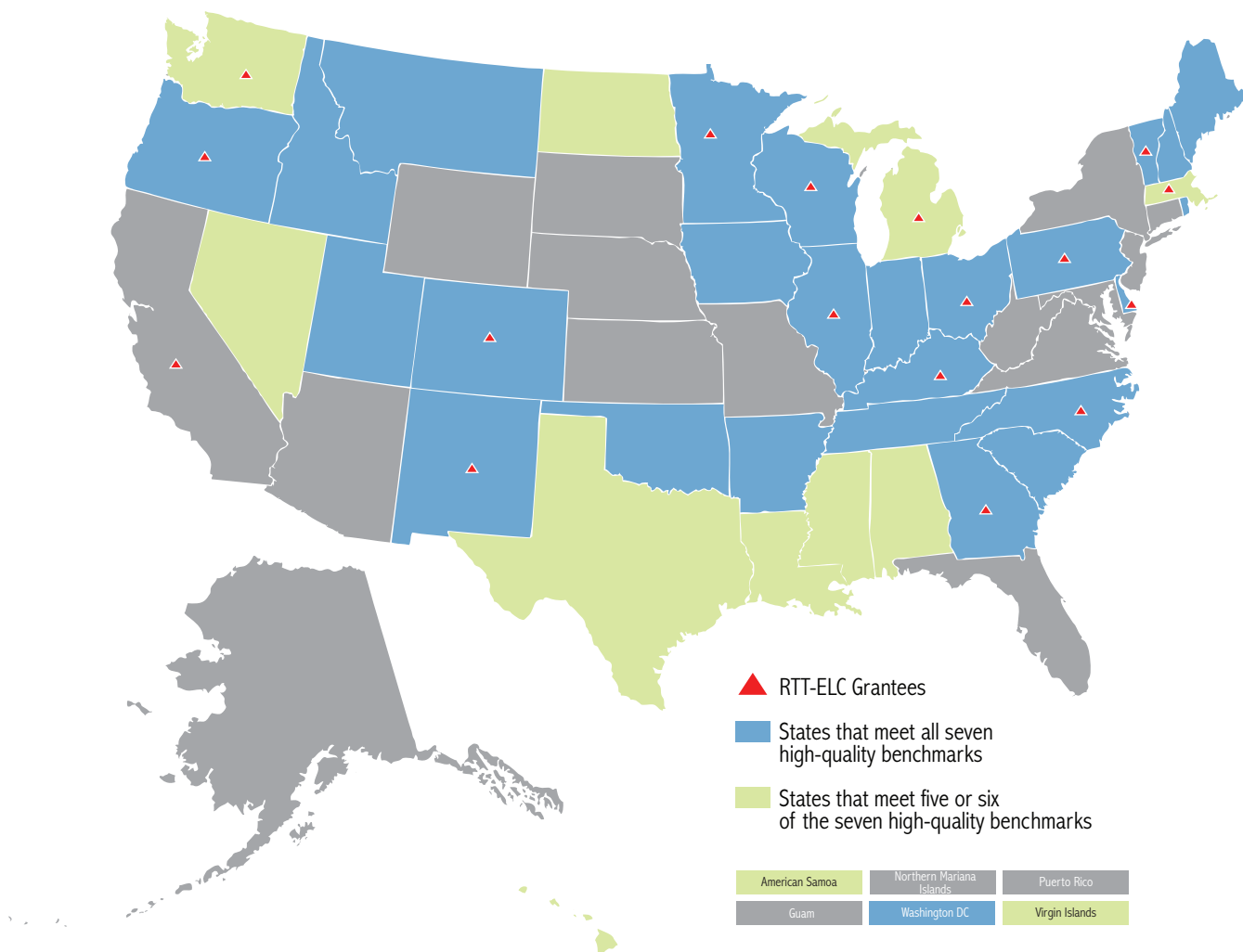
of ensuring that children at risk of low achievement in school get access to high-quality early learning, in part by removing the market for low-cost, low-quality providers. A challenge for those choosing this strategy would be to create monitoring systems that ensure that public investments are yielding high-quality results.

Equitable Access to High-Quality Early Learning

Have public investments in quality split the child care sector into two markets: high-cost high-quality and low-cost low-quality? If so, initiatives that promote increased supply of care are not likely to increase access to quality care. Moreover, policies that reward high quality risk greater market differentiation. The reasons

are insufficient capacity among many providers to improve quality and insufficient demand for quality. Movement toward high quality and equitable early learning starts with building a complete picture of families. Families, not state agencies, are the principal engine and advocate for increasing access to high quality services. State boards of education and state education agencies that seek to close the readiness gap should consider a range of strategies that engage families and local providers. Specifically, clinics and pediatricians, local libraries, and state health and human services agencies have access to families with young children and can disseminate information about quality early childhood programs. Local provider engagement can be fostered through policies that encourage public school districts to establish and maintain

State Progress on Child Care Quality 2013 Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)



Source: US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, The Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Year Two Progress Report (Washington, DC, 2014).

outreach with early childhood providers in their communities. As these providers' clients will matriculate to public schools, local school districts can provide access to professional development opportunities to local early child-care providers.

Research is under way to provide more evidence of the validity of QRIS ratings and their efficacy for improving quality and child outcomes. Important questions remain about the effects of QRIS on families' access to high-quality programs. Future research will likely clarify questions not only about efficacy and cost benefits but could also help address broader problems with market supply and demand. ■

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