



ENSURING HIGH QUALITY Early Care and Education for all Children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

The inconsistency in implementing basic statewide regulations for preschoolers has prevented Massachusetts from maximizing its quality of education for young children. Sixty percent of Massachusetts' preschoolers are enrolled in public or private preschool programs or other early childhood educational settings.¹ These settings are supported by a variety of funding streams, which offer a respective array of requirements, regulations, standards, and guidelines for the operation of preschool programs. Determinations about which requirements, regulations, standards, and guidelines are followed in Massachusetts preschool classrooms are entirely dependent upon the type of setting the children are enrolled in, rather than what is in the best interests of preschool-aged children.

Nationally, Head Start programs are federally supported and must meet the federal Head Start standards including meeting Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) licensing requirements. In Massachusetts, community based preschool programs are generally privately funded and must also meet the Department of EEC licensing requirements. All of these programs have the option of applying for National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation which, if received, requires maintaining a higher level of standards than licensing regulations. Massachusetts public preschool programs are operated and overseen by the state's Department of EEC, but are exempt from licensing. The state's public preschool programs that receive Community Partnerships for Children (CPC) funding are required to meet both the Early Childhood Program Standards for Three and Four Year Olds approved by the Department of Education (DOE) in 2003 as well as the NAEYC accreditation standards. However, locally funded public preschool programs in Massachusetts are "encouraged but not required to follow these standards."²

Thus Massachusetts preschool children and their families are met with an amalgamated system of varying rules, standards, and regulations overseeing preschool operation depending on the setting in which the child is enrolled. This inconsistency ignores key components of quality such as classroom ratios, child supervision, and regularity of program quality oversight.

Asking Questions about the Quality of Care

Our analysis aimed to: (1) identify gaps in service across the preschool and early education system; (2) illuminate the impact that such gaps have on children; and (3) make recommendations that will minimize risks and maximize the quality that Massachusetts offers to its preschool-aged children and their families. To do this, we:

- A** Examined and compared regulations and standards of Department of EEC licensure, NAEYC accreditation, CPC funding, and state oversight of public, unlicensed programs.

- B** Conducted informal interviews with public school staff from three school districts
- C** Surveyed 105 preschool providers (40% Child Care Centers/Preschools; 29% Public Schools; 21% Head Start programs; and 10% other).

Findings: How to Strengthen Learning Opportunities

FIRST: Children Must Be Safe and Supervised at All Times

This study found that 12.5% of survey respondents operate programs in which 3- and 4- year old children are not supervised at all times of the day. In these programs, preschoolers are allowed to leave their classrooms unaccompanied by an adult for reasons such as going to the bathroom, seeing a specialist, or delivering a message to another teacher. The state of Massachusetts requires licensed preschool programs to supervise children at all times. Public preschool programs are under no such obligation. Funding restrictions, high child-teacher ratios, and large classroom sizes often prohibit teachers from supervising all children in their care at all times.

Teachers must be required to supervise preschool children at all times in order to prevent accidental injuries and to ensure that prompt medical attention is given to children who incur injuries that are not preventable. National studies report that unintentional injuries are the number one cause of death among children ages 1-4 in both the USA and Massachusetts.³ Further, 3 million children and adolescents visit emergency rooms annually for injuries related to falling, of which "more than 40% occur among infants, toddlers, and preschoolers."⁴ Parents of preschoolers entrust schools with the care and supervision of their children.

SECOND: Child-Teacher Ratios Must Support a Learning Environment

An important indicator of high quality early education is the ratio of adult caregivers to children in the learning environment.⁵ Indeed, "studies in the early child-

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hood field have shown that good program standards (for example, low teacher-child ratios...) are associated with higher levels of classroom quality.”⁶ Low ratios are associated with more responsive, socially stimulating, and less restrictive learning environments.

In Massachusetts, preschool programs licensed by both the Department of EEC, as well as the DOE Preschool Learning Standards, state that programs serving preschool children 3-5 years of age are required to maintain a child to staff ratio of 10-1. These practices align with NAEYC national accreditation criteria.

However, in Massachusetts, public schools operate under the jurisdiction of the DOE: class size is determined by the local school districts. Early Childhood Program Standards are optional for these programs. As a result, child to teacher ratios in some public school preschool classrooms reflect ratios as high as 22-1.

Our survey of Head Start, private, faith-based, and public preschool programs across Massachusetts as well as our informal interviews with state school districts, yielded considerable variability in child to teacher ratios. Some programs failed to meet, and others exceeded required ratios. Moreover, fewer than 75% of programs are able to maintain required ratios throughout the entire school day. An important step toward providing high quality preschool is achieving consistency in the required child to teacher ratio (see Table I.)

Table I

PROGRAM TYPE	LOWEST RATIO	HIGHEST RATIO	AVERAGE RATIO
Public Preschool	2-1 **	22-1	7-1
Private Preschool	5-1	10-1	8-1
Head Start	5-1	10-1	9-1
Other*	3-1	12-1	7-1

* Montessori schools; parochial elementary school; child care in a higher educational system; family child care with Head Start

** Special needs classrooms

THIRD: The State Must Consistently Offer Oversight and Monitoring

In Massachusetts, preschool programs are licensed and regulated by different organizations depending on the type of funding and program, creating inconsistency in standards. Although the Massachusetts DOE approved the Early Childhood Program Standards for Three and Four year olds in April 2003, these standards are recommendations, not mandates, and do not apply to all programs in the state.⁷ Massachusetts licensed preschool programs require review and relicensure every two years. The state intends to conduct quality reviews of public preschool programs every six years with a mid-cycle Special Education follow-up review. Thus, the state’s oversight and monitoring system includes a wide variation in requirements between programs that are licensed and those that are not.

In this study, monitoring intervals for programs varied (see Table II). High quality, consistent standards are necessary for educational excellence. Massachusetts must implement these standards as baseline requirements for preschool education. Unfortunately, when this is not established as an expectation for all programs, our most disadvantaged constituents are most likely to end up with poorly qualified programs and teachers. Without a clear and consistent set of regulations, programs will vary in their level of quality and service making it even more difficult for national, state and local government

to establish clear methods for program assessment as well as hindering the ability of states to provide high quality education for all children.

Table II

PROGRAM TYPE (#)	1-2 YRS	3-4 YRS	5-6 YRS	NEVER	NO RESPONSE
OCCS (67)*	57	5	0	0	5
DOE (28)*	9	5	1	4	9

* Survey was completed in June 2005 prior to the formation of the Department of Early Education & Care.

Recommendations

As Massachusetts moves towards a system of universal preschool, attention must be given to the essential elements of quality that will promote educational excellence. We offer three recommendations:

- 1 The DOE Early Childhood Program Standards for Three and Four Year Olds (2003) should be the minimum regulatory requirement for all preschool programs regardless of funding or setting.
- 2 In order for all Massachusetts programs to achieve quality, regulations should be standardized, monitoring should occur at least every two years, support should be available, and consequences should be consistent.
- 3 In order for schools to offer a safe and stimulating learning environment for children, preschool classrooms should be required to maintain a minimum child to teacher ratio requirement of 10 to 1.

Working together, these three recommendations are all essential building blocks of a quality learning environment for young children.

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