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**Getting Ready for School:  
The Early Childhood  
Cluster Initiative of  
Palm Beach County, Florida**

**Program Implementation  
and Early Outcomes: Year 3  
Executive Summary**

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## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, policymakers and funders are recognizing what educators and psychologists have long known about the importance of early childhood experiences for later development. Of particular interest is the potential value of high-quality early childhood experiences in improving the school readiness of low-income children who traditionally start school behind their more advantaged peers. Prevention and early intervention programs, such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al., 2005), that enrich early childhood environments have been shown to produce more successful youth and adults by raising both cognitive and noncognitive skills (see also Barnett, 1995; Campbell, et al., 2002; Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Masterov, 2004; Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004; Temple & Reynolds, 2006). Moreover, evidence indicates that from an economic standpoint, educational interventions for disadvantaged children in the first 5 years of life have much higher returns in terms of future education and employment than later interventions (Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Masterov, 2004).

At the policy level, questions remain about the best way to structure, target and fund new preschool programs is a matter of debate, given available resources including whether the program should be targeted or universally available (Barnett, Brown, & Shore, 2004; Loeb et al., 2006). Still, a growing number of states have weighed in on this issue during the last decade by establishing universal or voluntary prekindergarten programs in an effort to improve children's readiness for school.<sup>1</sup> Early research on some state-funded programs indicates promising impacts on children (Barnett, Lamy, & Jung, 2005; Clifford et al., 2005; Gillam & Zigler, 2000; Gormely et al., 2005). There are also many uncertainties about how to structure programs themselves to maximize their impact on school readiness and other developmental goals. Research suggests a degree of agreement on the importance of some program characteristics such as full-day (versus half-day), smaller class sizes, low teacher-child ratios, and relevant professional development, while other characteristics continue to be actively debated, (e.g., teacher education, program location and age of the child served (Early et al., 2007; Kelley & Camilli, 2007). Many also worry that, in practice, the budgets actually allotted for state prekindergarten initiatives are not sufficient to provide the high-quality experiences needed to effectively prepare children for school.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond these structural measures of programs, an extensive body of research is coming together around the idea that classroom dynamics—social interactions and instructional experiences—are critical to positive outcomes for children (e.g., Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Burchinal, Cryer et al., 2002; Burchinal, Roberts et al., 2002; Frede, 1995; Frede & Barnett, 1992; Howes, 1997; Howes & Smith, 1995; La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; NICHD Early Childcare

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<sup>1</sup> As of April 2006, only six states did not provide any state funding for preschool programs. In several states, the prekindergarten program is a state supplement to Head Start. In some states, it is a combination of a state supplement to Head Start and other funds specifically for providing prekindergarten (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC]: <http://www.naeyc.org>). Despite the overall expansion in funding, recent shortfalls have led to declining enrollments and lower per-child expenditure (adjusted for inflation) in some states (National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER]: <http://nieer.org>).

<sup>2</sup> Thirty state prekindergarten programs currently require teachers to have a B.A. degree and, in most of these states, specialized training in early childhood education (NAEYC: <http://www.naeyc.org>). Since the early 1980s, according to Herzenberg, Price, and Bradley (2005), there has been a large decline in the qualifications of the center-based early childhood workforce nationwide. Thirty percent of childcare teachers and directors now have a high school diploma or less.

Research Network, 2000, 2001; Pianta et al., 2002). There is general consensus that the effects of early childhood programs on children’s development and learning depend, in large part, on the *quality* of their experiences in these programs. Accordingly, any effort to improve children’s development and readiness for school must take into consideration both the structural elements of good programming and the quality of interactions between adults and children.

### **The Early Childhood Cluster Initiative**

Recognizing the importance of quality in children’s early childhood experiences, the Children’s Services Council (CSC) of Palm Beach County, the United Way of Palm Beach County, the School District of Palm Beach County, and Palm Beach Community College (PBCC) launched the Early Childhood Cluster Initiative (ECCI) in the fall of 2005, modeled on the 1960s “Perry Preschool Project,” which is prominent in the field for its documented impact on disadvantaged children (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002; Schweinhart et al., 2005).<sup>3</sup> ECCI’s central feature was a full-day prekindergarten program targeted to 3- and 4-year-old children in four low-income communities.<sup>4</sup> The term “cluster initiative” referred to the initiative’s intentions to support and link the agencies and individuals that provide care for children in the 5 years prior to entering kindergarten.

All of the first-year ECCI classrooms were located in Title I schools that housed Beacon Centers, that is, programs managed by community-based organizations in school space during the afterschool out-of-school time hours—afternoons, evenings, and weekends—to provide social, recreational, and educational activities for children and families in the community. ECCI stakeholders anticipated that relationships formed between Beacon Centers and families during the preschool years would continue and provide support to children who remained in the school for kindergarten. ECCI classrooms were also supported by the Comprehensive Services program, which provided early identification of developmental delays and social-emotional problems and service referrals. Initial plans for ECCI also included gradually implementing the program in community childcare centers and homes.

As described in earlier reports (Spielberger, Baker, & Winje, 2007; Spielberger & Goyette, 2006), the central feature of the program was—as it was for the Perry Preschool Project—the High/Scope curriculum. Although this curriculum has evolved somewhat during the past 40 years, its fundamental precept of “active learning” remains the same. High/Scope’s approach to early childhood education is based on developmental theory and evidence from both developmental theory and educational practice that children learn best from concrete experiences

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<sup>3</sup> The findings from the long-term evaluation of the Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005) showed that participants of the program performed better through the years on achievement, literacy, cognitive, and language tests than those who did not participate. Moreover, participants were more likely to be high school graduates, be employed and earn higher incomes than non-participants. The results of the program suggest that children who participate in high quality early care and education programs have better outcomes than children of comparable backgrounds who do not.

<sup>4</sup> These communities or targeted geographic areas (TGAs)—the Glades, Lake Worth/Lantana, Riviera Beach/Lake Park, and West Palm Beach—have high levels of risk for poverty, teen pregnancy, crime, and child abuse and neglect. According to the 2003 *State of the Child in Palm Beach County*, 75 to 93 percent of children in the TGAs receive free or reduced lunch; the rate of child abuse and neglect in the TGAs is between 4.1 and 6.6 times the county average; and crime rates in the TGAs range from 14 to 93 percent above the county rate.

in which they personally plan, carry out, and reflect on their activities with appropriate support and guidance from adults (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002; Schweinhart, Weikart, & Hohmann, 2002). Thus, the curriculum places special emphasis on the learning environment, the daily routine and the nature of adult-child interactions. High/Scope is also committed to a broad conception of assessment, including daily anecdotal note-taking by teachers as part of the planning process and as a basis for communicating child progress to parents (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002).

ECCI was similarly characterized by low teacher-child ratios and an emphasis on teacher qualifications. Each ECCI classroom had a 1:6 adult-child ratio and was staffed by a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree and early childhood certification who received intensive training in the High/Scope method, as well as two assistant teachers called Early Learning Associates (ELAs). ELAs were required to have a minimum of a Child Development Associate credential (CDA)<sup>5</sup>, have at least an introductory course in High/Scope, and to have agreed to pursue an associate's degree at the start of the initiative. Resource teachers, most of whom were experienced in the application of High/Scope and who had, at a minimum, qualifications similar to those of classroom lead teachers, provided ongoing supervision, training, and support for teachers, using a peer coaching model.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the ECCI program activities and participants—including children, families, teachers and other school staff, and Beacon Centers—and its intended short- and long-term outcomes. This framework, which is based on the Planning, Implementation and Evaluation (PIE) document generated by program designers, assumes that well-trained and experienced teachers will provide developmentally appropriate learning environments and activities to children.<sup>6</sup> These activities, in turn, will foster children's cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language and literacy development and thus better prepare them for kindergarten. Because children's learning experiences at home also influence their preparation for school, teachers' work with parents will help improve their knowledge and understanding of what and their children are learning and how they can best support their children in school.

The emphasis of program implementation shifted during the first two years of ECCI. The first year focused on providing intensive training to lead classroom teachers, which included course work led by an experienced High/Scope trainer and on-site technical assistance from resource teachers. During the second year the initiative expanded to include the addition of a community-based childcare center serving infants and toddlers as well as preschool children and the piloting of an intensive program of activities, led by a Parent Volunteer Coordinator, to strengthen parent involvement at one school site and the community childcare center.

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<sup>5</sup> The CDA is a performance-based credential conferred by the Council for Professional Recognition (<http://www.cdacouncil.org>). In addition to holding a high school diploma, CDAs must have 480 hours of experience working with children and 120 hours of formal childcare education, both within the past 5 years, and pass an assessment by the Council for Professional Recognition. The assessment includes a written and oral assessment by a Council representative, the development of a professional resource file, collection of parent questionnaires, and documented observations of work with children and families by a CDA advisor/trainer.

<sup>6</sup> *Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation (PIE) for Early Childhood Cluster Initiative*, Children's Services Council document, February 21, 2006.

The third year brought additional changes in scope and focus. In an effort to contain costs and focus ECCI in schools with both the necessary interest and capacity to implement the program, the program was reduced from twenty classrooms in ten schools to twelve classrooms in seven schools.<sup>7</sup> The Parent Volunteer Coordinator position and program of activities to enhance parent involvement led by the Parent Volunteer Coordinator were expanded from two classrooms at one school to six classrooms at four schools. The community childcare center was separated from the initiative, although it received other resources to support its quality improvement efforts. During the fall of the third year, another change was that the intensive 4-week training provided to certified teachers in the first 2 years of the initiative was provided for the first time to one of the two ELAs in each classroom. Finally, in February 2008, CSC decided it could not continue to fund the ECCI program beyond the third year and announced that the program would be terminated June 30. As a result, High/Scope training for the remaining ELAs who had not received training in the fall was eliminated, the ECCI program manager at the school district was reassigned to another position, and another school district staff member assumed management responsibilities for the last few remaining months of the project.

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<sup>7</sup> One impetus to the reduction in scope, which was not part of the original plan for ECCI, was a change in the property tax rates, which was proposed by the Florida legislature in mid-2007 and passed into law in early 2008. This raised concerns about CSC's ability to continue to fund the program at the same level without clear evidence of effects on children.

## The ECCI Program Evaluation

Chapin Hall has been conducting an implementation and evaluability study of the ECCI project since the midway point of its first year. As described in our first report (Spielberger & Goyette, 2006), the initiative made considerable progress in its initial year, particularly in implementing the High/Scope curriculum in the classroom, training and mentoring teachers, and developing relationships with families. However, not all components of the initiative could be fully implemented in the first year, including the use of the Child Observation Record (COR) and a program of activities to promote parent involvement. In addition, participants suggested that more time was needed to integrate the ECCI program into the school setting and build foundational relationships with school administrators, Beacon Center staff, and other service providers.

In the second year, despite substantial turnover in staff from the first to second year, the initiative improved in several areas (Spielberger, Baker, & Winje, 2007). First, the High/Scope curriculum model became more established in the school-based sites, which appeared to be the result of classroom training provided for teachers new to the program, greater experience and understanding among existing staff, and regular on-site technical assistance provided by resource teachers to all classroom staff. Second, although classrooms varied in their quality, mean scores on all of the domains of the High/Scope Program Quality Assessment (PQA) instrument, the primary measure of program classroom quality used in the evaluation, either increased or were maintained. Third, four of the twenty lead teachers received High/Scope certification (and a fifth was close to being certified). Finally, it also appeared that the level of parent involvement had increased in the small number of classrooms where staff attention was focused.

On the other hand, progress in implementation of the program at a community childcare center was slower than expected. In addition, although school staff overall were positive about the goals of the ECCI program, they varied in their views of the High/Scope curriculum. Two-thirds of the kindergarten teachers, 40 percent of the administrators, and one-quarter of the prekindergarten teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the curriculum and questioned the program's impact on children's school readiness. Analyses of open-ended comments from some respondents suggested that underlying these results was a belief that the curriculum would not prepare children well for the kind of kindergarten curriculum they were likely to experience at their schools.

Analysis of children's scores on two kindergarten readiness screens, the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screen (FLKRS) and the Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS), suggested that kindergarten children who were enrolled in the ECCI program during its first year were comparable to other kindergartners in the school district in terms of their school readiness screen results—even though demographic information indicated the ECCI sample included a higher proportion of low-income children and ethnic minorities. Although we considered this a positive finding, without baseline measures, we cannot conclude that any differences or lack thereof between the groups were indicators of program effects.

In light of the findings from the second year, expected reductions in the scope of the program, changes in project management at the school district, and the new logic model for the

parent involvement component, it was decided that the third year evaluation should continue to examine program implementation. In addition, because of the likelihood of further reductions in the scope of the initiative and a decision to discontinue evaluation activities after the third year, CSC and the United Way requested that the third year evaluation focus, where possible, on the impact of the initiative on parents and children and the value of the Parent Volunteer Coordinator. Thus, primary research questions for the third year were the following:

- What is the level of parent involvement in the ECC I program, Beacon Center, and school? Do parents engage in developmentally appropriate activities in their home with their children? Is parent knowledge of developmentally appropriate activities and how to support their children's learning associated with levels of parent involvement at school?
- Does the ECCI program meet parents' expectations? How satisfied are they with the program and their children's progress?
- Are there differences in parents' involvement and satisfaction with ECCI that are associated with the presence of a Parent Volunteer Coordinator dedicated to increasing parent participation?
- What percentage of children who participated in ECCI are considered ready for kindergarten as measured by the state kindergarten readiness screen and other assessments? How do ECCI graduates compare with other kindergartners in the school district?
- Are there differences in children's kindergarten and first-grade outcomes associated with family demographics, children's level of development during preschool, parent involvement, or assessed classroom quality?

Thus, the third year of ECCI began with three main goals—(1) to continue to improve the implementation of the High/Scope curriculum and certify teachers in High/Scope, (2) to expand the reach of the Parent Volunteer Coordinator and assess the value of this position, and (3) to understand outcomes for participating children and parents. These goals, in turn, shaped the focus of the third year of the evaluation. Evaluation data were drawn from administrative data; surveys and interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents; site and external documents, including the early childhood research literature; and ECCI program records and reports. We also continued to conduct assessments of classroom program quality. Below we summarize findings from the third year and present conclusions and recommendations based on 3 years of evaluation results. Although the ECCI program has ended, the initiative provides valuable lessons about implementing a high-quality preschool program in a large school district and the importance of developing common understandings of and support for the curriculum among parents, administrators, and primary-grade teachers.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

### **Program Implementation and Quality**

During 2007-2008, the third and final year of the initiative, the ECCI program continued at twelve of the twenty original classrooms, in seven schools. In an effort to foster families' relationships with their children's schools and link them to supports (e.g., afterschool activities) that would continue after children entered kindergarten, all of the schools selected to be part of ECCI also housed Beacon Centers. Additional supports, including health and developmental screening and service referrals, were provided to children and families through the Comprehensive Services program.

At each site, program activities were conducted by a classroom team consisting of a certified teacher and two Early Learning Associates (ELAs) with at least CDA credentials. Teachers continued to receive High/Scope training and support through outside coursework and on-site assistance. In the third year, for the first time, the Preschool Curriculum Course, a 4-week training in High/Scope, was also provided to half of the ELAs (along with additional training for certified teachers), a need identified earlier in the initiative. Each classroom had no more than eighteen children, resulting in a low teacher-child ratio that did not exceed 1:6. Children enrolled in this free program were 3- and 4-year-olds residing in the school attendance area, with two-thirds of the slots reserved for 4-year-old children. Along with their work with children, teachers also managed lending libraries, hosted parent-child activities in the classroom, and conducted meetings and workshops for parents. In addition, in the third year, the full-time Parent Volunteer Coordinator increased her work to six of the twelve classrooms. The primary purpose of the Parent Volunteer Coordinator's activities, which were conducted primarily outside the classroom, was to increase parents' participation in the program and their knowledge of and use of developmentally appropriate practices at home.

### **Program Quality**

The ECCI program in the third year was smaller, more focused, and of higher quality than in its first 2 years. As described above, the initial design for ECCI to support a "cluster" of school-based and community-based childcare sites connected to Beacon Centers was modified in the second year because of reduced funding and in an effort to operate the program in sites with the best chance for successful implementation. As measured by the Program Quality Assessment (PQA) tool, program quality and implementation of the High/Scope curriculum improved during the third year, and variability in quality among classrooms declined. Although most of the third-year assessments focused on newly trained ELAs rather than the certified teachers previously rated during the first 2 years, the scores continued to increase in all four domains of the PQA. All four domains were rated as 4.4 or higher, well above the 4.0 benchmark established at the beginning of the initiative. Of the thirteen teachers (twelve ELAs and one certified teacher) who were assessed on the PQA in the spring of 2008, ten received High/Scope certification. Along with the four teachers certified in the second year, a total of fourteen teachers received certification during the 3-year initiative.

Thus, across the 3 years of ECCI program implementation, formal assessments of program quality demonstrated continuing progress toward full implementation of the High/Scope curriculum model. These considerable accomplishments appeared to be the result of classroom training provided for teachers; greater experience, understanding and practice among staff; and on-site technical assistance provided by resource teachers. By the end of the third year, particular growth had been demonstrated in the area of adult-child interactions—the area that some educators identify as the most important element of quality and hardest to modify.

### **Views of School Staff**

In addition to improvements in program quality prekindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers, and administrators all expressed satisfaction with the philosophy of the ECCI program and its school readiness goals. Prekindergarten teachers indicated that they felt well informed about the High/Scope curriculum and well supported by resource teachers and outside training in their efforts to implement the program. There was some evidence in our surveys during the third year that administrators had more frequent contact with the program and felt more familiar with the curriculum than in the previous year, although a majority of kindergarten teachers continued to have infrequent contact with the program and felt only somewhat familiar, at best, with the curriculum.

A majority of respondents in all three groups agreed that the program had had a positive effect on children, especially in developing their social skills. They differed, however, in their views about the impact of the program on parents and parents' involvement in their children's education at school and at home. Prekindergarten teachers supported by the Parent Volunteer Coordinator rated the impact of the program on parents more highly than teachers at schools where parents did not have contact with the Parent Volunteer Coordinator. Correspondingly, teachers at schools that did not have contact with the Parent Volunteer Coordinator were more likely than teachers at schools with contact with the Parent Volunteer Coordinator to ask for additional resources and training on ways to work with parents. While the way classrooms were selected to receive the services of the Parent Volunteer Coordinator make it impossible to describe these relationships in causal terms, these differences suggest that teachers in classrooms without contact with the Parent Volunteer Coordinator desired additional information and support on ways to improve parent involvement.

As in the second year of the evaluation, school staff—prekindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers, and administrators—tended to agree on the importance of developing children's social and emotional competencies, such as social interaction skills, verbal abilities and behaviors, such as self-control and attention, to prepare them for school. However, they diverged in their views about appropriate curriculum and instructional methods for preschool children. Kindergarten teachers and administrators, in particular, favored more traditional methods of instruction and motivating children than most prekindergarten teachers. Although prekindergarten teachers were generally more positive about the curriculum, about half of this group of respondents questioned whether it adequately prepared children for kindergarten at ECCI schools. Furthermore, only about half thought that parents understood the curriculum. These results suggest that despite the considerable progress in implementing High/Scope

evidenced in PQA results, there was still considerable variability in the support for the curriculum by administrators and kindergarten teachers at the end of the third year.

### **Parent Involvement and the Views of Parents**

The ECCI parent involvement effort was conceived initially as a broad-based outreach effort that would include many partners (Beacon Centers, principals and other school officials), but that at its core required teachers to welcome parents and invite them in as participants. In its initial conception, teachers would also have visited parents in their homes, an outreach strategy employed by the Perry Preschool Project that served as the ECCI model. ECCI established the Parent Volunteer Coordinator position when it became clear early in the implementation of the ECCI program that teacher contracts prohibited home visits. During the last 2 years of implementation, ECCI sought to continue teacher outreach to parents while also clarifying and expanding the role of the Parent Volunteer Coordinator.<sup>8</sup>

The parent involvement outreach activities that were put in place through ECCI were viewed by many parents as effective in getting them more involved, whether or not they were in a classroom served directly by the Parent Volunteer Coordinator. At the same time, parents' ratings of their children's readiness for school were positively related to the level of their participation in the program. Again, we can make no causal claims about any effects of the Parent Volunteer Coordinator in this relationship.

A majority of parents were satisfied with the ECCI program. They expressed high levels of confidence that their children would be ready for kindergarten in the fall and a belief that ECCI was a positive influence toward this goal. Parents who expressed satisfaction with the curriculum highlighted their children's learning in the classroom, their readiness for kindergarten, and the information provided to parents about how to work with their children at home as reasons for their satisfaction. About a fourth of the sample expressed dissatisfaction, mainly because the curriculum did not adequately challenge children and because, in their view, the curriculum lacked structure and discipline.

On the other hand, there were consistent disparities among different language groups in parents' views of the initiative and its impact on their children and their involvement. Haitian Creole speaking parents were less likely than Spanish- or English-speaking parents to say that the program had influenced their own behavior or knowledge or their child's social skills or readiness for kindergarten. This finding suggests that special attention needs to be paid to welcoming and involving parents for whom English is not their primary language.

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<sup>8</sup> Although it may be tempting to conclude that the home visiting component was critical to the success of the ECCI program, our analysis and review of the research literature suggests otherwise. Research on the Perry Preschool Project indicates that home visitation itself was not significantly related to children's academic success and social behavior. Instead, the effects of the Perry Preschool Project were driven by the curriculum model that emphasized child-directed behavior, including pro-social behavior (Epstein, 1993).

## School Readiness and Behavioral Data of ECCI Graduates

Analysis of school readiness data for the second cohort of ECCI graduates who entered kindergarten in the fall of 2007 indicated that 91 percent were considered “ready” for kindergarten as determined by a rating of either *consistently demonstrating* or *emerging/progressing* on the ECHOS measure used in the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screen (FLKRS). These results were just slightly higher than those for the state of Florida as a whole (88%) and those for all other kindergartners (87%) in the School District of Palm Beach County. They also were higher than those of other children entering kindergarten at the ECCI schools (82%), the group of children that is likely to be most similar to the ECCI cohort in terms of demographic characteristics. We also observed that on this measure a larger percentage (58%) of ECCI graduates were screened as *consistently demonstrating* than were screened as such in the previous year (40%). We do not know the reason for this difference, though this second cohort was the first to include children who had been in ECCI for 2 years. This increase might reflect differences in children’s exposure to ECCI and higher quality of ECCI classrooms, but we cannot be certain without baseline measures for these children.

On the two measures from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) used in the FLKRS, scores for the ECCI children were somewhat higher than the scores for other, demographically similar kindergarten children in the ECCI schools. On the DIBELS Letter Naming Fluency measure, the scores of the ECCI children were comparable to the scores for other kindergartners at other, non-ECCI schools and the scores for all children in Florida. However, on the DIBELS Initial Sound Fluency measure, the scores of the ECCI children were lower than the scores for kindergartners at other, non-ECCI schools and the scores for all children in Florida. Thus, the ECCI children appeared to be similar to other children in recognizing letters but behind their more affluent peers in knowing the initial sounds of letters. Again, without baseline measures, we cannot attribute these differences to program ECCI effects.

With respect to behavioral data, kindergarten teachers rated ECCI graduates higher on social and emotional competencies than their non-ECCI peers. Thirty-six percent of the ECCI graduates received a low score on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale on at least one behavioral domain in the fall 2007 screening. This percentage was lower than the percentage of other kindergartners at the ECCI schools (53%) who received a low T-CRS score. It is also lower than the percentage of kindergarten children in other schools (47%) in the school district. On other measures, only a small percentage of kindergarten children received disciplinary referrals, with the percentage of ECCI children about the same as that of their peers at the ECCI schools and slightly below the percentage for kindergartners at other schools. One concern is the percentage of children (14%) who received disciplinary referrals in first grade, which was similar to that of other first-graders at ECCI schools but much higher than the percentage of first graders in other schools (5%). Disciplinary policies and school climate affect these rates, so it seems important to investigate whether supports for behavioral issues are adequate at these schools.

Thus, the results suggest that kindergarten children who were enrolled in the ECCI program in 2006-2007 were, using available measures, similar in their performance to other kindergartners in the Palm Beach County School District. On some measures of school

readiness, ECCI children were rated *more highly* than other kindergartners at the same schools—particularly in their social-emotional competencies (as measured by T-CRS scores) and the ECHOS portion of the FLKRS. The ECCI children were also comparable to their peers in terms of letter-naming skills but behind in terms of sound recognition. Again, we lack necessary baseline measures for any of these groups of children, and therefore cannot conclude that these differences and similarities indicate program effects.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In our first two reports on the ECCI program, we identified a range of accomplishments and specific challenges for the initiative as it continued to mature. The accomplishments included generally high levels of support for the goals and ECCI activities among stakeholders, high levels of demand for the program as indicated by student enrollment, and progress in implementing the High/Scope curriculum in classrooms. One challenge was the complexity of the curriculum and the likelihood that teachers would require several years to master it, including using the Child Observation Record as a tool for child assessment and program planning. Other challenges included teacher turnover; the heterogeneity of teacher teams; and the lack of communication and clear agreements between the ECCI program and key partners such as school administrators, Beacon Centers, and parents. In addition, progress in increasing the level of parent involvement, operating the program in a community childcare setting, conducting ASQ screening by parents, and referring and linking children and families to community services through the Comprehensive Services program was slower than anticipated by some ECCI stakeholders.

These challenges jeopardized both the near-term attainment of high-quality classroom instruction and teacher-child relationships, and productive and sustainable links between parents and ECCI schools. Thus, in earlier reports we identified the need to foster greater understanding and agreement among key participants—primarily parents, kindergarten teachers and administrators—about the High/Scope curriculum and the way this curriculum can meet expectations for children’s school readiness. Fostering a common understanding of the principles and practices of developmentally appropriate preschool education can strengthen relationships between parents and school staff, support parents in their interactions with children outside of school, and prepare primary teachers to work with the children graduating from ECCI classrooms. To support this shared understanding, we recommended using forums such as parent-teacher conferences, Parent Partnership meetings, and school staff meetings to discuss school readiness and how the High/Scope curriculum contributes to children’s school readiness, both socially and cognitively. We also suggested that prekindergarten teachers might need additional assistance in developing new ways to communicate with parents about how the High/Scope curriculum prepares their children for kindergarten.

Going into the third year, ECCI reduced its breadth while sharpening its focus and expectations. The initial vision of working with a “cluster” of providers providing childcare and education to children between the ages of 0 and 5 was revised, and the program concentrated on a smaller number of school-based sites. Camp sessions previously held during the summer and other breaks in the school calendar had either been cut or were to be cut in the third year. The position of the ECCI program manager had been eliminated in the spring of the second year and management of the project was turned over to an existing school district staff member. These refinements were made in an effort to reduce overhead, cut unpromising or inefficient aspects of the initiative, and reallocate remaining resources. Additional implementation requirements were established for ECCI school sites operating in year 3, additional training was planned for ELAs, and resource teacher roles were reorganized to reduce confusion about competing external assessments of ECCI classrooms. Revised activities to support parent involvement were identified before school started in the third year and expanded to additional classrooms. This mix

of contraction, refinement, and expansion occurred in the context of increasing attention and expectations for ECCI performance generated by the staff and board of the CSC, the United Way of Palm Beach County, and by the broader accountability generated when new results from the FLKRS were published in local newspapers. A declining state economy (the result, in part, of changes in property tax assessments) during the third year also increased scrutiny and accountability.

In this newly critical context, where program resources were diminishing but the stakes remained high, CSC decided against funding the program for a fourth year at an even more reduced level. However, much can be learned from the ECCI experience implementing a high quality preschool program in a large school district.

First, there were advantages and disadvantages associated with the decision to implement ECCI in the School District of Palm Beach County. The decision capitalized on the district's existing organizational strengths as well as its relationships and standing in the community. At the same time, it was made without sufficient planning time—time to develop common understandings about the facilities and staffing needed for the program and structures for communication between the ECCI project and school district staff. As a result, ECCI stakeholders and project staff had to make compromises in implementing the program. In particular, home visits were considered a critical component of the initiative to the funder and other ECCI stakeholders, but existing school district contracts and limitations made it impossible to implement this component.

There were other challenges in implementing the program in the school district. As it happened, the first year of the ECCI program coincided with the implementation of the recently approved Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Program. In the first year especially, this placed some of the school district staff in what felt like an awkward position because ECCI was a more expensive program available to only certain neighborhoods, with more staff, training, and other resources. For a public institution where equality is a powerful ideal, operating ECCI in parallel with a similar program with fewer resources set up some competitive dynamics. In addition, asking the school district to move beyond its traditional boundaries to implement the program in a community-based organization in the second year stretched school district staff beyond their experiences and capacities.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, operating the High/Scope program in ECCI schools during a time of standardized testing and the demands of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation's "annual yearly progress" made it difficult to reconcile the child-directed philosophy and curriculum with the other demands put on schools. Although the High/Scope approach is intended to support, among other things, academic achievement,<sup>10</sup> High/Scope consultants warned that learning the curriculum was a multi-year process. We also advised waiting for full implementation before trying to assess outcomes. The inability to demonstrate early success using a school readiness

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<sup>9</sup> The school district was and still is responsible for on-site mentoring and training for staff at community child centers participating in the Quality Improvement System (QIS); however, as described in our second year report, implementing ECCI in the community childcare setting entailed much more than teacher training.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, during the third year of implementation, ECCI teachers were encouraged by their trainers and resource teachers to focus more specifically on early literacy skills in their classrooms.

measure was enough to raise questions about the effectiveness of the program in relation to its costs. Moreover, the inclination by some stakeholders to assess the program's quality and effects on the basis of children's FLKRS scores might be unwise with no pre-test or control for demographic characteristics.<sup>11</sup>

Second, assessing appropriate levels of parent satisfaction, knowledge and involvement may be especially complicated in a program that is community-based and free. Offering a program at no cost, perhaps especially in low-income neighborhoods, may easily trump efforts to attract parents who are motivated by the curriculum and philosophy. Whatever means are used to select families, parent involvement activities must be attractive to parents, reasonable in terms of their expectations for parents, and easy for parents to become involved in—in other words, they must take into account other aspects of the parents' lives, including work and childcare. At the same time, parent involvement activities must also try to engage parents more fully than they typically are engaged and contribute to their learning about how to support their children's education. As with many other programs, there can be a tension in trying to meet both of these goals.

Based on the ECCI experience, we maintain that there is still a primary need to foster greater understanding among parents, administrators, and primary teachers about the principles and practices of a developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum—of which High/Scope is one example—and the way this curriculum can prepare children for kindergarten. The current movement to align curricula from prekindergarten to third grade is an important step in this direction. Common conceptions of school readiness and preschool programming, based on child development, can help to build relationships between parents and school staff and make children's transition to school a positive experience for both children and families, as well as strengthen support for the early childhood program among administrators and other school staff. Second, although educational credentials are one indicator of teacher quality, the research literature and the classroom quality measures in this study suggest they are not the only indicator. Implementing a high-quality and effective early childhood program will also require choosing teachers with experience and training in early childhood and providing ongoing, on-site training and mentoring for these teachers to develop and maintain their skills. Early childhood programs have the greatest potential when stakeholders agree upon the purposes and practices of the program, teachers are able to understand and incorporate those ideas, and where the program itself is provided the resources and time to support this necessarily challenging and extended process.

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<sup>11</sup> As a recent report from The National Academies (2008) explains, assessments of young children should be used very cautiously in making decisions about program funding and only “if the level of children's development when they entered the program has been taken into account. Child assessment results should never be the only information considered” (The National Academies 2008, p. 1).

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