

The School Readiness Initiative in South Central Connecticut:

Classroom Quality, Teacher Training, and Service Provision

**Meriden Middletown
New Haven Waterbury**

FY 2000 Update

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January 2001

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Brief. In an effort to implement the Connecticut School Readiness Initiative (CSRI) at the highest possible level of quality, four south-central cities (Meriden, Middletown, New Haven and Waterbury) initiated an ongoing coordinated project consisting of objective evaluations of classroom level quality and continuous program improvement. During FY 1999, baseline data were collected on the quality of all 123 CSRI classrooms in these four cities. Findings from this baseline assessment were used to immediately launch targeted quality improvement efforts in each of these classrooms. Due to limited school readiness funds in these cities, follow-up data has been collected on only about one-fourth of these programs. Follow-up results provide strong indication of remarkable improvement. For example, the percentage of classrooms rated *inadequate* fell from 9% to 0%, the percentage of classrooms rated *inadequate* to *minimal* dropped from 50% to 8%, and the number of classrooms rated *excellent* tripled (from 14% to 42%). Based on results from this project, several recommendations for increasing program quality are offered, including increased efforts to promote program accreditation and support of local quality enhancement projects.

INTRODUCTION

After nearly forty years of research on the effects of preschool, two overall findings are clear. First, preschool programs can significantly improve children's school readiness and have a remarkable, long-lasting positive impact on the lives of children. Second, these impacts are dependent on the quality of the preschool program – high-quality programs lead to positive impacts, and low-quality programs are ineffective and potentially detrimental to children's development. Furthermore, in evaluations of state-funded preschool programs in both Michigan and South Carolina, as well as several studies of Head Start and child care programs, children who attended high-quality programs were found to have achieved greater levels of school readiness than children who attended lesser quality programs.

The goals of this project included:

- **Providing a baseline from which to develop continuous program improvement plans;**
- **Implementing targeted initiatives to positively impact program quality;**
- **Reevaluating to determine the degree to which quality was enhanced.**

PROJECT PROCEDURES

The School Readiness Councils of the four priority school districts in South-Central Connecticut funded this project during the second year of the CSRI (FY 1999; Meriden, Middletown, New Haven and Waterbury), under the coordination of Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES). Rather than each of the municipalities designing, implementing and funding their own evaluation, effort and money were combined in a single project. In this way each School Readiness Council was able to receive evaluations of their classrooms at a fraction of the cost and effort of separate evaluations.

- During the baseline evaluation (FY 1999), measures of classroom quality and characteristics were obtained on all 123 classrooms across the four priority school districts in South-Central Connecticut, including Meriden ($n = 18$), Middletown ($n = 22$), New Haven ($n = 54$), and Waterbury ($n = 29$).
- Data were collected by 13 trained observers using well-known and validated scales that have been used in a variety of similar projects nationwide.
- Immediate needs were addressed to insure that all site-specific health, safety, and facility repair issues were remedied without delay.
- Results for individual programs and classrooms were provided to directors and teachers, and assistance was offered regarding the establishment of a plan for enhancing the quality of services in each participating classroom. Interventions included:
 - ◆ Individualized quality enhancement plans using baseline evaluation results;
 - ◆ Early childhood consultants working directly with teaching staff;
 - ◆ A series of targeted training, support, and networking for staff;
 - ◆ Multidisciplinary teams to provide consultation to program staff;
 - ◆ Training for program directors in supervision, networking, and evaluating classroom quality;
 - ◆ New educational materials necessary to support appropriate preschool curricula;
 - ◆ Improved and expanded playground sites;
 - ◆ Development of a preschool curriculum and child assessment system;
 - ◆ Program staff training on how to access special education services;
 - ◆ Mentors for programs to individualize instructional strategies for children with special needs;
 - ◆ Expanded entry-level training leading to a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.
- Follow-up evaluations currently are being conducted to measure improvements in quality.

BASELINE EVALUATION FINDINGS DURING FY 1999

- Sixty percent of classrooms that received School Readiness funding as of June 1999 received scores in the good to excellent range and forty percent needed work to reach that level of quality.
- Classrooms in programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) significantly outscored their non-accredited counterparts on virtually every measure of program quality assessed.
- There was a significant positive correlation between both the number of staff and the overall staff-child ratio and classroom quality.
- The area of greatest need for quality improvement was in the program aspects most consistent with CSRI's legislated goal of promoting "school readiness" through a developmentally appropriate learning curriculum.
- Twenty seven percent of playgrounds and facilities needed improvement.
- In many classrooms, teacher and assistant teachers needed opportunities to pursue formal education credentials in early childhood.
- Teachers and assistant teachers reported considerable staff turnover rates with low salaries noted.

- Many teachers reported that they did not have access to the appropriate support services necessary for comprehensive school readiness programming.

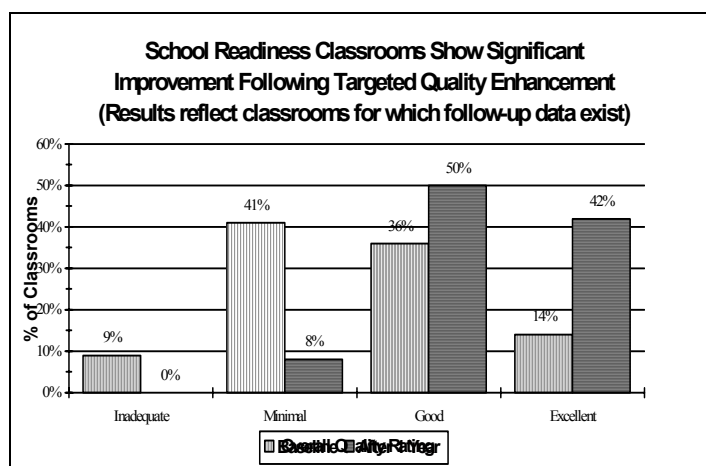
FOLLOW-UP FINDINGS FROM FY 2000

Results of posttest data completed in FY 2000 on 26 classrooms indicated significant overall improvements in quality after less than one year of targeted intervention.

- ❖ Quality improved significantly, with less variability across classrooms.

- ❖ The percentage of classrooms rated *inadequate* or *minimal* dropped from 50% at baseline to only 8% after improvements.

- ❖ The percentage of classrooms rated *inadequate* at baseline fell from 9% to 0%.



- ❖ The percentage of classrooms rated *excellent* tripled (from 14% to 42%).
- ❖ Each and every classroom provided targeted quality enhancement showed marked improvement, with three classrooms improving from *inadequate* to *excellent*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ***Increase efforts to improve the quality of CSRI classrooms through NAEYC accreditation.***
 - ❑ One very optimistic finding from the project was that classrooms in NAEYC-accredited programs provided significantly higher quality care and education, relative to their non-accredited counterparts. Although the initial legislative intent was that only “nationally accredited programs” be provided CSRI funding, by far most programs do not meet this standard of acceptability and many appear to be far from achieving it. *However, locally driven facilitation of appropriate accreditation strategies may be a highly efficient means of promoting and maintaining high-quality CSRI classrooms.*
 - ❑ Considerable research has supported the value of NAEYC accreditation, and a recent study has demonstrated that preschool classrooms in programs undergoing NAEYC accreditation significantly improve in quality during the accreditation process. Indeed, NAEYC accreditation is the standard benchmark for quality in the field of early childhood care and education, and classrooms in programs not accredited by NAEYC were far less successful in achieving the level of quality shown to be predictive of positive child outcomes.
 - ❑ It is worth stating that the findings in this evaluation are only applicable to accreditation through NAEYC, and the author knows of no research supporting the utility of accreditation through any alternative organization at the preschool level.

2. ***Increase funding for quality improvement to help programs meet CSRI's legislative intent.***

- ❑ It is through evaluative projects such as this one that the classrooms and programs most in need of help can be identified and detailed plans for continuous program improvement be devised and implemented.
- ❑ In many instances quality enhancement is most needed in the areas directly associated with the legislated intent of CSRI, and in the areas of basic health and safety practices.
- ❑ This process of data-driven accountability and support has already begun in South-Central Connecticut, and the data generated by this project has been essential to efficiently targeting quality enhancement efforts in a way that can result in measurable improvement.
- ❑ To meet the demand for targeted program improvement, we advocate establishing a quality enhancement line item budget of at least 10% of the total capacity funding for each priority school district.
- ❑ In addition, we recommend that local School Readiness Councils be permitted to utilize carry-over funds to build a system of quality care and education.
- ❑ *It seems likely that the need for quality monitoring and enhancing efforts will increase significantly as the number of children and families served by CSRI increases.* Currently, local School Readiness Councils are responsible for deciding which child care programs within their respective municipalities will participate in CSRI. Potentially, as the need for participating child care programs increases, local councils may have to resort to placing children in classrooms of increasingly lower quality. Therefore, funds to enhance quality may need to be increased at a rate higher than commensurate increases in program capacity.

3. ***Support efforts to measure classroom quality and hold program administrators accountable for continuous improvement.***

- ❑ This project demonstrates the utility of measuring classroom quality using well-validated instruments administered by well-trained, outside, objective raters. These methods are among the most promising for promoting accountability for providing high-quality services, helping to facilitate improvement, and documenting the impacts and judicious use of quality enhancement funds.
- ❑ In the absence of NAEYC accreditation in many CSRI classrooms, it seems reasonable to support quality through increased objective monitoring of classroom quality and coordinated quality enhancement efforts.

4. ***Expand access to CSRI classrooms to services that support their work and promote the overall development of children and families.***

- ❑ These services include educational consultants for curricular development; psychologists, psychiatrists, and licensed clinical social workers for mental health concerns; speech/language therapists and physical/occupational therapists for the promotion of language and motor development; and pediatricians, nurses, dietitians, and dentists for promoting physical health and hygiene.
- ❑ These services are useful for all classrooms in order to better facilitate children's overall development and well-being and are essential for the integration of children with special needs.

- ❑ Among the recommendations recently made by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Mental Health (2000) was an increased focus on early prevention of mental health problems through better mental health collaborations with the public schools. Furthermore, this urgent need for greater focus on the mental health needs of preschoolers recently has been identified by a national multidisciplinary task force of leaders in the fields of early intervention and mental health.
- ❑ Further research should focus on the mental health, developmental and physical health needs of children and families being supported by CSRI, so recommendations regarding efficient service delivery can be generated.
- ❑ State-level CSRI policy development should include other state agencies responsible for the health, safety and care of young children.

5. ***Compensate teachers and assistant teachers at a level more commensurate with the importance of their duties in order to attract and maintain a viable professional workforce.***

- ❑ Full-time salaries are quite low, staff turnover rates are impacting program quality, and it seems likely that poor compensation may be related to both staff turnover and classroom quality. Further research may better elucidate this for CSRI classrooms.
- ❑ Efforts to support the professional development of teachers and assistant teachers should be supported, including their attainment of higher education credentials, specific training in early childhood care and education, and active membership in professional organizations for early childhood educators. This increased professionalization of early childhood staff may lead to increased classroom quality.

CONCLUSIONS

CSRI classrooms vary greatly in terms of classroom quality. Although the legislative intent was that only “nationally accredited programs” be provided CSRI funding, many programs are struggling to achieve this standard of acceptability. These findings argue for the need to locally monitor the quality of CSRI classrooms, at least in South-Central Connecticut, and to continue to expand funding mechanisms for enhancing the quality of these classrooms.

At present the surest indicator of quality in these classrooms is NAEYC accreditation. Unfortunately, over two-thirds of the classrooms in FY1999 were in non-accredited programs, and the need for CSRI classrooms far exceeds the number of accredited classrooms available. Therefore, alternative methods for assuring the quality of preschool placements need to be utilized, such as this evaluation's use of independent objective raters. At present, some funding is available for the enhancement of CSRI quality; however, it is not clear that this funding is adequate to meet the present needs of these classrooms.

High-quality early childhood care and education is not easy to provide, and any large program like the CSRI needs time and focused effort to mature. The data in this study represent a good first step toward the goal of providing a safe and developmentally appropriate preschool program. Any program worth doing is worth doing well – especially when Connecticut's youngest and most vulnerable children are concerned.