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PROTECTING THE CHILD IN NEED: The past, present and future of More at Four

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Executive Summary

- There are currently legislative proposals to alter the administration, eligibility criteria and funding levels of More at Four, North Carolina's nationally lauded education program for at-risk four-year olds.
- High-quality pre-kindergarten programs targeted at low-income children at risk of later academic failure are proven to have net economic benefits. A dollar spent today can save many more dollars later in welfare, education, health and justice-related expenditures.
- More at Four is a high-quality program that served around 30,000 children in 2007-2008. Eligibility for the program is narrowly targeted at low-income and special-needs children. Three-quarters of enrollees come from families with incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty level and therefore qualify for free lunches. More than half of the children served in 2007-2008 had never been in a formal child-care or pre-school setting prior to entering More at Four; nearly every one of these children qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.
- Class sizes are small, teacher quality is high and there is evidence that the program is spurring an across-the-board improvement in teacher knowledge, especially in More at Four classrooms in public schools.
- Successive reviews by UNC-Chapel Hill researchers have concluded that learning rates in More at Four classrooms exceed forecasts and that students who have special needs learn at the same rates, at least, as their classmates.
- Teaching literacy skills to children before elementary school is vital; reading is essential to later learning. The quality of More at

Four literacy instruction is high and is continuing to improve.

- Policymakers wanting to change More at Four should tread lightly. Any changes to eligibility rules need to protect child welfare first. Judgments of parents and their characteristics, history or status should be set aside. What matters is the emotional and material existence of the child.
- Changes to budgets should be done so that classroom instruction quality is not compromised. If difficult budget choices are to be made, funding per slot should be held constant.
- Administrative change must not come at the expense of child welfare. The process should be examined carefully before administrative changes and mergers with other programs are begun in order to properly assess any costs and benefits. Acting in haste now, especially considering the minor short-term savings, may hurt child welfare. Using administrative change to initiate cuts that affect classroom instruction should be rejected.

Overview

In difficult budget times there is a temptation to generate savings by reconfiguring the administration, target population and level of funding of some programs. This budget year, More at Four, the pre-kindergarten program serving four-year olds living at or near the federal poverty level, is one such program being examined as a possible source of savings.

This edition of BTC Reports examines who More at Four serves, what these children are being taught, and the kinds of outcomes this teaching has generated. It offers basic principles by which policymakers should judge any proposed changes to the program's administration or student eligibility criteria, as well as any changes that may affect instructional quality. These principles are grounded in empirical research on what makes More at Four and similar programs effective early childhood interventions.

Why is pre-kindergarten education so important?

Closing the achievement gap -- that is, the difference in rates of students achieving proficiency on end-of-year tests between students from poor households and the rest of the student population and between black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts -- is a primary challenge for North Carolina's education system. Studies show that almost half the achievement gap on fourth-grade tests is present at school entry.¹

Considerable research since the 1960s has emphasized the impact of children's early cognitive and emotional development on later life outcomes.² Recent research has found that at-risk children (those from low-income households and those with disabilities or health problems) who have been through structured, quality, early childhood programs have significantly improved social and emotional development, greater school achievement, and a greater likelihood of high school graduation. They also are less likely to participate in delinquency and crime, to be held back a grade, or to require special

education compared to matching cohorts who did not receive the same early childhood program experience.³

Quality early childhood education programs are estimated to provide a net economic benefit, especially when they focus on at-risk three- or four-year-olds. The best programs feature an emphasis on language readiness, smaller class sizes and quality instruction, and are administered through school systems so as to enable a seamless transition from preschool to elementary school and to ensure the highest teacher excellence. There is evidence from programs that have had students tracked over time that it is not only important that a pre-kindergarten program be first rate, but also that it provides more comprehensive services that address child and family health and literacy.⁴

The net economic benefit for every one dollar invested in such programs has been estimated to vary from a \$1.38 return in the case of a stand-alone universal reduced-class-size initiative, to a more than eight dollar return from programs that involve and educate parents, are targeted at at-risk children and emphasize literacy. Returns of two dollars to more than four dollars on every dollar invested are likely.⁵ These returns include reduced justice, special education and health spending, lower welfare enrollments and higher tax collections. Put simply, quality early childhood education mitigates and helps prevent the intergenerational transfer of poverty and reduces social costs associated with poverty.

What is More At Four?

Initiated by Governor Mike Easley in 2001, More at Four provides at-risk children with high-quality pre-kindergarten (pre-K) classroom-based care and instruction in order to prepare them for a successful elementary education. Students attend a full six-hour to six-and-a-half-hour day, 180-day school-year program in small classes. Non-More at Four students can and do attend these classes (either their parents pay or federal Head Start funds them). The typical size of a class that includes More at Four children is 16 or 17 students, of which 13 or 14 are More at Four children. The maximum size for a class with More at Four children is 18.

More at Four serves children in all 100 counties and is administered by 91 local partners, the majority of which are school districts. In 2008-09, local school districts administered 49 of the programs, Head Start administered three programs, and local non-profit Smart Start organizations administered the remaining 39. The majority of children are taught in public school settings. This suggests that the current arrangement where the Department of Public Instruction administers More at Four is perhaps not unreasonable.

Between 2003 and 2008, More at Four served approximately half of its children in public preschool sites (48% - 52%, depending on the year) and half in private or community settings. Of the half in community settings, between half and two-thirds were taught in for-profit childcare settings (23% - 32% of all students, depending on the year); the rest were taught in non-profit childcare settings (9% - 12% of all students, depending on the year) or Head Start sites (10% - 19%, a minor proportion of which were administered by public schools).⁶

The degree of cooperation and interaction of local More at Four programs and Smart Start initiatives varies. But school systems and local Partnerships for Children (Smart Start) share the leadership of local More at Four committees. These provide planning and oversight for local More at Four implementation. Coordination between the Smart Start and More at Four programs – indeed between all child-care and pre-kindergarten instruction settings – is an important process that needs to be encouraged in order that budgets are spent efficiently and maximize child welfare.

The guidelines for More at Four stress the need for a research-based curriculum taught by teachers who after four years are to have appropriate early childhood teaching credentials or licensure.⁷ Activities are primarily of two kinds: structured play that encourages creativity (drama, art, sand and water play, etc.) and academically focused activities (computers, writing, reading, math and science).⁸

Who is being taught in More at Four classrooms?

The program has expanded considerably since its inception, serving 1,244 students in its first year (2001-2002); growing to 10,891 in 2003-2004; and then expanding to 29,978 students in more than 2100 classrooms in 2007-2008 (Figure 1). Eligible students must come from families with household incomes at or below 75% of the state median income or up to 300% of the federal poverty level with one or more risk factors, such as limited English proficiency, an identified disability, a chronic health condition, or an identified developmental or educational need. A quick examination of the More at Four student population since its inception in 2001

FIGURE 1
NUMBERS OF STUDENTS SERVED – 2001-2008

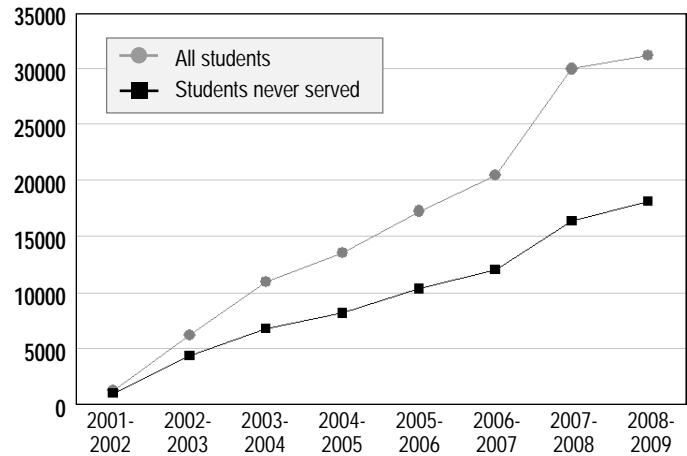
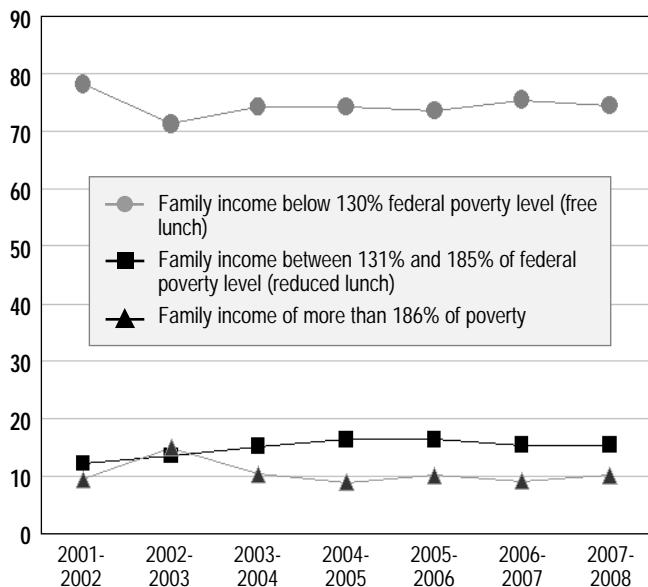


FIGURE 2
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ENROLLED BY FAMILY INCOME, 2001-2008



confirms that the program does predominantly serve children from low-income households (Figure 2) who face difficult obstacles to learning in the critical early years (Figure 3). Most of the students are minorities (Figure 4).

Children who have never been served by a preschool or childcare program are given preference, followed by those who are not currently served by a preschool program or who are in subsidized childcare, followed by students who are underserved. As a consequence of these policies, a majority of students in More at Four since its inception had never previously been in a pre-kindergarten or child-care setting (Figure 1). Children in this “never-served” population may be especially vulnerable to proposed changes in More at Four eligibility criteria.

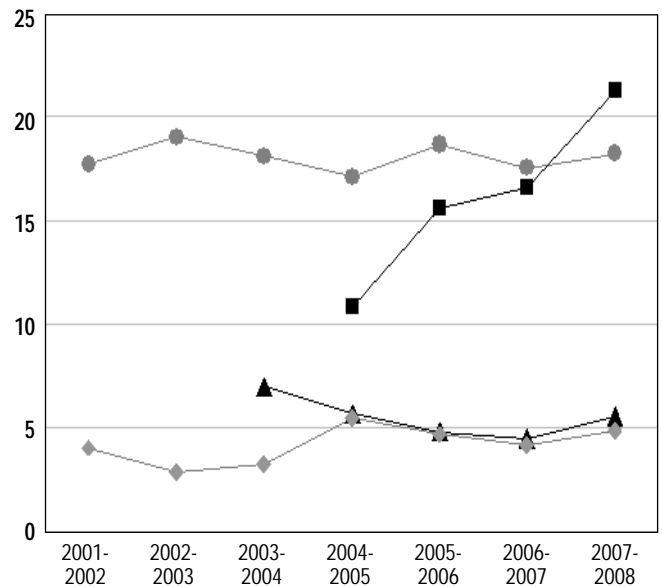
Who is More at Four reaching that has never been served before?

Currently, More at Four prioritizes the never-served population of children. Many of these children have not been able to access other early childhood education programs because their parents cannot afford such programs. They may be unable to benefit from the state's child-care subsidy program for one of the following reasons: they have at least one parent who is unemployed, their parents cannot afford to cover their portion of the child-care costs even with the subsidy, or they are on the subsidy waiting list.

An examination of the never-served population provides some insight as to the potential dangers of changes to

FIGURE 3

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ENROLLED BY IDENTIFIED SPECIAL NEED, 2001-2008

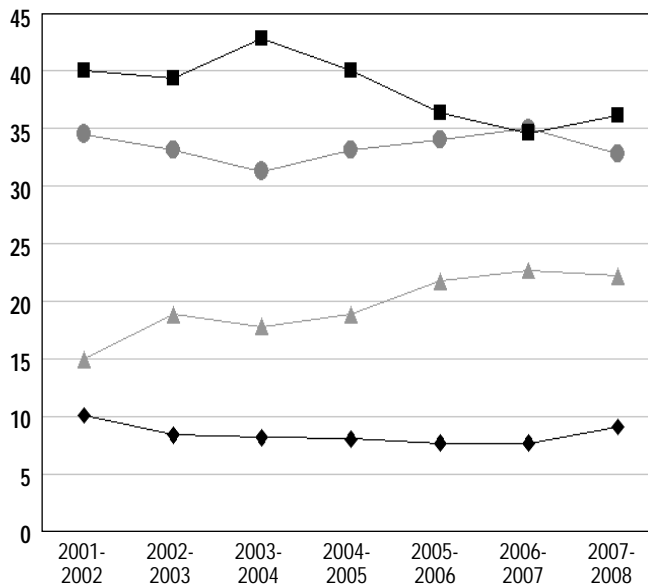


- Family or child limited or no English at home
- Developmental or educational need
- ▲ Identified disability
- ◆ Chronic health condition

eligibility requirements or cuts to benefit rates and/or overall funding.

FIGURE 4

ENROLLMENT PERCENTAGES BY ETHNIC GROUP, 2001-2008



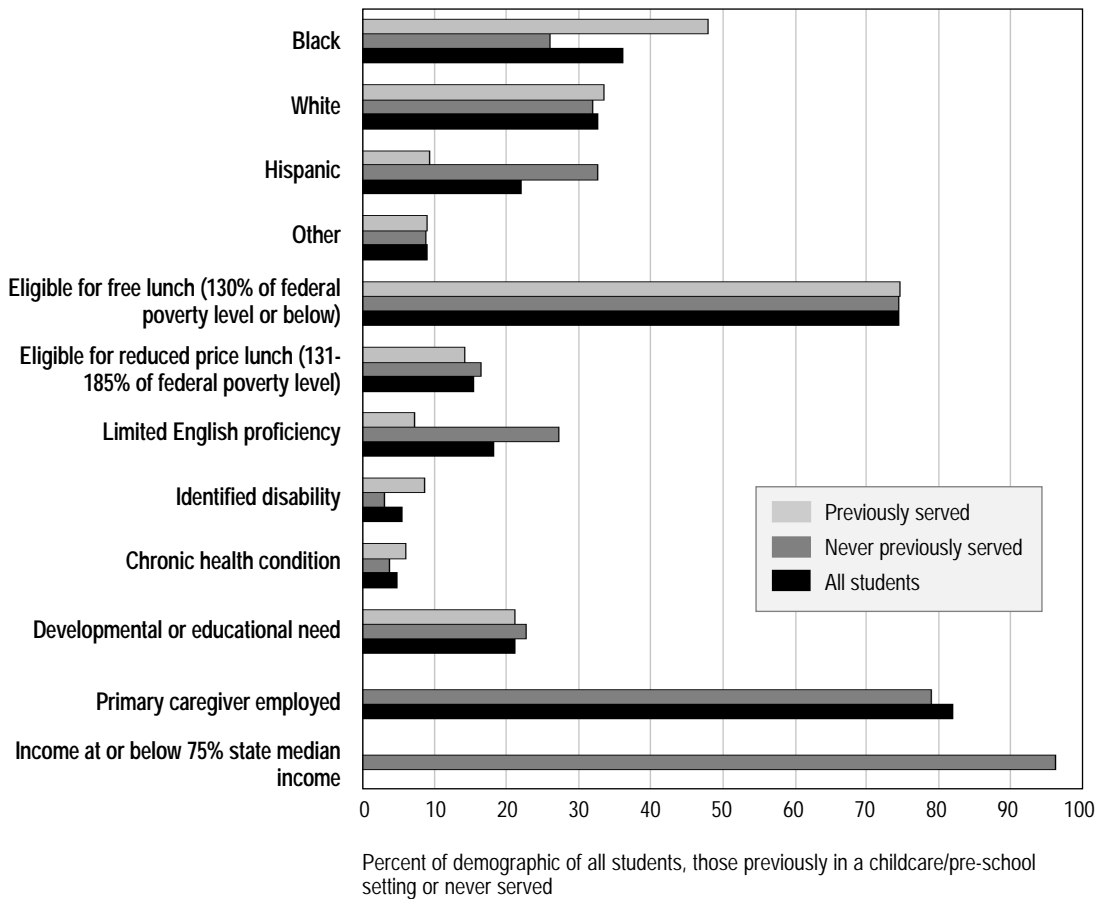
- Black
- White
- ▲ Hispanic/Latino
- ◆ Other

In most respects, the never-served student population looks like the group of students who have spent some time prior to More at Four in an institutionalized child-care or pre-school setting (Figure 5). In other words, More at Four is meeting the needs of a wider group of poor children. In its absence, less than half of these children would get any access to quality preschool care or instruction.

In 2007-2008, 55% of students enrolled in More at Four – more than 16,000 children – had never previously been served by any early childhood program. Almost all (96%) of these students were from households at or below 75% of the state median income. Four-fifths came from working-poor homes, although a significant minority came from homes where the primary caregiver did not work – 21% in 2007-2008. Three-quarters came from households at or below 130% of the federal poverty level.

The More at Four never-served prioritization criteria is boosting participation rates among some select sub-groups of poor children. Since 2002, the never-served

FIGURE 5
MORE AT FOUR STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS – 2007-2008



student population is more likely to have an unemployed primary caregiver compared to the entire student population, but it should be noted that for both groups the percentages have declined over time (Figure 6).⁹ The never-served population is more likely to have limited English language proficiency students than the entire student population, but both groups have seen a slow increase in their relative size over time (Figure 7).

Students from the Hispanic or Latino ethnic group have become a slightly larger share of the More at Four

population since 2002, largely because of increases in the never-served population. The relative size of the white student body has remained roughly the same over time, while the relative size of the black student body has declined some because of the relative decline in the never-served population (Figure 8). It should be noted, however, that in 2007-2008, the never-served population became relatively less Hispanic and Latino, and more black, reversing the trend of the previous three years.

Clearly, the More at Four eligibility criteria

FIGURE 6
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS, PRIMARY CAREGIVERS NOT EMPLOYED, 2002-2008

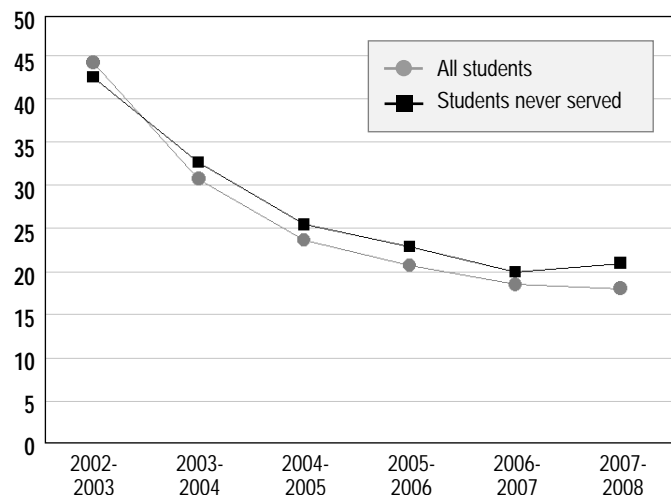
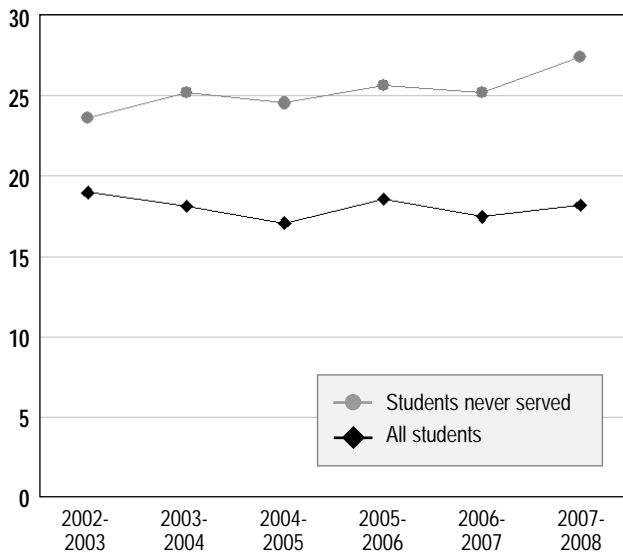
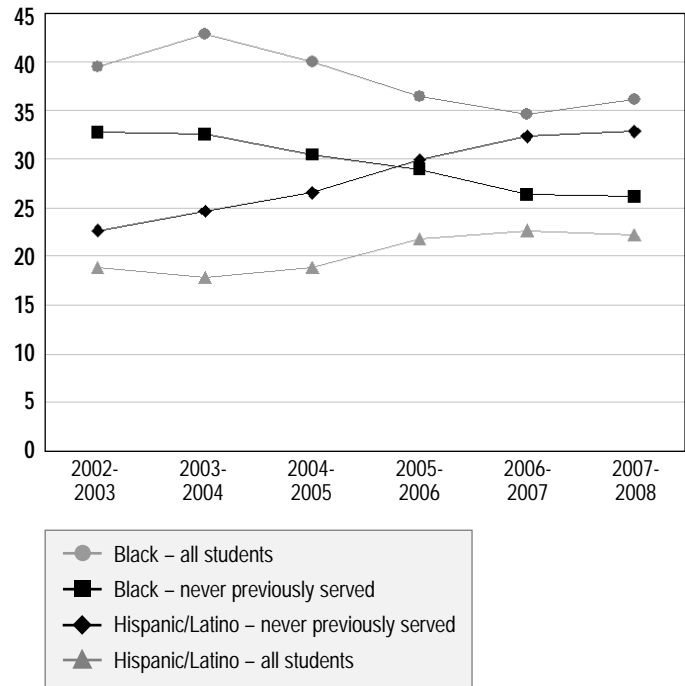


FIGURE 7**PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS, LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY, 2002-2008****FIGURE 8****PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS BY ETHNICITY, 2002-2008**

are successful in ensuring greater pre-K participation rates of children from low-income households. More at Four has also been successful in targeting children from households with unemployed caregivers and who have limited English and/or are Hispanic and Latino.

What Has More at Four Achieved?

“The More at Four Program had even stronger effects for children entering the program with greater needs compared to those with lesser needs.”

– UNC-Chapel Hill researchers, year 2 evaluation, 2002-03

“Children showed significant developmental growth over the More at Four program year in all outcome areas measured: language and literacy skills, math skills, general knowledge, and behavioral skills.”

– UNC-Chapel Hill researchers, year 3 evaluation, 2003-04

“Children made significant gains in all skill areas over the course of the More at Four year, and are consistent with the findings from previous years.”

– UNC-Chapel Hill researchers, year 5 evaluation, 2005-06

“Children at greatest risk also exhibited greater growth over time (i.e., steeper growth curves) in many of these areas: language and literacy skills (receptive language, letter naming), math skills (applied problems, counting), and general knowledge (social awareness, color knowledge).”

– UNC-Chapel Hill researchers, year 6 evaluation, 2006-07

“Children exhibited significant growth during the More at Four pre-k year across all domains.”

- UNC-Chapel Hill researchers, year 7 evaluation, 2007-08

A succession of annual studies conducted by University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill researchers found More at Four to be a consistently high-quality education program with better than expected learning growth among students, including significant and higher than expected growth in language and literacy, math skills, general knowledge and social skills.¹⁰ Justifiably, More at Four has been recognized as one of, if not the best statewide pre-kindergarten program in the United States.¹¹ In general, the quality of instruction in More at Four has remained stable and high since its inception. The current challenge is to maintain quality as budgets tighten.

Significantly, in successive reviews by the UNC researchers, students that are at higher risk of scholastic failure – be they from a impoverished household, where English is their second language, or having a disability, developmental disorder or chronic health condition -- have been found to have similar or higher learning rates to the rest of the More at Four student population.¹²

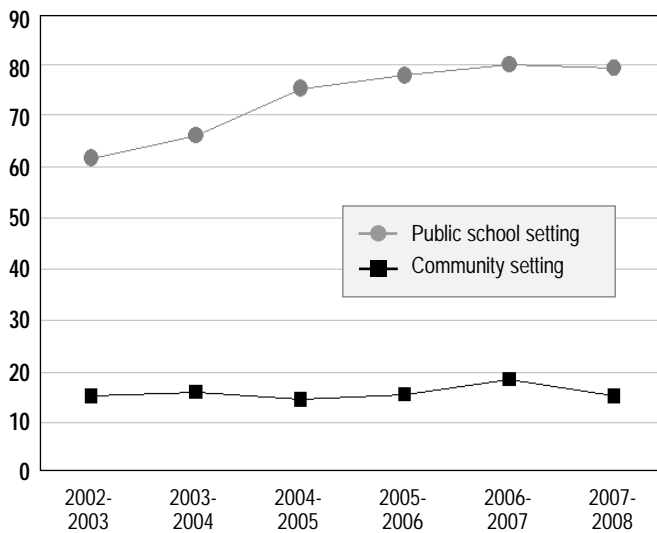
Since reading confidently is essential to later learning,¹³ high-quality teaching aimed at improving literacy should be a vital performance indicator for More at Four. The signs are promising. UNC researchers have found that higher-quality literacy teaching in More at Four classrooms is associated with the presence of a lead teacher that has a B-K (Birth through kindergarten) license.¹⁴ More at Four requires all lead teachers to have a B-K license within four years. Subsequently, the rate of licensure of lead teachers in public school settings in More at Four classrooms has steadily increased between 2002-2003 and 2007-2008 from 62% to 70%. It should be noted, however, that the rate is a good deal higher in More at Four classes held in public

schools than in More at Four classes held in community settings, where it has remained stagnant – around 15% (**Figure 9**).

The emphasis on small class sizes has been productive for students, too. The UNC researchers found that smaller class sizes¹⁵ are associated with higher-quality classroom practices. Such evidence should be important for policy.

FIGURE 9

PERCENTAGE OF LEAD TEACHERS WITH B-K LICENSE OR EQUIVALENT, 2002-2008



Conclusions

More at Four has been extremely effective in bringing thousands of low-income children into high-quality classroom settings and improving teacher quality. Many of these children had never set foot into structured childcare or pre-kindergarten learning environments before enrolling in More at Four. The results have been significant, including higher than expected learning and considerable increases

in teacher licensure. The results for children who are especially vulnerable – the very poor, the ill, those with disabilities or who speak English poorly – has been dramatic with accelerated learning curves and, at worst, similar rates of learning to other students where they would be expected to fall further behind.

While the program can be considered a social investment – pay a little now or pay more later via increased justice, detention, and welfare costs – it is on the children and their experiences that policymakers should focus. From this perspective come the following three simple policy recommendations:

Recommendations

The Child is Key to Program Eligibility Rules

More at Four offers at-risk students opportunities to make up lost ground socially and scholastically and prepares them properly for elementary school. It is critical that, no matter what views one may hold about the role of parents in early education or in general, eligibility be based on the needs of the child. Therefore, eligibility criteria should not include judgments as to whether a parent does not qualify because he or she has undesirable characteristics, features or status. It is the child who qualifies. Eligibility rules should continue to be driven by the child’s needs, rather than any criteria that either explicitly or implicitly decide eligibility based on whether the child’s parents “deserve” assistance. Reforms to eligibility criteria that endanger access to More at Four for children who have never previously been in a formal child care or pre-kindergarten setting should be rejected.

Protect instruction quality

Small class size and high-quality teachers are vitally important to building a quality pre-kindergarten program that has lasting effects on its graduates. These keys to excellence must be protected. As tempting as it is to cut allotments per child-slot, doing so in order to meet budget challenges could water down the quality of the program and reduce its effectiveness. Over time, reducing funding per slot may open More at Four to criticism that it is not working as it should. If difficult budget choices must be made, simply reducing investments per slot should be avoided.

Analyze and Plan Before Administrative Change

First, it must be determined that the act and process of any administrative change will do no harm to the experiences of children in More at Four. Quite apart from any possible budget cuts, it is important that any proposed change, such as a merger with Smart Start, be carefully examined beforehand and possible challenges clearly identified so that a rigorous cost-benefit analysis of the change can inform the decision. While the research literature suggests that closer coordination of pre-K education, healthcare and childcare is desirable and produces better economic returns and benefits for the child, a prudent course should exercise caution especially when short-term administrative savings from change are probably minor.¹⁶ The primary concern during organizational change is that children in More at Four must be held harmless. Minor short-term administrative savings should not offset this concern. Administrative reform for cuts or changes should not be used as cover for cuts that affect the quality of classroom instruction.

1 Reynolds, A.J. “Cost Effective Early Childhood Development Programs from Pre-School to Third Grade,” Presentation to Achievement Gap Conference, Educational Testing Service, May 22, 2008.

2 See Reynolds, A.J & Temple, J. A. “Cost-Effective Early Childhood Development Programs from Pre-School to Third Grade,” *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 2008, 4: 109-139 at 110ff.

3 See the literature referenced in Reynolds & Temple 2008.

- 4 See Reynolds (2008) pp 128-133.
- 5 See the review of the various studies of economic cost/benefits in Reynolds & Temple (2008) pp 117-129, 134.
- 6 Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008a) *Evaluation of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program: Performance and Progress in the Seventh Year (2007-2008)*, Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute, pp 15-17.
- 7 The most used historically in More at Four classrooms and in 2007-8 is the Creative Curriculum (84% of classrooms in 07-08), and OWL or Bright Beginnings (10%), while High/Scope and Montessori curricula classrooms are also evident. See Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008a), p 18.
- 8 Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008a), table 16.
- 9 This trend may be due to improving labor market conditions since 2001, plus the relative success of More at Four in targeting this group and achieving a high degree of saturation in its early years.
- 10 See Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008a), pp 60; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008b) *Evaluation of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten program Year 6 Report (July 2006-June 30, 2007): Children's Longitudinal Outcomes and Program Quality Over time (2003-2007)*, pp 53; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2007) *Evaluation of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program: Children's Outcomes and Program Quality in the Fifth Year*, Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute, pp 35ff; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Maris, C. L. (2005a) *Evaluation of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program: Year 3 Report (July 1, 2003-June 30, 2004)*, Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute, p 41; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Maris, C. L. (2005b). *Evaluation of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program: Year 2 Report (July 1, 2002-June 30, 2003)* Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute, p 38.
- 11 National Institute for Early Education Research (2009) *The State of Pre-School 2008* (Rutgers Graduate School of Education) (<http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>)
- 12 See Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008a), p 96; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008b) p 84; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2007) p 71; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Maris, C. L. (2005a) pp 41, 63; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Maris, C. L. (2005b) p 38.
- 13 See, for example, the argument in McInnes, G (2009) *In Plain Sight: Simple, Difficult Lessons from New Jersey's Expensive Effort to Close the Achievement Gap*, (New York City, NY, Century Foundation Press)
- 14 Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008a), pp 57-58; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008b), p 51; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2007) p 33; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Maris, C. L. (2005a) p 52; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Maris, C. L. (2005b) p 47.
- 15 Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008a), p 58; Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2008b), p 51.
- 16 See Reynolds and Temple (2008), pp 132-133.

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