

Children's Investment Fund

Early Childhood Education and Development Cluster Evaluation Project *Final Report*

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Child Welfare Partnership
Portland State University
Graduate School of Social Work
Portland, Oregon

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In 2002, the City of Portland voters passed Measure 26-33 which created the Children's Investment Fund. The purpose of the Children's Investment Fund is to support proven programs that provide high quality childcare to children and families in need, promote school readiness, provide safe and constructive after-school alternatives for children, and/or help to prevent child abuse, neglect or family violence.

Thirteen of the funded programs with similar goals and services aimed at school readiness and quality childcare were grouped into an Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) cluster. The programs in the ECED cluster include: *Albina Early Head Start, Albertina Kerr Early Intervention Program, Child Care Improvement Project, Early Head Start Family Center of Portland, Friendly House Preschool, Insights Teen Parent Program SEEDS Program, IRCO Parenting Program, Mt. Hood Community College Head Start at Gateway Center, Neighborhood House Early Oregon PreKindergarten, Peninsula Children's Center, Portland Community College Child Development Center, Portland Impact Parent Child Development Services, Portland Public Schools Head Start at Kelly Center.*

From January 2004 to October 2005, the Child Welfare Partnership at Portland State University designed and conducted a pilot evaluation of the ECED cluster. The purpose of the study was to assess and report on the impact of the Fund and its investments on children receiving services from programs in the cluster and to strengthen evaluation capacity among the programs as well.

EVALUATION OBJECTIVES AND DESIGN

Based on a framework for evaluation that was drawn from the literature on school readiness and national standards for quality childcare, the evaluation was designed to answer the following questions:

- Did the programs serve the population that was intended to benefit from the provision of Children's Investment Fund dollars?
- How did children benefit from Children's Investment Fund grants?
- Did ECED programs deliver evidence-based curricula, demonstrate adherence to best practices linked with school readiness, and high quality childcare practices?
- How were children in ECED programs doing with respect to developmental status? How did they do over time?
- How did programs respond to children and families when there were concerns about developmental status or other issues related to school readiness?

ECED programs submitted data quarterly, beginning October 2004, on children and families served and the nature and extent of services delivered. In addition, each program conducted developmental screenings and/or assessments on children at the point of intake and again six months later. These data were submitted to PSU on a regular basis for analysis of the status of children at entry and overtime.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Findings from the Process Study

- *Children's Investment Fund dollars provided services to 1028 children and their families over an 18-month period, serving a population that was largely low-income and strikingly diverse:*
 - *75% were living at or below the federal poverty line;*
 - *40% spoke a first language other than English;*
 - *Nearly half were Latino/Hispanic or African American.*
- *467 children also exited programs during this period; providers noted the challenges of retaining low-income families who are frequently highly mobile.*
- *Children and families received a wide array of services linked with school readiness and quality early education and development including 2480 health and developmental screenings, referrals for a wide array of services, and caregiver education delivered through center-based programs and home visiting.*
- *Children and families for whom English was the second language benefited from: bilingual staff, specialized classroom instruction, translation/interpreter, and/or program materials in appropriate languages.*
- *Programs within the ECED cluster utilized standardized curricula and/or program models that are recognized nationally as a best-practice in early childhood care and education. Programs all had reported procedures in place to monitor quality.*
- *Staff salaries, education, and training reflected a wide range. The majority of staff had college degrees but only one in five had a graduate degree. Salaries were relatively low, and turnover among employees hired with Investment Fund dollars was approximately 35% over 18 months.*

Key Findings from the Child Tracking Study

- *Programs provided data to the evaluation on the developmental status of 700 children. For more than half of these children, data were provided across two points in time to track their progress, substantially increasing the monitoring of children's progress.*
- *Most children were doing well. Eighty percent of children at both screening points were on track in all developmental domains based on the screening and assessment instruments used.*

- *When screening suggested risk for developmental delay, it was most often in language/literacy (communication skills).*
- *The large majority of children for whom there were initial concerns either no longer showed potential delay by the second screening (64%) or maintained their status (23%).*
- *Concerns emerged or increased for approximately 14% of the children who were screened a second time six months after intake, pointing to the importance of monitoring children over time.*
- *When teachers/child care providers had a concern about a child, based on their direct experience, referrals were made at least 75% of the time; children for whom potential developmental delays were identified based on formal screenings/assessments received fewer referrals.*

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Programs in the ECED cluster served a diverse population of primarily low-income families whose children might be expected to benefit greatly from high quality childcare and early education programs. This was especially true for the large number of children for whom English was a second language or who entered programs with special challenges or needs.

Screenings and assessments of children's developmental status across the 12 direct service programs in the ECED cluster present a picture of children who are by and large doing well. Children for whom English is a second language may need more time to develop the communication and language skills that will help them prosper in K-12 educational settings, and children who have diagnosed disabilities may not be able to match the developmental trajectory of their peers, as measured with these screening tools.

The findings from the child tracking component point to the importance of ongoing screening, given that potential concerns emerged for some children when they moved from one age range to the next. Without these second screenings, these potential problems would not have been identified or addressed. Programs provided many referrals (or direct services) to address concerns about the children in their care, but the rates of referrals varied, with more referrals apparently made based on provider's judgment about children than on the results of developmental screening or assessment tools.

In sum, the ECED cluster did an exemplary job of serving the intended population and of compiling and submitting data on service delivery and developmental screenings when children entered their programs. Fewer children were screened six months later, in part due to attrition but also in part due to the time and resources required for the paperwork involved. To sustain ongoing tracking of children in Portland's early childcare and education programs and the monitoring of other program outcomes, additional resources will need to be allocated for this purpose.