



Summer 2001 Pre-Kindergarten Program Evaluation Report



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Background

In July and August 2001, two school districts in Alameda County, Hayward Unified School District and Oakland Unified School District, piloted innovative school readiness programs for children entering kindergarten in Fall 2001. Hayward's "Early Start" program and Oakland's "Jump Start" program both provided a half-day, six-week series of classes targeting low-income children without any preschool experience. Both programs were designed to introduce children to the school environment and expose them to school readiness activities. Children learned about school routines, participated in reading, singing, counting, and writing activities, selected individual "work" projects, and interacted with one another. Teachers helped children separate from their parents, engage in social problem solving with each other, and gain confidence in their abilities.

Hayward's Early Start program also offered families some additional services. Hayward collaborated with a number of partner agencies and a business corporation¹ to provide 2-3 parenting education sessions at each school site, assistance with accessing health and community services, and a mobile van that provided children's immunizations and physicals².

Given the potential for replication in other parts of Alameda County should these models prove successful, Every Child Counts offered to evaluate the programs. The evaluation was based on several data sources. Pre and post assessments using the High/Scope Child Observation Record (COR) were conducted for 43 children in six classrooms, three in Hayward and three in Oakland³. The High/Scope COR was selected as an assessment tool because it has documented reliability and validity (Smith, n.d., p. 3) and has been used in several studies, including an evaluation of the Michigan School Readiness Program, a preschool program sponsored by the State of Michigan. Also, since the COR is based on observation, the children did not need to be removed from the classroom to be tested, and by observing them in a natural environment, a broader understanding of their skills and abilities could be obtained. Three of the six COR developmental domains that most closely correspond with program goals were selected for use: Initiative, Social Relations, and Language and Literacy.

Other data sources included: focus groups with parents, teachers, and child observers; child and parent attendance records; and information on child health and family demographics. A majority of the data was collected in Hayward because of the broader

¹ Funding from the Alameda County Children and Families Commission helped to cover the cost of classroom supplies.

² Each family also received a backpack, a pencil case with supplies, a kindergarten information book, a teddy bear, and an English or Spanish version of the book, "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?"

³ The Hayward classrooms were at Burbank, John Muir, and Palma Ceia elementary schools. The Oakland classrooms were at Howard, Lockwood, and Santa Fe elementary schools. Oakland offered the program at a few other schools as well.

scope of Hayward’s program and because program and evaluation planning started earlier there than in Oakland. Thus, our findings pertain primarily to Hayward’s Early Start program.

Findings

Although this was a small, pilot evaluation project, the results are very promising. Findings from several sources suggest there was a positive impact on children and families, particularly in the area of children’s social development and peer relationships.

An analysis of the COR ratings conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation found that children demonstrated statistically significant gains on all measured developmental outcomes⁴.

Number of Cases	COR Subscale	Mean Gain Score
42	Initiative	.35
38	Social Relations	.45
32	Language and Literacy	.40
30	COR Combined	.45

Boys had statistically significant larger gains on the Social Relations scale and the COR Combined scale than girls. Children whose primary language was Spanish had greater gains on the Initiative scale than children with other primary languages. Finally, total family monthly income was positively associated with gains on the Language and Literacy scale.

High/Scope’s report cautions that the lack of a comparison group makes it “impossible to say with certainty that these developmental gains are in fact caused by the treatment...program” (Smith, n.d., p. 3). Additionally, the small sample size limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings. However, the magnitude of the gains is impressive:

In previous studies using the COR, full-year treatments have not typically produced gain scores of a magnitude greater than 1.0. In the COR validation study, fall-to-spring gains for a group of over 400 4-year-olds in Head Start were 0.88 for Initiative, 0.9 for Social Relations, and 0.65 for the Language and Literacy scales. These gains were documented over a period nearly five times as long as the [Hayward and Oakland Summer Pre-K] treatment. The gain scores...suggest that the program purpose of rapidly accommodating 5-year olds with no prior preschool experience to the school context may be working (Smith, n.d. pp. 3-4).

⁴ The COR ratings for Hayward children (n=32) and Oakland children (n=11) were combined. The sample sizes were too small to conduct separate analyses. Ideally, we would be able to report the results separately, since the programs, while similar, also differed from one another.

The COR data also suggest that the programs are targeting the right population of children. According to the High/Scope report, mean scores at program entry “are considerably lower for the 5-year olds in this program than they have been for 4-year-olds in several research administrations of the instrument in past years” (Smith, n.d., p. 4).

Results from the focus groups support the COR findings. Both Hayward and Oakland parents expressed strong satisfaction with the programs and gave examples of how their children’s behavior had changed as a consequence of program participation⁵. One parent said: “It is great! The other children are teaching her things in English. She is learning shapes... She counts to 50 now. ...she has learned much. She is our second child and I see her learning more.” Parents and teachers also noted increases in children’s independence and self-confidence, their willingness to share, and their excitement about school. One parent said: “At night, he himself thinks to go to bed. And in the morning, he eats on his own without my having to urge him on, and then he is ready to go to school.... What he learns here is reflected at home. I’ve noticed a big change. He has learned a lot.” One teacher said that being a teacher in the program “was very gratifying...since the children were right on the edge of picking up so many things. It was...a really good experience.”

Focus group results indicate that the programs also had positive effects on parent-child and family-school relationships. One mother who attended the parent education sessions in Hayward decided to enroll her child in a summer reading program at the public library. Another mother bought several books for her child to read. Another parent said: “[During the parent education session], it was helpful to have someone tell us what to do. You think these things come naturally, so it was good to have someone give direction.” One teacher said that from her interactions with parents, “I could tell at the parent [education] meeting that they had talked about how to read with your child!”

Another accomplishment of Hayward’s Early Start program is that by the end of the program, 95% of the children met state medical requirements for entrance to kindergarten, according to Healthy Start records.

Plans for Continued Tracking of Hayward Children

Over the next three years, Every Child Counts plans to continue tracking the progress of the children who participated in Hayward’s Early Start program and who remain within the Hayward Unified School District. The following outcome indicators will be collected:

- School attendance rates in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade
- Proportion of children matriculating from first to second grade
- Proportion of children with an IEP at the end of the second grade

Lessons Learned about School Readiness Programs

⁵ Six parent focus groups were conducted in Hayward (three in English and three in Spanish). One parent focus group was conducted in Oakland (in English).

The evaluation findings suggest that even relatively short interventions to prepare children for school can be highly effective.

Some of the program elements that appear to contribute to success are:

- A planning period prior to the summer program to identify goals, develop the curriculum, collaborate with partners, and plan logistics
- Experienced teachers. For example, one school district recruited California Early Childhood Mentor teachers to staff its program.
- Commitment from the teachers to complete the entire program in order to maintain continuity
- Preparation time for the teachers before the program begins. This is especially needed since the intervention is short.
- A low child to adult ratio in the classroom. For example, in Hayward, each classroom was staffed by a mentor teacher, AmeriCorps volunteer, and a child development assistant.
- Bilingual staff in the classroom and a commitment to providing a culturally and linguistically inclusive program for children and families
- Opportunities for children to exercise initiative and develop socially and emotionally
- A parenting component at the school site that supports school readiness activities
- A health component at the school site, together with referrals to community resources and services to help families address pressing needs

Lessons Learned about Evaluating School Readiness Programs

- It is possible to document significant gains even when the intervention occurs over a short period of time (6 weeks)
- Assessors with various language skills are needed, or translation support must be available to assessors. The primary languages of the children enrolled in the Hayward and Oakland programs include Spanish, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Farsi, and Hindi.
- For children with limited English language skills, the High/Scope COR assessment in some ways provides a measure of their adaptation to a new language environment rather than a true measure of their developmental abilities
- Use of the High/Scope COR works best when the teaching style is not overly directive and children are allowed opportunities to interact with one another, handle books on their own, attempt to write their own names, etc.
- There is a limit to the number of children who can be assessed in each classroom without overloading the classroom with observers. To obtain a minimum sample size for statistical purposes, it is best if more than 3 classrooms per program are included in the evaluation.
- Conducting child assessments requires good attendance rates. In one school district, we were unable to assess several children due to absences.

- While using an observational assessment is preferable to testing children, particularly children with no prior preschool experience, observational approaches are labor intensive and thus can be costly.

References Cited

Smith, Charles

- n.d. Evaluation of Developmental Outcomes for the Hayward and Oakland Unified School Districts' Summer Pre-Kindergarten Interventions. High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Report submitted to the Alameda County Children and Families Commission, October 17, 2001.