How to Get More Early Bloomers

By DANIEL T. WILLINGHAM and DAVID W. GRISSMER  JAN. 29, 2014

WHEN New York City’s mayor, Bill de Blasio, went to Albany earlier this week to talk about his program for universal preschool, the discussion reportedly focused on funding, not on whether or how preschool would actually help children. President Obama seemed equally confident when he introduced his plan for universal preschool last year, flatly stating, “We know this works.” But the state of research is actually much murkier. And unless policy makers begin to design preschool programs in ways that can be evaluated later, the situation won’t get any clearer.

A preschool that “works” could mean different things. It might simply be a safe spot for kids to go. Or it could be a means to get poor kids ready to learn reading and math; they are currently eight to 10 months behind wealthy kids when they start kindergarten. Mayor de Blasio and the president are more ambitious: They think that preschool ought to change life trajectories, resulting in more high school graduates and fewer prison inmates. These plans have two precedents in particular, the Abecedarian and Perry preschool programs from the 1960s and ’70s, whose students went farther in school and, decades later, had better jobs than children from similar backgrounds who did not attend those programs.

But large state programs differ from these model programs in two important ways. First, Perry and Abecedarian attendees were randomly selected from a large group of volunteers. The other kids served as the comparison group, which made it easy for researchers to assess the programs’ impact. Large state programs seldom use random selection, so their effectiveness is more open to debate.

In addition, Perry and Abecedarian were expensive, intensive programs. Preschools in large state programs inevitably vary in what they do, and they
show variable results. That’s why advocates always solemnly intone that preschool must be “high quality.” But what does that actually mean?

Researchers know what doesn’t work. Preschools that focus mostly on social activities (as the federal Head Start program does) show minimal academic benefits. But trying to teach primarily reading and math to 4-year-olds — essentially putting a kindergarten curriculum into preschool — doesn’t work either.

The preschools that do work teach less well-prepared kids precursor skills, the kind that many wealthy kids learn at home, through activities that don’t look especially academic. Songs and rhyming games, for example, help children hear that words are composed of individual sounds, making it easier to learn how to read letters. Kids gain knowledge about the world — important for reading comprehension in later elementary years — when they are read to by their parents and when they listen to them. Jigsaw puzzles and globes help kids develop spatial skills, which later help with math. Household rules teach children to learn to control their impulses, part of learning self-discipline.

Teaching these precursor skills in a preschool setting, rather than at home, is not easy. Teachers have just a few hours per day and many children to serve. But at present, it is not often a key objective.

So large state preschool programs have two problems: It’s hard to guarantee quality at the outset, and it’s hard to evaluate results once the program gets going. But both problems can be addressed.

First, we should capitalize on what we know. Small-scale studies indicate that some curriculums (like “Building Blocks” for mathematics) are effective. We know some features of preschools (like a warm emotional climate) are important. The federal government ought to ensure that states have access to concise research summaries of what does and doesn’t work. Such communication is currently not a priority, but it could increase the proportion of good schools pretty painlessly.

Second, high-quality evidence requires planning. Ideally, we would be able to compare kids with access to the program to kids without access. If all children gain access at the same time, we’re stuck with less-optimal research methods and uncertain results. Policy makers could encourage states to randomly vary when and where new programs start — complications of pre-K implementation will probably make this necessary in any case. Yes, there’s a moral bullet to be bitten
in the short term because some families will gain access to preschool later than others. But gaining high-quality evidence for program effectiveness is the best strategy for the long term.

Third, comparing preschool programs is hard because quality depends not just on factors in the classroom like the curriculum and the teacher’s skill, but also on how those factors interact with sleep, nutrition, parenting and other aspects of domestic life. Yet we know little about such interactions.

To understand them, we need a national study (enrolling perhaps 15,000 children) that would collect detailed information about the family and the preschool, beginning at age 3 and continuing through at least second grade.

Helping poor children succeed will not be easy, and we’d be fools to think we’ll get this right the first time. We need the tools of science to help plan course corrections, which means planning policies so that both scientists and teachers can learn on the job.

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