

TASK FORCE ON 4 YEAR OLD KINDERGARTEN

JUNE – DECEMBER 2006

The charge of this task force was three-fold.

1. Does evidence support there is a cumulative educational or societal benefit to having 4 year olds in structured programs?
2. If the state sees value in having 4 yr olds in structured programs, what is a reasonable or adequate cost of such a program?
3. How should we deliver these programs, and who is best qualified to decide?

SECTION 1: Current status of 4 yr old kindergarten in Wisconsin

The Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimates there are approximately 60,000 4 yr olds in Wisconsin. In the school year 05-06, approximately 21,000 were enrolled in state paid 4 yr old kindergarten programs – or roughly one-third. The taxpayers of Wisconsin paid approximately \$96 million for these programs in the 05-06 school year. The statewide average revenue limit authority was \$8,814 per FTE in that same year.

Since 1984 and up through the current year, a 4 yr old kindergarten in a public school setting is funded through the school funding formula. This is a direct budget appropriation from GPR funds. There is no separate state appropriation for the education of 4 yr olds. In both the revenue limit calculation and the equalization funding formula, 4 yr olds are counted as .5 FTE. If a district includes 87.5 hours of parental outreach with their 4 yr old kindergarten, they may claim an additional .1 (or .6 total) for each of these children in the aid and revenue limit calculations. The majority of Wisconsin's public 4 yr kindergartens include a parental outreach program.

The membership count in a public school district that is used to calculate general aid is accounted one year in arrears. That is, for example, the average of the membership count from September of 2005 and from January 2006 will be used in determining equalization aid in October of 2006. A public school district that begins a 4 yr kindergarten program will fully pay for the first year of the program before they ever receive any additional new state aid.

The second and subsequent years they are allowed to add the full value of eligible FTEs from the 4 yr kindergarten program in their membership count for state aid. The resolution for what seems to be a loss in the first year, is that they will be allowed to count those students for one year after they have left the district.

Because the revenue limit formula is based on a 3 year rolling average membership, it takes 3 years to fully realize the ability to levy the local tax effort for new members. Depending on the cost of the new 4 yr kindergarten, this may require the school district to use additional fund equity until the local tax effort reflects the increasing membership average. The resolution for what seems to be a “ramping” up of taxing authority by averaging also protects the district by allowing it to “ramp” down when its membership declines.

For example: School A receives \$7,000 in state aid and \$3,000 in local tax effort for each FTE in the revenue limit formula. They start a 4 yr kindergarten program with 100 students at a cost of \$4,000 per student.

Year One – They will not receive any state aid, but will average 50 FTE ($100 \times .5$) into their revenue limit calculation, netting an increase in tax levy of \$49,500 ($100 \times .5 \times \$3000 \times .33$).

Year Two – They will increase their taxing authority by \$100,500 ($100 \times .5 \times \$3000 \times .67$), plus they will receive \$350,000 in new state aid ($\$7,000 \times 100 \times .5$).

Year Three – They will realize the full collection of \$150,000 in taxing authority, plus they will receive \$350,000 in state aid for their 4 yr old kindergarten program.

For the sake of this example, we will assume the membership remains static at 100 kindergartners and that the cost remains static at \$4,000 per child.

Year One – The district expenses for the program will exceed the new revenue realized by \$350,500. The district will have to front that money from fund equity, borrowing, or budget adjustments.

Year Two – The district revenues for 4 yr kindergarten will exceed expenses by \$50,500.

Year Three, (and subsequent years) – The district revenues for 4 yr kindergarten will exceed expenses by \$100,000 each year.

MRCSP & MPCP

The State also funds 4 yr kindergarten programs in the Milw-Racine Charter Schools (MRCSP) and the Milw Parental Choice Schools (MPCP). These programs are reimbursed \$3,709 and \$3,175, respectively, this past year for each eligible .5 FTE.

Unlike the public 4 yr kindergartens that are funded through the equalization aid formula, the choice and charter schools receive the funding in the same year as the student is counted. The MRCSP payment is shown as a deduction after the equalization aid formula has been calculated, while the MPCP payment is paid 55% from the general fund and 45% from a reduction in school aids to the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). Historical memory from DPI and LFB leaves no answer as to why the charter and choice kindergartens receive less than their public school partners. It is just the way it was set up. Finally, there are a small number of suburban 4 yr olds (LFB estimates approx. 50) who attend MPS through the Chapter 220 Integration Program. The resident districts are allowed to count these children for revenue limit and equalization aid purposes. MPS is also allowed to count these children for 75 percent of the equalization aid they would net from the state if the children were Milwaukee residents.

SECTION 2:How do public school districts decide to begin a 4 yr kindergarten & what do they look like?

Five public school districts have shared their views and experiences with 4 yr kindergarten programs. I am choosing to review the presentation from the School District of LaCrosse in tandem with the presentation from Edgerton School District first because of their similarity. LaCrosse served as a model for Edgerton, who will be starting their formal program in the 06-07 school year. LaCrosse labels their program a “pre-school” while Edgerton has identified their program as a “4 yr kindergarten”.

Educators from the LaCrosse district had concerns that some of the children in their district did not come prepared to begin 5 yr kindergarten. Some of the district’s elementary schools had Title 1 programs for 4 yr olds. Because slots in Title 1 were limited, however, there were children turned away who they believed could have benefited from this program. Knowing that the state funded 4 yr old kindergartens, in 1998 these educators recommended a universal 4 yr old program for the entire district.

Administrators from the private child care programs and the Head Start programs in the LaCrosse area were not pleased to hear that the school district planned to empty out all their successful 4 yr programs. Their private 4 year old programs represented a significant part of their businesses. The issue became very divisive in the community. The school district re-examined their reason for the recommendation and met with the private sector providers and Head Start to come up with a collaborative solution.

The result of their collaboration allows all 4 yr olds in their community to have access to a quality learning experience before 5 yr old kindergarten. Participation is voluntary. Delivery of the programs may be in the public school, private school, or with a parent at home. They designed four specific models.

Model 1 – Public School Staff in Public School Site

Model 2 – Public School Staff partnering in a Private Agency Site

Model 3 – Public School contracts with Private Agency

Model 4 – At home instruction by parents (curriculum & aid made available by district)

(Details of each of these models are described in depth in the handouts provided by the district.)

The school district remains in the financial “hub” position for the first three models, meaning that the school district counts all the children in these models for revenue limit and equalization aid purposes. The school district also controls the payments for services in the Model 2 & 3 contracts. The LaCrosse administrator stated that she believed that all of the first three models were equally capable of delivering high quality services and that no single method proved to be more successful than the others.

The collaborative program in LaCrosse is satisfactory to the school district for a couple of reasons. First, they are reaching most of the children with preparatory instruction, and second, because they receive additional aid and taxing authority that sufficiently covered their costs. The LaCrosse School District’s revenue limit for the 05-06 school year was \$9,483 per member according to the DPI website. They received approximately \$5,149 per member in general state aid in that same year. The administrator could not tell us what the cost of the pre-school program was in the public school setting (Model 1). They pay the Model 2 private sector child care facilities \$165 annually for each child. They pay the Model 3

private sector child care facilities \$2,250 annually per child. To date, they have not contracted with any parochial schools.

The issue of a District-employed teacher in a private setting, or having the District contracting for services with a private sector provider rather than hiring their own staff and resources creates an unusual employment relationship. The administrator did explain that the District was compelled to enter into a sidebar agreement with the local union to avoid a possible grievance. This sidebar included requiring that Model 3 teachers, who are private sector employees, be paid at least as much as a starting teacher in the local union. In short, the gatekeeper of state funds (the school district) would not allow the totally private Model 3 preschools to participate if they did not conform to the district's union demands.

Although they have had the program since the 99-00 school year, the administrator did not know if the cumulative benefits of the program resulted in fewer special need referrals in elementary school or increased performance in 3rd grade reading scores or 4th grade NAEP scores. She did not think that this information had been reviewed. She did have some general observation notes that were formed from preschool teachers' assessments. Some of those were included in her handouts.

As previously mentioned, Edgerton School District has chosen to model their pre-school program after the LaCrosse model. The educators and administrator in Edgerton had increasing concerns about the readiness of a significant number of children entering 5 yr kindergarten. Through observation, but not documented, they concluded that there was a correlation between low socio-economic backgrounds and lack of pre-school opportunity, poor social skills, classroom readiness, behavior and academic success. Only 30-40 percent of their incoming 5 yr olds had attended any type of pre-school prior to kindergarten. Edgerton made a conscious decision not to target a specific socio-economic group, however, because they felt there was significant value in the role models of children from the non-targeted segment.

Edgerton chose to collaborate with four well-established pre-schools in their community for a couple of reasons. To launch a 4 yr old program in the public school would compete and potentially harm these private sector businesses and, Edgerton School District lacked the space to house a 4 yr old program without building an addition to their facilities. This could potentially mean a referendum which the administrator did not believe would be acceptable to the community.

The collaborative options in Edgerton mirror Models 1, 2, & 3 as discussed in the LaCrosse program. The public school will have a program (Model 1). There will also be the private provider sites that have public school staff the 4 yr kindergarten (Model 2). And the public school will contract with private providers to deliver the complete service, including qualified staff (Model 3).

Edgerton is anticipating that 95 percent of their 4 yr olds will participate in one of the pre-school programs in this initial year. That represents approximately 110 youngsters, and includes all of the eligible Spanish-speaking students. They do intend to include the parental outreach option. The school district also requires a consistent curriculum based on state guidelines regardless of the model of the provider. The curriculum focuses more on school readiness than academic progress. It was not clear what “school readiness” included or how it would be measured. At this point in time, Edgerton obviously does not have any comparative data on cumulative academic or social benefits of their program.

The Edgerton School Board approved this program with the understanding that fund equity may have to be used for the first two years of the program. The administrator did not know the cost per student of the public school program or how much the fund balance would be drawn down to begin the program. The school district will pay Model 2 providers \$600 annually per student and the Model 3 providers \$2,000 annually per student. Edgerton School District’s revenue limit was \$8,338 per member in the 05-06 school year according to the DPI website. They received approximately \$5,413 per member in general state aid in that same year.

Edgerton, as yet, has not encountered any employment issues with their local teachers union. The administrator is expecting that the union will see the value in this collaborative program and realize that it should not be grieved. Time will tell on that.

Both LaCrosse and Edgerton spoke of transportation issues. Different levels of bussing may be necessary for Models 1, 2, or 3. Bussing can be a traumatic experience for a 4 yr old. An advantage for Models 2 & 3 is that many of the children are already housed at the private provider site for their daycare. This can save dollars and trauma.

Monona Grove School District is a mid-sized, suburban district. It has had a unique pre-kindergarten program for a number of years. They have a screening process by which they select 36 pre-kindergartners each year from a potential class of 175-200. Selection does not consider income level or disabilities. Rather they screen for kindergarten “readiness” and select the children that they believe will benefit most from a structured program. “Readiness” was not clearly defined. Selection is the only access to the program. A parent cannot enroll their child. The program is housed in the public school facility.

Monona Grove educators and administrators have tried to compile data to indicate any cumulative beneficial impact this might have on the selected students. To date, they have not made any statistical analysis, but indicated they may be seeing a slight reduction in special education referrals due in part to this program.

The administrator did not know the cost per student of the program. Monona Grove School District does count the 36 pre-kindergartners for revenue limit and equalization aid purposes. Monona Grove School District’s revenue limit was \$9,591 in the 05-06 school year according to the DPI website. They received approximately \$4,561 per member in general state aid in that same year. It was questioned at the meeting as to whether this practice was in agreement with constitutional law because the program was not universally available.

Fall River is a small, rural school district. It has provided a 4 yr kindergarten program for that community for over 20 years. The focus of their program has been school readiness, not academics. School “readiness” was not clearly defined. Approximately 90 percent of their 4 yr olds participate. Their administrator made no apology that the main reason for the inception of the program was to seek additional funding. However, she followed up with a statement that the acceptance by educators and the community was based on what they perceived to be a significant societal benefit. The community had even supported a building project to provide a first-rate setting for this program.

Fall River’s 4 yr old program costs approximately \$90,000 - \$95,000 and services between 30 & 40 children (calculating this out would net a per child cost of \$2,500 - \$3,000). The administrator clarified that these costs did not reflect the cost of transportation to the public school facility.

Fall River does not utilize the option for parental outreach. They have not historically had a child care center in Fall River, so the option of using other models was not viable for them.

Janesville School District was the final public school district that presented information to us. They currently have an enrollment of approximately 10,500 students. The services that they currently provide to pre-schoolers include approximately 150 youngsters with identified special needs and 150 youngsters that qualify for Title 1 services.

Over the past two years, Janesville School District administrators and Board of Education did extensive study in anticipation of starting a 4 yr kindergarten. The Superintendent stated that the fund balance was not adequate to cover the start up costs for the first year. However, he did not know what the draw down on the fund balance would be, nor did he know the estimated cost per child. Like some of the other districts, he said the cost of transportation would be an additional problem. The project did not progress to the point of solid costing for this.

The Superintendent of Janesville School District explained in depth how divisive this issue became in their community. It was so explosive that it was abandoned to be brought up in a future time. The opposition to public 4 yr kindergarten in Janesville is in part due to the fact that there are many private providers of high quality pre-school programs, both secular and parochial. The Superintendent stated that close to 90 percent of their incoming 5 yr olds have attended some type of structured pre-school or pre-kindergarten.

Parents came out in force demanding that they wanted to continue to have choice in where their children attended pre-school. The fear that the school district would move to a public 3 yr old program was also voiced by many parents.

The final administrator that presented to us was Mr. Terry Brown from St. Anthony's School in Milwaukee. St. Anthony's is an Archdiocese school, and the largest school participating in the MPCP with a membership of 990 students. They serve a low income, non-English speaking demographic. More than 80 percent of their children will be eligible for free or reduced hot lunch this fall.

They have worked off of the premise of *evidence-based* programs, rather than *researched-based theories*. This means that they are using programs and curriculum that have been used and proven in schools –vs- some of the programs that are based on research such as the popular brain studies. One of these programs is English immersion –vs- bilingual education. The administrator stated that the results from immersion worked so well that they have kept this practice. He stated that there is another school in the neighborhood that offers bi-lingual education, but parents seem to prefer English immersion because it nets progress. Many years the majority of entering 4 yr olds come from non-English reading, speaking or writing parents. It is St. Anthony’s goal for all their children to achieve in line with the best performing schools in Wisconsin. They understand poverty and language is a struggle for many of their students but do not accept it as a reason for poor achievement.

While there is considerable focus on socialization, there is an academic element also. The 4 yr kindergarten at St. Anthony’s runs a 7 hour day with 135 minutes of direct instruction in reading and 90 minutes of direct instruction in math every day. St. Anthony’s does track and test their students regularly. It is their goal to have all students reading English at level by May of first grade, regardless of their first language. In May of 2006 they were at 100 percent achievement. They do monitor & mentor their teachers regularly, including a significant investment in professional development. They continually foster and expect a “results culture” among their educators.

Mr. Brown said the cost for this full day program is about \$4,400 per child. They receive \$3,900, or 60 percent of the MPCP voucher, for each child in the choice program. The church makes up the difference of approximately \$500 per child.

Section 3: Basic Historical Information on Wisconsin 4 yr Kindergartens

I have included in this section the presentation from Jill Haglund from DPI and the presentation from David Brooke from Knowledge Learning Corporation. The information from these two presenters included historical fact and anecdotal observation. Ms. Haglund’s presentation reflected the findings of the Early Education Matters project that was done by the Wisconsin Council on Children & Families through funding from the Joyce Foundation.

Basically, this report entitled, *Assessing the Value of 4K in Wisconsin: A Study of 4K community Approach Districts*, which was completed in 2006 describes what types of collaborative kindergarten programs are found throughout Wisconsin. Her slides reflected the value that DPI has observed in using public/private collaborative efforts to start a public 4 yr kindergarten. For specific information about a particular school district, reference can be made to the report or executive summary materials.

Her presentation made general assumptions from national studies including the infamous Reynolds Chicago, Perry Preschool, and Abecedarian. We anticipated having an in-depth presentation from Dr. Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research, about these studies so we postponed our questions about the research for later in the process.

Ms. Haglund was not able to answer questions about costs of individual 4 yr K programs in Wisconsin, nor was she familiar with the state average cost of these programs. She was not aware of any data that had been collected by the DPI to assess whether there was documentation of any educational benefit to Wisconsin students because of exposure to pre-school education.

Mr. Brooke's testimony to the Task Force was interesting and reflected what the private sector has done to meet the market demand for early education. This is a growing market and he felt the competitiveness helps to keep the quality high. He also, did not share specifics on costs or benefits.

Section 4: What does the research tell us?

Dr. Steven Barnett from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) shared a presentation with us regarding the economics of early education. His analysis was based on three well-known, extensive research studies from three different historic decades. Each of these studies had strengths and weaknesses when making a general overall conclusion.

High Scope Perry Pre-school

Probably, the most famous of these studies, which many people have used appropriately and inappropriately to justify their pre-school biases, was the High Scope Perry Pre-school study. This study took place 44 years ago in Ypsilanti, MI.

The subjects were 123 three and four year olds from very low income homes, in settings that were less than likely to instill the same value on education and employment as higher income demographic brackets. The subjects were exposed to a half-day program for the length of the school year and the program included a parental outreach factor. Some of the children were exposed to the program for one school year before entering regular kindergarten and some of the children were in the program for two school years. There was a control group of children from similar background that did not attend a pre-school who were used for comparison.

This longitudinal study not only looked at the educational achievement and graduation rates but also continued to follow behavioral and economic status of almost 100 percent of the subjects at age 27 and again at age 40. I am not going to restate the comparative statistics but rather they are available in the materials provided to Task Force members. It is not hard to see that there was a reduction in cognitive special education needs for the subject group, and that overall the subject group scored significantly higher on achievement tests than the control group. It was also very evident that individuals in the study's subject group were more likely to graduate from high school on time.

At the age of 27 and at 40, the economic status of the subject group was comparatively higher than the control group. That is, a higher percent of the subject group were likely to be employed, have bought a home, stayed off of welfare as an adult, and have some financial stability. Behaviorally, they were more likely to have been arrested less than five times in their life, which would be a natural result of the fact that they were less likely to be involved in violence and drug crime.

One very important overlay that should never be ignored in the High Scope Perry study is the demographic that these children came from. They came from low-income, high welfare and high crime neighborhoods. It is reasonable to assume that the exceptional progress they appeared to make in relationship to their classmates is in part from the early intervention in their lives and in the lives of their parents or caretakers. Instilling the importance of education and the importance of good parenting can result in improved educational progress. And, it has long been established that raising the level of education, will naturally decrease poverty, which will have a positive impact on decreasing crime.

The difference between the subject group and the control group may seem stark. It is important to recognize, however, that while the subject group was much improved, its ratio may still be unacceptable to our society at large. For example, few of us would consider having 64 percent of our society arrested more than five times by the age of 40 acceptable. I realize it is an improvement from the control group, but my point is that it must be considered within the context of the study. While this study was very comprehensive and can be very helpful to us, it is presumptuous to take the results of a study with such a narrow demographic and statistically apply it to a broader population.

Abecedarian Study

The second study that Dr. Barnett described was the Abecedarian study which was recorded in 1972. The setting was a decidedly different demographic than the Ypsilanti study a decade earlier. It took place in Chapel Hill, NC. The children were from homes that reflected a better education and income status than the High Scope Perry study. There were 111 subjects ranging in age between 6 weeks and 5 years. Some children were only exposed to the program for one year, while others had the benefit of this intense pre-school program for their first five years of life. It was a full day, year round program with a pupil/teacher ratio of about 1 to 6.

Comparison of the subject group and control group reveal that the subjects in the study made better academic progress than their counterparts. It is interesting to note that the investment in the program was considerably more than the High Scope study. That is, more years of exposure, longer school day, longer school year, low pupil/teacher ratio, all in addition to improved education and economic status of the parents. While the performance the control and subject groups displayed are higher in general than the High Scope groups, the impact of the program appears to have diminishing effect on improvement. That is, the Abecedarian study had a much greater investment in years of exposure, length of day, and length of term than the earlier study. It could be easily argued that the Abecedarian study had twice the investment in intensity and time as the High Scope study. Yet, it is evident that the improvement of the subjects in the later study, while somewhat higher than the first study, certainly did not increase respective to the increased investment. For example, subject group graduation rates in Abecedarian were 67 percent, only slightly better than the 66 percent of the High Scope subjects.

One cannot observe this phenomenon and not consider that the law of diminishing returns is evident as the socio-economic demographic of the child improves. In other words: the lower the socio-economic demographic, the greater the return on investment for early education intervention. This obviously begs the question: Are there demographic brackets that will not show a return for public investment in pre-school education? Or, as Dr. Barnett worded it, “your mileage may vary”.

Chicago Public School Study

The Chicago Public School study took place in the 1980s. Unlike the first two studies, it was of a larger scale (1,539 subjects) and represented a mix of socio-economic groups. Like the High Scope study it was a half-day program during the school year for three and four year olds. Like the Abecedarian study, the influence of a mixed demographic may have had some impact on the results. Certainly this study confirms that some children benefit from some early education intervention.

I realize that the casual reader of these studies must be careful in assuming that all of the states represented in the discussed studies use the same criteria to document grade repetition, graduation standards, and special education identification. It is difficult -- perhaps impossible -- to compare apples to apples here. That is why these studies have been used to justify the case of supporters as well as those who question the value returned to society for the investment of publicly funding 4 year old kindergarten.

In somewhat of a contrast to Dr. Barnett’s presentation, Lisa Snell from the Reason Foundation gave testimony that challenged the committee to examine all research on early childhood public education. The Reason Foundation is a non-partisan public policy research organization that promotes choice, competition, and a dynamic market economy. Ms. Snell’s comments underlined that our nation’s flexible approach to early education already gives children a strong foundation for starting their school years without stripping parental rights. She argued that skills assessments for kindergarten entrance and reports by kindergarten teachers show a large and increasing majority of pre-schoolers are, in fact, prepared for kindergarten.

She argued that using the public school as the only vehicle for delivering early childhood education does not necessarily provide the best quality or the best cost efficiency. Citing the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), she brought out that there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate any lasting educational or socioeconomic benefit of government run pre-school programs for all children. Evidence from performance on National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), which is considered the nation's report card on public education, argues against the value of investing tax dollars in universal pre-school.

This confirmation is brought home in the 2005 NCES 4th Grade Reading Report which shows that even though the State of Wisconsin currently invests almost \$100 million annually in 4 year old kindergarten, we have not shown improvement in our reading scores over the last decade.

In 2005, the average scale scorer for fourth-grade students in Wisconsin was 221. This was not significantly different from their average score in 2003 (221), and was not significantly different from their average score in 1992 (224).

The percentage of students in Wisconsin who performed at or above the NAEP Proficient level was 33 percent in 2005. This percentage was not significantly different from that in 2003 (33 percent), and was not significantly different from that in 1992 (33 percent).

The percentage of students in Wisconsin who performed at or above the NAEP Basic level was 67 percent in 2005. This percentage was not significantly different from that in 2003 (68 percent), and was not significantly different from that in 1992 (71 percent). (NCES 2006-452WI4)

She did call to our attention that there are other studies that refute Dr. Barnett's hypothesis that teachers with higher education degrees result in the assumption that the quality of instruction is higher and will lead to greater future student success. One of these is the 2005 UC Berkeley research study. The researchers found that Barnett based his conclusions on studies that used very tiny sample sizes and in some cases were seriously flawed. Other studies found that teachers with bachelor degrees seemed more sensitive toward their students than teachers with lesser education, but failed to find a link between pre-school teachers having a bachelor degree and higher future performance of the students.

One could summarize that the higher cost investment of requiring a bachelor degree for a pre-school teacher may not necessarily net a greater return. An expected conclusion remains: that parents have a much greater effect on the continuing success of their children in an education system than the degree held by their pre-school teacher.

Section 5: Stakeholders in Wisconsin

A wide variety of stakeholders were invited to make short presentations to the committee. The organizations that they represent are listed here. Their input is important because it informs lawmakers of the interests and needs of their members. The focus of this taskforce, however, was to research and define what evidence there might be to uphold the theory that there is an educational and/or societal benefit to structured 4 year old programs, and what would be a reasonable cost to deliver such programs.

Association of Wisconsin School Administrators

Department of Workforce Development's Child Care Section

School Choice Wisconsin

V.E. Charter Development Group, Inc.

Wisconsin Association of School Boards

Wisconsin Catholic Conference

Wisconsin Child Care Administrators' Association

Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

Wisconsin Early Childhood Association

Wisconsin Education Association Council

Wisconsin Head Start Association

Section 6: Summary and Recommendations

The question is not whether Wisconsin has universal funding of 4 year old kindergarten. Wisconsin has had universal funding of 4 year old kindergarten for over 20 years. Rather, the question is whether access to these programs is universal. It is very evident that allowing the public school districts to be the "gatekeepers" of state funding for 4 year old kindergarten in their communities has not been the best venue for delivering universal access.

One committee member summed up the discussion well by saying that the ‘debate has shifted’ – meaning that is not whether Wisconsin should fund 4 year old kindergarten but rather that we should have a more defined plan. Furthermore, in our current limited resource setting, increased funding for 4 year old kindergarten programs is not likely, and would only be found at the expense of another education program.

That said, supporting the premise that providing access for all children to a quality 4 year old kindergarten should be a goal, will mean that we need to be able to clearly identify what the purpose of the program is and how to control the cost of the program. This is vital if we look to make the service available to more children without significant budget increases.

It is not an over-simplification to state that the goal of early education preparation is to improve student performance as children proceed through their school years. Ultimately, the goal is to increase ability to continue with higher level education and increase earning potential as an adult. There must be a measurable financial return to the economy. This is the only way funding of this program is justifiable and sustainable.

Without base data and longitudinal records, it is virtually impossible to make rational analysis as to whether the millions of dollars that have been spent on 4 year old kindergarten have had any benefit to the taxpayers of Wisconsin. The case for funding 4 year old kindergarten in Wisconsin has been made on selective, limited, and non-existent evidence. What empirical evidence there is has been assumed by extrapolating a cost-benefit from decade old studies and overlaying it onto the current patchwork of 4 year old programs we see in Wisconsin school districts. Care should be taken not to view this as measurement but rather as an uncertain projected calculation.

It is important to note here that these concluding recommendations are not the result of a formal vote of the task force. Rather, they are intended to provide a plan of action based on the analyses of the presentations, testimony and committee discussions that have ensued over the past six months.

1. The State should define a clear cut purpose for publicly funding 4 year old kindergarten. Included in this purpose should be mastery of the English language, improvement of NAEP test scores, and reduction of future special education needs.
2. There should be a defined, consistent method of collecting the longitudinal data so that it can be analyzed and monitored to ensure that the State's investment is meeting its defined purpose.
3. There should be minimum practice and academic standards to provide guidance and consistency in achieving the defined purpose.
4. Parental outreach should be considered a vital part of pre-school programs, not an optional financial incentive.
5. Allow a direct fiscal relationship between the State and private providers of 4 year old programs that meet the standards. One model would be to allow the funding for this reimbursement to be a "first draw" on the general school aid account. Under such a model, the value of the reimbursement for a half day program could have an appropriate fractional value of the MPCP voucher.
6. Maintain the reimbursement for public school district programs through the school funding formula and recommend that the reimbursement for public pre-schools should have a direct relationship to the cost of providing the program.