Pre-K in DC: Leading in Access and Working to Improve Instructional Quality

A recent report emphasizes the positives of high access and funding, while acknowledging that work remains to be done to improve instructional quality

BLOG POST

By
Aaron Loewenberg

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Washington, DC has long been a leader in early education access. DC was the site of a pilot Head Start program in 1964 and, in 1972, became one of the country’s first jurisdictions to make pre-K programs available to four-year-olds.

Today, DC continues to be a leader across the nation when it comes to educating young children. In fact, 86 percent of the district’s four-year-olds and 64 percent of its three-year-olds attend publicly funded pre-K in a public school, public charter school, or community-based organization, making it number one in pre-K access in comparison to the fifty states. In all, about 13,000 children receive pre-K services in the District. DC also spends more on pre-K than all
fifty states: $16,431 per child, about three and a half times more than the national average of $4,521. This funding, which includes a blending of per-pupil funding and Head Start funds, helps pay for full-day pre-K classes led by licensed teachers with bachelor’s degrees.

A recent report from the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) emphasizes the positives of high levels of access and funding, but also acknowledges that work remains to ensure all pre-kindergarteners receive a high-quality education that prepares them for future academic and life success.

The OSSE report reveals that the quality of pre-K instruction needs attention. By utilizing the CLASS Pre-K evaluation tool as a measure of program quality, the researchers were able to see how DC teachers are doing in three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (see the below graphic explaining the domains).

While DC’s pre-K teachers are exceeding the established thresholds in the domains of emotional support and classroom organization, they are falling short in the area of instructional support (see below). This means that many pre-K students likely attend programs in which teachers do not consistently encourage students to use higher-order thinking skills, provide feedback that expands learning, or use language facilitation strategies to encourage conversation.
Many pre-K programs in DC are working to improve the instructional support offered by teachers through strategies such as establishing an instructional coaching model and creating opportunities for peer collaboration among teachers. One philanthropic organization, Fight for Children, is working to improve the quality of DC pre-K programs through Joe’s Champs - a program that targets school leaders.

Launched in 2013, Joe’s Champs decided to specifically target principals because many felt limited in their understanding of early childhood education. This lack of knowledge can prevent principals from feeling comfortable giving instructional guidance to pre-K teachers at their schools (a finding reinforced in our principal focus groups). Since DC principals are responsible for evaluating teachers and providing feedback to improve teaching it’s all the more important for elementary school principals to have the foundational ECE knowledge necessary to fairly evaluate and offer advice to pre-K teachers.

Joe’s Champs provides ongoing professional development for principals while also using a mentor coaching model to help principals gain a better understanding of topics such as child development, age-appropriate teaching strategies, and the impact of childhood trauma. According to Fight for Children’s strategic plan, 13 DC schools are currently enrolled in Joe’s Champs and three schools are piloting a preK-3rd grade alignment effort as the next phase of Joe’s Champs. Joe’s Champs boasts a network of 55 leaders that receive 80 hours of professional development and coaching each year.

To measure the impact of the program, Fight for Children utilizes the same CLASS assessment that is used to measure all DC pre-K programs. As mentioned earlier, many DC programs seem to struggle in the area of instructional support. Schools that partner with Joe’s Champs, however, have a three-year growth rate of 28 percent on instructional support scores compared to an average growth rate in DC of 17 percent. These numbers suggest Joe’s Champs is an effective intervention for supporting instructional quality.
While DC is doing a lot of things right when it comes to pre-K, especially in terms of access, the OSSE report makes clear that work remains to be done when it comes to supporting teachers in improving their instructional quality. It may seem strange that a program such as Joe’s Champs targets principals as a means of improving the instruction of teachers. But in order for elementary schools to be sites of high-quality early education it’s imperative that principals serve as early education leaders in their schools. Only when school leaders possess an in-depth understanding of what high-quality teaching looks like at the pre-K and early elementary level can they support teachers in instructing in the ways young children learn best.