FOCUS ON EARLY LEARNING:
Lessons from the French Écoles Maternelles

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During the past three years, a series of events catalyzed a broad-based discussion to improve early childhood education in Washington state:

- A public opinion survey released in 2002 showed that 75% of those polled favored providing funds to make voluntary, high-quality preschool available to all 3 and 4-year-olds.
- An evaluation of the state’s Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder, which linked salaries for teachers to their educational achievement and experience, showed marked improvement in quality in participating early learning settings.
- In 2001-2, more than 43% of school districts in Washington were funding pre-kindergarten programs as more and more educators were focusing on closing the "readiness" gap to address the achievement gap.
- Early learning teachers and stakeholders formed the Child Care Workforce Alliance of Washington to advocate for early childhood education.
- Head Start programs throughout the state were woefully underfunded with only one-third of eligible students able to participate.
- Foundations and early learning stakeholders were forming coalitions to advance high-quality early education.
- In 2002 and 2003, City of Seattle Initiative 77 increased public awareness that early learning is a fundamental building block for academic achievement and deserving of public funding.
- Local business interests publicly stated support for early learning programs.

Regrettably, high-quality early learning is not available to many of the state’s young children, with quality, affordability, and accessibility issues remaining unresolved for parents, educators, government officials, and all individuals concerned about early childhood education and development.

In this context, the French-American Foundation and the Economic Opportunity Institute thought it would be useful to examine the French école maternelle, a universal pre-kindergarten system, and explore what elements of that system may be appropriate and applicable for children and families in Washington.
The French-American Foundation and the Economic Opportunity Institute believe that the most successful elements of France's century-old preschool system of *école maternelle* offer interesting lessons and insights for Washington. France’s *école maternelle* program is an internationally renowned system of free, universal, high-quality pre-kindergarten education. Although it is voluntary, nearly 100% of French children ages 3 to 5 attend *école maternelle* because their parents recognize its value and importance for their children’s early learning and socialization.

In November 2003, the French-American Foundation and the Economic Opportunity Institute sponsored a conference “Focus on Early Learning: Lessons from the French *Écoles Maternelles*” for an invited audience of legislators, policy makers, government officials, university and college professors in the field of early childhood education and development, foundations, business, staff and directors of early learning centers, and parents. This report and its recommendations are the result of this conference.

Currently, the state’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has embraced the goal of insuring equal opportunity for all children to enter school ready to be successful in grades kindergarten through 12. OSPI’s goals, mission, strategic plan, and action agenda include continued partnership with early care and education providers to develop a continuum of teaching, family involvement, and support for children from birth to age 21 and to promote the development of a comprehensive, high-quality early care and education system for all.

OSPI is joined by other state agencies (in particular, the Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development and the Department of Social and Health Services), the federal government, local governments, and school districts in providing and funding a wide range of programs and activities for children from birth to 5. These same organizations are developing the policy momentum toward a well-funded system for early learning.

Families in Washington rely on early learning programs in a variety of settings: family home providers, child development centers and preschools, Head Start programs, the Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (ECEAP, the state’s version of Head Start), and programs run by school districts. Quality elements, including state licensing, accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), teacher qualifications, career ladders, staff-child ratios, and staff compensation, differ widely among and within these provider groups. Over 250,000 children from birth to 5 participate in non-parental early learning and child care in Washington state each year.

“Our country, that leads the world in millionaires and billionaires, and in military might and health technology, falls far behind most other industrialized countries in investing in its children, in their early care and education. In France the value and importance of children is not even discussed, it’s assumed, and that is a very fundamental difference, and one we’re going to have to get to in America.”

Marion Wright Edelman
President, Children’s Defense Fund
In contrast with the fragmented approach to early care and education in America, France provides all young children, rich and poor, with a comprehensive system of education and care. Various forms of subsidized care are available for children under the age of three, including licensed day care centers, called crèches, and licensed home day care provided by assistantes maternelles. This summary will focus on the most important features of the école maternelle system, which serves children ages 2 to 5.

The French pre-kindergarten system is part of a national, centralized educational system first established in the 1880s. French pre-kindergarten is of consistently high quality in schools throughout the country. Housed in impressive purpose-built facilities, each preschool is complete with cafeteria, outdoor space, and a separate sleeping area for naps.

Cost: Preschool is free to parents. It is estimated that the annual cost per child per year is approximately $5,130. In France, preschool costs are shared between the national and local governments, with the national government paying for teacher training and teachers’ salaries and the local government paying for facilities, materials, and support staff.

Teacher training: French preschool teachers are selected and trained in a rigorous, competitive process. Teachers must first earn a three-year university degree (equivalent of a B.A.) in a subject area. This is followed by at least one year of training at a university-based teacher training institute, the Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres, to receive the equivalent of a master’s degree in early childhood and elementary education. In the French teacher training institutes, students receive the same training to teach at the preschool or elementary school level. Throughout their career, pre-kindergarten teachers are assessed and reviewed by education inspectors from the National Ministry of Education.

Staff wages and benefits: Unlike their American counterparts, French pre-kindergarten teachers are well-paid, earning the same salaries, paid vacation and generous health, retirement, and other benefits as school teachers at the elementary or secondary level. As a result of their relatively high pay, generous benefits, and greater social status, there is considerable stability among French preschool teachers (which American research has shown to be a very important factor in educational quality). France has relatively few problems with turnover of personnel, whereas in the United States, 30% of childcare workers leave their job each year.

Classroom staffing: French preschool teachers are supported in the classroom by qualified teaching aides, who must earn a one-year vocational degree in early education. The support staff assist teachers through the day, for example, by setting up art and other activities, super-
vising work in small groups, supervising outdoor play, helping children eat, and preparing children for naps.

**Class size:** The average class size in the French preschool is 25 students, and the average adult to child ratio is 1 to 12.5. This is somewhat higher than the ratios recommended by American early childhood experts. But many French experts believe large groups help children develop social skills, self-assurance, and the ability to work independently and in small groups. Furthermore, a highly qualified, well-trained teacher is much more capable of delivering a quality education within a group setting. From an American perspective, this may also be viewed as an acceptable trade-off — more qualified, better trained, and well-paid teachers with slightly larger class sizes — which can help keep the cost per student within an acceptable range.

**Curriculum:** Because it is part of the national education system, French *école maternelle* follows a national curriculum, which sets general goals and guidelines. But highly skilled teachers have the freedom to select developmentally appropriate materials and activities and to devise lesson plans and projects following the general guidelines. The French preschool curriculum is designed around seven areas: 1) social skills; 2) linguistic and pre-literacy skills; 3) motor skills, the senses, and physical exploration; 4) "discovery of the world," which includes exploration of objects, the elements, natural materials, and an understanding of human and other life forms, natural and built environments, and time cycles; 5) imagination, sensitivity, and creativity (including art, music, theater, and creative movement); 6) drawing and graphic skills; and 7) the ability to classify, identify forms, and work with numbers (pre-math skills).

**The preschool day:** As in the United States, the regular school calendar in France does not match the schedule of the full-time working parent. To accommodate children who have two working parents, optional wrap-around services are available for full-day, full-year care. These wrap-around services include lunch provided in the school cafeteria, before and after-school care, and year-round care available during school holidays. The costs for wrap-around services are largely subsidized by the local government, with parents paying a portion of costs on a sliding scale.

**Public support:** There is broad public support for *école maternelle* in France, where early education and care are viewed not only as a private concern for parents, but as a public good and a public responsibility. The importance of pre-kindergarten and other services for young French children is unquestioned, taken for granted by parents, politicians, and the public alike. A consensus exists across the political spectrum about the importance of *école maternelle*, and it receives support from all political parties. Not to support it would be political suicide for a politician. “No one would dare” take away resources, according to one French mayor.

**Priority Education Policy**

One dilemma faced in the United States, where resources for early education are currently quite limited, is whether to place a priority on increasing access to child care and preschool education for low-income children (primarily through Head Start) or to consider adopting universal pre-kindergarten for all children regardless of income. (Georgia and New York have...
already adopted universal pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds, and other states are moving in that direction.)

In the case of France, where universal access is guaranteed for all to the same high-quality educational preschools, the approach has been to make additional resources available to children living in the most disadvantaged areas. Students are not screened (or stigmatized) individually to ensure they meet eligibility requirements as they are in the United States; instead, geographic areas serving larger numbers of at-risk children are designated as “educational priority zones” (zones d’éducation prioritaire, or ZEPs), and all the students in those communities benefit from additional resources. Socioeconomic indicators are the main factor in determining which schools should be included in a ZEP.

The goal of France’s priority education policy is to increase the quality of education in communities where there is a higher rate of school failure. The French Education Ministry spends 10% to 13% more on students attending schools in a ZEP.

Priority education policy applies to all levels of the educational system, but particular efforts focus on école maternelle. Preschools located in priority education zones use the same national preschool curriculum and highly trained teachers as all other preschools. They also receive additional resources which may be used, for example, to reduce class size, award teacher bonuses, hire additional specialists and support staff, lighten the teaching responsibilities of the school principal, develop community partnerships, and enroll more at-risk 2-year-olds in preschool. Of France’s 2-year-olds, 40% in ZEPs attend preschool, compared to 35% nationally.

ZEP preschools are also often laboratories for innovation, where new initiatives are tried that are later replicated in other schools. For example, some ZEPs have developed lieux passerelles, which are experimental programs, serving mostly 2-year-olds, that support children’s and parents’ transition to school. Other ZEP preschools have been leaders in efforts to reach out to parents and make them feel more welcome in the school setting.

Another innovative practice which is becoming more common in priority zones is the use of mediators or “resource persons” from the local community who act as a bridge between the school and the community. These mediators provide outreach to parents, help teachers understand diverse children and families in their schools, and connect families to community services and resources. ZEP schools are also encouraged to develop community partnerships with cultural organizations such as museums and libraries, and with social services.

**Conclusion**

What are the French keys to success for providing a more equal start for all children in school and in life? These include: voluntary, free, preschool for all 3 to 5-year-olds; additional resources invested in the most disadvantaged areas; an emphasis on very young children; the integration of children from immigrant backgrounds through immersion in the French language and culture; and comprehensive social support for children’s and families’ needs. Perhaps the most important lesson from the French experience is that within a system of universal services, it is possible to accord additional resources and support to children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, without this universal approach, it is difficult to ensure that children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds receive quality early learning experiences.

[Editor’s note: More detailed information about the French école maternelle system and priority education policy, including recommendations for the United States, are listed in the resource section.]
Introduction

In the past two years, California has begun implementation of a universal preschool system. Jane Henderson of the First 5 California Children and Families Commission was a participant in the French-American Foundation study tour in 2002. She discussed the ways California is implementing its program using funds derived from an increase in the state cigarette tax.

Drawing from the French experience and California’s program, the conference participants then chose two workshop sessions to focus on the applicability and relevance of these programs for Washington.

The French education system provides a framework for Americans. Several features are particularly noteworthy such as:
1) the inclusion of école maternelle in the French public education system;
2) provision of family supports through universal health care, generous family leave, crèches (for children birth to age 2), and other social support services for families that are in need while ensuring a healthy social mix of children in preschool programs; and
3) the respect, compensation, and professional development afforded to preschool teachers.

California’s First 5 Commission supports the vision that “California’s children will be healthier and better prepared to reach their greatest potential in school and in life.” The Commission uses the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) definition of school readiness, incorporating children’s readiness for school, schools’ readiness for children, and the family and community supports necessary for success.

California’s preschool efforts include the 2002 Joint Legislative Committee’s Master Plan for Education and implementation legislation (AB 56), plans for Preschool for All (PFA) Demonstration Projects, partnerships with the Packard Foundation and the California Department of Education and others. The First 5 PFA Demonstration Projects will work toward these goals:
- increase the quality and number of preschool spaces by demonstrating the impact of voluntary preschool in a limited number of communities,
- provide information on effective strategies and partnerships,
- reduce disparities in children’s achievement and reflect California’s cultural and linguistic diversity, and
- inspire public will and funding.

France’s ZEP policies have implications for the United States. The overarching goal is to create a system of early care and education for all children, starting with preschool programs as an integral part of the public education system. Given the scale of this goal, it makes sense to begin by focusing on low-income children and offer a comprehensive array of support services from preschool through the early elementary grades.

States can also learn from France’s egalitarian approach by encouraging a mix of social and economic levels and by focusing on models of excellence. As a nation, preschool learning and care can encourage and support dual language learning, starting with the earliest years. The policies and systems of the French preschool programs could be adapted for the United States, and truly impressive results would be possible for all America’s young children.
High standards of professional training for teachers and increased public funding were seen as integral to high-quality early learning for children. Increased compensation for early learning teachers would provide them with the incentives to invest in extended education and certification. The participants discussed pragmatic ways to integrate and improve current systems for teacher training in Washington state.

Parents alone cannot assume the additional costs to improve teacher training and increase compensation for early educators. Public funding is necessary and appropriate, as early learning is increasingly acknowledged as a public good, preparatory to K-12 education.

Recommendations

The group reached consensus on these recommendations:

- Required standards for teacher education and teacher compensation must be raised. [Note: The Washington State Early Childhood Education Wage Ladder was one such successful model for creating incentives for early learning teachers to gain relevant higher education credentials.]
- To raise teacher compensation, early learning must shift from a primary reliance on parent funding to a greater reliance on public funding.
- The public funding solution must include coordination and rationalization of existing streams of funding.
- Washington should work toward two seamless systems, one for teacher education and one for children moving from child care and preschool to the K-12 school system. [Note: Pathways for professional development in early learning could link pre-kindergarten teachers to K-12 educators, through, for example, P-3 professional education and certification. The Praxis Institute is currently developing such an educational credentialing B.A. and M.A. program.]
- To create a system of early learning, improved standards for teacher training and qualifications are necessary. The training curriculum and certification process should correspond with other levels of educational training and certification.
- Washington should build on and enhance the public preschool systems that are working well. Applications of existing research and further research should highlight early learning centers of excellence. This can leverage parental demand to increase and replicate these programs.

In this workshop, the discussion focused on public perceptions surrounding universal preschool, the model of the New School at T.T. Minor as an example of high-quality early education, and funding.

Framing the issue – a caution

In the United States, the rhetoric of “parental rights” and “parental responsibility,” the false perception that “universal” pre-kindergarten means mandatory preschool, and the ideological bias against “government intervention in young children’s lives” impede progress toward universal pre-kindergarten.

Recommendations

The group reached consensus on recommendations to focus the dialogue in the following ways:

- Ensure the value of pre-kindergarten to insure that children are ready to learn when they begin kindergarten.
- Appeal to the American spirit of generosity and present pre-kindergarten as providing all children with an equal chance of success in school and in life.
- Emphasize the voluntary nature of pre-kindergarten. (It is for families who choose it.)
• Emphasize that universal pre-kindergarten does not replace parental responsibility, but rather builds upon and incorporates parental responsibility.

The New School at T.T. Minor

Seattle’s T.T. Minor is the elementary school with the highest proportion of low-income children in the city. A private foundation decided to target and fund educational improvement at T.T. Minor. Because too many children were entering kindergarten not ready to learn, the New School at T.T. Minor instituted a universal voluntary pre-kindergarten program with wrap-around child care to create a year-round and all-day early learning environment. The program is open to all children in the surrounding neighborhood.

The pedagogy for this pre-kindergarten program is founded on the High Scope evidence-based pre-kindergarten curriculum. The typical class of 20 4-year-olds has a certificated Seattle Public Schools teacher and a classified teacher’s aide. Total all-day year-round costs are about $10,000 per child.

The first evaluations, conducted in 2003, indicated that on the 4th grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) tests, children who had gone through the pre-kindergarten program scored 23 points higher in reading and 16 points higher in math than those who started kindergarten without the pre-kindergarten component.

Workshop participants agreed that the T.T. Minor pre-kindergarten program is an excellent model for pre-kindergarten. However, participants also agreed that pre-kindergarten must have numerous iterations building on the current diversity of program models in the state. For example, some preschool programs may be associated with, but not be integrated into public school systems. Such programs would be developed from current private, nonprofit pre-kindergarten programs as well as ECEAP and Head Start programs.

Recommendations

• As the development of preschool opportunities advances, regardless of the type of program, rigorous standards for high-quality pre-kindergarten should be mandated, including child-centered pedagogy, teacher professionalism and compensation, and small class size.

Funding

With a potential universe of 40,000 4-year-olds in Washington state and a sliding scale fee system, public costs could run as high as $250 million a year.

Recommendations

Funding recommendations derived from the discussion of public perception and the elements of a model program. The participants recommended examining these options:

• Tying universal pre-kindergarten to K-12 funding;
• Leveraging current funding streams for childcare subsidies, Head Start, and ECEAP, with a sliding scale tuition (that would top out below actual cost); and
• Developing new streams of dedicated revenue.
Workshop participants expressed the need to ensure that education is culturally relevant at all age levels. The French system seeks to educate all children into a common French culture. Americans place a higher value on teachers having an understanding of the cultural differences among children and making education relevant to a diverse group of children and their parents. It was noted that some childcare centers and preschools in the United States often do a better job with cultural relevance than the K-12 system, and this was one area where the public school system could learn from early childhood education.

Participants discussed one French practice that could be readily adapted to American early learning settings: teachers observe, reflect on, and record their own actions and the effects on children’s learning as part of their on-going professional development.

[Note: The participants acknowledged that effective curriculum and pedagogy to enable a child to be ready to learn are compromised when early childhood education teachers are poorly trained, undervalued, and underpaid and have few incentives to gain relevant higher education. Similarly, thoughtful teaching is undermined when teachers are denied the public esteem and self-esteem that should be associated with their work.]

**Recommendations**

The group reached consensus on these priorities:

- Strategies should be adopted to nurture and acknowledge the child’s home language and culture in both the early learning and K-12 systems.
- Early education must focus on the whole child, nurturing social and emotional development along with academic achievement.
- Professional development needs to be well supported, with a focus on how children learn, and potentially incorporate the French model of teachers keeping life notebooks of observations and reflections.
- Early learning teachers must be appropriately compensated for their work. They must have financial incentives to gain higher education in their chosen profession.

Head Start and ECEAP in Washington, like ZEPs in France, target low-income children, but funding is based on family income and not on geographic district as it is in France. Funding is also limited, so that only one-third of eligible 3 and 4-year-olds are served. Of these, two-thirds are in part-day programs and one-third are in full-day programs.

Funding by income status tends to segregate low-income children in Head Start and ECEAP programs from other young children, creating less than optimal conditions for their early learning and socialization. However, there are several initiatives to develop pathways for economic integration that can achieve a more diverse socio-economic mix of children in preschool settings in Washington.

- The Puget Sound Educational Service District has developed integrated Head Start and ECEAP programs that provide

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**Workshop 3:**

*Preschool Program Curriculum and Pedagogy*

*Facilitated by:*

Olga Baudelot and Debra Sullivan, Executive Director, Praxis Institute

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**Workshop 4:**

*Giving More to Those Who Have Less*

*Facilitated by:*

Michelle J. Neuman and John Bancroft, Executive Director of Head Start, Puget Sound Educational Service District
were subsidized by the state because of their families’ low-income status. Overall, 44% of the children in centers participating in the wage ladder were receiving subsidies for their child care.

- The multiple initiatives for pre-kindergarten developed through the state’s 296 school districts include many early learning settings that integrate low-income children with middle-class and upper-income children.

Recommendations
- Workshop participants agreed that the gradual implementation of universal pre-kindergarten presents the only pragmatic approach that can lead to voluntary and universal access and that the initial focus should be on those children at greatest risk of not succeeding in school.
- At the same time, participants acknowledged that integration of children in universal pre-kindergarten, regardless of economic status, is important for its inherent value in education, social cohesion, and respect and for building a democratic society. Universal and economically integrated pre-kindergarten also can provide the popular support and traction to develop and maintain public funding for early learning.

CONCLUSION

The French école maternelle system is the product of a culture that embraces the role of a democratic government to provide public support for families and give children the foundation to learn and succeed. Research has shown that children’s abilities to learn in public school are enhanced by high-quality early learning programs for 3 and 4-year-olds and are jeopardized by poor-quality child care. With that knowledge, American policy makers and the general public have begun to support early learning with more than rhetoric. More than 40 states have created state pre-kindergarten programs, and several states have adopted universal preschool or are moving in that direction.

Washington state already has in place a number of building blocks that could be used to begin building a comprehensive system of early learning. These include pre-kindergarten programs sponsored by and through school districts, the Early Childhood Education Assistance Program, Head Start, the T.T. Minor School pre-kindergarten program, the career ladder for early childhood education teachers, and numerous other initiatives.

The problem in Washington is two-fold: many of the building blocks are missing, scattered, or only partially in place, and in order to fully develop an effective and caring early learning system, public funding commitments must be made. A good estimate for total new funding needed on an annual basis is $200 million. In the competition for scarce resources, this may seem like a high hurdle, but it is a small investment – less than 1% of the state’s budget - with a high payoff for our children’s future and a real commitment to leave no child behind.
Resources


Conference PowerPoint presentations are on the web site of the Economic Opportunity Institute at www.eoionline.org:
   Preschool in Washington state by Greg Williamson.
   The French system of early learning and care by Shanny Peer.
   Research findings on the French preschool system by Olga Baudelot.
   ZEPs by Michelle J. Neuman.
   California’s implementation of universal pre-kindergarten by Jane Henderson.

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France’s Écoles Maternelles