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Preschool Teaching at a Crossroads

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the Promise may have attracted students from a greater socioeconomic stratum, its effectiveness at keeping them is more subdued. Because exit rates fell overall, more of these types of students stayed in the district, although poorer students were even more likely to stay. These changes, however, were too small to affect the makeup of the student body as a whole, so composition is unlikely to play as significant a role as changes in the numbers of students entering or exiting, and their origins and destinations, on the effects of Promise-type programs.

Summary

Previous research has documented how the Kalamazoo Promise has increased enrollment in KPS, but researchers have paid less attention to the characteristics of students who were induced to enter—or stay—in the district. These dimensions are more subtle than changes in the volume of students or measures of their individual success, but they are equally important to understand for communities exploring the feasibility of place-based scholarships as a local economic development tool. In the short run, the Promise attracted 500 more new students to KPS than historical patterns would have predicted; they were less disadvantaged than in the past, and a third of them came from outside the metropolitan area. In the longer run, the Promise has helped keep nearly 2,000 students and their families from leaving the greater Kalamazoo area, with no noticeable impact on the socioeconomic characteristics of the district's enrollment.

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Marcy Whitebook

Preschool Teaching at a Crossroads

► *Why did the preschool teacher cross the road?*

► *To find a job in a kindergarten classroom.*

A chorus of economists, developmental scientists, and policymakers across the political spectrum are currently singing the praises of investments in early learning programs. The anticipated expansion of these programs will likely create a demand for preschool teachers, especially those who are trained and can deliver on the many promises of preschool. Will states be able to attract and retain the skilled workforce necessary for preschools of sufficient quality to level the educational playing field at kindergarten entry, let alone promote lifelong learning and well-being? As noted in a recently released study about Boston's public school prekindergarten program, preschool works to narrow the achievement gap when teachers are highly qualified *and* well-paid (Weiland and Yoshikawa 2013). Preschool success will rest to a large extent on getting teacher qualifications and compensation policies right. To date, policies addressing the former have been more promising than those focusing on the latter.

Two days after the 2013 State of the Union address in which President Obama made a rhetorical plea for universal preschool, he called for programs staffed by "highly qualified educated" teachers, saying, "This is not babysitting. This is teaching" (the White House 2013a). The president's comments were in line with a trend in policies directed toward raising preschool teacher qualifications. These policies reflect increasing evidence about the complex and critical needs of our country's developmentally, linguistically, and economically diverse population of young children. Rising teacher qualifications encompass changing expectations about what teachers of young children need to know in order to

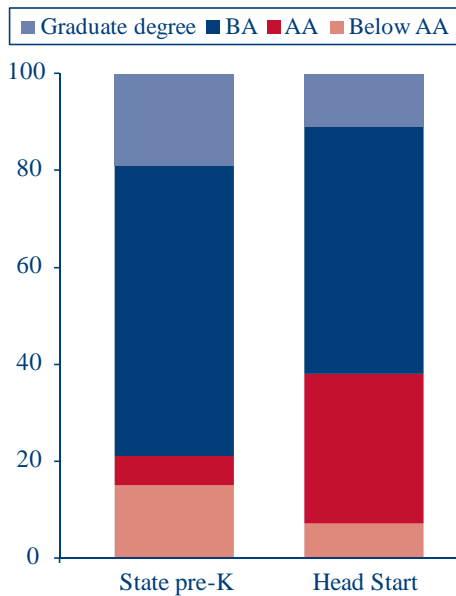
facilitate children's learning and improve classroom practices.

Twenty-nine state-funded preschool programs currently require educators with a bachelor's degree, up from 22 states in 2001–2002 (Barnett et al. 2012). Similarly, the vast majority of these programs require specialized training in early childhood for lead teachers, now at 85 percent compared to 74 percent a decade ago. In the same vein, Congress increased educational expectations for teachers in federally funded Head Start programs in 2008 (Ewen 2008), and now more than half of Head Start teachers working with three- and four-year-olds have BA degrees (Schmit 2012). (See Figure 1.)

Policies to increase pay have received far less, if any, attention. Low pay remains the norm for teachers of young children (see Figure 2), even among those who have made a considerable investment in their own education and training. For example, in 2011–2012 Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees earned an average annual income of \$30,722 per year and those with graduate degrees earned \$41,114 (Barnett et al. 2012). During this same period, the median annual earnings of those teaching kindergartners or older elementary school children were \$48,800 and \$51,660, respectively (who were not in special education classes) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012a).

Preschool teacher salaries vary tremendously, depending on how states structure their pre-K programs. A few states, such as New Jersey and Oklahoma, require comparable salaries for preschool teachers to those of teachers of older children, as also proposed by the White House (2013b). Most states' public pre-K programs are designed as

Figure 1 Teacher Degrees: State Pre-K and Head Start (%)



NOTE: For state pre-K, the 15 percent below AA are Child Development Associate holders; for Head Start, this is unclear. State pre-K includes information on 44,810 teachers reported by the 32 programs that have this information; information is not available on degrees for an estimated 22,000 teachers. The Head Start figures include all 45,596 lead teachers in Head Start programs, but not Early Head Start or the Migrant and American Indian and Alaska Native programs.

SOURCE: Carolan (2013).

mixed-delivery systems, with state funds going to both school districts and private preschools or child care programs; private programs that operate preschool classrooms with public funds, even when they receive the same dollar amount for salaries as public schools, cannot match the latter’s health and retirement benefits (Rich 2013). Preschool teachers in these programs may earn higher than average salaries for all preschool teachers (\$25,700 per year, or \$12.35 per hour) but still less than those working within district parameters (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012b).

Savvy preschool teachers know which programs are most likely to provide for their economic needs, and many “cross the road” in search for better pay. (Many, of course, choose to leave teaching altogether.) For example, California

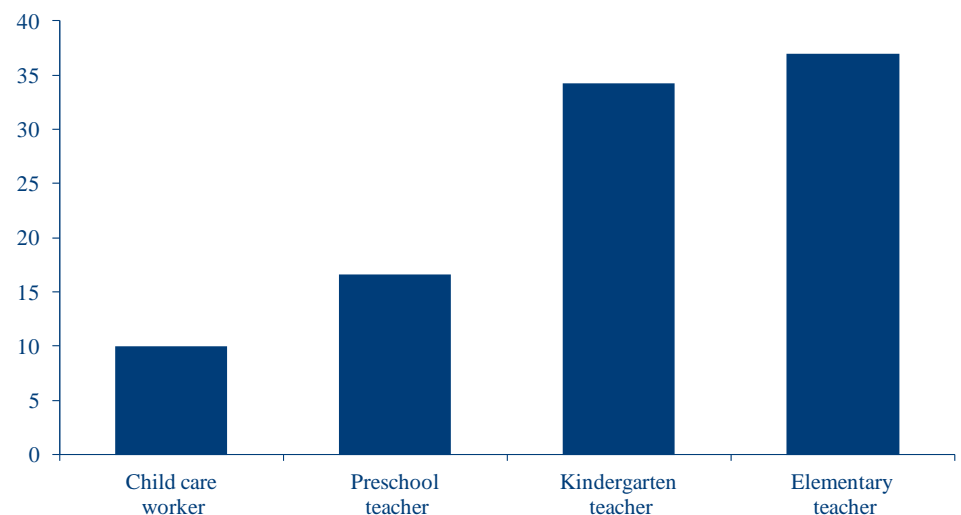
recently raised the age of kindergarten entry to five, and launched “transitional kindergarten” to meet its obligation to four-year-olds born in the fall who no longer qualified for kindergarten entry. Transitional kindergarten is considered another grade, and thus its teachers receive the same compensation as their colleagues in K–12 classrooms. Their counterparts who also teach four-year-olds, but in the decades-old publicly funded California State Preschool Program, earn wages more in line with other private sector preschool teachers. In 2006, the last year for which data are available, teachers with a BA degree or higher working the California State Preschool Programs and Head Start earned, on average, between \$14.08 and \$16.53 an hour (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment and California Child Care Resources and Referral Network 2006). California State Preschool Teachers have not seen cost of living increases for nearly a decade, and thus it is only a matter of time before those already holding BA degrees will seek the necessary certification (ironically, a credential that includes no specific preschool content) that will qualify them to cross the road to transitional kindergarten.

With poor compensation comes high teacher turnover and low instructional quality, both of which impede children’s

development and learning and the programs’ capacity to improve. They also prevent too many dedicated teachers from continuing to work in their chosen field (Whitebook and Sakai 2004). If comparable pay with K–12 teachers survives the policy process, many degreed teachers currently working in Head Start and private preschool programs (about one-quarter of the current workforce) are likely to run to their local publicly funded (and especially school-operated) preschool and the better pay and benefits they will provide. We may even see recent college graduates or current college students follow the road to preschool if jobs awaiting them pay salaries and benefits commensurate to teachers of older children.

It is worth recognizing that it took kindergarten teachers nearly 100 years to become considered the equals of other teachers in the public school system (Beatty 1995). But while it was challenging, their task was made easier because they already worked, for the most part, in the public schools, and were seeking inclusion in a relatively uniform, coherent system of services for which there was widespread public support. Child care workers, by contrast, face an unwieldy, cumbersome, and inefficient mix of services, and find themselves spread across highly diverse settings.

Figure 2 Comparison of Mean Hourly Wages of Early Childhood Educators with Mean Hourly Wages of Other Teachers (\$)



SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009).

The road to quality preschool may be paved with good intentions, but it is filled with dangerous potholes for those who want to teach young children and earn the wages worthy of their valuable work. The *2012 State Preschool Yearbook* notes that between 2011 and 2012, 27 of the 40 states offering state-funded preschool reported reductions in funding per child, averaging \$400 per student (Barnett et al. 2012).

Seeking better pay and status for those who care for young children challenges basic assumptions in our society about the importance of caregiving work, the role of mothers of young children in the workforce, the role of government in the delivery of child care services, and the capacity of the private marketplace to address the broader public welfare. It requires a redistribution of social resources, upon which there are many claims. Change of this magnitude takes time, and progress will not be entirely linear. There will be missteps and setbacks along the way that can, and should, inform our efforts. But it is clear that policymakers are unlikely to earnestly address this urgent social need until there is a strong movement of their constituents demanding that they become involved.

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