2013

Preschool Teaching at a Crossroads

Marcy Whitebook
University of California-Berkeley

Citation

This title is brought to you by the Upjohn Institute. For more information, please contact ir@upjohn.org.
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.

Reference


Brad J. Hershbein is an economist at the Upjohn Institute.
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 degreeed 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.
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.

References


Marcy Whitebook is the director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California–Berkeley.

Marcy Whitebook is the director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California–Berkeley.