

# HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING IN NEW MEXICO

*An Exploration of Practices that Work for  
Children from All Backgrounds*

JUNE 2015



UNM

---

*Center for Education Policy Research*

# HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING IN NEW MEXICO

*An Exploration of Practices that Work for Children from  
All Backgrounds*

Report Prepared by:

Hailey Heinz, Senior Policy Analyst



---

*Center for Education Policy Research*

Prepared with generous financial support from the  
Thornburg Foundation

## Executive Summary

In New Mexico and throughout the United States, consensus is growing about the importance of early childhood education. Based on an expanding body of evidence, researchers and policymakers argue that early learning is among the most cost-effective and important investments a society can make in its children. At the national level, President Barack Obama has adopted “Preschool for All” as part of his policy agenda, and in New Mexico, the state Legislature and Governor have together increased funding for early childhood education each year since fiscal 2010. The achievement gap between low-income children of color and their more affluent white counterparts begins before children enter kindergarten, and early learning is one of the most effective ways to alleviate that gap.<sup>1</sup> Some studies have found effects from quality early childhood education follow children into adulthood, affecting crucial outcomes like their lifetime earnings and likelihood of incarceration.<sup>2</sup>

But even as the importance of early learning becomes increasingly clear, it is also clear that quality matters. Just placing young children in a pre-kindergarten setting does not necessarily get the results policymakers hope for, and outcomes vary greatly depending on the type and quality of program. Studies have shown that the quality of early childhood education is linked to variations in school readiness, behavioral problems, and even risk-taking behavior as teenagers.<sup>3</sup> Quality is clearly an important part of the early childhood discussion, yet it is not always easy to define in concrete terms what quality early childhood education looks like. This report describes 10 early childhood education programs in New Mexico that successfully serve a high proportion of children from low-income families or children whose first language is not English. The goal of the study is to identify practices that are common among these programs, and the policies necessary to replicate these best practices across the state.

Sites were selected based on the third-grade test scores of children who attended the programs as 3- and 4-year-olds, and on program demographics. On each site visit, classroom practices were observed during instructional time, and site directors and teachers were interviewed. Although most of the sites included infant and toddler rooms, this study focused on practices for 3- and 4-year-olds. The purpose of these observations and interviews was to understand the structure and practices of these sites, and to identify any commonalities among them. The study does not attempt to draw a causal link between these practices and children’s later test scores. Rather, test score data were used as a guide for deciding which early learning sites to visit, in an attempt to identify well-established, high-quality programs that seem to get positive outcomes for New Mexico’s high-needs children. A more detailed description of the study methodology and a list of sites can be found in the Appendix.

---

<sup>1</sup>Shonkoff, Jack P. and Phillips, Deborah A., Eds. (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

<sup>2</sup>Schweinhart, L. J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W. S., Belfield, C. R., & Nores, M. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40* (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 14). Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

<sup>3</sup>Bowman, Barbara T., M. Suzanne Donovan and M. Susan Burns, Eds. (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council; Vandell, Deborah Lowe et al. “Do Effects of Early Child Care Extend to Age 15 Years? Results From the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development.” *Child development* 81.3 (2010): 737–756. PMC Web. 4 June 2015.

### *Key Recommendations*

- New Mexico should continue expansion of New Mexico PreK, and should continue to provide support to programs that add or expand PreK classrooms.
- Training programs for site directors should encourage a leadership style that makes employees feel supported.
- Efforts to retain and support early childhood educators should be continued and strengthened.
- New Mexico should consider implementing coaching as a form of professional development for early childhood educators.
- The state's FOCUS tiered quality rating and improvement system should be used as a policy lever to create classrooms where:
  - Early childhood educators are empowered to follow the interests and abilities of the children they care for, and are also equipped with a structure of observations and portfolios.
  - Families are treated as central to their children's early learning.
  - Children who are still learning English are in environments where their first language is respected.
  - Classrooms are filled with interesting items that children can explore independently or with teacher direction.
  - Teacher interactions with children promote self-confidence, emphasize both social and cognitive skills, and continue to support children's learning even after they have met expectations for kindergarten entry.

### *Key Findings*

- **Strong site-based leadership:** Program directors used a leadership style that made employees feel supported and appreciated. In a sector where wages are low and other employment benefits are generally not offered, less tangible benefits are crucial. Educators at most centers featured in this study said their workplace felt like “a family.”
- **Stability of Core Teaching Staff:** In part because of these feelings of family and appreciation, many programs included in this study had long-term, veteran educators in their classrooms. This was particularly true among lead teachers, with more turnover among assistant teachers and ancillary staff.
- **Following Children's Interests:** Educators said they felt empowered to follow the interests and abilities of the children they care for, using frameworks and standards to guide their practice but not feeling confined to inflexible lesson plans. Most of the sites included in this study did not use formal curriculum, but the majority did use the observation guidelines and planning structure of New Mexico PreK, which they said was beneficial.
- **Rich Classroom Environments:** Classrooms were filled with interesting items that children could explore independently or with teacher direction. These items included books and cozy reading areas, sensory areas (like sand trays), and areas for dramatic play (dress up, toy kitchen items). At several sites, these items were changed periodically to give children new experiences.
- **Intentional Family Involvement:** Family involvement was prominent and intentional, and included practices such as hosting inclusive family events, providing ways for families to volunteer, and accommodating parents' needs and work schedules.
- **Dual Language Instruction:** Several sites incorporated both English and Spanish into classrooms to support English Language Learners. In several cases, this meant ensuring that at least one adult in the classroom spoke Spanish, labeling classroom objects in both languages, providing dual language books, and singing songs and giving directions in both English and Spanish.
- **Social-Emotional Learning:** Teacher interactions with children were positive, affirming their efforts rather than emphasizing mistakes. Teachers were attentive to children's social and emotional development, and continued to facilitate learning even if children had reached the top of their skill rubric.

It is hoped that these practices may offer a model for other early learning programs in the state. If every child in New Mexico had access to high-quality early learning experiences that reflected these practices, it would help set these children – and the state – on a path toward success in school and beyond.

## Findings

### *The Role of New Mexico PreK*

Seven of the ten early learning providers included in this study had New Mexico PreK programs on site, and several of these said they had adopted the practices of NM PreK throughout their centers, even in classrooms that were not funded by PreK. These practices may provide some insight into these sites' positive student outcomes. Some sites have been providing New Mexico PreK since the program first became available in 2005, while some are still in their first few years with the program.

New Mexico PreK is a publicly funded program intended to serve 4-year-olds from low-income families or areas. The state reimburses programs for three hours of daily activities that are aligned with state Essential Indicators of early learning. These services are free to eligible families. New Mexico is currently in the process of expanding NM PreK from half-day to full-day and offering it to 3-year-olds at centers that apply for these expansions. Several sites that were visited for this study had applied for the NM PreK expansion, and one site (Noah's Ark East, in Albuquerque) was a pilot site for full-day PreK at the time of the visit.

Because a three-hour PreK program is not always practical for working families, many CYFD-licensed NM PreK programs are housed within a center that provides full-day child care. Children spend three hours of their day in PreK, and often spend the rest of their day at the same center – even with the same teacher – but those hours are not called PreK and are funded differently. Several directors interviewed for this study said the practices of NM PreK do not stop when the PreK day ends, and permeate the culture of their centers. NM PreK teachers are also required to work toward bachelor's degrees and attend trainings – professional development they can apply to their interactions with children throughout the child care day and during summer months when NM PreK is not in session.

The bulk of an NM PreK session is spent allowing students to choose their activities. During this time, children choose from a variety of toys and learning opportunities in the classroom, while adults move among them,

### *Selected Essential Indicators for PreK*

- Coordinates eye-hand movements using beads, laces, pegs, puzzles and other manipulatives and small objects, and when dressing and undressing
- Listens with understanding to directions and conversations
- Hears and discriminates the sounds of language in words to develop phonological awareness
- Converses effectively in his or her home language, English, or sign language for a variety of purposes relating to real experiences and different audiences
- Demonstrates comprehension of a story read aloud by asking relevant questions or making pertinent comments
- Recognizes, names, describes, compares and creates familiar shapes
- Sorts, classifies and groups materials by one or more characteristics
- Communicates ideas and/or feelings through creative activities (for example, making up a song, acting out a story, creating a piece of artwork or a set of movements)
- Makes predictions and forms hypotheses
- Expresses cultural influences from home, neighborhood and community
- Plays and interacts with various children sharing experiences and ideas with others
- Uses and accepts negotiation, compromise, and discussion to resolve conflicts

asking questions or prompting discussions intended to deepen students' learning. For example, JoAnne Martinez, a teacher at the Family Learning Center in Española who has worked there for seventeen years, observed a child drawing a cat during choice time. She asked him, "What do you see on a cat's face?" facilitating a conversation about eyes, noses, and whiskers, before she found him a book with a picture of a cat in it for him to look at for reference. Later, she started a conversation with some children who were playing with a toy goat, asking, "What do you think goats eat?" She connected this to the children's own lives, asking them about what kinds of animals they had as pets (one child had goats at home). Sometimes the teacher interaction during choice time was even simpler. For example, at several of the sites visited for this study, teachers would encourage students to write their names on artwork they had drawn or painted. This infused literacy and name-writing into choice time in an unforced, natural way.

New Mexico PreK also involves large-group activities, which often takes the form of calendar time, show-and-tell activities, read-alouds, and songs. In several classrooms, teachers were working with students on how to ask good questions. For example, at Watch Me Grow, a PreK site in Belen, students had worked in small groups to build robots out of recycled materials. The children presented to the class about their robots, and other children asked them questions. Many children's inclination was to give a compliment, ("I like the wings") and longtime teacher Gloria King helped them restructure their comments into questions ("How did you make the wings?"). She also gave presenters compliments and feedback on public speaking skills like speaking loudly, facing the class, and taking turns talking.

### *Best Practices in National Context: Salt Lake City*

*In the Granite School District, located in Salt Lake City, preschool students move between teacher-directed activities and independent play. At one table, a teacher leads an activity with students, who take turns finding matching pictures among a sea of cut-out images spread on the table. One student finds two matching dump trucks that each have the letter "H" written on the back – one capital and one lower case. The boy successfully names the letter and the sound it makes, before it is the next student's turn. Elsewhere in the room, another group of students do structured activities with another teacher, while others play independently.*

*The concept of rotating centers – and gradually extending the amount of time students are expected to focus on one activity – is one key focus of the "We Can!" early childhood curriculum Granite uses in its 90 preschool classrooms. "We Can!" is a classroom management system, as well as a curriculum for teaching early literacy skills. Over several years, Granite has worked with "We Can!" to modify the curriculum to meet the district's particular needs. During that time, Granite has seen a significant increase in the test scores of the students who complete the preschool program, and a decrease in those students' referral into special education. The effects are significant enough that Granite has begun experimenting with a financing strategy called Social Impact Bonds. This means private investors front the cost of the program, and receive a return on their investment based on the number of children who avoid special education as a result of the program. That is, they appear on track toward special education based on an initial screening, then receive preschool services and are ultimately not referred into special education.*

*So far, the program has been paying off for investors. Granite officials point to a variety of factors driving those results, including the "We Can!" curriculum and a comprehensive professional development strategy. Teachers receive weekly coaching sessions, in addition to four hours per month of professional development. Some of that professional development is led by teachers, who work in groups and decide what they want to focus on. All of it is linked to the coaches, who are masters-level professionals with teaching experience in early childhood. The coaches are overseen by the assistant director of preschool services in Granite, who is herself a former coach. Teachers work part-time, as preschool in Granite is a half-day program, offered four days a week to 3- and 4-year-olds in mixed-age classrooms.*

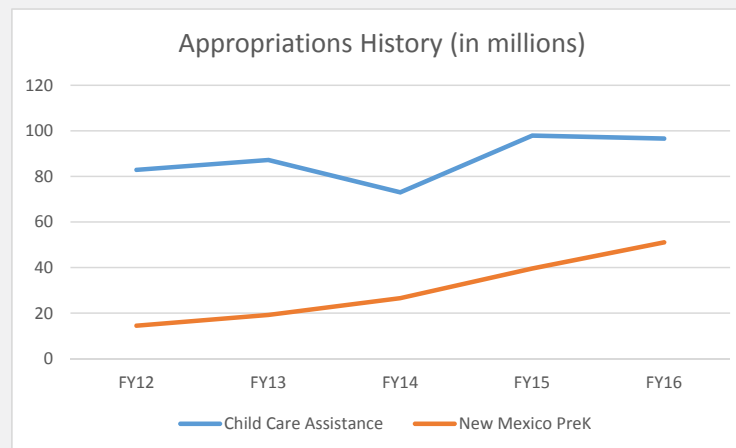
*The Granite practices are also being used in five child care centers in the area (for-profit and non-profit). Granite officials worked with these centers to identify teachers with potential to be coaches, who were then trained alongside the Granite preschool coaches to bring the "We Can!" practices and training to private centers. In this setting, best practices are established for children as young as 18 months old, the idea being that even at this young age, teachers should make deliberate plans and choices. Standards were established by working Utah's kindergarten standards backward, to establish what children should know at each age to be on track for kindergarten.*

## Public Investment

New Mexico provides public funding to early learning sites in two key ways: through child care assistance and New Mexico PreK.

**Child Care Assistance:** Provides funding for low-income families to access child care so they can work or go to school. The program is available to families with incomes up to 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (\$36,375 for a family of four), and is administered through the Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD). Families can use their child care assistance at any licensed or registered child care provider, for children ranging in age from infants to school-aged. The state pays higher reimbursement rates for providers that have higher ratings under the state tiered quality rating and improvement system. In terms of dollars spent and children served, child care assistance is the largest single chunk of New Mexico's investment in early childhood care and education.

**New Mexico PreK:** Provides part-day educational experiences for 4-year-olds at no cost to families. The services are targeted to families who are low-income or who live in low-income areas, and instruction follows a set of guidelines and learning indicators established by the state. The program is jointly administered by CYFD and the Public Education Department, and can be offered through the child care sector or through the public schools. New Mexico is currently expanding PreK to be available for longer hours and for 3-year-olds.



Source: Legislative Finance Committee, Post-Session Review, May 2015

New Mexico PreK also requires teachers to create portfolios based on their observations of children's learning. The observations are based on Essential Indicators (Indicators) of early learning, which range from fine motor skills to letter recognition to social problem solving. Indicators are posted around PreK classrooms in relevant areas, mainly as a reminder to teachers about what different areas of the classroom are intended to do. For example, in each classroom's dramatic play area (usually a part of the room equipped with dress-up clothes and toys for pretend play like a toy kitchen), this Indicator was posted: "Role plays to express feelings, to dramatize stories, to try out social behaviors observed in adults, and reenact real-life roles and experiences."

Teachers observe how every child in their PreK classroom is performing on each Indicator, and rate their performance on a rubric from one to five. They do this once in the fall and once in the spring, allowing them to see how the children progressed over the year, and creating a portfolio that is shared with parents at conferences. Numerous teachers interviewed for this study said the observations help guide their teaching, and help them make sure they know how each child is progressing. Some also said they benefited from PreK consultants that the state provides, who observe classrooms and offer feedback.

It is worth noting that New Mexico PreK also requires specific training and educational levels for lead and assistant PreK teachers. Lead teachers must either have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or

must be taking credit-bearing courses toward such a degree. Assistant teachers in NM PreK must either have an associate degree in early childhood education or be taking credit-bearing classes toward such a degree. Educational attainment in PreK classrooms visited for this study varied from lead teachers still working on their associate degrees to those with master's degrees. This is in contrast to New Mexico's child care workforce as a whole, where the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 27 percent of child care workers have less than a high school diploma, and 33 percent have a high school diploma but no college courses. Because New Mexico PreK teachers are required to pursue higher education, they have higher educational attainment than the industry as a whole, and this may contribute to positive outcomes in New Mexico PreK classrooms.

While the presence of a New Mexico PreK program does not seem to be necessary for high-quality early learning to take place, it does seem to foster a set of practices that teachers and directors point to as part of their success stories.

### *FOCUS and the State Rating System*

The sites that participated in this study ranged from 2 to 5 STARS under the state tiered quality rating and improvement system. Some programs with fewer STARS were working toward raising their STAR ratings, while others had chosen to stay at lower rating levels for a variety of reasons. Some were concerned about increased state involvement in their operations if they moved up through the STAR levels, and wanted to maintain their autonomy. At least one site director said although she is working to get her center to a 5-STAR rating through FOCUS verification, she is still addressing significant challenges related to facilities and her staff's educational attainment. Of the nine study sites eligible to participate in the child care rating system (one is strictly a public school-based PreK site), five were participating in the pilot of the state's new FOCUS quality rating system, with another on the waiting list to participate. FOCUS is currently voluntary and will replace the existing AIM HIGH rating system in the coming years. FOCUS raises standards for practices like staff professional development and adult-to-child ratios, and also raises state reimbursement rates for child care assistance. The state provides required trainings as part of the FOCUS pilot, as well as consultants who visit pilot sites to work with them on meeting the new criteria. Several directors said these consultants and trainings had been helpful to them, although the feedback on the system was mixed.

### *Workforce and Leadership*

A key finding of this study is that successful programs have a stable core of veteran staff. Program directors pointed to long-time staff as a central reason for their success, and said they believe children benefit from an environment with consistency of caregivers and low turnover. In particular, several directors said their lead teachers have been with them for a long time (often more than a decade) but they often experienced some churn among assistant teachers, going through several before a new hire would stick and advance.

*"We're all like a family. All the teachers, we communicate and we all fit like a family. We care about each other."*

- Nancy Gorman, teacher at Southwest Child Care



Child care providers in New Mexico earn an average annual salary of about \$17,396 per year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Most of the sites visited for this study said they did not offer higher-than-normal wages, and most did not offer health care or retirement benefits. Absent these kinds of material benefits, directors said they made efforts to provide less tangible ones, like a supportive and flexible work environment where teachers felt cared about and appreciated.

“We try to make it a family. We support them in every way we can, without being able to pay them what they’re worth,” said Leslie Robertson, owner and director of Tadpoles Daycare in Roswell. She said she has devised ways to foster workplace stability, by giving her employees a path to advancement within the center. When teachers are first hired at Tadpoles, they are hired as “base” teachers. After Robertson feels they have shown they are ready, they are given an opportunity to advance to a “core” teacher level. After that, they can advance to the third tier of “lead” teacher. In between each tier, teachers take a quiz that Robertson writes with questions about licensing regulations, as well as some open-ended questions (“Name three things that should be in your science center,” for example). Each tier comes with a modest pay increase, as well as other seniority-based benefits like first choice when it comes to scheduling. Teachers at Tadpoles also work four ten-hour days – a schedule Robertson said teachers seem to view as a benefit.

### *Spotlight: Three Tiers for Advancement*

Leslie Robertson, owner and director of Tadpoles Daycare in Roswell, gives her employees a path to advancement within the center. When teachers are first hired at Tadpoles, they are hired as “base” teachers. After Robertson feels they have shown they are ready, they are given an opportunity to advance to a “core” teacher level. After that, they can advance to the third tier of “lead” teacher. In between each tier, teachers take a quiz that Robertson writes with questions about licensing regulations, as well as some open-ended questions (“Name three things that should be in your science center,” for example). Each tier comes with a modest pay increase, as well as other seniority-based benefits like first choice when it comes to scheduling. Teachers at Tadpoles work four ten-hour days – a schedule Robertson said teachers seem to view as a benefit.

She pointed to other low-cost benefits she provides, like providing and laundering scrubs for teachers to wear, and negotiating an employee discount at a nearby gym (the gym owner’s children went to Tadpoles). She said these are small things she can afford to do for her employees that make them feel cared about and give them an incentive to stay. At other sites visited for this study, employees said over and over again that their workplaces felt like family, and that they stayed in their jobs – sometimes for decades – because of the rewarding nature of working with young children and because of the warmth of their workplaces.

This family feeling and longevity of core staff were consistent across sites visited for this study. There were no meaningful patterns around teachers’ educational qualifications, which ranged from less than a high school diploma to a few master’s degrees. The most common level of education among interviewed teachers was a high school diploma with coursework toward an associate degree in early childhood education. Many teachers were using T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarships to support their educational advancement. Several directors said they strongly encourage their employees to pursue their educations, but also said qualities like experience and temperament are at least as important as formal education. Directors also highlighted connection to the community. In particular, directors in Bernalillo and Española said they try to ensure that every classroom has at least one teacher who is from the local community, so they know the culture, the slang, and the families of the children they care for and teach.

## Curriculum

Of the 10 sites visited for this study, two used Creative Curriculum, one used A Beka curriculum, and one used High Scope curriculum in conjunction with Conscious Discipline for classroom management. The rest did not use a formal curriculum and teachers developed activities themselves or relied on informal sources of inspiration like colleagues and internet websites. New Mexico PreK requires a structure of classroom planning (a mix of full-group activities and free choice time, for example), but does not impose a particular curriculum. Sites can either adopt a curriculum to use with the New Mexico PreK requirements, or they can forgo a formal curriculum altogether and follow the PreK requirements only.

Many teachers interviewed for this study emphasized that they follow children’s interests when choosing activities. If the class seems interested in bats, then teachers create a unit about bats, usually working within the structure of New Mexico PreK. This technique of following the children was mentioned at several sites, and is supported by national experts as a positive practice.<sup>4</sup> Concretely, this means programs using the same structure and curriculum create different lessons depending on their particular group of children. For example, the robots the students made at Watch Me Grow were part of a “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” unit of Creative Curriculum, and the robot theme was chosen based on the children’s interest. Children made the robots from boxes, pie tins, coffee cans and other reused materials. Their lead teacher, Gloria King, led them in discussions about recycling and what it means to use materials more than once.

Creative Curriculum is also used at La Escuelita, one of the New Mexico PreK sites of Bernalillo Public Schools. Sarah Armstrong, the principal of the school, gave a similar example from the same recycling unit of the curriculum. She said the students in one class showed strong interest in cars, so the class made cars out of old toilet paper tubes. They also used a large piece of cardboard to create a map for the cars to “drive” on, with roads, mountains, and trees made of old water bottles. Students all painted their cars and raced with them, and Armstrong said the unit was popular and successful.

*“I really feel like the students are engaged because the student interests are taken into consideration.”*

- Sarah Armstrong,  
Bernalillo Public Schools

These findings indicate there is not a particular curriculum associated with New Mexico’s successful early childhood programs, but there are practices – such as following children’s interests and mixing large and small group activities through the structure of New Mexico PreK – that seem to make a difference.

## Learning Environments

Several teachers talked about their efforts to create engaging classroom spaces for children, and said the environment enhances their teaching. At Family Learning Center in Española, PreK teachers JoAnne Martinez and Carmella Salinas take turns every Friday afternoon changing their room. They introduce different books, puzzles and materials to keep the room fresh with new discoveries for children. Salinas described this as, “Really setting up your environment so that the environment is like a third teacher.” She described this as “intentional

---

<sup>4</sup>Snow, Catherine (2014). Discussant on topic of “Learning Environments that Promote Early Development,” presented at “The Leading Edge of Early Childhood Education: Linking Science to Policy for a New Generation of Prekindergarten” at Harvard University, Dec. 12, 2014.

teaching,” adding that, “Whatever materials you place, the kids can find it themselves, and it’s not teacher initiated, it’s child initiated.”

Teachers at other sites voiced similar sentiments. ValindaJo Barkley, a teacher at Noah’s Ark East in Albuquerque, said she was preparing to change out her room, which was elaborately themed around fire and fire fighters during the visit. The sensory table, for example, contained plastic cups that were decorated with flames and a spray bottle labeled “fire extinguisher.” Students stacked the cups and tried to knock them down with the water stream, experimenting with different ways of stacking the cups that made them harder or easier to knock down. The fire theme emerged after students showed interest in a fire engine that was part of an earlier transportation theme.

Classrooms also had some commonalities that reflect the New Mexico PreK standards. For example, all had an area for dramatic play, a carpet for full-group activities like calendar, and a reading area with a selection of books. Many of the reading areas had been set up with pillows and cozy decorations to make them inviting.

### *Family Involvement*

Most of the early childhood educators interviewed for this study named family involvement as a key component of their success. Some of this reflects a New Mexico PreK requirement that sites spend at least 90 hours annually on activities like home visits, parent conferences, and other parent interactions. Sites visited for this study used those hours for math and literacy nights, holiday celebrations, and other opportunities for families to feel welcome in the early learning environment.

Other forms of family engagement were more structural. For example, Cradles and Crayons (with locations in Sunland Park and Anthony that were both visited for this study), runs vans throughout the day to maximize convenience for families. Sometimes the vans have just one student in them, being shuttled between Cradles and Crayons and a part-day Head Start or PreK program.

The van service even extends to picking children up at their homes in the morning if parents cannot drop them off. Parents can reach Cradles and Crayons staff by text message, and a van will come to get their child. Miriam Medina, director of the Sunland Park location, said she believes this kind of personalized service – coupled with a friendly, open-door policy – drives the center’s success.

### *Dual Language Instruction*

Some sites were chosen for inclusion in this study because they served above-average percentages of children who are English Language Learners. These sites placed Spanish-speaking children in classrooms with at least one Spanish-speaking adult to ensure the children never felt isolated or unable to communicate their needs. Sarah Armstrong, of La Escuelita in Bernalillo, said she believes this is an important practice for young children.

“It’s safer for them to be in a classroom where an adult can communicate with them,” she said. “What if that student needs to say something? He needs to be heard; he needs to be understood.”

Armstrong said the staff of La Escuelita try to maintain a 50/50 split between English and Spanish speech, even when they are just talking with each other over lunch. In the classroom, this split between languages takes the form of labeling classroom items in both languages, singing songs first in English then in Spanish, and reading books that have the story in both English and Spanish.

### *Best Practices in National Context: Boston*

*During December, pre-kindergarten classrooms across Boston Public Schools (BPS) showed evidence of students planning a pizza party. They were making written invitations and paper mache piñatas. They had glued colorful toppings onto construction paper pizzas, and had brainstormed a group list of things that are needed for a party (fancy clothes, for instance). Several books about parties, shopping, and friendship were on display, and some classrooms had a small “store” set up with a cash register and toy food for purchase.*

*The pizza party activities were part of a research-based curriculum BPS has chosen for all its pre-kindergarten classrooms. The district uses Opening the World of Learning (OWL) for its language and literacy curriculum and Building Blocks for teaching mathematics. Teachers are given resources and implementation guides for how to teach the curriculum well, but also have autonomy to adjust it to the needs of their students and their own teaching style. One teacher, for example, bought a pre-made piñata rather than have students make one, and chose to emphasize other activities.*

*Consistent, research-based curricula and coaching for teachers were highlighted in a 2012 evaluation as important elements of the BPS pre-kindergarten program. That evaluation found that students enrolled in the program made substantially larger gains in math, reading, and executive function than a control group who were not enrolled.<sup>5</sup> The study also found that these gains were most pronounced for Hispanic students. The study did not draw a causal link between the students’ learning gains and the OWL/Building Blocks curricula, but did highlight them as key aspects of the “treatment” that enrolled students received. The evaluation also highlighted the coaching and feedback that teachers receive as part of the program.*

*The BPS pre-kindergarten program, which Boston officials refer to as “Kindergarten 1” or K1, has attracted positive attention in various venues, and was among the programs singled out for praise by the Obama administration at a December summit on early childhood education. A key strategy of the K1 program has been to maintain a focus on quality, while gradually scaling up to offer spots to more children. In the 2014-15 school year, BPS offered more than 2,400 K1 slots to 4-year-olds. The district also offers a smaller number of slots for 3-year-olds, which are called “K0.”*

*The K1 program is taught by BPS teachers with the same credentials and pay scales as teachers in the older grades. The school district is also beginning to pilot a more mixed delivery system called “Boston K1DS,” which awards grants to community-based programs that provide K1 services. The grants are intended to create pay parity between BPS K1 teachers and community-based teachers who teach the same curriculum and would otherwise receive lower pay. These teachers receive the OWL and Building Blocks curriculum and the professional development that accompanies it.*

Other sites use less formal strategies for reaching students who are learning English. At Cradles and Crayons in Sunland Park, teacher Yadira Mireles is more comfortable with Spanish than she is with English, as are most of her students. In her classroom, Spanish is the language of casual interactions, but more formal teaching – songs, calendar time, and read aloud – are done in English.

When children speak languages besides English and Spanish, teachers try to be inclusive. At Southwest Child Care in Albuquerque, teacher Alma Cervantes worked with students during choice time on identifying colors. She asked one child to identify the color yellow in English and Spanish, then asked her how to say “yellow” in Vietnamese, which is the child’s home language. These kinds of strategies seem to be effective in ensuring that young children feel included in early learning regardless of their home language.

---

<sup>5</sup>Weiland, C. and Yoshikawa, H. (2013), “Impacts of a Prekindergarten Program on Children's Mathematics, Language, Literacy, Executive Function, and Emotional Skills.” *Child Development*, 84: 2112–2130. doi: 10.1111/cdev.12099

## *Social-Emotional Learning*

Teachers across several sites said building children’s confidence and positive feelings about school is important. They said the preschool years are not a time for giving students harsh feedback or creating stress around getting the right answer. D. Tyler Guerin, a teacher at Noah’s Ark East in Albuquerque, said this positive school experience is a priority for him.

“It’s set up to feel successful,” Guerin said, “Not only for the children but for the parents and the family unit as a whole, to be comfortable and happy and successful with whatever it is, if it’s science night or a parent conference.” He said it important to him that children go on to kindergarten viewing school as an exciting, interesting place to learn, and not an unpleasant institution.

Gloria King, of Watch Me Grow in Belen, said she personally had negative experiences early in school, and remembers having frowny faces drawn on her papers and feeling degraded as early as first grade. She said she tries to give children the opposite experience, building their confidence in learning so they aren’t afraid to try new things and make mistakes.

“That’s my goal with all the kids, is to give them confidence enough to try new things,” King said.

But raising children’s sense of self-worth and confidence doesn’t mean lowering standards or accepting minimal effort. Several teachers said children rise to the expectations that are set for them, and educators keep adding more advanced concepts even if children reach the top of the PreK rubric.

“Children are capable of so much more than we give them credit for,” said ValindaJo Barkley of Noah’s Ark, who said one of her key practices is to keep finding learning opportunities for children even after they demonstrate all the kindergarten readiness skills on the PreK rubric.

Several teachers also said helping children learn social skills can be as important as academics. If students can’t get along in a classroom environment, it will be hard for them to put academic knowledge to use. Carmella Salinas, of Family Learning Center in Española, said this is key.

“The academic part is ingrained in every center, but they’ll never get to use that if they don’t understand how to have a relationship with one another,” Salinas said. “It’s all about, how are you going to get your shovel back on the playground?”

## **Lessons from Other States**

High-quality interactions between teachers and young children look similar everywhere: Teachers ask open-ended questions to help children think for themselves, and they foster confidence by affirming children’s efforts and strengths. These and other practices were evident in the New Mexico sites visited for this study, as well as the Boston and Salt Lake City sites that were visited for national perspective. However, there were also some key differences that may hold some lessons for New Mexico.

## *Structure and Workforce*

It is important to note that the pre-kindergarten systems in both Boston and Granite (Salt Lake City) are managed by the school districts. This means they are linked to the public schools and are centrally administered, making it easier to implement a single curriculum or classroom management system across sites. In this way, they are more structurally comparable to La Escuelita at Bernalillo Public Schools than they are to the other sites in this study. New Mexico's mixed delivery system of administering New Mexico PreK through both the public schools and the child care sector presents some structural challenges not faced by the national models examined here.

For example, national reviews of best practices recommend setting pre-kindergarten teacher salaries at or near the level of public school teachers.<sup>6</sup> This is intended to prevent the phenomenon of early childhood educators leaving the profession as soon as they earn bachelor's degrees, drawn by significantly better earnings and benefits in the public schools. In the case of Boston Public Schools, this is not an issue because pre-kindergarten teachers have the same pay and educational credentials as other public school teachers. The Granite preschool workforce is more comparable to New Mexico's, with more mixed educational attainment, lower pay than K-12 teachers, and lacking fringe benefits like health insurance.

## *Curriculum*

Both the Boston and Granite pre-kindergarten systems use a single curriculum across their sites, which aims to ensure children learn rich content and enables the districts to offer tailored professional development. Both curricula allow teachers significant discretion in how they implement them. In Boston, for example, every classroom in the city might be studying owls, but each classroom would do different activities and emphasize different things, depending on the teacher's style and the children's interests. This is significantly more structured than New Mexico's system, where no curriculum is required for child care or New Mexico PreK and most of the sites included in this study did not use any curriculum at all.

Use of a single, research-based curriculum is not unique to Boston and Granite, but is a common ingredient among pre-kindergarten programs nationwide that have been shown to get positive results.<sup>7</sup> This is partly because such curricula can ensure students learn rich content. Dr. Catherine Snow, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, warns against spending too much classroom time on units with basic vocabulary like, "my family" or "my body." She said all children will learn common words from their daily lives, and pre-kindergarten classroom time should be spent teaching them things they might not otherwise encounter, like natural science.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Minervino, Jim (2014). "Lessons from Research and the Classroom: Implementing High-Quality Pre-K that Makes a Difference for Young Children." Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid

<sup>8</sup>Snow, Catherine (2014). Discussant on topic of "Learning Environments that Promote Early Development, presented at "The Leading Edge of Early Childhood Education: Linking Science to Policy for a New Generation of Prekindergarten" at Harvard University, Dec. 12, 2014.

Several New Mexico educators featured in this study are able to provide quality instruction using self-directed classroom units and activities. However, the state's lack of a central curriculum may contribute to an uneven system where the quality of children's experiences varies dramatically depending on their teachers' skill level. In Boston and Granite, the use of a single curriculum ensures consistency of literacy and math content across programs. It also enables the school districts to offer professional development that is directly relevant to all programs, and allows programs to share effective practices with one another more meaningfully. The use of evidence-based curricula in early care and education programs is an area rich for future exploration, and New Mexico would benefit from a systematic study of the curricula being used in New Mexico and in other states with high-performing systems.

## *Coaching*

Coaching as a form of real-time professional development is gaining traction nationally, and both Boston and Granite use coaches as a key part of their efforts to help pre-kindergarten teachers continuously improve. Essentially, coaching means master teachers routinely observe teachers as they work, and provide them with feedback about how they can improve. When done well, coaching is more useful to teachers than traditional forms of professional development, because it is specific to them and they can put it immediately to use.

None of the New Mexico sites included in this study had any formalized systems of coaching, although some educators spoke about informal practices in which more seasoned staff provided advice and mentorship to newcomers. Although the lack of a centralized curriculum could make it challenging to implement coaching throughout New Mexico's early learning system, flexible and well-trained coaches could offer tailored feedback to educators using a variety of curricula or practices. This could be done through an expansion and deepening of the role of existing state consultants for New Mexico PreK and FOCUS or through the state's Training & Technical Assistance Programs.

## Recommendations

- New Mexico should continue expansion of New Mexico PreK, and should continue to provide support to programs that add or expand PreK classrooms. The structure and components of PreK provide a useful framework for programs to offer quality instruction.
- Training programs for site directors should teach and encourage a leadership style that makes employees feel supported and appreciated. In a sector where wages are low and other benefits are generally not offered, less tangible benefits are crucial.
- Efforts to retain and support early childhood educators should be continued and strengthened. T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarships were cited by many educators as important and useful to them, and a few also mentioned INCENTIVES, a program intended to boost educator retention.
- New Mexico should consider implementing coaching as a form of professional development for early childhood educators. This could be done through an expansion and deepening of the role of existing state consultants for New Mexico PreK and FOCUS, or through the state's Training & Technical Assistance Programs.

- The state’s FOCUS tiered quality rating and improvement system should be used as a policy lever to create classrooms where:
  - Early childhood educators are empowered to follow the interests and abilities of the children they care for, and are also equipped with a structure of observations and portfolios to guide their practice.
  - Families are treated as central to their children’s early learning, in concrete ways such as hosting inclusive events and accommodating parents’ needs and work schedules.
  - Young children who are still learning English are in environments where their first language is respected and valued. Where possible, they should be in environments where at least one adult can understand them.
  - Classrooms are filled with interesting items that children can explore independently or with teacher direction. These items should be changed periodically to give children new experiences.
  - Teacher interactions with children promote self-confidence by affirming children’s efforts, emphasize both social and cognitive skills, and continue to support children’s learning even after they have met expectations for kindergarten entry.

## Conclusion

Early childhood education is a crucial way to support the youngest New Mexicans and to build a foundation for their future success. However, it is not enough for children to merely be enrolled in some form of early care. For New Mexico to realize a return on its investments in child care assistance and New Mexico PreK, programs must be of high quality. This study has found examples in New Mexico of high-quality programs that serve low-income students and English Language Learners and successfully prepare these children for school. There are also lessons to be learned from other states and cities, where pre-kindergarten has been broadly implemented and found to have significant impacts on school readiness. It is hoped that this study has provided a concrete picture of what “high-quality” means in early learning and has also provided a hopeful glimpse of exciting things that are happening for children right here in New Mexico.



## Appendix: Methodology

This study is focused on school readiness outcomes for children. Although early childhood education may serve many functions in society (providing children with early social experiences and facilitating consistent, full-time work for parents, for example), this study is driven by the school readiness domain of early childhood education. As the findings show, however, programs that successfully prepare children for school are often also attentive to their social-emotional needs and to the needs of whole families.

Sites for this study were selected using a data set provided by the New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee (LFC). Staff of the LFC had created a data set that linked children's third-grade test scores in reading and math with the child care or New Mexico PreK site where the children received care when they were three and four years old. To protect the privacy of the children and families involved, the LFC provided the data to CEPR at the provider level, and did not provide any data at the individual child level.

The children included in the data set were third-graders in the 2010-11 school year or the 2011-12 school year. In order to be included, children had to be enrolled in a full academic year of NM PreK, or had to receive at least four quarters of state child care assistance during the two years prior to starting kindergarten. If children received care at multiple child care sites, they were assigned – for purposes of the data set – to the child care center where they spent the most time. It is important to note that only children enrolled in NM PreK or child care assistance are included in this data set, meaning it excludes children whose parents pay out-of-pocket for child care. This is consistent with the goal of this study, which is to examine child care centers that seem to get positive school readiness outcomes for children from lower-income families.

This data set was used to identify child care and PreK sites where students in the data set later had above-average third-grade test scores relative to other sites. Specifically, sites were considered for inclusion if the students' test scores in math and/or reading (percent proficient and average scaled score were both examined) exceeded the median for the data set. In order to ensure selection of sites that served low-income and English Language Learner (ELL) students, selection was limited to sites where an above-median percentage of the student cohort were identified as ELLs, qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, or both. The percentage of students identified as having special needs was also considered in choosing sites.

It is important to note that selection for this study was done using relative, not absolute, criteria. That is, sites were selected based on how they compared to other sites in the data set. It is also important to note that because the selection criteria were linked to demographics, this study has almost certainly excluded some high-quality early childhood education programs that serve children from more advantaged family backgrounds. Those programs are also doing important work, but they are not the focus of this study. This study also does not include home-based child care. Although home-based care is an important component of New Mexico's early learning sector, these providers were excluded due to practical considerations (they are not included in the LFC data set) and because best practices in a home-based care setting likely differ somewhat from center-based practices and should be examined separately.

Using this methodology, 12 sites from around New Mexico were selected for inclusion in this study (two of which were affiliated with one another). Two sites declined to participate, leaving 10 participating sites. Site visits were then conducted, in an attempt to understand the practices being used at these sites. On each visit, classroom practices were observed during instructional time, and interviews were conducted with site directors

and teachers. Although most of the sites included infant and toddler rooms, this study was focused on practices for three- and four-year-olds. The purpose of these observations and interviews was to understand the structure and practices of these sites, and to identify any commonalities among them. Site visits were conducted in March, April, May and June of 2015.

This study also included a review of best practices nationwide, and field visits to pre-kindergarten programs being implemented in Boston Public Schools and the Granite School District in Salt Lake City, Utah. The report considers how practices in New Mexico align with these national practices and what might be learned from them.

### *Limitations*

Assessing the school readiness outcomes of early childhood education is a complex endeavor, especially because New Mexico does not currently have a unique student identifier linking children's early childhood experiences with their outcomes in the K-12 education system. New Mexico is working toward such a system using federal grant money awarded through the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge. Using the same grant funding, efforts are also underway to implement a kindergarten readiness assessment, which will be used statewide and may prove valuable in evaluating the effectiveness of early childhood programs. However, these systems are not yet in place. In the absence of such systems, third grade reading and math scores have been used a proxy for school readiness.

Many things can happen in a child's life between age 4 and age 8, the approximate age at which most New Mexico children will take their third-grade standardized tests. We should therefore be cautious in drawing a direct line from children's PreK and child care experiences to their later academic achievement. However, a central promise of early childhood education is that its effects can last far beyond third grade, even into adolescence and adulthood. This promise is borne out by the research, and it is defensible to posit that the effects of high-quality early learning experiences will still be detectable in third grade.

This study is also limited by the sample sizes in the data set, which are small. Because the data set only tracks students who can be linked to their later school records and who spent at least one year in state-funded early learning settings, the sample size for some centers is as low as 12 students. The largest sample size is 35 students.

Another limitation of the data set is that it is relatively old. The data the LFC matched are for students who were third-graders in the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years. This means the older children in the data set were in child care or PreK as early as 2005. A lot can change about the quality of an early learning site in a decade. Some of the sites that were visited for this study had changed leadership in the past decade, or had added a New Mexico PreK program in the past few years. This study did not attempt to discover the practices these sites were using in previous years when they served the children in the data set. Rather, it focused on the practices these sites use now. This study also did not attempt to establish a causal link between the practices these sites use and the school readiness outcomes in the LFC data set. Rather, test score data were used as a guide for deciding which early learning sites to visit, in an attempt to identify well-established, high-quality programs that seem to get positive outcomes for New Mexico's high-needs children.

## *Sites*

The sites visited for this study included one public school-based New Mexico PreK site (another such site was approached and declined to participate). The rest were center-based programs licensed by the Children, Youth and Families Department. Of the nine CYFD programs, six had an NM PreK program on site and three did not. The sites ranged from 2 to 5 STARS in the state Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) and were located in communities around New Mexico. They included a mix of non-profit and for-profit programs, and several sites were religious or linked to churches. The included sites were:

- La Escuelita, Bernalillo Public Schools
- Cradles and Crayons (two locations, Anthony and Sunland Park)
- East Gate Kids, Albuquerque
- Family Learning Center, Española
- Jungle Book, Hobbs
- Noah's Ark East, Albuquerque
- Southwest Child Care, Albuquerque
- Tadpoles Daycare, Roswell
- Watch Me Grow, Belen