



Consortium of Social Science Associations

SRCD Briefing Discusses High Quality Preschool Expansion

May 5, 2014

On April 29, the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD), a COSSA Governing Member, along with the Foundation for Child Development sponsored a congressional briefing on research related to high quality preschool expansion. In her opening remarks, Martha Zaslow of SRCD noted the President's call for substantial funding for programs like Head Start and the universal preschool initiative, and the importance for policymakers to understand what the research says about high-quality preschool in large-scale settings. Congressman George Miller (D-CA) stopped by the briefing to express his continued support for evidence-based early childhood education initiatives.

Research on early childhood education, according to Hiro Yoshikawa of New York University, should answer the following questions: Is preschool at scale a worthy investment? Can quality preschool be implemented at scale? Can preschool at scale work? In two large-scale studies, conducted in Boston and Tulsa, researchers sought to answer these questions with implications for larger, perhaps nationwide, implementation.

Debora Phillips of Georgetown and Steven Dow of the Community Action Project of Tulsa detailed the Tulsa, Oklahoma preschool program and what the research has found since its inception. The program began in 1998 and provides universal preschool across Oklahoma. Research studying the program has found that through ensuring quality assurance—by high teacher requirements, competitive salaries, reasonable class sizes and student-to-teacher ratios—outcomes have increased significantly across a diverse student body compared to the years prior to this program. Beyond standard competency measures, students have higher attentiveness levels, and generally a better aptitude to regulate their own ability to learn. Dow observed that in Oklahoma—a low tax, typically red state—communities, businesses, politicians and voters have all seen the benefit of this program and the return it provides to Oklahoma tax payers. It “galvanizes and brings people together,” he said.

In Boston, according to Christina Weiland of the University of Michigan and Jason Sachs of Boston Public Schools, results have been similarly positive. Research has found that the targeted areas of language, math and literacy competencies have improved significantly. Further, students who participated in these programs had lower rates of delinquency and teenage pregnancy than those who did not participate. Researchers also observed that the teacher is the most important factor to be improved upon to increase quality; better teachers lead to better prepared students. A final observation around the noted “fade out” effect—a phenomenon that shows effects of preschool programs begin to drop off by third grade—can likely be attributed to the fact that education in the kindergarten through third grade levels often is of lower quality than that at the preschool level. Thus, it is vital to also examine how to improve K-3 quality.