Session # A-1

Title: Mini-Plenary-Research Tools for Archiving Program Goals

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SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

CHERIE KOTILINEK (MN)

The MN School Readiness Study (since 2002) looks at kids entering and assesses school readiness. These data have found that the factors most associated with lower school readiness were family income and mother's education. The question follows: How can we improve that?

A partnership between the MN Early Learning Fund & the Governor's Office focused on this issue and determined that program-specific solutions are not the answer. They decided to focus on low-income children and work to influence parents' decision making. It is necessary to partner at every level to improve child outcomes. Families need more access to information and more flexible program policies. Public and private sector partnership is crucial.

This year's legislative session resulted in three initiatives:

1. Incentive for providers in designated areas of MN to improve quality
2. Incentive for providers to serve low-income/high-risk children through vouchers for quality (scholarships, allowances, and school readiness service agreements)
3. Quality standards…an implementation of the QRS

An evaluation of these initiatives will follow, focusing on the children, rather than the programs.

Summary of MN Key Questions

Will a Quality Rating System and higher funding influence parents' choice?
Which distribution models more cost-effective?
Do quality ratings and higher funding lead to improved outcomes for children?
Do the quality ratings and higher funding lead to more economic stability for parents?

ROD SOUTHWICK (MA)

MA has embarked upon a universal pre-k program (funded at a low level). They are at the early stages of this "experiment."

UPK pilot eligibility parameters:

- Public schools, pre schools, family child care, family child care system providers

- Willing to serve subsidized kids
- Access to full day full year services
- Follow state-approved guidelines
- Use approved assessment tools
- Have a teacher in classroom with BA (or director with BA) or accredited through NAEYC

The purpose of this program is to reward quality and recognize programs that have a threshold of quality. Programs were to spend money on increased teacher salaries, purchase hardware/software for Internet-based assessment tool, professional development, facilitate access to wrap-around services for families, etc.

Summary of MA Key Questions
Which quality improvement activities are most effective and cost-effective at improving child outcomes?
How do they measure outcomes across the state?

THE RESEARCHER RESPONSE
The first thing a researcher must do is determine the type of research question (monitoring/tracking, effectiveness, description of program/policy).

Monitoring/Tracking
How do you measure children's progress over time relative to other children? i.e. Are they closing the achievement gap?

1. Identify outcomes of interest
2. How do you measure the outcomes?
   Can existing data be used? Can it be linked to subsidy use? Can it be obtained regularly? What's there? What's there over time? What do you have to collect yourself?
3. Define the population or subgroup of interest

Challenge: Are the children doing better because of the subsidy program policies? Not necessarily…caution when analyzing outcomes over time.

Effectiveness
Will the QRS and higher funding improve choices of care? Which quality improvement strategies will best enhance children's outcomes? (These are very common questions because policymakers want to know which policy choices or funding strategies are most effective or most cost-effective.)

1. Set up a contrast (between the policy of interest and a different policy; between two or more competing policy options)…contrast two worlds with different policies
   - Random-assignment is an effective way or contrasting the two groups
   - Propensity Score Methods take two groups that are as similar as possible and measure everything that is different about them at the outset (this method is less expensive, but also less convincing)

2. Consider the outcomes of interest
    - Provider outcomes
    - Child Outcomes (language development; early literacy; etc
3. How long should it take for these outcomes to be realized?
4. Measure the outcomes

Challenge: Children learn every day (with or without policies), so remember that you are trying to measure how much more they developed than they would have without the policy.

Program/Policy Description
Are any of the distribution models more likely to be used by parents or providers? Why? Qualitative data can be useful.

Challenge: Qualitative information should come from a representative sample

ADDITIONAL PRESENTATION: EEC SUPPORTIVE CHILD CARE EXPANSION (ROD SOUTHWICK, MA)
One reason this project is interesting is that it used data from several sources.
Last year, MA provided funding for 800 more slots.
1/3 child care coordinators did not place children in Head Start programs.
Question: We have X amount of children on the waitlist and we have X resources in each area. Maybe there are not slots, but are there other programs?

They approached Head Start in the areas where they could help and tried to recruit new voucher providers where there was no existing capacity. And, after a 6 month period, they placed over 1,000 children in expanded or new programs. The waitlist was virtually eliminated…they found care for nearly everyone. However, once kids were removed from the waitlist, other children replaced them on the waitlist.

Conclusion: Through the sharing of data across agencies, they were able to find spots for the children on the waitlist, i.e. coordination across agencies can be good.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

How do you influence parents' decision making?

The MN QRS is built on parent-friendly ways of stating information (talks about components they can understand). In the pilot areas the project also includes a parent education/connection component to help them understand the early childhood experience and choices.

What about families with different value systems?

Do the best you can

Deanna/Chris mentioned using your state's data on literacy and math skills…how?

NCLB starts at Grade 3 and some states have Pre-K and K assessments. MN is looking at assessing children at Age 0-3 (but not for program evaluation purposes). There is not much standardized testing at this age. MA UPK mandates that everyone have an assessment tool, but it's more for developmental assessment. When tests become high stakes, there is a real issue of bias.

IL is looking at its professional development system components…and we want to know everything. How do you prioritize the questions that you want answers to?

Identify your professional development initiatives? Which ones can change and which ones do you intend to keep? Rather than contrast between a program and no program is to test alternatives against each other. If you have multiple ways of doing something, try them.

Once you decide what the conventions are (the various types of professional development training) make sure that the plans can be implemented before you start evaluating it. Give yourself some time for the program to work. Evaluation does not happen after the program…you need to consider evaluation at the start of the program so that you can collect the data on both the outcomes but also on the children.

KEY POINTS

- States have questions; These typically fall into Monitoring progress and outcomes; Evaluating Effectiveness; and Program Description; These different types of questions can be addressed with by different types of methodology.
- Start by prioritizing the elements that you need to know most.
- Evaluate policy with a comparison group—compare to no policy, or compare different types of policy
- When possible, coordinate and share ideas, information, data, and resources across agencies.