Iowa’s Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four-Year-Old Children

The Iowa State Board of Education has long supported quality early childhood education, and in 2007 the legislature created the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four-Year-Old Children (SWVPP). The purpose of the preschool program is to provide an opportunity for all 4-year-old children in the state of Iowa to enter school ready to learn by expanding access to research-based preschool curricula and licensed teaching staff.

Under the program, school districts, along with community partners, submitted grant applications for the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four-Year-Old Children. Those awarded a grant have demonstrated collaborative involvement with multiple stakeholders both in the planning and implementation of the preschool program. In the 2010-11 school year, 19,799 4-year-old children participated in the SWVPP through this state funding, while an additional 5,000 preschool age children participated in this quality program with support from other funding sources. This is close to two-thirds of the roughly 39,000 4-year-olds in the state. State funding for SWVPP for the 2010-2011 school year was $64 million.

Key Requirements for Local Programs Participating in the SWVPP

- **Licensed teachers.** All programs must have early childhood licensed teachers who are responsible for designing and implementing effective learning environments using instructional strategies to enhance children’s learning.

- **A minimum of 10 hours per week of quality preschool instruction.** Providers may also provide “wrap around” programming through other federal, state, or local programming (fees may be charged for these services if they are not funded through state or federal sources).

- **Community collaboration.** Programs must provide family involvement opportunities such as home visits, family nights, and conferences. The delivery of quality preschool services by the licensed teacher could be provided in the public school setting, or the teacher could collaborate with community-based early childhood programs, nonpublic, faith-based, nonprofit, or for profit centers to implement teaching strategies that enhance children’s learning and development.

- **High program standards.** School districts and partners select and implement at least one of three approved program standards: the Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, the National Association for the Education of Young Children Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria, or the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

- **High learning standards.** Programs must have rigorous and relevant curriculum and assessments to enhance children’s strengths, interests, and knowledge (based on the Iowa Early Learning Standards); and alignment with K-12 standards and academic expectations.

- **Appropriate adult-child ratio** of 1 to 10 and a maximum group size of 20.

Positive Impacts of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program

Districts, families, and community partners report many positive impacts as a result of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program. These include an increase in:

- Access to high-quality preschools;
- Number of licensed teachers with expertise in early childhood education;
- Quality of programming, curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- Collaboration among teaching staff;
There has also been an increase in skills development among participating children. Dynamic Indicators for Basic Early Learning Skills (DIBELS) scores from children participating in the SWVPP were compared to children with no preschool experience. The DIBELS assessment measures children’s literacy skills for identifying beginning sounds of words by pointing to the picture of the matching sound.

In 2010-2011, 64 percent of the kindergarten children who participated in the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program were proficient as compared to only 57 percent of the children who had no preschool experience prior to kindergarten enrollment. In 2006-2007, prior to the SWVPP, only 56 percent of all kindergarten students assessed were proficient. This represents a 7 percent increase in the percentage of children proficient.

What’s Next for the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program?

The Iowa State Board of Education continues to support access to quality preschool programming with the goal of all children entering school ready to learn. The next step is to focus on helping assure that programs are high quality by aligning assessment, curriculum, and instruction. The Iowa Department of Education is working with early childhood consultants in the state’s intermediate units, the Area Education Agencies (AEAs). These AEA early childhood consultants provide professional development and technical assistance to the providers participating in the SWVPP.

For more information about Iowa’s Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program, contact:

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