Evaluation of the Bright Beginnings Program: Key Findings and Recommendations

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The impact of Bright Beginnings, a pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), was evaluated between 2012-2014. Initially, existing records were used to track how well children enrolled in Bright Beginnings from 2006 to 2008 performed through 3rd and 4th grade End of Grade (EOG) exams.

In 2013-14, a more complete evaluation was conducted, including classroom observations in the fall and spring, teacher assessments of students' social-emotional functioning (how children get along with one another and with adults) in the fall and spring, interviews with parents, and surveys of teachers. This allowed an examination of how teacher/classroom functioning related to children’s verbal and social-emotional development.

**Key Findings**

Children make modest gains in verbal ability, but these gains fade over time in elementary school. Children are screened and selected into BB because they score below their peers on cognitive, developmental, and/or pre-academic functioning; as a result, they begin the year with low levels of verbal skills. By the end of the year, they have made modest to moderate improvements in their verbal ability, yet they still score lower than their peers at the end of the year. When they get to kindergarten, children from BB largely score at “benchmark” or “proficiency” levels on standardized assessments of verbal ability. However, their performance fades by the first grade, and when followed up to the 3rd and 4th grades, they lag behind their peers on End of Grade exams.

Bright Beginnings students who go into higher performing elementary schools do substantially better on 3rd grade EOGs than those going into lower performing schools. Gains in verbal skills during the pre-kindergarten year, with a “fade out” in performance over the next few years, is a very common finding among early childhood education programs. However, Bright Beginnings children who attend better elementary schools (schools with higher average EOG scores) perform markedly better on their 3rd grade EOGs, compared to their Bright Beginnings peers in poorer functioning schools. This points to the need for continued strong academic programs for these children beyond the pre-kindergarten year.
Students show substantial gains in social-emotional development, which predicts success as adults more than academic gains. In the 2013-14 year, teachers assessed the social-emotional development of children early and later in the year. Substantial gains were made in Bright Beginnings’ children’s ability to interact successfully with their peers and with adults over the year. While Bright Beginnings children begin the year lower than most children (on nationally-normed measures), they end the year above average on those measures. This is particularly important, because research shows that, despite the “fade out” in verbal skills, children in early childhood intervention programs do better as adults in several ways (e.g., graduate from high school, are employed, stay out of prison). These differences as adults appear to be due to gains in social-emotional functioning in their pre-k year.

Students show substantially greater social-emotional development when provided higher quality instruction. Classrooms vary substantially in the quality of implementation of the program curriculum. Students in “high performing” classrooms showed greater gains in their social-emotional development than those in “low performing” classrooms. In addition, classroom functioning tended to deteriorate over time. This indicates a need for stronger coaching of teachers to ensure that all children have a high quality classroom experience. In other communities, strong coaching has been found to lead to improvements in teaching.

Recommendations

To improve Bright Beginnings, CMS should:

- **Improve instruction by strengthening coaching of teachers**, using structured observations to guide teachers. Improved coaching, together with coordinated support from school principals, can improve instructional practices across classrooms and maintain them over time. Research suggests that improvements in classroom quality – even for strong classrooms – can increase child learning. Ultimately, stronger coaching would help ensure that all children consistently have a high quality pre-kindergarten experience.

- **Assess social-emotional development of students** early in the year, and provide teachers with feedback regarding each child’s social-emotional functioning. This information should be used by teachers, with support from coaches, to differentiate their instruction to improve children’s development.

- **Increase Pre-Kindergarten Program’s capacity to collect / manage data** about parents and children in the program. This will enable the program to provide teachers and coaches with information to better tailor instruction to the needs of children, and to enhance the ongoing evaluation of the program.

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