

10 Essential Elements of Early Childhood Program Effectiveness

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Overarching Principle A. A Supportive and Enriching Organizational and Social Context for Learning is Foundational to Optimal Benefits and Sustained Gains. Elements of effectiveness in early childhood programs and broader learning systems achieve their most beneficial impacts within an organizational context that is well-supported by financial and human resources and continuously promotes a collaborative and inclusive climate among program and/or school leadership, staff, children and families, communities, and stakeholders. Within these enriched contexts, openness to change based on evidence and experience, a belief in shared ownership, and tailoring priorities and services to the unique needs of children and parents are evident. Eliminating persistent structural inequalities and barriers at the macro-ecological level, including multilevel poverty, discrimination and racism, segregation, and lack of access to high quality service systems are core goals.

Overarching Principle B. Gains are more likely to be initiated and sustained as the number of essential elements present in programs and classrooms increases. Although most theoretical models of learning and development support the proposition that gains are more likely to be sustained as the number of essential elements present in a program increases, At present, there is no hard and fast rule about the minimum threshold needed to achieve large gains in school readiness followed by sustained gains over time. The landmark early childhood programs included nearly 100% of the essential elements, exclusive of universal access. Recent studies in the Human Capital Research Collaborative have found that classrooms and programs in which at least 60-70% of the measured key or essential elements were the most likely to demonstrate strong short- and longer-term gains for children.

1. Provide universal access for all children. The positive effects of early education on school readiness and performance have been found across all levels of socioeconomic status. These impacts are sustained for high quality programs. Children at higher levels of risk, including family socioeconomic status and special needs, show the largest benefits. A universal access system, however, increases effectiveness at scale to achieve achievement proficiency.

2. Begin no later than age 4. In general, the earlier that educational enrichment begins, the larger the impact and the more likely those effects will be sustained. Within the first 4 years, the evidence of benefits and long-term effects is strongest for programs serving 3- and 4-year-olds. This principle element does not mean that later intervention cannot be effective, only that the evidence base favors earlier participation, especially for cost-effectiveness.

3. Sufficient intensity of learning experiences. The instructional content and activities of programs should be of sufficient length and intensity to address learning needs adequately. Such levels of intensity addresses the importance of focused time in each domain of learning. A teacher's organization and use of time does matter. Full-day programs spanning 9-12 months per year are especially beneficial.

4. Multifaceted and engaging learning experiences across domains. Instructional and learning activities cover the core domains of language and literacy, number skills, cognition, physical health, and socio-emotional and mental health. A balance of teacher- and child-directed activities are provided and are tailored to individual, family, community, and socio-cultural contexts. In addition to a balance of instruction, field trips and out-of-school experiences are high priorities. A diverse set of instructional activities, curricula, and learning experiences help to promote active and engaged learning.

5. Highly trained professionals and on-going professional development. Children taught by teachers who are well trained with a BA or higher are more likely to experience high quality programs. Teachers

and staff should have regular opportunities with sufficient time allocated to participate in professional development activities to keep current on best practices in the field. Compensation that is equivalent to or competitive with K-12 education is a critical component of this element. This includes classroom assistants as well.

6. Accountability system marked by shared leadership, clear learning standards, and monitoring for improvement. A clear leadership vision is established that is shared and inclusive of all staff. Programs should have well documented learning standards. There should be formal assessments of children's progress on well-validated indicators. Careful monitoring of program quality also is important, and this is for the purpose of program improvement. The use of evidence and teacher feedback is built in to this process. Formative evaluation also is central to a strong accountability system which separates this approach from an audit or summative evaluation.

7. Comprehensive family services. Programs that provide a full range of child education and family services are more responsive to children's needs and will be more likely to impact child development outcomes. Attention to children's education and social development, family needs, health and social services are important. Opportunities for parent involvement are especially important.

8. Small class sizes and low child to staff ratios. Early childhood class sizes of less than 18 and child to staff ratios under 9 to 1 are associated with greater learning gains. These should be lower for 3-year-olds, i.e., class sizes of less than 16 and ratios under 8 to 1.

9. Optimal duration and length. The number of years of preschool and the length of program services is positively associated with children's learning and development, especially if quality is high. Longer duration beyond or prior to preschool also strengthen learning gains.

10. Coordination and alignment with K-3 to provide a continuous P-3 system of supports. The extent to which the preschool program is integrated with kindergarten and the elementary grades leads to smoother transitions to school. Attention to coordination and the provision of services across ages can help sustain effects of preschool. To be most effective and consistent with evidence-based programs, a continuous and supportive preschool to 3rd grade system should include both structural enhancements (leadership, small classes) and integration of services (PD, instruction).

Resources and References

These are the sources of evidence in support of each element.

A. General References Supporting Many or All Elements

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C. Essential Elements

1 Universal access

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