Fact Sheet: Early Childhood Development

Background
Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs are effective in helping to aid and sustain student’s cognitive and social emotional growth. There are bodies of research that demonstrate that these and other preventative interventions have sustaining effects on students’ growth and successful outcomes throughout Kindergarten to High School and beyond.

Prevention scientists have identified a myriad of conditions (e.g., poverty, harsh parenting) and experiences (e.g., maltreatment, witnessing violence) that place children at risk for academic failure and poor self-regulation of behavior and emotion. Early Childhood Interventions and Preventative programs that have emerged from this evidence are designed to address one or more of these factors. However, in urban communities, sustainable practices are often inconsistent in their processes. Many schools fail to implement these programs with fidelity, fail to educate their parents, and lose momentum over time, due to lack of evaluation and continued accountability. There is also great difficulty in involving families and monitoring compliance with existing interventions. Moreover, many prevention programs are not adequately funded or are attached to short term funding mechanisms that come and go with the grant dollars.

It is generally acknowledged that it is more costly to remediate older children than to intervene earlier in life. The most cost-saving programs target high-risk children who have the most potential for improvement, although some research still supports a cost-benefit of certain models of publicly-funded, universal Pre-K programs. For the long run, a 2005 analysis found that early childhood programs for vulnerable populations would dramatically increase savings; by 2050 there would be an annual federal/state government budget savings of $61 billion, a GDP increase of $107 billion, and a crime related savings of about $1.55 billion in 2004 dollars. Additionally, other related work suggests that providing all 20% of the nation’s three- and four-year-old children who live in poverty with a high-quality ECD program would have a substantial payoff for governments and taxpayers in the future. As those children age, costs for remedial and special education, juvenile and criminal justice, mental health, unemployment, and welfare benefits would decline. Once in the labor force, their incomes would be higher, along with the taxes that are returned to society. Investing in quality ECD’s programs for all children from low-income families would cost billions of dollars annually, but would create much larger budget savings over time.

Registries employing rigorous evaluation standards include a number of programs showing good effects on early cognitive or language development. And there is good evidence for the importance of Social and Emotional Learning.

Gaps or shortcomings of current approaches
The Association of Small Foundations (2008) study showed that by the age of 3, children in low-income homes will have heard only one-third as many words as children in middle and high-income homes (10 million versus 30 million words). This research suggests, that by the time a child completes third grade, the gaps have widened significantly among students of low socio-economic status. Children who enter kindergarten with poor early
Literacy skills continue the trend throughout their formative and secondary years. The data shows that ten to fifteen percent of children with serious reading problems will drop out of high school and that there is a correlation of lack of reading comprehension to that of drug use and criminality. Language is the basis for development of higher order cognitive skills that underlie self-regulation; thus, its development is key to successful outcomes in multiple domains.

Lynch (2004) suggests that there is a strong consensus among experts who have studied high-quality early childhood development (ECD) programs and that these programs have substantial payoffs. Programs that focus on the building blocks for cognition and self-regulation of behavior and emotion are particularly effective in improving overall outcomes for children. There is also a growing literature on the need for interventions that are trauma-informed; stress and adversity in early childhood can have profound effects on developing neurological and physiological systems needed for self-regulation and academic achievement. However, these interventions are not available or accessible to most residents of inner-cities where they are most needed.

There are also concerns surrounding how to properly implement programs with fidelity. Importantly, prevention programs are often not adequately funded and the quality of implementation suffers. Urban environments also are not always amenable to collaborating with institutions and community groups that are implementing true change. Many times the conditions, services, and resources needed to establish, maintain and oversee these programs are inconsistent (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995). As a result, such programs appear to be ineffective when it is not the program, per se, but the lack of support.

Change happens over time; reinforcements must be in place to sustain the mastery from K-12th grades. Simple programs are easier to explain, easier to sell, and easier to manage. However, long-term dangers accrue if fidelity in training is bypassed. There must be a concerted effort to ensure that the community organizations understand that an investment in their educational system means a sustainable change within the community.

**Recent scientific findings that suggest solutions**

Can classroom instruction and educational interventions contribute to the retention, learning, and social-emotional growth of children throughout their educational experience and beyond?

Educational institutions look to prepare students for academic success, which often overshadows the importance of children’s social-emotional development (Raver, 2002). There are bodies of research that suggest the use of preventative interventions to help still degenerative behaviors and to promote sustaining effects long after intervention programs are delivered. The Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (2008) suggests that important developmental foundations of social-emotional competence begin at birth.

The National Academy of Sciences proposes that a major challenge for students in kindergarten is that 60 percent of students are cognitively prepared, but only 40 percent have the social-emotional skills need to be successful (2008). Although most preventive interventions affect more than one problem, preventive interventions still tend to focus on only a subset of the problems that societies seek to prevent.

When discussing future directions for promoting social-emotional competence, we can change verbiage from students being “at risk” to “at promise” (Siperstein & Favazza, 2008). One may define “at promise” as using screening and assessment to help identify children with social emotional needs and to learn more about each child’s strengths to guide daily practices. The “at promise” child would seek to use the promotion of social emotional competence to prevent social-emotional challenges.

In order to create change, teachers require additional professional development and classroom management skills. There is also a dire need for sensitivity and response to children who have experienced trauma. Teacher quality has become a critical component of educational reform. The nation’s educational reform agenda challenges teachers to learn new skills and perspectives, while simultaneously unlearning practices and beliefs that have dominated their work for years (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996). Educators, parents and
community will have to be provided with professional development to ensure that preventative programs are being evaluated and measured throughout the students’ life time.

**Pivotal references and links**

1. Annie E. Casey Foundation (www.aecf.org)
2. “Closing the Gap in 3rd Grade Reading Levels,” Education Week (May 7, 2008), Vol. 27, Issue 36
8. Evolving the Prevention System That We Need: Shifting from reactive interventions to ones that prevent. Published on January 3, 2015 by Anthony Biglan, Ph.D. in The Nurture Effect

**Dr. Brita A. Theadford** is an Adjunct Professor for Rowan University. Founding Member of SisterHood, Incorporated (a non-profit). She has worked in the field of education for over 16 years. Her experience is diverse having worked in urban and suburban public school districts across the State of New Jersey. She has served as an Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School Principal, District Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction and Teacher Evaluator. Dr. Theadford is a Member of the National Prevention Science Coalition to Improve Lives. She has served as a Lead Chairperson for the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) Model Curriculum - Biology and as a Reviewer of the Next Generation Science Standards.

**Diana Fishbein, Ph.D.**, C. Eugene Bennett Chair in Prevention Research, Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University. Co-Director of the National Prevention Science Coalition to Improve Lives. Dfishbein@psu.edu

www.npscoalition.org