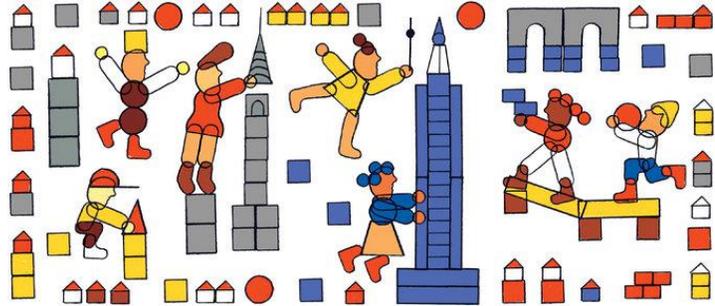


How New York Made Pre-K a Success

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BORSCHT isn't found on most prekindergarten menus, but it's what the cooks were dishing up for the 35 children at Ira's Daycare in Briarwood, Queens, on a recent school day. Many families in this neighborhood are Russian émigrés for whom borscht is a staple, but children from half a dozen countries, including a contingent from Bangladesh, are also enrolled here.

These youngsters are among the 68,547 4-year-olds enrolled in one of the nation's most ambitious experiments in education: New York City's accelerated attempt to introduce preschool for all.

In 2013, Bill de Blasio campaigned for mayor on a promise of universal pre-K. Two years later, New York City enrolls more children in full-day pre-K than any state except Georgia, and its preschool enrollment exceeds the total number of students in San Francisco or Boston.

"It's the hardest thing I've ever been part of," Richard Buery, the deputy mayor who oversaw the prekindergarten expansion, told me. "Every aspect has been a challenge." Two thousand teachers had to be recruited, 3,000 classrooms opened and 300 community providers vetted as prekindergarten partners.

Simply getting more children in the door doesn't guarantee successful outcomes. Still, New York's experience in trying to institute the program so quickly provides some valuable lessons for other pre-K efforts across the country.

New York decided early to make pre-K available to every child, rather than just poor kids. A study of Boston's preschools found that poor and middle-class children who attended pre-K did better on subsequent tests of literacy and math. Poor youngsters also became more socially and emotionally competent. In short, everyone benefits from pre-K.

In New York, the percentage of 4-year-olds in prekindergarten is essentially the same in every neighborhood, in part because the city made an effort to attract families across the demographic spectrum. A door-to-door campaign was mounted to persuade parents in poorer precincts, many of whom were unfamiliar with the early education the city was offering.

The make-or-break factor for prekindergarten is quality, and every study confirming its long-term benefits focuses on an exemplary initiative. What makes for quality? A full-day program, staffed by well-trained teachers, supported by experienced coaches and social workers, who know how to talk with, not at, youngsters; a teacher for every 10 or fewer children; a challenging curriculum backed by evidence; and parental involvement.

But quality costs money — \$9,076 per student per year, according to a report by two groups, The Institute for Women’s Policy Research and Early Childhood Policy Research. Few states are willing to make that kind of commitment. Florida, the only state to deliver preschool on a scale and at a speed comparable to New York City, offers a cautionary lesson. In 2005, voters there made universal prekindergarten a constitutional right. But quality suffered because the state spent a meager \$2,238 for each 4-year-old in 2013-14, largely by using underpaid and poorly trained teachers.

Florida isn’t the only place coming up short. During the 2013-14 school year, the 41 states that provide prekindergarten spent an average of \$4,125 per child. That’s not much more, in constant dollars, than a decade earlier, and a little more than a third of the average per-student cost for kindergartners through 12th graders.

On paper, New York City’s full-day program checks the quality boxes. The teachers must have at least a bachelor’s degree. They receive in-class tutoring and help from social workers. The curriculum has been well vetted and the classrooms are well stocked. There’s a spot in a full-day class for every 4-year-old. The city is spending \$10,200 for each child, about as much as Boston budgets for its public pre-K, a demonstrably effective program.

Citywide, about 60 percent of the 4-year-olds in universal prekindergarten go to a nonprofit-run preschool like Ira’s in Queens, and while some are little more than day-care centers, they are improving because of effective coaching. “These kids are mainly learning through play,” says Labiba Abdur Rahman, a teaching coach who works at 17 sites, including Ira’s.

A lesson on apples at Ira’s incorporates everything from art to arithmetic. The children draw apples, copy the names of the different varieties, peel and slice them, determine whether the weight of an apple changes when it’s boiled, build an orchard with blocks, “sell” apple pies at the classroom bakery and examine slices under a microscope. The youngsters work in small groups, and the teacher moves among them, asking questions and listening closely to determine who needs help.

Although the “learn through play” pedagogical approach is the same, the prekindergartens aren’t cookie-cutter copies. At Rainbow Child Development Center, in Flushing, Queens, children from a mix of backgrounds are learning Mandarin Chinese, as well as English. Students in the pre-K at Hellenic Classical Charter School, in South Park Slope, Brooklyn, mainly Hispanic and African-American, are introduced to Greek language and culture through song, dance, history and art.

From the outset, the prekindergarten administrators made data-mining and analysis a pivotal component. An independent research firm, as well as several New York University faculty members, are digging into many aspects of the program, from the “home-away-from-home”

classroom and parents' engagement to children's academic and social progress. They are delivering their findings continually so that the school system can use the information to make improvements.

"New York's approach is a model for how to collect and analyze data to inform practice, to bring the system to the highest quality," said Pamela Morris, a professor at New York University who is studying how well teachers are using a rigorous new math curriculum. The city's preschool program scores higher than the national average on assessments of the learning environment, according to data prepared by an independent research group as well as appraisals of the all-important interactions between teachers and kids. Parents give it a thumbs up, with 92 percent rating their child's experience as good or excellent. Not only has their youngsters' learning greatly improved, parents report, they are also better behaved.

Early education cannot work miracles. For the gains made by these 4-year-olds to stick, there must be a smooth path from prekindergarten through the first years of elementary school and beyond. What's more, starting preschool earlier, at age 3, has been shown to have a substantial impact, especially for kids from poor families, but at present public prekindergarten is available only to 4-year-olds.

Although universal pre-K is off to an impressive start, it's still a work in progress. But already educators can learn a lot from the city's having achieved the seemingly impossible: delivering good prekindergarten to so many children so quickly.

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