ECCE EVALUATION: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE PAST?

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To Maximize Policy of Research and Evaluation

• Strategy: a high level plan to accomplish a specific goal usually over a long period of time
• Descriptive studies--where are we, where are we going?
  – How good are services? How are children and families doing?
• Causal studies--what are the results, why did they happen?
  – You need a clear counterfactual
• Integrate research, practice and policy
  – Objectivity comes from design not distance
• Plan communications from the beginning & invest in them
• Be honest--learn as much from failure as success, GPS
  – Even Start, Early/Head Start, Abbott Pre-K (1st 5)
Why is the Perry Preschool Study So Influential?

1) Audacity

2) Simplicity

3) Intensity

4) Validity

5) Materiality
Audacity

- A public school administrator conducting a true experiment
- Creating a half-day preschool in the public school beginning at age 3 in 1962
- Believing that student progress could be dramatically changed for very low income African American children
- “Someone had to run the first 4 minute mile”
Simplicity

- An experiment with two groups
- Focused on *educating* the child
- At each follow-up all results presented in a short monograph
- Extensive use of graphics to present results
- $7 to 1 (age 27)
Intensity

- **Program**
  - One highly qualified teacher per 6 children
  - Learning community focused on teaching

- **Research**
  - Extensive data on program, children and families
  - Broad and deep measurement of outcomes in multiple domains with frequent follow-up
  - Minimal attrition
Validity

Strong basis for “truth” claims: RCT with minor exceptions—no field study is perfect--and information on what and how

- Researchers and program developers were part of the same team and key researchers were experts in practice
- Many statistical controls, measures of family background
- Valid and reliable measures of cognition, achievement, school behavior, etc.
Materiality--measures that matter

- Achievement and Behavior in School
- Special Education, Retention, and Dropout
- Delinquency and Crime
- Employment and Earnings
- Benefit-Cost Analysis--what is the economic value?
Perry Preschool Cognitive Effects Do No Fade Out Over Time
Nurse Family Partnership

- Home visitation for disadvantaged mothers and children beginning prenatally
- Conducted by David Olds, program developer
- Series of randomized trials (true experiments)
- Moved on to more diverse populations
- Different geographic & socio-economic contexts
- Compared para-professionals to professionals
- Developed legislative agenda to fund programs
NJ’s Abbott Pre-K (31 high poverty cities): Rapid and timely research to inform policy

• Descriptive research to:
  – Persuade key stakeholders in ECEC and education
  – Persuade State Supreme Court
  – Persuade media and general public

• Initial Studies
  – Most existing ECEC is very low quality
  – Most of the children began school far behind

• After Implementation Begins Measure Progress
  – To chart a course for reaching goals
  – To generate continued support
Lessons for Program Evaluation

- Must begin with a clear goal or goals and a plan (which will change)
- Simple studies can capture the public imagination and understanding
- Have developers and decision makers (policy and practice) and researchers work together from the very beginning
- Distance between researchers and policy/practice leads to error
  - Evaluations designed by policy makers and programs alone tend to be weak
  - Evaluations designed by researchers alone tend to mismeasure & misinterpret
- Long-term consequences matter to people more than short-term
- Measure implementation as well as outcomes—to explain
- Communications are as important as the research
Hope

Most important, this study and others like it offer us hope, hope that we can make a difference in the lives of children, especially those living in poverty, and hope that focused government action can be a part of the solution. Hope is a fragile thing, easily undermined by strong doses of unfortunate, seemingly intractable realities. But it is only with hope that we can make a lasting contribution to our society.

Larry Schweinhart