

# How do they know what works?

## Studies evaluate programs, not just student performance

**ELLEN PEISNER-FEINBERG**

Guest columnist

**N**orth Carolina's More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program has been in the news lately, with attention on the importance of evaluation results for determining its benefits. Program evaluation can provide data to guide quality improvement efforts, to address accountability and to inform policy decisions.

Well-designed evaluations of education pro-

grams often focus on issues around quality improvement, as well as outcomes for children. Including an evaluation component costs money, though. What do programs gain from evaluation? And how can they ensure that the evaluation is rigorous and objective?

Both short-term and long-term evaluation studies can offer useful evidence for guiding decision-making. For early childhood education programs, short-term evalu-

ations can provide information about the more immediate benefits on children's preparation for school. For example, studies might look at children's gains in learning during the pre-Kindergarten program or at entry into kindergarten, as an indicator of school readiness. Such evaluations also can inform quality improvement, especially when they include information about the characteristics of the program and the quality of the learning environments.

Long-term evaluations can provide information about the sustainability of pre-K program effects

on longer-term outcomes, such as children's later school success. When examining such long-term effects of early education programs, it is important to recognize that children continue to have a variety of educational experiences beyond preschool, in kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade and so on. Some experiences may be positive, but others may not be as beneficial as possible. If long-term effects are found for pre-K, they indicate the powerful impact of early experiences and speak to the value

**See What Works? Page D10**

# What works?

FROM PAGE D7

of investment in early education. However, subsequent school experiences are not always designed to sustain the positive effects of preschool, and often may interfere with or mask these early benefits.

In any program evaluation, it is important to ensure that it is designed to measure appropriate outcomes based on program goals. For early education programs such as More at Four, this means examining the quality of the learning environment; the gains children make in language, cognitive and social skills; whether the target population is being served; and other characteristics such as the qualifications of staff and the types of early childhood settings.

There is value to including evaluation early in program implementation and sustaining evaluation throughout the program. Such efforts help a program stay on track with meeting its goals and can provide information for continuous quality improvement. Early and sustained involvement allows the evaluation to be based on a good understanding of the program goals and objectives as originally designed and any changes that might occur. That way, the evaluation can adequately and appro-

priately measure the program's delivery and effects, examine whether to continue to have the same level of effects over time, and understand and interpret the impact of any changes in policy or practice.

Especially for public programs such as More at Four, it is important to conduct independent evaluations to ensure that the results are unbiased and valid. Although it is important for evaluators to have a good understanding of a program, they need to function separately from the program itself. The More at Four Program has included an independent annual evaluation since its inception in the 2001-2002 school year, conducted by the FPG Child Development Institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Evaluation studies have examined statewide data on program characteristics for all local sites, classrooms and teachers every year, and have included observations of the quality of the learning environments for random samples of classrooms across the state. In addition, the evaluation has studied the short-term and long-term outcomes for children who attended More at Four from entry into the pre-K program through third grade, and has found positive effects on children's language, reading, math and social skills.

Based on a recent presentation of evaluation findings by the Office of Early Learning, which oversees the More at Four Program, the State Board of Education recognized the value of such data for providing evidence of program effectiveness. Similarly, the More at Four Program was featured at NBC's Education Nation Summit, in part because of its long history of independent evaluation. The More at Four Program has recognized the value of independent evaluation and made a commitment to use the results to improve quality, inform decision-making, and provide public accountability. Such efforts not only benefit the program in helping it meet its goals, but also benefit the public in ensuring that we are making wise investments in the education of our children.

Ellen Peisner-Feinberg is a senior scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.