

Smart Start and Quality Inclusive Child Care in North Carolina

Study Highlights

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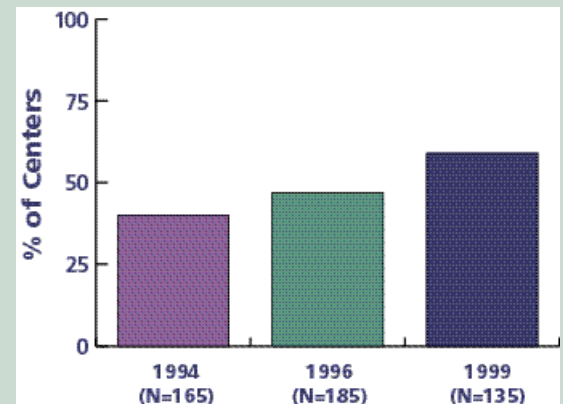
Virginia Buysse, Kathleen Bernier, Debra Skinner, & Pat Wesley
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center ■ UNC-Chapel Hill



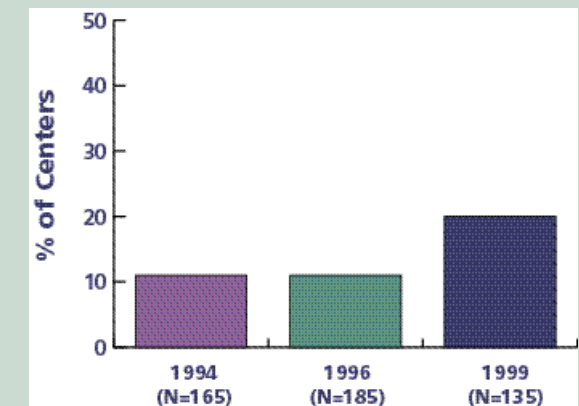
Sample Child Care Data

From the Statewide Smart Start Evaluation Study

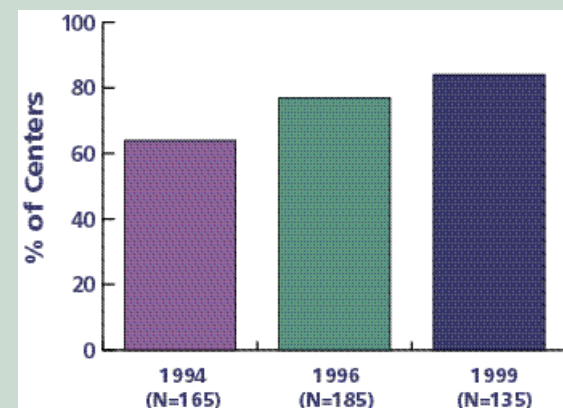
Centers Serving At Least 1 Child with Disabilities



Centers Receiving Smart Start Funds Targeting Children with Disabilities



Centers Reporting Availability of Professional Development Focused on Children with Disabilities



Serving young children with disabilities in community child care centers, rather than in specialized programs, is now a widely accepted practice called inclusion. One of the major barriers to including children with special needs in early childhood programs has been the limited number of high quality child care centers in North Carolina. Initiatives like Smart Start, aimed at improving program quality, represent an important step in removing obstacles to achieving high quality care for children with disabilities and their families. During the past five years, since Smart Start began providing technical assistance and resources to child care centers, the proportion of centers enrolling at least one child with a disability increased from 40% to 59%. A 1996 study found that the 12 original Smart Start partnerships included children with disabilities and their families in their planning efforts and activities. The 1996 study also showed that centers enrolling children with disabilities were of higher quality than centers that did not.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined the current role of Smart Start in supporting high quality inclusive child care in North Carolina. Because we still have much to learn about what it really means to provide high quality care and education to children with disabilities, we interviewed 92 parents and professionals from inclusive child care centers nominated as high quality programs. To learn more about Smart Start's efforts to improve services for children with disabilities, we also talked to 25 directors of inclusive child care centers and relied on existing data collected by the statewide Smart Start Evaluation Study.

Summary

Findings

1. According to parents and professionals, the definition of quality inclusive child care has at least two parts. First, it includes factors such as qualified personnel and developmentally appropriate practice that affect the program's general quality for all young children. Second, it includes practices such as providing therapies and adapting the classroom environment that address the needs of individual children and their families.
2. Parents and professionals reported that there were several benefits of high quality inclusive child care. These include
 - enhanced development and well-being for children with special needs
 - increased acceptance of children with disabilities by children without disabilities
 - additional support for all parents such as regular communication and opportunities for parent education and family social events
 - a positive impact on all parents' expectations and beliefs about child development and disabilities.
3. During the 5 years between 1994 and 1999, the proportion of child care centers enrolling at least one child with a disability increased from 40% to 59%. This substantial increase suggests that more inclusive settings are now available for young children.
4. Approximately 8% of the 1998–1999 expenditures among all 82 Smart Start partnerships was allocated for activities that targeted children with disabilities.
5. Compared to previous years, child care centers now receive more Smart Start funds to improve services for children with disabilities. These funds are used for a variety of activities including
 - improvements in the overall quality of child care programs
 - child care subsidies for children with disabilities
 - adaptive equipment and modifications of the classroom environment
 - health and developmental screenings
 - access to disability specialists and staff
 - salary supplements and staff bonuses
 - teacher training related to serving young children with special needs.

Recommendations

1. Develop a statewide comprehensive approach to monitoring the quality of inclusive child care programs. This should include identifying outcomes for individual children and families and describing specific program practices that improve those outcomes.
2. Continue to document Smart Start activities and expenditures that support high quality inclusive child care in North Carolina to educate consumers and to assist local partnerships in strategic planning.
3. Continue to document the proportion of child care centers enrolling at least one child with disabilities as a way of monitoring the extent to which early childhood inclusion is being implemented in the state.