

Quality Early Learning — Key To School Success

A First-Phase Program Evaluation Research Report For
Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Initiative (ECI)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY BY

Stephen J. Bagnato, Ed.D., NCSP, Director
SPECS Program Evaluation Research Team
Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh
The UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh

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Introduction: A Community Success Story

Most children start kindergarten and first grade with big smiles and high hopes. But too many kids see those hopes dim as they slip farther and farther behind their classmates. Extreme poverty and a lack of quality early learning experiences are only two of the factors that cause too many capable children to start behind and stay behind. The social costs—in both human and financial terms—seem insurmountable.

It doesn't have to be that way. In Pittsburgh's high-risk neighborhoods, the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) is proving locally what research has shown elsewhere: early learning in quality preschool settings is key to helping all kids succeed—now and in the future.

This executive summary highlights the major initial outcomes of an ongoing research study of ECI. Where fully put into operation, the ECI model in its first phase (nearly 3 years, from 1997-2000), shows impressive and promising results. Children learned early skills for school success; mentored programs achieved stringent quality standards; with teachers' help, parents learned new ways to nurture their children's development; and communities proved their leadership and made their programs successful. Perhaps most importantly, ECI children are beating the odds and succeeding in the early grades.



The teachers tell me everything that's going on and I can work with my kids on things they need to improve. They're doing great, better than I even hoped they would.

Robert Williams
Parent of two ECI children

Overwhelming evidence shows us that high-quality early childhood education programs are a worthwhile investment in our future because they have long-lasting positive effects, including preventing later and more costly expenditures by our social and juvenile justice systems. Over the long term, high-quality early education programs will provide a solid foundation for both school success and workforce development.

Jim Roddey
Allegheny County Chief Executive



How Is The ECI Research Accomplished?

Rigorous evaluation has been integral to the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) from the start. A national competition resulted in the selection of **SPECS (Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings)**, an independent, collaborative research team from The Early Childhood Partnerships program of Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and the UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh.

SPECS uses an innovative and untraditional "authentic assessment and program evaluation" approach that:

- Collects child progress data on all ECI children only in natural everyday settings and routines
- Uses teachers, parents, and others as the primary observers of children
- Samples only functional, teachable skills that are predictive of early school success
- Offers ongoing feedback to teachers, parents, and community leaders for their mutual care of children and improvement of their programs

SPECS conducts the research on ECI by monitoring child, family, program, community, health, and early school success outcomes and benchmarks.

What Is The Early Childhood Initiative (ECI)?

The Early Childhood Initiative is a visionary "natural experiment" conceived and championed in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania through the leadership of The Heinz Endowments and funded privately, primarily by business, corporate, and foundation partners.

ECI's overarching mission is to offer low-income children and families quality early care and education in their own urban neighborhoods. ECI teachers and parents work together to nurture children's language, thinking, play, social, and behavioral skills—the critical building blocks for early learning and school success.

Despite setbacks, barriers, and corrections in the original project stewardship, ECI programs have been successfully created and operated by community leaders in Braddock, Wilkensburg, Sto-Rox, Homewood, The Hill, East Liberty, Steel Valley, and Highlands. Children and programs have thrived, as have the associated local ventures and supports created around the ECI programs.

The future shows promise in the Heinz Endowments' funding of statewide ECI ventures in Erie, York, and Lancaster, as well as in the Braddock and Wilkensburg initiatives, which are now operated under the stewardship of the Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, OR FOR A COPY OF THE FULL REPORT, CONTACT THE SPECS EVALUATION TEAM

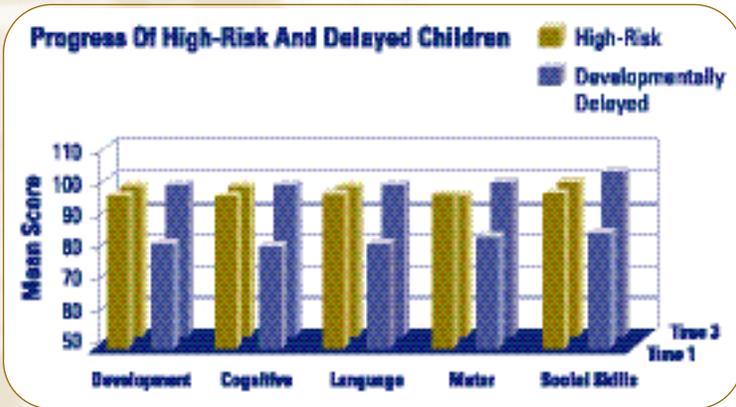
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The SPECS team has carefully tracked the progress of over 1000 enrolled children since ECI's earliest days. Progress is observed and profiled three times each year, with a focus on thinking, language, early literacy, social, behavioral, and play skills. Feedback is regularly given to teachers and parents to guide their teaching and care.

ECI CHILDREN AVOIDED EXPECTED SKILL LOSSES, LEARNED AT ACCELERATED RATES, AND EVENTUALLY PERFORMED AT AVERAGE LEVELS.

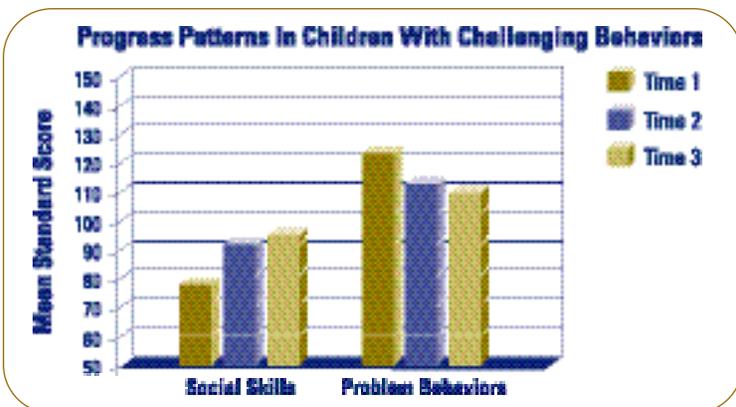
National research shows that, without strong interventions, high-risk children start declining developmentally before age 3, and start school far behind their age-peers.

- At first evaluation, 86% of the ECI children were high-risk; after nearly 3 years of ECI, they not only avoided declines but maintained a slightly accelerated rate of gain, exceeding maturational expectations.
- 14% already showed delays serious enough to meet early intervention criteria for special education in Pennsylvania. (The national incidence rate for delays is 3-8%.) After nearly 3 years of ECI, children with delays showed accelerated gains beyond expectations and into the normal range of development.



ECI PROGRAMS PROMOTED EFFECTIVE SOCIAL SKILLS AND SELF-CONTROL BEHAVIORS.

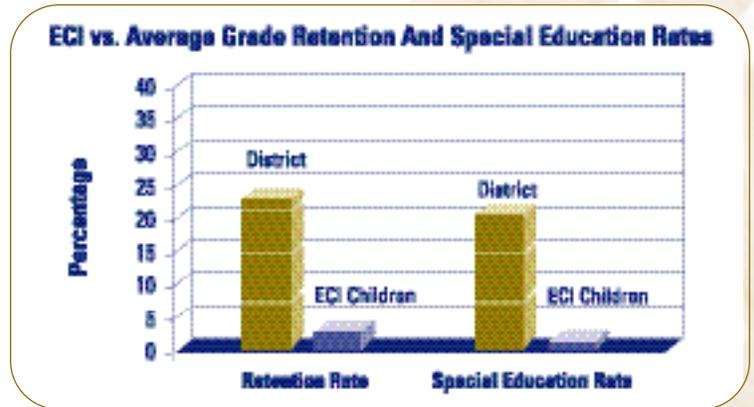
- 18% of children demonstrated social skills delays and behavioral problems severe enough to merit a mental health diagnosis. At the end of nearly three years of ECI, these children showed normal social skills and behavior patterns.



THE SUCCESS OF ECI CHILDREN IN KINDERGARTEN AND FIRST GRADE WAS FAR GREATER THAN EXPECTED.

By October of 2000, over 100 ECI children had transitioned to kindergarten and first grade.

- In school districts within ECI communities, the average primary grade retention rate was 23%; for the ECI children, the rate was less than 2%.
- In school districts within ECI communities, the average special education placement rate was 21%; for the ECI children, the rate was less than 1%.
- Kindergarten and first grade teachers assessed ECI children as performing within the average to above-average range compared to their age-peers nationally on measures of early learning.



CHILDREN IN ECI PROGRAMS SHOWED GREATER PROGRESS THAN THOSE IN NON-ECI PROGRAMS.

- ECI children demonstrated a higher slope of developmental progress than children in non-ECI programs in most skill areas (for instance, language and social) with an average gain of nearly 20 specific early school success curricular skills.

The results reported here are statistically significant beyond the 95% confidence interval and document child progress as a result of ECI participation that exceeds progress due to normal maturation.

For taxpayers, the implications of quality early care and education are staggering. In our district, the average yearly per-child cost of special education supports is \$8,300; that's in addition to the cost of regular classroom education. Over 12 years, that's \$99,600 per child. In many cases, much of that expenditure can be avoided if a child has access to quality preschool care and education.

Ron Grimm, Ph.D.
Superintendent
Woodland Hills School District

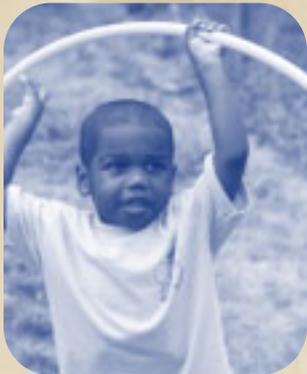
What Distinguishes An "ECI Program"?

Four major features are common to every ECI program, no matter what the program's setting:

- Weekly mentoring to improve program quality, based on standards and practices of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- Diverse ways to encourage parent participation
- Ongoing child assessment and feedback to guide curricular instruction and care
- Community-based leadership and interagency partnerships, especially with schools

Most of the children I taught came from disadvantaged families—but there was an enormous difference in achievement, capability, and attitude between the students who'd had quality preschool experiences and those who had not.

Cheryl Cole
Former kindergarten teacher
Woodland Hills



The ECI team really held the line on what constituted "quality," bringing a critical eye and making recommendations about the sites and staffing—but they also operated like partners, and they were invested in the community.

Val Ford
Director, Early Childcare
Homewood

Who Are The ECI Children, Families, And Teachers?

- Ages: Infants (2 weeks) to preschoolers (5.5 years); average = 3 years, 3 months
- Currently, 1350 children; 834 children for first-phase research
- Average program participation: 12.2 months (range= 4 - 40 months)
- 47% girls, 53% boys
- 73.4% African-American, 24.3% Caucasian, 2.3% Asian and Hispanic
- Median yearly family income: \$13,204
- Education of teachers and caregivers: MS 1%, BS 22%, Associate 27%, High School 50%
- Average experience of all providers: 6.8 years

RESULTS: Mentoring Ensures Program Quality

ECI programs vary, and include new early childhood centers, existing providers, Head Start settings, early literacy programs, family child care homes, and inclusive early intervention programs.

For every program, ECI Management (ECIM) provides weekly mentoring to teachers and administrators about curricula, equipment, physical settings, and educational practices. Programs improved considerably through the mentoring.

- In only 2 years, 50% of programs met quality standards for NAEYC accreditation.
- 70% of teachers enhanced their child development knowledge and practices.
- ECIM consultation improved program quality and intensity and led to child success.

RESULTS: Community Leadership Makes Programs Successful

SPECS researchers meet regularly with ECI community leadership councils and provide feedback on community efficacy, goal attainment, and community supports for ECI programs. Throughout the process, the councils have shown extraordinary vision, commitment, diversity, creativity, and expertise in nurturing their ECI programs, despite encountering institutional barriers.

- 90% of ECI leaders reached consensus about their shared goals and their ability to reach the goals.
- ECI leadership councils attained over 75% of their workplan objectives for their programs.
- 34 programs were created and 14 existing programs were expanded, stimulating the creation and growth of small businesses.
- New infrastructure and collaborations emerged because of the entrepreneurial skills of ECI leaders.
- Creation of the School Readiness Group, a cross-community organization promoting quality early education, underscores the cohesion, ingenuity and resiliency of ECI leaders.

RESULTS: Parents Learn To Help Their Children Succeed

SPECS members observe and interview ECI families to gather information about child development and behavior at home, parenting behavior and knowledge, expectations about child development, and perceptions about family stress and social support. During ECI, parents improved their knowledge and skills and helped their children to succeed.

- 80% of parents gained more effective nurturing skills.
- Most parents showed average parenting skills after 3 years of ECI (based on national norms).
- Parents set expectations for learning and success.
- Parents learned ways to encourage early reading.
- Parents received social supports when needed.

What Lessons Should We Learn For The Future?

There is still much research to be done—but the interim results reported here are nevertheless conclusive and promising. Through the ECI programs, children’s lives are being changed for the better, and the change is sustaining. There is no doubt: ECI works.

The SPECS research underscores the key elements* that enable children of poverty to beat the odds, learn early, and begin to succeed in school.

- Standards and ongoing mentoring are essential to program quality improvements.
- When preschool teachers support parent participation, parents learn to effectively nurture their children’s development.
- With the right incentives, respect, and latitude, community leaders can champion creative ventures that enable their programs and neighborhoods to achieve visionary goals.
- Agencies must collaborate “outside the box” to support children at developmental risk.
- Schools are indispensable partners in the success of early care and education programs.

Quality early learning programs like ECI’s are education reform... welfare reform... crime prevention... workforce development... and community development, all in a locally controlled “grass roots” form.

Despite all the evidence, Pennsylvania is one of only nine states that do not fund quality preschool programs. A number of organizations are working hard to change that, and many of them are using SPECS/ECI results to help motivate legislative action.

As statewide evidence continues to mount, perhaps legislators and other key decision-makers will come to realize that there is no longer any doubt: quality early learning programs benefit children, families, schools, business, and society.

These programs aren’t a luxury; they’re a necessity—and a smart investment.

* SPECS ECI results align closely with past national research; see Ramey, CT and Ramey, SL (1998). Early intervention and early experience. *American Psychologist*, 53(2), 109-120.



What Are The Benchmarks For ECI Success?

To encourage a common focus on quality and school success, ECI programs and leaders work toward benchmarks—Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)—developed by ECI’s original consortium of business, corporate, foundation, and community leaders.

Forty KPIs were established in these areas: Child, Family, Program, Community, Health, and School Transition. Over the first 3-year phase of ECI, nearly 90% of the KPIs were achieved or surpassed by community leadership groups and their ECI programs.



For low-income children, first grade is bearing down on them like a freight train.

Brookings Institution –
Brookings Papers on
Education Policy, 2000

Quality early education is a workforce development issue. In addition to academic achievement, children in programs like ECI’s learn important life-long skills—including cooperation, self-control, persistence, and problem-solving ability—that will help them succeed in school and, later, at work.

Murry Gerber
President and CEO
Equitable Resources, Inc.



What Skills Did ECI Children Learn?

- Knowledge of numbers and counting
- Everyday problem-solving in natural situations
- Expressing themselves through words and sentences
- Waiting, sharing, taking turns, following directions, paying attention
- Drawing, writing letters and numbers
- Cooperating in group activities and games
- “Reading:” singing, rhyming, enjoying books
- Remembering details of stories read aloud
- Creative and pretend play
- Making friends
- Showing respect to adults and friends

The SPECS evaluation team is privileged to work with remarkable people in Pittsburgh's ECI communities. Providers, teachers, and parents show enormous dedication. Children in the programs inspire with their eagerness and joy in learning. Business, corporate, and foundation leaders have our respect for their vision and their commitment to school readiness and our role in ECI. Perhaps most of all, we are humbled to work with the people associated with the ECI programs in urban neighborhoods, especially the community leaders who have shown such unwavering commitment and creativity. ECI would have been impossible without the unique talents of these partners:

Greater Braddock Early Childhood Network

Robert Grom, CEO, Heritage Health Foundation

Wilkinsburg Early Childhood Initiative

Leon Haynes, Executive Director

Primary Care Health Services Homewood Early Childhood Initiative

Wilford Payne, Executive Director

Sto-Rox Early Learning Network

Father Regis J. Ryan, Executive Director

East Liberty Early Childhood Initiative Network

Carl Redwood, Program Director, Kingsley Association

SouthSide Early Childhood Initiative

Hugh Brannan III, Executive Director, Brashear Association

Highlands Early Childhood Initiative

Nancy Kuritzky, Program Director

Hill District Early Childhood Initiative

James Henry, Executive Director, Hill House Association

Steel Valley Early Childhood Initiative

Penny Dykes, Program Director

THE SPECS TEAM

Stephen J. Bagnato, Ed.D., Director

George McClomb, Ph.D., Director, Community Strand

Thanita Adams, MA, MSW, Site Liaison

Jennette Cook-Kilroy, M.Ed., SPECS and Program Strand Coordinator

Heidi Feldman, M.D., Ph.D., Health Strand Coordinator

Elizabeth Fuchs, BA, Coordinator

Ken Jaros, Ph.D., Family Strand Coordinator

Margie Matesa, M.Ed., Site Liaison

Connie Nojeim, BA, Site Liaison

Eleana Shair, M.Ed., Data Management Coordinator

Julia Slater, M.Ed., School Transition Strand Coordinator

Janel Smith-Jones, Ph.D., Child Strand Coordinator

Kristy Stefero, BA, Research Assistant

Hoi Suen, Ph.D., Statistics and Research Design, Penn State

Carol Whitacre, BS, Early Literacy Strand Coordinator

SPECS Evaluation Team

Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh

The UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh

3705 Fifth Avenue

Pittsburgh, PA 15213

(412) 692-6300

Email: uclid@pitt.edu

www.pitt.edu/~uclid

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Dr. Bagnato and his Early Childhood Partnerships program were awarded the 2001 University of Pittsburgh Chancellor's Distinguished Public Service Award for their work with ECI and other community joint ventures aimed at improving the quality of programs which support families and young children at developmental risk and with developmental disabilities. The award nominations came from diverse community partners.



Stephen J. Bagnato, Ed.D., Director



George McClomb, Ph.D., Director, Community Strand



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