

Road to the Future

UNIVERSAL HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL IN SEATTLE



by Marcella Fecteau Weiner

Over the past several years, there has been a renewed interest in research (such as the HighScope Perry Preschool Study) that shows that high-quality preschool narrows the achievement gap and improves the social and academic future of children, particularly those from low-income environments.

Despite the evidence in favor of high-quality preschool for all, in 2013, just under half of US three- and four-year-olds were attending a full-day preprimary program (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). In Seattle, Washington, where preschool enrollment was already well above the national average, Mayor Ed Murray, along with City Council President Tim Burgess and other council members, took notice of the research findings and asked themselves what they could do to ensure that all young Seattle children get the best possible start on their way to elementary school, high school, and beyond. To this end, the city council unanimously passed a resolution in September 2013 with the goal to make



The goal of Seattle's preschool program is to provide high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds.

voluntary, high-quality preschool available — and affordable — for all three- and four-year-olds in Seattle (Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning, 2016).

On the Path to Approval

In the Spring of 2014, with the support of the city council, Mayor Murray proposed a four-year, \$58 million property tax levy to fund the first part (a demonstration phase) of the Seattle preschool program (Murray, 2014). Under the Seattle preschool program (SPP), all three- and four-year-olds in Seattle will have access to high-quality preschool. The entire cost for preschool (approximately \$11,000 per child per

year) will be covered for families making up to three times the poverty level (Murray, 2014). In Seattle, this means that a family of four making less than \$80,000 can enroll their child in preschool — for free (Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning, 2016). For families with incomes greater than this, tuition is determined on a sliding scale. Seattle homeowners share the cost, which translates into about \$43 a year for the average homeowner (Halverson, 2015).

In the Summer of 2014, the city council unanimously agreed to send Murray's plan to the November 2014 ballot for voters to decide (Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning, 2016). Seattle residents overwhelmingly approved the SPP, with 69 percent of voters casting "yes" for the city's universal preK proposition (Halverson, 2015). With 14 classrooms in already functioning preschools, including three in Seattle Public Schools, the SPP got off to an auspicious start in September 2015 (Kroman, 2015).

Focus on Quality

Murray’s first goal for the SPP is to improve the quality of existing programs and then increase enrollment “that will build toward serving 2,000 children in 100 classrooms by 2018” (Murray, 2014, p. 7). The SPP is provided through a mixed-delivery system that offers preschool classes in public schools, child care centers, homes, city parks, and church basements that have been evaluated and certified by Seattle’s Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL). To ensure the quality of the preschool classes participating, the SPP pays its preschool teachers a K–12 wage and requires that they have a bachelor’s degree and attend trainings to meet competency requirements (Kroman, 2015). (Teachers who don’t have a bachelor’s degree can apply for waivers if they have 10 years of combined education/experience and will receive some tuition assistance to achieve education requirements.) In addition, all SPP pro-

To ensure high-quality instruction to Seattle’s preschoolers, the SPP provides early childhood educators with the necessary training.

viders need to use “curricula that reflect evidence-based practices, which are likely to include purposeful play-based learning and social-emotional development that lay a lasting foundation for strong future academic and life achievement” (Seattle City Council, 2013).

To ensure the quality of the preschool programs participating, the SPP pays its preschool teachers a K–12 wage.

Currently, SPP providers must use either the HighScope Preschool Curriculum or Creative Curriculum, but, in the next few years of the program, potential providers will be able to apply for a curriculum waiver. To date, 60 percent of SPP providers use the HighScope Preschool Curriculum.

High-Quality Training for High-Quality Preschool Programs

While Mayor Murray and city council representatives worked on garnering support for the SPP and its subsequent implementation, Sonja Griffin, manager of the Quality Practice and Professional Development Unit in the Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning, works on the ground with early childhood educators to give them the training they need so they can provide the high-quality programs that Murray believes are so important. The HighScope Preschool Curriculum is their curriculum of choice, because, as Griffin explains, “it is a constructivist approach based on evidence that supports young children’s development.”

Griffin thinks HighScope has an advantage over some of the other early childhood curricula because it trains teachers on how to share power in the classroom with young children. “And I think for the children in our communi-



HighScope's PCC, TOT, and FCC Training



The Early Learning Academy delivers its training to prospective early childhood educators in Seattle through specific courses designed by HighScope to prepare teachers for implementing the HighScope Curriculum in the classroom.

The four-week Preschool Curriculum Course (PCC) is designed to prepare teachers and caregivers to implement the HighScope educational approach in their early childhood programs. Using carefully selected training materials, participants focus on child development, developmentally appropriate practice, and their own educational development. Those who complete the program are qualified to implement the HighScope educational approach in their programs and assess its enhancement of children's development.

Teachers who have completed the PCC are eligible to take additional course work and become Certified HighScope Trainers. Agencies that make this investment in training ensure the integrity of the HighScope Curriculum within their programs. In addition, Certified Trainers can help agencies save time and money by training new staff to implement the HighScope Curriculum and by providing curriculum updates to senior staff. Those who participate in the Training of Trainers (TOT) Course are asked to demonstrate their proficiency in leading and supporting other teachers as they implement the HighScope Curriculum.

HighScope's Family Child Care (FCC) training series is intended for providers working in licensed family child care homes. The workshops offer providers an opportunity to learn, share, grow, and support one another as part of a learning community. Through active participation in workshops and interaction with other family child care providers and the trainer, trainees build a strong network of confident child care providers who demonstrate their new learning in their child care centers with the help of an on-site coach.

This delivery system ensures that the integrity of HighScope Curriculum content and training is maintained from one cohort of trainees to the next, and for all classrooms where the HighScope Curriculum is used.

ty, especially children who are coming from low-income communities who might not have had that opportunity to be in a position of shared power, HighScope is an opportunity for them to now experience having a voice in the classroom and having that sense of power," says Griffin.

In the Fall of 2013, what was then Seattle's Office for Education (now part of DEEL) launched its Early Learning Academy to provide HighScope training through its Preschool Curriculum Course (PCC), Training of Trainers (TOT), and Family Child Care (FCC) training series. The academy also provides on-site coaching to help providers implement the curriculum after their initial training and offers three annual institutes where participants can further advance their knowledge about developmentally appropriate practices for young children.

The Early Learning Academy is committed to providing PCC training to a different cohort of 40 teachers

There was an overwhelming response to the Family Child Care training — the first two groups were filled after just two outreach meetings.

each year until 2018. Additionally, teachers who have completed the PCC can apply to become trainers; so far, 16 educators have completed the TOT program and 12 will finish the program this year. In August 2016, two cohorts of family child care providers (for a total of 60 providers) completed their HighScope FCC training.

Family Child Care (FCC) Training

It's been nearly three years since the Early Learning Academy introduced the FCC training program and the response has been overwhelming — the first two cohorts were filled after just two out-

reach meetings. The demand for training is particularly strong for the Somali family child care providers, who represent approximately 50 percent of the participants in the FCC training and are a large percentage of the family child care providers in Seattle. All of the FCC trainings are attended by a Somali interpreter who simultaneously translates what the HighScope trainer teaches.

Griffin, who has attended most of these Saturday trainings, has been most impressed by the eagerness and responsiveness of these care providers. "The Somali family child care providers are very excited about this training. For many of them, they have not had a lot of training," she said. "You can see they are so eager for the knowledge and information." In addition to learning about the HighScope approach and developmentally appropriate practices, providers who complete this training meet specific portions of their licensing requirements as well.

The commitment of these FCC providers to their training is unwavering. For two years, these teachers have attended sessions on two Saturdays a month; as of August 2016, they have completed 30 sessions of training. Griffin has marveled at the transformation she has seen in these teachers — in how they view themselves as professionals and also in how they have transformed their learning environments in their homes to better support the needs of young children. In the Fall of 2017, the SPP will launch a family child care pilot program to see how family child care can fit into its overall goals.

Challenges and Successes

Providing a wide range of training to a diverse group of early childhood professionals is not without its challenges. In Seattle's PCC training, for example, not all teachers from a particular center attend training at the same time, which has made it difficult for the few teachers who received training when they return to their center. These teachers sometimes find it hard to implement new ideas they learned from the PCC when

Sonja Griffin Presented With Weikart Award

During the 2016 HighScope International Conference, the HighScope Educational Research Foundation presented the David and Phyllis Weikart Achievement Award to Sonja Griffin. The award is given annually to people outside of the HighScope staff who the Foundation feels have demonstrated exemplary dedication to HighScope's vision and mission.

Griffin, manager of the Quality Practice and Professional Development Unit in the Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning, was presented with this award for her outstanding leadership in fostering exceptional training programs for early childhood teachers in the Seattle community.



their colleagues don't have the same understanding. To better support teachers who have completed the PCC training, HighScope field consultants now work closely with teachers who have completed the training by joining them in the classroom and providing them with coaching to help them implement the HighScope Curriculum. Field consultants also work side by side with these teachers to complete HighScope's Preschool Program Quality Assessment

Teachers realized that being culturally relevant means really knowing your children, families, and their communities.

(PQA), a rating instrument designed to evaluate quality and identify staff training needs. Griffin feels that this coaching has helped teachers become much more intentional in implementing the HighScope Curriculum.

Another challenge encountered by Griffin and her colleagues was the perception that some teachers in the PCC training had that the HighScope Curriculum was not culturally relevant to the children they serve. As teachers progressed through the training, however, they learned more about the HighScope Curriculum and what it promotes: using the children's interests to develop activities; adding real items that represent the children's homes into the learning environment; and talking with the children about their interests, their families, and their community. They began to realize that this was what it meant to be culturally relevant: to really know your children, your families, and your community and apply what you see there to the strategies that the HighScope Curriculum provides.

In general, the teachers' overwhelming response to the HighScope training has been very positive. Griffin says, "I see so much excitement when I'm there [at the PCC and FCC trainings] visiting.

The teachers love plan-do-review, the small-group times, and the fact that this curriculum enables them to be more intentional when working with children."

For many of the teachers, participating in the HighScope training has been their "aha" moment, and Griffin has been particularly impressed with how the teachers in the Seattle Public Schools have embraced the HighScope Curriculum. Griffin recalls seeing very skeptical looks on the faces of Seattle Public School teachers at their first training session. At the end of the training, Griffin notes, one of those "skeptical" teachers told her, "Now I get it. I wish I would have known three years ago when I was teaching kindergarten about the importance of early learning and why we do the things we do." In the Fall of 2015, the Seattle Public School system had three SPP preschools; this year it will open up five more.

The Future of the Seattle Preschool Program

The SPP continues to work toward its goal for universal pre-K for all Seattle families: It plans to expand to 70 classrooms in 2017 and 100 by the following year, building toward serving 2,000 children by its fourth year of implementation (Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning, 2016). The SPP will inevitably run across challenges, whether that be considerations with training, spacing issues, or continuity of care. Whatever the challenges, though, the SPP has won the support of Mayor Murray and the city council, and the teachers and voters who realize the importance of early childhood education in improving the lives of Seattle's children and families. ■

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Through training, these teachers learn how to use the children's interests to develop activities that ensure active learning.

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