Supporting Great Start Readiness Program Teachers in Michigan

November 2018

INFORMING THE DEBATE

MAPPR Policy Research Brief

Institute for Public Policy
and Social Research
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

About the Michigan Applied Public Policy Briefs

INFORMING THE DEBATE

The paper series, Informing the Debate, is generated out of grant-funded, policy-relevant research sponsored by the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR).

The IPPSR program, Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Program or MAPPR, supports research on current issues held across communities within the State, and often, across the nation. Policy researchers from a variety of disciplines summarize research outcomes and their implications once they have completed the funded project.

When developing the paper series initiative in 1992, the topics of the papers were submitted following a two-day meeting with leaders from the business sector, nonprofit agencies, foundations, and university faculty and staff. That group evolved into the Urban Research Interest Group.

The Urban Research Interest Group recognized the pressure on urban core leaders to make critical decisions that continue to impact people long into the future. A commitment to generating background research to add to the core of debate on possible solutions to complex, urban problems was made. The dynamic connection between urban, suburban, and rural communities was quickly noted and the research support was extended to all communities.

The expected outcomes of the paper series include discussion that fosters and strengthens multidimensional connections among policy, academic, and practicing professionals. Throughout the years, the series has continued to cultivate research interest in policy-relevant issues among university faculty for consideration of decision makers across Michigan communities, and has often been reviewed by other states.

Additional information about IPPSR, the Michigan Applied Public Policy Research (MAPPR) Program, and further activity is available on the website, www.ippsr.msu.edu or by contacting AnnMarie Schneider, Grant Administrator at annmarie@msu.edu.

INFORMING THE DEBATE

MAPPR Policy Research Brief

Supporting Great Start Readiness Program Teachers in Michigan

Authors
Bethany Wilinski
Assistant Professor
Department of Teacher Education
Michigan State University

Alyssa Morley
Ph.D. Candidate in Educational Policy
Department of Teacher Education
Michigan State University

Jessica Marie Landgraf
Ph.D. Student in Educational Policy
Department of Teacher Education
Michigan State University

Sponsor
The Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
College of Social Science
Michigan State University

Series Editors
AnnMarie Schneider, M.S.
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Michigan Applied Public Policy Research (MAPPR) Grant Program Administrator
Michigan State University

Leah Owens
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Communications Assistant
Michigan State University

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

States are increasingly investing in publicly-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs; the population of four year-olds enrolled in public pre-K has more than doubled over the past decade. Because pre-K participation can lead to improved academic achievement and economic returns to society, forty-three states and the District of Columbia now provide publicly-funded pre-K. Teachers are critical to the success of public pre-K. Research has shown a positive relationship between teacher credentials and the quality of their programs (Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010; Early et al., 2007). While teachers are critical to fulfilling the promise of pre-K, it can be difficult to retain teachers due, in large part, to compensation issues (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay, 2012). Teacher turnover negatively affects program quality. There is some evidence that teachers are more likely to continue in the profession when they feel supported, are fairly compensated, and have positive working relationships. Understanding more about the factors that support pre-K teachers' job satisfaction and well-being is paramount to ensuring pre-K program quality.

In this report, we review findings from a study that investigated the experiences of teachers in Michigan's public pre-K program, Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). We interviewed GSRP teachers working in public elementary schools to learn more about the factors that contribute to their job satisfaction and well-being. This particular set of teachers, which we refer to as public school pre-K teachers, is of interest because their work is especially complex. Pre-K is situated between two very different systems, early childhood education (ECE) and K-12, with divergent approaches to teaching and learning (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). When pre-K is housed in a public elementary school, the differences between the two systems come into sharp focus, and pre-K teachers must navigate the tensions between the two. To understand more about what it is like for teachers to work in this "borderland" (Britt & Sumsion, 2003), we conducted an interview study of 30 public school pre-K teachers. Because we know that teachers' work does not happen in isolation, we also interviewed kindergarten teachers and administrators in their building, as well as Intermediate School District (ISD) officials who oversee the implementation of GSRP.

Our findings suggest five key factors that affect public school pre-K teachers' work experiences: (1) their perception that early childhood education is valued; (2) compensation; (3) classroom location; (4) ideas about "best practice"; and (5) relationships with colleagues. Many GSRP teachers reported feeling that their work was treated as unimportant and expressed a desire to have their work recognized by the district and building colleagues. Low wages and a lack of compensation parity for GSRP teachers was one of the reasons they felt their work was not valued. Compensation was a deciding factor for some teachers who considered leaving pre-K. Teachers also described feeling isolated in their work as a result of their classroom location. Some teachers whose classrooms were located in middle school buildings or district preschool centers described feeling isolated from colleagues and important resources. Even among teachers whose classrooms were in

elementary schools, many described limited interaction with colleagues and a lack of access to much of the school building, which contributed to feelings of isolation.

GSRP teachers' sense of belonging in their school building was also shaped by the fact that their approach to teaching and learning was very different from elementary grades teachers. This led some pre-K teachers to see their work as disconnected from the rest of the building because they were "speaking a different language" than their elementary grades colleagues. Finally, many of the GSRP teachers we interviewed described that they had limited opportunities to interact with elementary grades colleagues and little support from their building administrators. This seemed to diminish GSRP teachers' job satisfaction.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following steps be taken to improve GSRP teacher well-being and job satisfaction:

- Ensure compensation parity for public school GSRP teachers
- Provide a clear career ladder in GSRP, with opportunities for advancement
- Ensure that GSRP teachers and students are included in their school building community
- Raise awareness among school administrators about the importance of early childhood education and GSRP
- Provide training for administrators to support GSRP teachers
- Raise awareness among kindergarten teachers about GSRP
- Create opportunities for GSRP and kindergarten teachers to interact and learn from one another
- Provide support for advocacy of play-based learning

While these are long-term goals, the state can begin making progress immediately toward improving GSRP teachers' working conditions. We recommend that the state begin collecting data on GSRP teacher compensation (starting salary, salary schedule, benefits, and payment for professional responsibilities), retention, and career trajectories in order to begin to understand more broadly the working conditions of GSRP teachers.

OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

States are increasingly investing in publicly-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-K) because of its potential to redress achievement disparities (Gormley & Gayer, 2005) and yield economic returns to individuals and society (Heckman, 2011).[1] Public pre-K is offered in 43 states and the District of Columbia. Between 2002 and 2016, the percentage of four year-olds enrolled in public pre-K across the U.S. more than doubled, from 14 to 32% (Barnett, Friedman-Krauss, Weisenfeld, Kasmin, & Squires, 2017). As more children participate in public pre-K, there has been a growing focus on program quality; which have

[1] Public pre-K is defined as "programs funded and administered by the state with a primary goal of educating 4-year-olds who are typically developing and who are in classrooms at least two days per week" (Barnett et al., 2009).

been associated with better learning outcomes for children. Teachers are critical to the pre-K quality equation; research shows evidence of a relationship between teacher credentials and program quality (Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010; Early et al., 2007). Yet, keeping teachers in pre-K is a challenge; the annual turnover rate for pre-K teachers in the U.S. is 15% (Allen & Kelly, 2015). This is a concern because teacher turnover negatively affects program quality (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay, 2012). Retaining high-quality teachers is therefore essential to delivering on the promise of pre-K and ensuring that young children are provided with the tools for academic success. Evidence suggests that teachers in all grades are more likely to continue in the profession when they feel supported in their work and have positive relationships with co-workers and supervisors (Jeon & Wells, 2018; Kilgallon et al., 2008; Wells, 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Teacher retention is also influenced by wages, experience, and job satisfaction (Cumming, 2017; Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014; Totenhagen et al., 2016).

Pre-K teaching poses a particular challenge to teacher job satisfaction and retention because it occupies a unique space in the educational landscape, situated between early childhood education (ECE) and the K-12 system. ECE and K-12 are distinct systems with separate histories and philosophies, differences that manifest primarily in divergent approaches to the curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). For example, the elementary grades are typically organized by content area and governed by standards and accountability frameworks (Goldstein, 2007; O'Day, 2002) while pre-K teachers tend to prioritize developmentally appropriate practice and focus on individual students' growth and development (Brown, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). When public pre-K programs are located in elementary schools, the tensions between these two approaches are brought into sharp focus. Pre-K teachers in these settings must therefore actively negotiate varied perspectives on "best practice." The challenge of navigating curricular and pedagogical differences is further compounded by the fact that pre-K teachers in public schools earn on average $10,000 less per year than kindergarten teachers in the same building (Whitebook et al., 2014). We posit that the combination of these two factors poses a particular set of challenges for public school pre-K teachers, which may create obstacles to teacher retention. By understanding public school pre-K teachers' daily experiences, we can identify policy levers to improve their job satisfaction and well-being, with a goal of improving public school pre-K teacher retention.

PUBLIC SCHOOL PRE-K TEACHERS IN MICHIGAN

Like many states, Michigan is making a substantial investment in public pre-K. Michigan's publicly funded pre-K program, the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), has provided free preschool to at-risk children since 1988. Recently, GSRP received an additional $65 million budget allocation under Governor Snyder. GSRP is an example of a targeted pre-K program; it serves a small percentage of four year-olds who qualify based on the presence of risk factors that may affect their academic achievement (Michigan Department of Education, 2015). In 2016, 34% of four year-olds in Michigan participated in GSRP, and the state spent an average of $6,291 per child (Barnett et al., 2017). State

funding for GSRP is administered by Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), which contract with school districts, public school academies, and community based organizations to provide GSRP. In this brief, we focus specifically on the experiences of GSRP teachers working in public schools, who we refer to as "public school pre-K teachers" or "public school GSRP teachers."

In Michigan, decisions about pre-K teacher compensation are made at the district level. School districts decide whether or not GSRP teachers will be included in the collective bargaining unit, which has implications for their ability to achieve pay parity with elementary school colleagues. Many districts take pre-K teacher qualifications into account when determining compensation. There are two pathways to becoming a GSRP teacher in Michigan: a bachelor's degree in child development (or a related field) or a bachelor's degree with a teaching license. Teachers who hold a teaching license have greater wage and career mobility because they are able to teach in the elementary grades and can be included on the school district pay scale. Those who do not have a teaching license are limited to teaching pre-K and are often paid an hourly wage. Even when GSRP teachers are included on the school district pay scale, there is sometimes a separate scale for pre-K teachers. In one school district, we were told that a separate pay scale was being created for preschool and pre-K teachers, which would limit those teachers' earning potential to $35,000 per year. These compensation issues may negatively affect GSRP teachers' job satisfaction.

Although Michigan does not collect data on pre-K teacher retention, we heard anecdotally from ISD officials that teacher turnover poses a significant challenge to pre-K quality across the state. In light of Michigan's substantial public investment in GSRP and the potential for GSRP to improve children's future outcomes, there is an urgent need to better understand the factors that contribute to GSRP teacher well-being and job satisfaction.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

Pre-K as Borderland

Pre-K teaching is often referred to as a "borderland" because pre-K is situated in a liminal space between the historically separate worlds of early childhood education (ECE) and the K-12 system (Britt & Sumsion, 2003). While ECE and K-12 are governed by distinct policies, regulations, and approaches to teaching and learning, the presence of pre-K in public elementary school buildings forces the two systems to interface in new ways (McCabe and Sipple, 2011). Situated within this borderland, public school pre-K teachers may find themselves in particularly challenging work environments (Henderson, 2012). Teaching pre-K in an elementary school requires negotiating the different approaches to the curriculum, assessment, and teaching that separate ECE and the elementary grades. Navigating competing expectations and assumptions of the K-12 and ECE systems has implications for teachers' professional identity (Delaney, 2015; Woodrow, 2007) and job satisfaction (Wilinski, 2017).

Working conditions in the borderland may also differ considerably from the elementary grades. In addition to earning less than their kindergarten counterparts, public school pre-K teachers may experience differences in benefits, have less access to professional development opportunities, and reduced time to interact with colleagues, prepare lessons, and even to eat lunch (Whitebook et al., 2014). Public school pre-K teachers' job satisfaction and desire to remain in the profession may be negatively affected by working conditions that differ so significantly from elementary grades teachers.

Teacher Retention and Job Satisfaction

Pre-K teacher attrition is a pervasive challenge (Allen & Kelly, 2015). Prior research shows that certain working conditions may lead to increased teacher turnover in ECE, including: lack of administrator support, inadequate program resources, and high work demands (Kusma et al., 2012; Wells, 2014). Higher wages, holding a higher-level position, having more experience in the field, positive workplace relationships, and higher levels of job satisfaction are factors that have been associated with teacher retention (Cumming, 2017; Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014; Totenhagen et al., 2016). The unique challenges of being positioned in a borderland (pre-K program in an elementary setting) have not been addressed in the literature on ECE teacher retention and job satisfaction. We posit that some of the factors contributing to attrition, such as poor relationships with supervisors and colleagues, may be accentuated in borderland spaces because of policy differences (Kilgallon et al., 2008) and divergent pedagogical practices (Delaney, 2015).

Teacher job satisfaction is important because it affects program quality and teacher retention. There is evidence that structural elements of preschool programs influence teachers' job satisfaction and plans to remain in the profession. One study found that teacher wages were positively associated with children's positive emotional expression in pre-K classrooms (King et al., 2016). The link between wages and job satisfaction is particularly salient in the context of public pre-K; among state-funded pre-K programs in the U.S., only six have compensation parity between pre-K and K-3 teachers (Barnett & Kasmin, 2017). Beyond salary and benefits, program resources have also been correlated with teacher satisfaction. Studies have found that job satisfaction is positively affected by the presence of school resources (Whitaker et al., 2015), positive interactions with supervisors (Wagner and French, 2010), and opportunities for professional development (Ota, 2013). One study also found greater levels of self-efficacy among teachers who collaborated with colleagues (Guo et al., 2011; Nislin et al., 2016). On the other hand, negative or stressful relationships can have damaging effects on pre-K teacher well-being (Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010).

In summary, previous research has examined pre-k as a borderland and pre-K teacher retention and job satisfaction. However, little is known about how the particular conditions that characterize borderland teaching influence pre-K teachers' well-being and job satisfaction. The present study of public school pre-K teaching aims to uncover the ways that specific features of borderland work environments shape pre-K teachers' experiences and plans to remain in the profession.

SUPPORTING PUBLIC SCHOOL GSRP TEACHERS IN MICHIGAN: A RESEARCH PROJECT

In order to better understand the experiences of public school pre-K teachers' and the ways that borderland teaching affects their well-being and job satisfaction, we conducted an interview study of 30 GSRP teachers in two Intermediate School Districts (ISD) in Michigan. We purposively selected two ISDs, which we call Howard and Barrymore, that included a mix of urban, suburban, and rural school districts to understand variation in experiences within and across ISDs. After conducting interviews with officials in each ISD (12 total), we recruited GSRP teachers. Teachers were selected based on their credentials and prior teaching experiences, characteristics that we anticipated might inform how they negotiated competing priorities in pre-K. After interviewing teachers, we conducted interviews with kindergarten teachers (13 total) and administrators (10 total) in their building. Conducting interviews with stakeholders in a range of social locations enabled us to understand how the perspectives of others in the school building shaped GSRP teachers' experiences. Table 1 provides an overview of data collected in each ISD.

Table 1. Overview of Data Collection

	Howard ISD	**Barrymore ISD**	**Total**
Districts reached	7	4	11
Pre-K teachers interviewed	22	8	30
Kindergarten teachers interviewed	11	2	13
Principal/Administrators interviewed	7	3	10

All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. We then analyzed interview data and identified patterns that enabled us to understand the ways that conditions of pre-K teaching were related to the ways teachers talked about their job satisfaction and desire to remain in the profession.

Findings from this study point to five key conditions that affect GSRP teachers' experiences: 1) value of early childhood education, 2) compensation, 3) classroom location, 4) divergent ideas about best practice, and 5) relationships with building colleagues. These were the factors that teachers described as playing a role in their job satisfaction, and which can be addressed through policy.

Value of Early Childhood Education

Most of the teachers we interviewed expressed a desire for greater recognition of the value and importance of early childhood education. Teachers wished that building colleagues, the school district, and society, in general would recognize the importance of the work they were doing. One teacher explained that she wished more people would understand "the work that we do is meaningful and we're just not playing all day." Another teacher felt that while pre-K was valued in her school district that was not the case in all places. When asked what she would change about pre-K teaching, she said, "I would choose for more public schools to be able to see pre-K and the teachers the way my school district sees them--as an integral part of that system." For many teachers we interviewed, being recognized as "part of the system" signaled that the school district valued ECE and took pre-K seriously.

In some schools, teachers felt their work was appreciated by building colleagues. One teacher described her supportive principal this way: "The first time he spent time in here...I don't know if it was even a hour, and he's walking out the door going, 'You need a raise' [laughter]." In another school, GSRP teachers were seen as experts in conflict resolution and kindergarten teachers would seek them out for advice. Even when GSRP teachers felt their work was valued by administrators and kindergarten teacher colleagues, they often noted a contrast between school-level support and a broader climate where the field of ECE did not seem to be respected. A teacher at one school explained, "I've had so many of my family members say, 'So, when are you going to get a real teaching job? You're teaching preschool, and you went to school for five years?'...Pre-K teachers are not valued in the same way that K-12 teachers are...I think that people need to see the value in preschool again."

The perception that ECE teaching is not valued may affect GSRP teachers' job satisfaction and desire to remain in the profession. Teachers' sense of whether their profession was valued also connected to other elements that shaped their work experiences, such a compensation, relationships, and school-level inclusion. For example, teachers saw value ascribed to ECE as connected to district decisions about GSRP teacher compensation. One GSRP teacher who worked in a district where GSRP teachers were paid only a fraction of elementary teacher salaries explained, "I think we should be paid the same as everyone else that has the same degrees that we do. It's just not feeling valued." GSRP teachers' relationships with building colleagues seemed also to be shaped by perceptions of ECE; some teachers described feeling ignored at staff meetings by elementary colleagues who did not share their emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice. In another building, the GSRP teacher explained that her elementary grades colleagues were surprised to learn that she had the same qualifications as they did. Many GSRP teachers in our study reported that elementary grades teachers seemed to have a limited understanding of ECE, which led them to feel undervalued in their building.

Key Findings: Value of Early Childhood Education

- Despite qualifications that match and often exceed K-3 teachers in their districts, GSRP teachers report feeling like their work is treated as unimportant.

- GSRP teachers express a desire to have their work recognized by the school district as important.

- While the value of ECE is important as a standalone factor contributing to job satisfaction, this also connects with other conditions, such as salary, relationships with colleagues, and school-level inclusion.

- Positive interactions with building colleagues may contribute to GSRP teachers feeling that their work is appreciated and included.

Compensation

We found that GSRP teacher salaries varied dramatically from district to district, with some teachers paid according to the district salary scale and others paid an hourly wage with no or limited benefits. As noted above, when GSRP teachers talked about salary issues, they often linked pay to being respected and valued by the school district. Compensation disparities seemed most significant for teachers who were paid an hourly wage. These teachers could not understand why they were paid less than their elementary grades colleagues when they had the same credentials and did the same work. In contrast, teachers in districts with compensation parity saw their salary as an expression of the district "knowing how important early childhood education is." The relationship between teacher compensation and feeling valued may have implications for teacher retention in pre-K. As one teacher who was paid an hourly wage explained, "I would like to continue to teach preschool, but there's not really an opportunity to grow financially…but there's no way to go up." Differences in compensation between public school pre-K teachers and their elementary grades colleagues is a factor that may prompt GSRP teachers to seek employment in other grade levels or school districts, or to leave the profession entirely.

In our study, compensation seemed to play a role in teachers' decisions to continue to teach GSRP in the future. When asked "If you could look five years into the future, what are you doing and why?", 47% of teachers planned to leave GSRP teaching or were unsure whether they would continue. Of those whose plans were tentative, 57% said they would consider leaving GSRP because of compensation issues. Figures 1 and 2 provide an overview of teachers' five year plans.

Figure 1

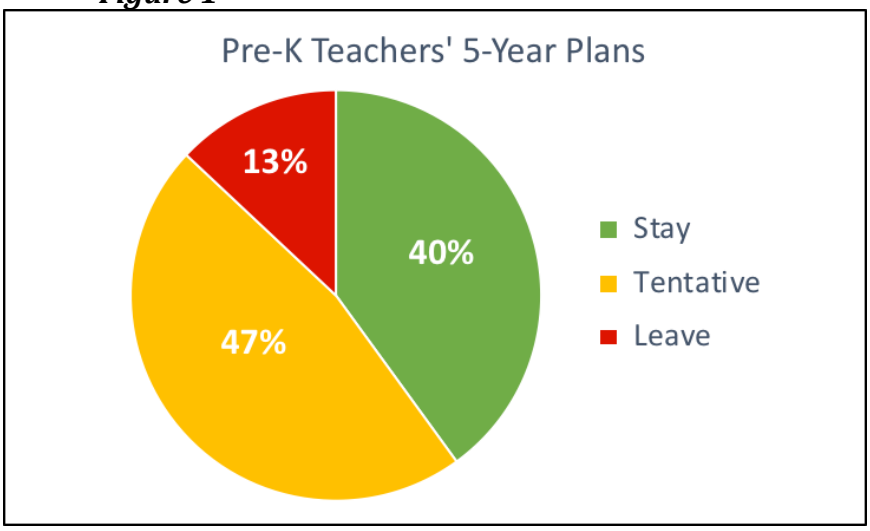
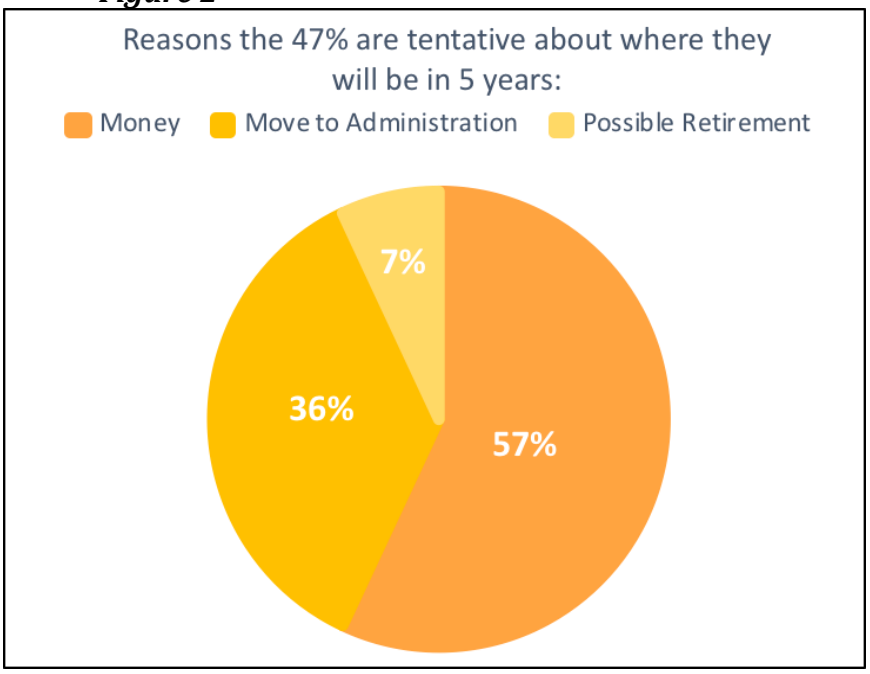


Figure 2



Key findings: Compensation

- There is no provision for compensation parity of public GSRP teachers with public elementary school teachers.
- GSRP teachers may decide to leave pre-K teaching as a result of low compensation.

Classroom Location

Most of the teachers we interviewed had classrooms located in an elementary school building (18 total). A few, however, were located in middle school buildings because it was the only place the district had space to house GSRP (2 total). For these teachers, the physical location of their GSRP classroom led them to feel disconnected and unable to enact "best practice" in an early childhood setting; they had no pre-K colleagues or administrative support in the building and lacked appropriate spaces for their students, such as a playground. In other cases, GSRP classrooms were located in district-operated early childhood buildings (11 total). While some teachers thrived in this environment, others described feeling like the school district did not recognize their work. One teacher, who referred to her early childhood center as the "stepchild" of the district, explained: "How we feel is that we're not part of this district. We're just childcare. We're not teachers. We're childcare staff. 'Cuz that's how they treat us. We're not worthy of support. We're not worthy of acknowledgement for anything. Even for the kindergarten parents, I've gone to information night. They never once said anything about these programs."

Even GSRP teachers in elementary school buildings experienced isolation, however. Many described feeling as though they were "operating on an island." The reasons for this were twofold: one had to do with state licensing requirements and building norms and the other, which we describe in the next findings section, had to do with the curriculum and pedagogy. In some schools, GSRP students and teachers only had access to limited spaces in the school building. GSRP classes were subject to state childcare licensing regulations, which meant that GSRP classes could only be in parts of the school that met state licensing requirements. Therefore, some classes were only able to be in their own classrooms and the playground, and were unable to go the library, computer lab, or even a kindergarten classroom. This physical isolation of GSRP classes was antithetical to the idea that having pre-K in elementary school buildings creates greater alignment between pre-K and the elementary grades. Teachers described how physical isolation within the school building also meant that they missed out on potential opportunities to connect with elementary teachers, students, and resources. In addition to this, GSRP teachers at some schools had to be especially cognizant of students' activity and noise level. As one ISD official explained: "In some of the settings that I've worked where there are older grades, [GSRP teachers are] constantly having to be mindful of somebody's testing or they might disrupt other classrooms." Being constantly aware of noise and activity level may make it difficult for GSRP teachers to enact a play-based curriculum, which is required in GSRP and considered best practice in early childhood education more broadly.

Key Findings: Classroom Location

- Public school GSRP classrooms are not always located in elementary school buildings.

- When GSRP classrooms are located in non-elementary school buildings, teachers may feel isolated and unsupported.

- GSRP teachers in elementary school buildings may also experience isolation when their access to different parts of the school building is limited as a result of childcare licensing regulations that govern GSRP.

Divergent Ideas about "Best Practice"

Beyond physical isolation, pre-K teachers described feeling isolated from elementary grades colleagues due to divergent ideas about best practice. GSRP requires teachers to use a play-based curriculum, with little teacher-directed activity. Teachers explained that a key difference between GSRP and kindergarten was that kindergarten was teacher-directed while GSRP was child-directed. Many GSRP teachers said that this created distance between themselves and the kindergarten teachers in their building. Differences in the curriculum and pedagogical approaches led some kindergarten teachers to critique GSRP teachers. One GSRP teacher said kindergarten teachers told her "You didn't teach them nothing" because she did not focus on "academics" in GSRP. This teacher described having to "stand my ground" in defense of the GSRP curriculum and her pedagogical approach. Interestingly, other teachers felt the opposite way; they described feeling limited by the approach in GSRP, which did not allow them to use teacher-directed activities or worksheets. These teachers felt it would be important to include some elements of the kindergarten curriculum in pre-K so that children would be better prepared for kindergarten, even though this would require deviating from GSRP regulations. In both cases, the differences between the GSRP and elementary grades curriculum and pedagogical approach created challenges for GSRP teachers.

Key Findings: Divergent Ideas about "Best Practice"

- GSRP and the elementary grades follow different approaches to teaching and learning. These differences may affect GSRP teachers' sense of belonging in elementary school buildings.

- GSRP teachers may feel isolated within elementary school buildings because their curriculum and practices with pre-K children differ dramatically from the elementary grades.

Relationships with Colleagues and Administrators

The fact that pre-K and the elementary grades used different curricula, pedagogy, and assessments also shaped GSRP teachers' interactions with administrators and elementary grades teachers in their building. Many teachers talked about being in buildings where administrators had no early childhood background. Teachers tended to not rely on their principal's feedback or support when the principal was perceived to have little knowledge of ECE. One teacher even altered her teaching practice as a result of this,

explaining that she used teacher-directed practices when her principal observed her, even though this was not the way she typically taught. She explained her rationale in this way: "[My principal] really has no concept [of ECE], so she goes by what she's seen in kindergarten and first-grade classes, so you have to do something more toward that." A teacher at another school said of her principal, "I can't expect much from the administration… [the principal] knows nothing about GSRP." During our interviews we asked GSRP teachers to draw the web representing who supports them in their work. More than one third of the teachers (11 of 30) did not include their principals or administrators in their support web. When asked why, one teacher said, "I don't know, she's not a whole lot involved, she might step in the classroom once in a while. I think she's more involved in the transitioning from the preschool to the kindergarten, but as far as the program itself, she's not very involved in the program."

With their elementary grade colleagues, some teachers described feeling that they spoke a different "language" because they used a different curriculum and assessment tool. As a result, they had to "translate" in order to work productively with non-GSRP classrooms. For example, one GSRP teacher described the challenge she faces when talking about literacy screeners with a kindergarten teacher. She explained, "We had to go back and say, 'OK, which language are you speaking and what is your assessment mode?...How can we compare these things?'" When they were able to work with elementary grades colleagues to resolve differences, GSRP teachers found that differences were actually productive.

Many GSRP teachers described that their opportunities to have any interaction with non-pre-K teachers were limited. At most schools, GSRP students have separate lunch times and playgrounds, and GSRP teachers have planning time that does not overlap with elementary grades teachers. Until recently, GSRP at one school operated with a different start and end time than the rest of the school, so GSRP teachers rarely even passed their building colleagues in the hallway. These practices can contribute to experiences of isolation among GSRP teachers; furthermore, if GSRP teachers and building colleagues are not interacting, the idea that pre-K in public schools generates greater continuity between ECE and K-12 is troubled. Even when GSRP teachers were included in the school activities, they sometimes reported that these activities, such as school-wide professional development, were not relevant to their work. One teacher said that because professional development sessions were not relevant to her, "I try to get out of them [and] go work in my room, because that's where I need to be." If GSRP teachers viewed professional development opportunities as relevant to their work, these sessions would have the potential to provide opportunities for pre-K and elementary teachers to interact and build relationships.

Whether through relevant trainings or other school activities, GSRP teachers expressed their appreciation for opportunities to engage in dialogue with colleagues in elementary grades. In many cases, GSRP teachers and kindergarten teachers interacted as they discussed particular students who would be transitioning between their classrooms. In one district where GSRP was located in a separate building from elementary grades, a district administrator set up kindergarten transition meetings to facilitate communication

between pre-K and kindergarten teachers. At a different site, ISD Early Childhood Specialists set up data meetings where GSRP teachers were able to share with elementary teachers insights from the data they collect on students. One GSRP teacher described this meeting as an important opportunity for kindergarten teachers to learn more about the extensive observational data that GSRP teachers collected about their students.

Creating avenues for pre-K and elementary teachers to collaborate may have important implications for teacher job satisfaction. Establishing these avenues is particularly important, since contrasting schedules and physical separations can make informal interactions infrequent. Our findings suggest that it is crucial for administrators to consider the frequency and nature of opportunities for GSRP teachers to interact with colleagues in the building.

Key Findings: Relationships with Colleagues

- In many instances, principals engaged minimally with GSRP. For more than one-third of GSRP teachers we interviewed, principals were not viewed as a main support in their work.
- Many GSRP teachers have limited opportunities to interact or collaborate with elementary grades colleagues. This may lead GSRP teachers to feel isolated in their work and may exacerbate the differences between pre-K and the elementary grades.
- In spite of pre-K and elementary grades differences, GSRP teachers responded positively to opportunities to engage in dialogue with elementary grades colleagues.

POLICY OPTIONS FOR MICHIGAN

Although teaching in the pre-K borderland presents a unique set of challenges for public school pre-K teachers, we found that the teachers we interviewed overwhelmingly loved what they do. Although we only spoke with a small number of GSRP teachers, these findings are encouraging and suggest that Michigan's most vulnerable children are in good hands in GSRP. At the same time, the work experiences of public school GSRP teachers can be improved. A concerted effort to improve GSRP teachers' work experiences may positively affect teachers' job satisfaction and desire to remain in the profession, which are key elements of pre-K quality. Because pre-K is most effective when it is high-quality, this is also a smart investment.

Based on findings from this study, there are a number of steps Michigan can take to improve GSRP teachers' job satisfaction and encourage GSRP teachers to remain in the profession.

➢ Ensure Compensation Parity for Public School GSRP Teachers

Public school GSRP teachers should be included on school district salary schedules and compensated at the same rate as their elementary grades colleagues. GSRP provides a foundation for later learning and should be considered on par with later grades.

Compensating GSRP teachers fairly will help to ensure teacher retention and program quality.

- Provide a Clear Career Ladder In GSRP, With Opportunities for Advancement

Many teachers are committed to working with young children and actively choose to continue to teach in programs like GSRP. These teachers should be provided with opportunities for professional advancement.

- Ensure That GSRP Teachers and Students are Included in Their School Building Community

Many GSRP teachers described feeling isolated from the rest of their school building. This was especially true when teachers were located in non-elementary school buildings. Public school pre-K should be housed in elementary school buildings, and there should be policy mechanisms in place to ensure that children are able to use building facilities beyond their classroom. Building administrators should provide support for GSRP teachers to participate in building-wide activities, which would help to foster connections between teachers and students at different grade levels. Administrators should be aware of GSRP regulations so that barriers to participation in school-wide events are removed.

- Raise Awareness among School Administrators about the Importance of Early Childhood Education and GSRP

From the perspective of GSRP teachers, many building administrators knew little about GSRP or early childhood education. An increased understanding of ECE and GSRP among building principals would ensure greater buy-in for GSRP at the district and building level and create a more positive working environment for GSRP teachers.

- Provide Training for Administrators to Support GSRP Teachers

Building principals should be aware of GSRP regulations and have a deep understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in GSRP so that they can provide optimal support for GSRP teachers.

- Raise Awareness among Kindergarten Teachers about GSRP

Kindergarten teachers should understand the curriculum, pedagogy, and approach to assessment in GSRP so that they develop an awareness of what and how children are learning in the year prior to kindergarten. Providing kindergarten teachers with an understanding of GSRP will enable them to work more effectively with their own students and will support more positive relationships between GSRP and kindergarten teachers.

- Create Opportunities for GSRP and Kindergarten Teachers to Interact and Learn From One Another

There should be a formal structure that supports interaction between GSRP and kindergarten teachers. Regular opportunities to meet would create a mechanism for teachers to develop relationships, share information about their programs, and to develop ways to better support their students, including fostering a smooth transition between pre-K and kindergarten.

- Provide Support for Advocacy of Play-Based Learning

GSRP follows a play-based curriculum, which is widely accepted as best practice in early childhood education. Yet, this approach is very different from what most elementary teachers and principals are used to. In order to better support GSRP teachers, there must be a more widespread understanding of what and how children are learning when they play. Policy should support advocacy efforts that will enhance understanding of play-based education among teachers, administrators, parents, and the public.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

While the aforementioned policy changes will take time and investment, there are near-term strategies that can be put in place in order to better understand and support the public school pre-K teaching force. First, there should be mechanisms in place to collect data on GSRP teacher compensation that includes information about GSRP teacher starting salary, salary schedule, benefits, and payment for professional responsibilities (e.g. planning time, professional development). A more in-depth understanding of GSRP compensation issues at the state level would serve as a foundation for policy measures to ensure pay parity. Alongside this, Intermediate School Districts should collect data on GSRP teacher retention and mobility in order to better understand how long teachers stay in GSRP and where they go when they leave. In particular, it would be important to understand whether teachers leave GSRP classrooms to teach in elementary grades. A widespread pattern of leaving GSRP for elementary school teaching would signal the importance of ensuring compensation parity.

CONCLUSION

Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program is designed to support four year-olds who are considered at risk for low academic achievement. This play-based pre-K program supports children's social-emotional development and pre-academic learning in order to help them succeed in kindergarten and beyond. While GSRP has the potential to be hugely beneficial to young children and their families, it is critical that GSRP teachers are well-supported in order to ensure stability in the GSRP teaching force. In our study of public school GSRP teachers' experience, we found that while many teachers loved their work, they also faced

challenges that could be improved by policy. GSRP teachers expressed their desire for the importance of early childhood education to be recognized more broadly and for compensation parity with elementary grades colleagues. Their work experiences were also affected by the location of their classrooms, divergent ideas about best practice, and their relationships with building colleagues. As we described in this brief, there are policy measures that can facilitate structural and relational changes that will make GSRP teaching a more positive experience.

REFERENCES

Allen, L., Kelly, B. B. (2015). Qualification requirements, evaluation systems, and quality assurance systems. *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through age 8: A unifying foundation.* Washington, DC: National Research Council. Retrieved from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK310534/

Barnett, S. and Kasmin, R. (2017). *Teacher compensation parity policies and state-funded pre-K programs*. New Brunswick, NJ: the National Institute for Early Education Research and Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

Barnett, W. S., Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Weisenfeld, G. G., Kasmin, R., & Squires, J. H. (2017). *The State of Preschool 2016*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education
Research.

Bogard, K., Traylor, F., Takanishi, R. (2008). Teacher education and PK outcomes: Are we asking the right questions? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly. 23.* 1-6.

Britt, C., & Sumsion, J. (2003). Within the borderlands: Beginning early childhood teachers in primary schools. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *4*(2), 115-136.

Brown, C. P. (2009). Pivoting a prekindergarten program off the child or the standard? A case study of integrating the practices of early childhood education into elementary school. *The Elementary School Journal, 110*(2), 202–227. http://doi.org/10.1086/605770

Bueno, M., Darling-Hammond, L., & Gonzales, D. (2010). A matter of degrees: Preparing teachers for the pre-k classroom, (March), 24. http://doi.org/10.1227/01.NEU.0000326327.35212.EA

Bullough, R. V., Hall-Kenyon, K. M., & MacKay, K. L. (2012). Head Start teacher well-being: Implications for policy and practice. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *40*(6), 323-331.

Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (2009). Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8 (3rd ed.). Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Cumming, T. (2017). Early childhood educators' well-being: An updated review of the literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *45*(5), 583–593.

Delaney, K.K., (2015). Dissonance for understanding: Exploring a new theoretical lens for understanding teacher identity formation in borderlands of practice. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood. 16*(4)*.* 374-389.

Early, D. M., Maxwell, K. L., Burchinal, M., Alva, S., Randall, H., Bryant, D., … Vandergrift, N. (2007). Teachers' education, classroom quality, and young children's academic skills: Results from seven studies of preschool programs. *Child Development, 78*(2). 558-580.

Goldstein, L. S. (2007). Beyond the DAP versus standards dilemma: Examining the unforgiving complexity of kindergarten teaching in the United States. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 22*(1), 39–54. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2006.08.001

Gormley, W.T., Gayer, T. (2005). Promoting school readiness in Oklahoma: An evaluation of Tulsa's pre-K program. *The Journal of Human Resources, 40*(3)*,* 533-558.

Guo, Y., Justice, L. M., Sawyer, B., & Tompkins, V. (2011). Exploring factors related to preschool teachers' self-efficacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *27*(5), 961-968. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.03.008

Hall-Kenyon, K. M., Bullough, R. V., MacKay, K. L., & Marshall, E. E. (2014). Preschool teacher well-being: A review of the literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *42*(3), 153-162. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-013-0595-4

Heckman, J. (2011). The economics of inequality: The value of early childhood education. *The Education Digest, 77*(4)*,* 4-11.

Henderson, L. (2012). The early childhood-school relationship: Overcoming invisible barriers. *Early Childhood Folio*, *16*(2), 20-25.

Jeon, L., & Wells, M. B. (2018). An organizational - level analysis of early childhood teachers' job attitudes : Workplace satisfaction affects. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *in press*. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-018-9444-3

Kilgallon, P., Maloney, C., & Lock, G. (2008). Early childhood teachers' sustainment in the classroom. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *33*(2), 41-54

King, E. K., Johnson, A. V., Cassidy, D. J., Wang, Y. C., Lower, J. K., & Kintner-Duffy, V. L. (2016). Preschool teachers' financial well-being and work time supports: Associations with children's emotional expressions and behaviors in classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *44* (6), 545-553. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-015-0744-z

Kusma, B., Groneberg, D. A., Nienhaus, A., & Mache, S. (2012). Determinants of day care teachers' job satisfaction. *Cent Eur J Public Health*, *20*(3), 191-198.

Madrid, S., & Dunn-Kenney, M. (2010). Persecutory guilt, surveillance and resistance: The emotional themes of early childhood educators. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *11*(4), 388-401. http://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2010.11.4.388

McCabe, L. A., & Sipple, J. W. (2011). Colliding worlds: Practical and political tensions of prekindergarten implementation in public schools. Educational Policy, *25*(1), e1-e26. http://doi.org/10.1177/0895904810387415

Michigan Department of Education. (2015). Great Start Readiness Program. Retrieved from http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-63533_50451---,00.html

Nislin, M. A., Sajaniemi, N. K., Sims, M., Suhonen, E., Maldonado Montero, E. F., Hirvonen, A., & Hyttinen, S. (2016). Pedagogical work, stress regulation and work-related well-being among early childhood professionals in integrated special day-care groups. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *31*(1), 27-43. http://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2015.1087127

O'Day, J.A. (2002). Complexity, accountability, and school improvement. *Harvard Educational Review, 72*(3), 293–329.

Ota, C. L., Baumgartner, J., & Austin, A. M. B. (2013). Provider stress and children's active engagement. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *27*, 61-73.

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2011). Teacher job satisfaction and motivation to leave the teaching profession: Relations with school context, feeling of belonging, and emotional exhaustion. *Teaching and teacher education*, *27*(6), 1029-1038.

Totenhagen, C. J., Hawkins, S. A., Casper, D. M., Bosch, L. A., Hawkey, K. R., & Borden, L. M. (2016). Retaining early childhood education workers: A review of the empirical literature. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *30*(4), 585-599. http://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1214652

Wagner, B. D., & French, L. (2010). Motivation, work satisfaction, and teacher change among early childhood teachers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *24*(2), 152-171. http://doi.org/10.1080/02568541003635268

Wells, M. B. (2014). Predicting preschool teacher retention and turnover in newly hired Head Start teachers across the first half of the school year. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *30*(PA), 152-159. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.10.003

Whitaker, R. C., Dearth-Wesley, T., & Gooze, R. A. (2015). Workplace stress and the quality of teacher-children relationships in Head Start. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *30*(PA), 57-69. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.08.008

Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study.*

Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

Wilinski, B. (2017). *When pre-K comes to school: Policy, partnerships, and the early childhood education workforce*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Woodrow, C. (2007). W(H)Ither the early childhood teacher: Tensions for early childhood professional identity between the policy landscape and the politics of teacher regulation. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood. 8*(3). 233-243.

INFORMING THE DEBATE

Michigan Applied Public Policy Research (MAPPR)
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research

www.ippsr.msu.edu | @IPPSR

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY