

# Accelerating the 'Pace' Against Illiteracy: Parent and Child Education

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In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released a damning critique of the American education system, concluding, "[i]f an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."<sup>1</sup> The report, titled *A Nation At Risk*, underscored the generally low expectation of student performance, insufficiently demanding curricula, inadequate teacher training, and poor educational conditions in our nation's schools. In so doing, it stimulated powerful nationwide demand for reform.

Kentucky, the state that in 1980 reported the nation's lowest percentage of adults, age 25 and older, who had graduated from high school, had cause to consider itself particularly implicated by the report.<sup>2</sup> Governor Martha Layne Collins, a former educator, joined businesses, education reform groups, editorialists and local citizens in clamoring for change. The National Conference of State Legislatures, the Council of State Governments, and the Southern Legislative Conference, among others, inundated legislators with recommendations and plans for reform.

The result, in 1986, was the enactment of PACE (Parent and Child Education), a pilot program providing preschool education for the children of illiterate parents while raising the educational level of the parents themselves. PACE is based on the simple but powerful premise that children's education cannot be fostered in isolation from their parents—a premise supported by growing evidence of the dual importance to later academic performance of both prekindergarten training and parental involvement in education.

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1. Nat'l Comm'n on Excellence in Educ., U.S. Dep't of Educ., *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* 5 (1983).

2. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dep't of Commerce, 1980 Census of the Population, vol. 1, ch. C. (General Social and Economic Characteristics), pt. 1 (U.S. Summary), at 309-14 table 239 (1983).

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### *A. Research Findings in Early Childhood Education*

In the United States as a whole, poverty is more common among children than any other age group. In 1983, 14 million children lived in poverty, comprising about 40% of the poor population.<sup>3</sup> The percentage of children age 17 and younger living in poverty that year reached 22%, the highest level in 21 years.<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census data suggest that education can fundamentally change the economic prospects of such children. In 1987, the median income for heads of households age 25 and older was \$18,102 for those with eight years of schooling, \$29,937 for high school graduates, and \$50,115 for those who had completed four or more years of college.<sup>5</sup>

Early intervention in the lives of at-risk children through preschool programs has proven to be an important component for later school success. A longitudinal study following 123 children who participated in the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation's Perry Preschool Project through age 19 suggests that a quality preschool program can lead to consistent improvement in school achievement of disadvantaged children, increased rates of post-secondary enrollment and employment at age 19, and substantially lower rates of delinquency, arrest, and dependency on welfare as of age 19.<sup>6</sup>

The longitudinal data generated by the High/Scope program suggest that preschool programs confer benefits on taxpayers and society as well as on the individual participants. While the cost for one year of the early-childhood program was about \$5,000 per participant, the lifetime benefit (in constant 1981 dollars discounted at 3%) was about \$29,000 per participant.<sup>7</sup> These amounts were based upon the net benefit from the savings for child care, savings in kindergarten through Grade 12 education, increased earnings, decreased welfare benefits, and reduced costs associated with criminal activity after subtracting the cost of the preschool program and

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3. H. Hodgkinson, *All One System: Demographics of Education—Kindergarten Through Graduate School 8-9* (1985).

4. *Id.*

5. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Dep't of Commerce, *Current Population Reports, Money Income and Poverty Status in the United States: 1987*, at 13 table 1 (1988).

6. Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein & Weikart, *Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths Through Age 19*, 8 *Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation* 1 (1985).

7. Schweinhart & Koshel, *Policy Options for Preschool Programs*, 5 *High/Scope Early Childhood Policy Papers* 7 (1986).

college expenses.<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Schweinhart and Jeffrey Kosher, authors of the High/Scope Policy Papers, concluded that "this return amounted to nearly six times the cost of a one-year program or three times the cost of a two-year program. From reduced costs for special education alone, the savings were enough to reimburse taxpayers for the cost of the one-year program."<sup>9</sup>

Research also shows that children's success in school and later employment are closely related to their parents' educational attainment and to positive parental support; if schools are to educate at-risk children successfully, they must assume the responsibility for their parents' education as well. Kentucky data are consistent with such research. A 1963 study of rural dropouts in Eastern Kentucky found that 90% of the dropouts' fathers had left school before the 12th grade and that 94% of their mothers had dropped out before graduation.<sup>10</sup> Only 1% of the parents of adults in the state's adult education program had ever completed high school, and the average educational attainment of the parents was between four and eight years of school.<sup>11</sup>

Educationally disadvantaged parents often feel isolated from their children's schools and powerless to become involved in their children's education. They do not teach their children to value education, do not provide an educationally stimulating home environment, and do not act as advocates for their children in the educational system. Even the most innovative, well-funded educational programs cannot ensure that children will gain the literacy skills they need to climb out of poverty if their parents are not given the necessary information to work with the schools as well as the literacy skills to provide a supportive educational environment in the home.

### *B. Kentucky Strives to Break the Illiteracy Cycle*

My own experience with Appalachian poverty and illiteracy had convinced me of the inefficacy of treating independently the educational needs of parents and children. In 1969, as a psychology student at Cumberland College in Kentucky, I participated in a study of

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8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

10. Office of Research and Planning, Ky. Dep't of Educ., *Identifying Potential Dropouts: A Research Report 22* (1981).

11. Ky. Dep't of Educ., House Bill 662: Parent and Child Education Program (PACE) (1984) (unpublished paper on file with author).

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preschool intervention in the Appalachian home. Preschool children were living with illiterate parents and suffering life's beginning in economically deprived circumstances that left little hope for their future. Day-to-day existence in the coal fields of eastern Kentucky, rather than education, was foremost in these parents' minds. As I worked with the children—reading, telling stories and playing simple games—I was struck by the defeated, anguished expressions of their mothers. The very process of trying to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and illiteracy—a cycle that prevented opportunity and hope from becoming part of the lives of thousands of Kentuckians—itsself was introducing the children to a world that their parents could not share.

In the PACE program, parents without high school diplomas attend classes in public schools three days a week with their three- or four-year-old children. Parents and children arrive at school and eat breakfast together; parents then attend adult education classes and children go to preschool classrooms. Parents work on such skills as reading, language, social studies, writing, and critical thinking. Their adult basic education curriculum is designed to prepare them to pass the General Educational Development (GED) test and receive a high school equivalency certificate. Children, meanwhile, work on language, math, representation (the ability to portray the world through art and dramatic play), and movement using the High/Scope curriculum.<sup>12</sup>

After two-and-a-half to three hours, parents join their children in activities designed to teach parents how their children learn and how parents can, and should, help them learn. Parents and children then go to lunch together. After lunch, the children take a nap while their parents plan and attend programs to train them to be more effective parents, students, and citizens.

Almost three-fourths of PACE's budget at each site is allocated to staff training and to the salaries of an adult basic education teacher, an early childhood teacher, and a teaching assistant. Other typical expenses are for materials, food, transportation, testing fees, and publicity.

The PACE program, in which 901 adults and children have participated, is small. Its \$900,000 annual budget supports 18 programs

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12. The curriculum, developed by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation of Ypsilanti, Michigan, is designed, among other things, to teach children to express themselves graphically and verbally and to solve problems (for example, by choosing what to do for part of the school day).

in 12 counties; the state, however, has 51 counties or school districts in which 60% or more of adults have not completed high school.<sup>13</sup> The program may, nonetheless, be on the verge of dramatic growth. At a statewide education conference in February, members of 15 groups, including the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, the Parent-Teacher Association, and the Kentucky School Boards Association, strongly supported PACE expansion. A group of legislators has recommended the appropriation of \$5 million annually for PACE in fiscal years 1989-90 and 1990-91, which would enable the program to cover all eligible districts in the state.<sup>14</sup>

PACE outlines seven goals for participants:

Raising the educational level of the parents of preschool children through instruction in basic skills.

Enhancing parenting skills.

Increasing developmental skills of preschool children to better prepare them for academic success.

Providing a role model for the child of parental interest in education.

Enabling parents to become familiar with and comfortable in the school setting.

Enhancing the relationship of the parent and child through planned structured interaction.

Demonstrating to parents their power to affect their child's ability to learn.<sup>15</sup>

The question of how well PACE has achieved its goals has yet to be fully evaluated.<sup>16</sup> Early indicators, however, are encouraging. Ninety-one percent of 44 PACE parents interviewed during the 1986-87 academic year reported that the program helped their children, and 86% said that the program prepared them to take the high school equivalency examination.<sup>17</sup> In fact, during PACE's first year, approximately 50% of participating adults passed the GED (a

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13. Shanahan, *Breaking the Cycle of Undereducation*, 2 *Governing* 40 (1988).

14. *See, e.g.*, Interim Joint Comm. on Educ., Ky. Gen. Assembly, Working Paper on Educational Improvement—The Next Step! 1-2 (Dec. 1988). In 1986-7, eligibility for PACE was determined by whether 60% or more of adults in the county or school district had not completed high school. In 1988, guidelines for eligibility were revised. The test now is whether 50% or more of adults have not finished high school. Under the new standards, about 100 counties or school districts qualify.

15. Ky. Dep't of Educ., PACE 2-3 (1987) (unpublished internal memorandum).

16. The Department of Education, which administers the program, is undertaking a comprehensive study this year.

17. Y. Kim, *Parent and Child Program Evaluation Report 2*, 10 (1987) (unpublished report).

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rate significantly higher than that of the Kentucky Adult Basic Education group with which PACE was compared).<sup>18</sup> Children in the program have increased their measurable skills by an average of 28% using the Child Observation and Child Assessment Record.<sup>19</sup>

PACE also is increasing school districts' awareness of the importance of parent participation in education. Six of the PACE districts are re-evaluating their kindergarten curriculum in light of what they have learned from the PACE early childhood curriculum.<sup>20</sup>

Although these early indicators of success are encouraging, the PACE program is not without obstacles. Recruitment has been a problem in some districts. Potential participants often confront family resentment, and some rural Appalachians, especially, tend to distrust outside authorities in general and school personnel in particular. In addition, participants frequently are shy, reluctant to admit their lack of education, and afraid of failure.

Duration of the program, too, has been a problem. Once parents obtain high school equivalency certificates, their children no longer qualify for PACE. Several efforts have been made to address this problem, including developing informal agreements with Head Start to give preference to PACE children, and, in some cases, arranging for a child's PACE teacher to continue the relationship by visiting the child at home. In addition, the Ford Foundation earmarked a portion of a \$100,000 grant to help cover the costs for preschool education for PACE children after their parents receive high school equivalency certificates.

### *C. PACE's Lesson for Educators*

The PACE model has great potential not only for Kentucky, but for other states as well. The program has elicited scores of inquiries. Mississippi, which is developing its own PACE program, and Connecticut, Wisconsin and Illinois, which are considering doing so, have been among the interested states.

The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust Foundation is funding a family literacy grant that incorporates the PACE model. Under the aegis of the Southern Region Education Board, these private funds are used to operate PACE programs in North Carolina and in

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18. *Id.*, at 13.

19. The A. Alfred Taubman Center for State and Local Gov't, John F. Kennedy School of Gov't, Harvard Univ., Profiles in Innovations: Selected Nominees in the 1988 Ford Foundation/Harvard University's Innovations in State & Local Government Awards Program 7 (1988).

20. *Id.*

two cities in Jefferson County, Kentucky, that did not qualify for state funding.

PACE has been discussed at national legislative and education conferences and was one of 10 winners of the Innovations in State and Local Government Award given by the Ford Foundation and Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The Harvard Family Research Project included PACE in its listing of state-sponsored parent education and family support programs and plans to conduct a case study of the program. I recently described the PACE model at the Bi-national Conference on Innovation in New South Wales, Australia.

The replication process is just beginning. We hope this legislation will serve as models for other states and other nations seeking to break the seemingly enduring cycle of inter-generational illiteracy.