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The Capacity of Early Childhood Care & Education in Rural NYS

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What is the Issue?

Comprehensive early education programs can have a positive impact on children's future success in school and employment. Yet, despite the importance of such experiences to later outcomes, early education is delivered through a complex network of programs-with different settings, regulations, goals, and funding- the availability of which may differ in urban, suburban, and rural contexts. In fact, little is known about the capacity of early care and education in rural areas of the United States, and New York State in particular.

Currently, New York is one of 38 states that fund pre-kindergarten programs. With regard to child care, rural children are only two-thirds as likely as non-rural children to be in center-based care (other than Head Start). Instead, rural children are often cared for by relatives, typically in homes that are not part of any regulated system (in what is termed "informal" child care in New York State; Grace, et al., 2006). Limited research also suggests some challenges with child care in rural communities. One of the biggest challenges is that a smaller, dispersed population tends to limit the child care options available. Not only are there fewer providers and programs (especially centers) to choose from, but there are also problems with transportation due to the longer distances between home, child care setting, and workplace (Colker & Dewees, 2000).

With funding from the state Legislature obtained by the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources in 2006-2007, the NYS Rural Education Advisory Committee commissioned a study assessing these research questions:

- What is the incidence of early childhood learning program slots for children under age 5 in New York State rural counties and school districts?
- How does the number of early learning program slots relate to the population of children in rural and non-rural settings?

- What factors (e.g. space, wealth, education level) may be related to patterns of early learning programs in rural versus non-rural communities in New York State?

Data and Methods

The data for this study are drawn from three sources: 1) NY State Education Department; 2) NYS Office of Children and Family Services; and 3) the U.S. Census. By using multiple sources of data, this report is the first to provide a comprehensive look at the complex early care and education system in New York State with a special emphasis on rural communities. Information on key segments of the early care and education community, including child care centers, home-based family child care, state-funded pre-kindergarten, and Head Start are all included in order to provide the most complete picture possible.

Early care and education terminology used in this report:

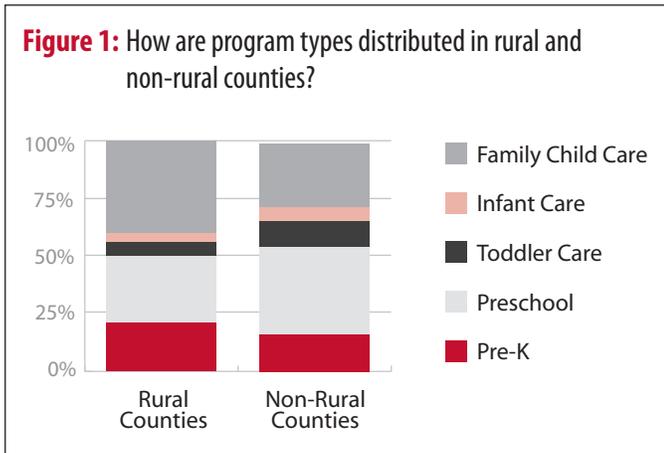
- Center-based child care (including Head Start) includes settings for three age groups of children: Infants (0- to 18-months), Toddlers (18 months to 3 years); and Preschoolers (3- to 4-year olds). Individual programs may include slots for all three age groups or may specialize in only one or two.
- Pre-kindergarten includes state-funded programming for 4-year-old children. Until the 2007-2008 school year, pre-kindergarten in New York State included two state-wide programs: Targeted and Universal Pre-kindergarten. Data for this report includes 4-year-old children in either program.
- Family child care refers to care for children under age 5 in home-based, registered settings.

Findings:

- Rural and non-rural settings offer the same program types, however the distribution varies (see Figure 1). Family child care and public pre-kindergarten

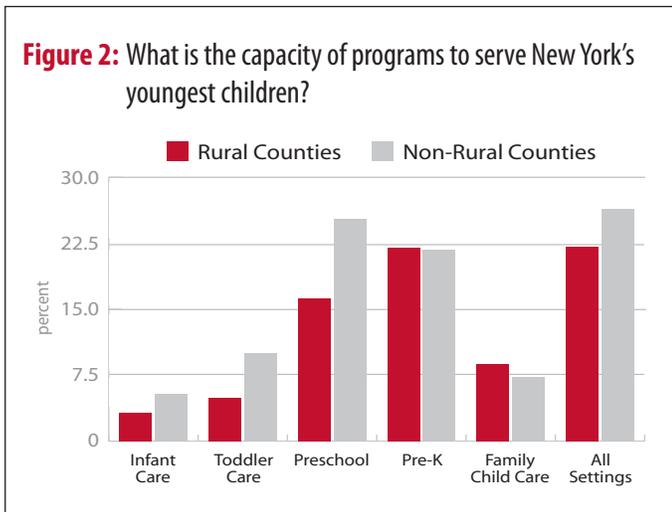
are slightly more represented in rural counties while slots for infant, toddler, and preschool center care are less represented in non-rural counties.

Figure 1: How are program types distributed in rural and non-rural counties?



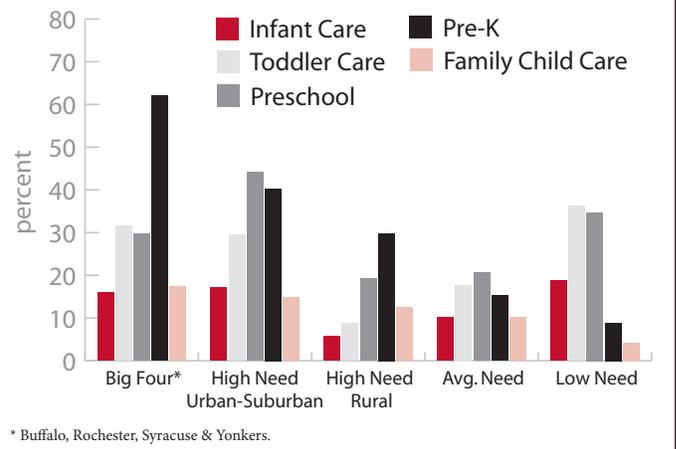
- In both rural and non-rural counties, the number of slots available does not come close to matching the number of children in a region whose families may participate in these programs (see Figure 2). In rural counties, slots only cover 22% (about 1 in 5) of all children. In non-rural counties this percentage is 26% (about 1 in 4).

Figure 2: What is the capacity of programs to serve New York's youngest children?



- Regions served by high need rural school districts have substantially less capacity in all program types than do those living in areas served by high need urban and suburban school districts (see Figure 3). The more urban locations have two to three times the capacity for infants, toddlers, preschool, and pre-kindergarten participants.

Figure 3: How does capacity vary by school district locale and wealth?



- Districts with more square footage per student, higher rates of student poverty, or larger district enrollment are significantly more likely to offer pre-kindergarten than those districts with less space, higher wealth, and lower enrollment.
- Even after controlling for space, wealth, enrollment and adult education level, the high need urban and suburban school districts are two-and-a-half times more likely to offer prekindergarten than high need rural school districts.

Conclusions

This is a study of the capacity of communities across New York State to serve the youngest segment of society in early education programs. In particular, this study assesses the current state of regulated care and education in rural portions of New York State. This report offers considerable evidence of variation in the patterns of early-child care and education between rural and non-rural settings. These differences are at both the county and school district level with less capacity for services often evident in rural communities when compared to non-rural areas of NYS. This difference in education capacity is especially noticeable when comparing state-funded pre-kindergarten. Such programming is more than two-and-a-half times more likely in high need urban/suburban districts when compared with their low-income rural counterparts. New York State must recognize these patterns and engage in action to reconcile these differences in capacity to better serve the youngest citizens of the state.

* For references and the full paper, please visit the CaRDI website.

