

# Child Care Research Strategies



**Christine Ross**

Mathematica Policy Research

**Deanna Schexnayder**

University of Texas - Austin



# Child Care Research Questions

## Minnesota

- Will a Quality Rating System and higher funding influence parents' choices of care?
- Are any of the distribution models more cost effective? More likely to be used by parents or providers?
- Do the quality ratings and higher funding lead to improved outcomes for children?
- Do the quality ratings and higher funding lead to more economic stability for parents?



# Child Care Research Questions

## Massachusetts

- What program quality improvement activities are most effective at improving children's outcomes?
  - For programs meeting minimum standards, which choices are more effective: teacher salary increases, professional development, comprehensive or wrap-around services?
- How to measure the progress of children in early care and education over time? Are we closing the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income children?



# Types of Research Questions

- **Monitoring / Tracking**
  - Descriptive questions asking, “How are families / children faring?” or, “What is the quality of our services?”
- **Effectiveness**
  - Impacts of a policy choice on outcomes we care about
- **Description of program / policy**
  - How have programs / policies actually been implemented?



# Monitoring / Tracking Questions

- *Example:* Measuring children's progress / closing achievement gaps.
  - Consider outcomes of interest
  - Identify measures of the outcomes
  - Define population or subgroup of interest



# Monitoring / Tracking Questions

## Measuring Progress / Closing Achievement Gaps

- Consider outcomes of interest: What is most important to your agency or programs? What should these programs influence?
  - Language development
  - Early literacy skills; early math skills
  - Social-emotional development: curiosity, ability to get along with peers and teachers; persistence; self-control



# Monitoring / Tracking Questions

## Measuring Progress / Closing Achievement Gaps

- Identify measures of the outcomes: existing data or new data collection?
  - Kindergarten entrance “readiness” assessment
  - State-mandated tests in grade 3 and beyond
  - Special assessment at end of pre-K year
- If existing data, can it be linked to subsidy use, or use of particular providers?
- Can the data be obtained regularly?
- Caution on high-stakes tests



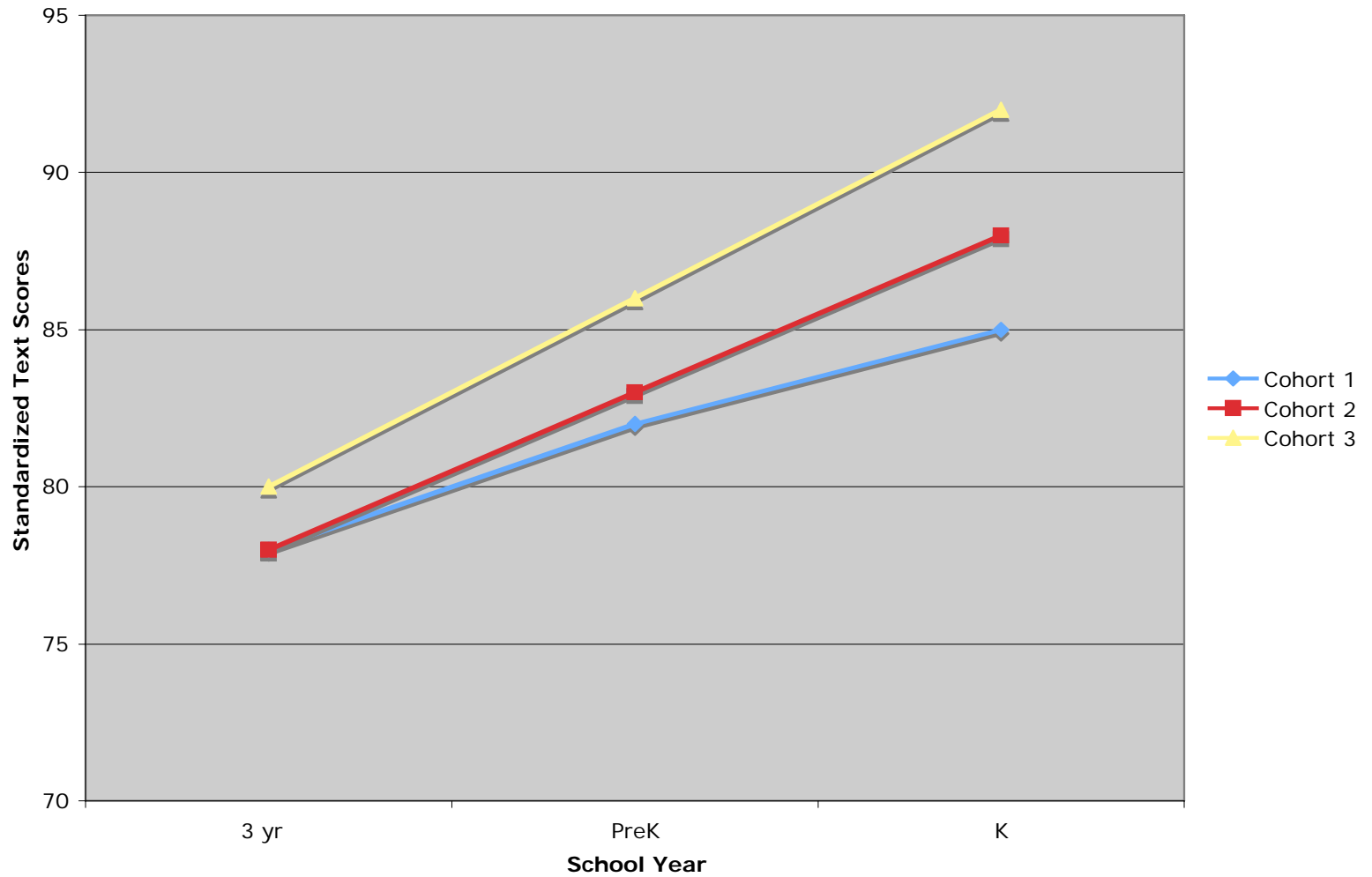
# Monitoring / Tracking Questions

## Measuring Progress / Closing Achievement Gaps

- Define population or subgroup of interest:  
What group will best address the question?
  - Broad: all low-income
  - Recipients: children receiving subsidies
  - Special at-risk populations



# Closing the Achievement Gap





# Effectiveness Questions

- *Example:* Will the QRS and higher funding improve choices of care?
- *Example:* Which quality improvement strategies will best enhance children's outcomes?
- These are the most common types of questions, because policymakers want to know which policy choices or funding strategies are most effective or most cost-effective.



# Effectiveness Questions

- To address these questions, you need to set up a contrast:
  - Between the policy of interest and a different policy
  - Between two or more competing policy options
- Which policy is experienced by families must be assigned, not chosen
- Contrast 2 worlds with different policies



# Effectiveness Questions

## Alternative Quality Improvement Strategies

### ■ Random-Assignment Contrast

- The groups of providers who use particular strategies need to be equivalent
- Can the quality improvement strategies be assigned at random?
- If not, is there another question to be addressed?

### ■ Propensity Score Methods

- Need to model factors predicting the choice of quality improvement strategy and measure them
- Results may still be unconvincing



# Effectiveness Questions

## Alternative Quality Improvement Strategies

- Consider outcomes of interest
  - Provider outcomes
    - Quality of care
    - Stability of staff
  - Child outcomes
    - Language development
    - Early literacy and / or early math skills
    - Social-emotional development: self-control, curiosity, persistence, ability to get along with peers and teachers
- How long should it take to observe effects?

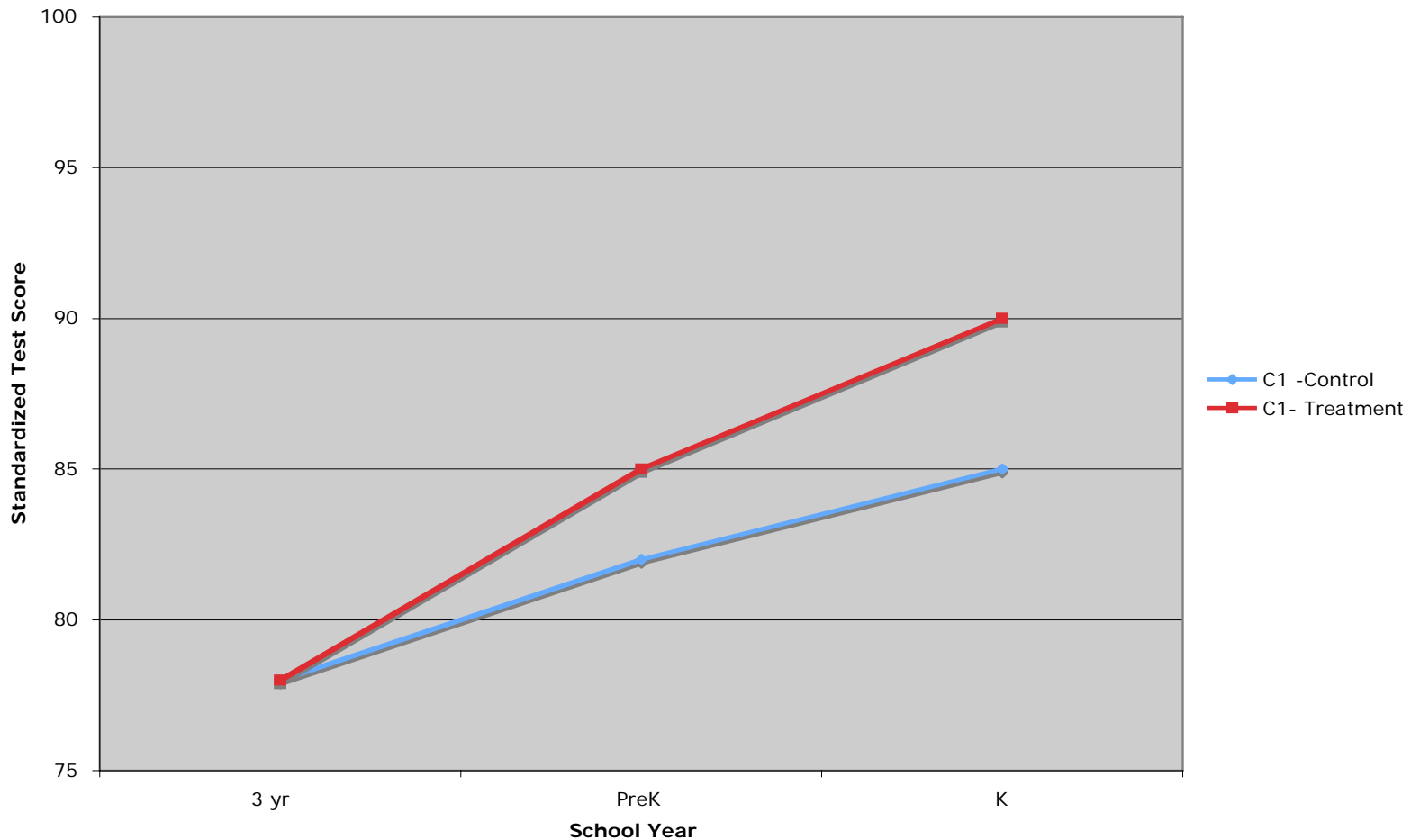


# Effectiveness Questions

## Alternative Quality Improvement Strategies

- Measure the outcomes
  - Child care quality assessment
  - Fall-Spring assessments in early care and education settings
  - Kindergarten entrance “readiness” assessment
  - State-mandated tests in grade 3 and beyond

# Impact of Policy Alternative on Student Achievement





# Program / Policy Description

- *Example:* Are any of the distribution models more likely to be used by parents or providers? Why?
  - Examine data on use of alternative models
  - Use focus groups of parents / providers using the model and those not using to understand why or why not
  - Talk to local-level administrators about their perceptions of why groups participate or not
- **Challenge:** Qualitative information should come from a representative sample