

# Education Reform

Backgrounder 24, April 2004

## Early Childhood Education - States Moving Toward Universal Coverage

With many state policymakers convinced that high-quality early-childhood programs contribute to children's later academic success, publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs have risen to the top of the education agenda in recent years. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia now have some form of preschool program supported by public funds. And in some of those states, efforts are underway to expand services to all children.

According to *Education Week's* "Quality Counts" report in 2002, state spending on preschool reached a combined total of \$2 billion. But because pre-K is paid for separately from K-12 education, it has been vulnerable to budget cuts in tough times. During fiscal 2004, funding for preschool dropped or remained flat in 16 out of 19 states where data was available,

according to a survey conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research, a think tank in New Brunswick, N.J. Cuts included reductions in the number of children served, as well as money for technical assistance or efforts to improve quality in the programs.

Only three states approved increases in spending for preschool. One was Illinois, where the budget for preschool was increased by \$30 million, with a goal of serving 25,000 at-risk children over a three-year period. Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich—who had pledged to expand preschool during his 2002 campaign for office—ordered administrative cuts in state agencies in order to balance the budget. Many governors say they are convinced that early-childhood education programs are a necessary part of their efforts to meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. In late 2003, governors or their representatives from 24 states met in Orlando, Fla., to discuss ways to improve and expand pre-K programs despite budget problems.

Florida was a fitting location for the gathering, as voters approved a mandate to provide "universal" pre-K in the state by the end of the 2005-06 school year, but the initiative did not spell out how to pay for it. State officials estimate that the program will serve 140,000 4-year-olds—75,000 more than currently enrolled, and that the program could cost more than \$500 million. An advisory council recommended that any money the state is

currently spending on early-learning services for 4-year-olds should be directed to the new program and that local public/private partnerships also be developed to raise resources.

### Different Models

While policymakers agree on the benefits of preschool, each state's program has unique features. Some, such as those in California and Texas, serve only children from low-income families, similar to the federal Head Start program. The rationale is that wealthier families can afford—and will pay—to send their 3- and 4-year-olds to private preschools anyway. State funds, therefore, should be used to give children whose parents can't afford preschool the same opportunity.

But the new discussion in states is "universal" programs, meaning that pre-kindergarten be available to all children, just as kindergarten is.

Georgia led the way in 1995, when it expanded its lottery-funded pre-kindergarten for poor children to any family who wanted to enroll a 4-year-old. According to the NIEER's "2003 State Preschool Yearbook," Georgia served almost 66,000 4-year-olds—55 percent of that age group—in the 2002-03 school year.

Other states, including New York and Oklahoma, have followed. While states and advocates call the programs universal, that doesn't mean that the classes will be open to all families right away. New York, for example, opened classroom doors to the neediest students first, with plans to expand eligibility to higher-income families as more state funds became available. According to the NIEER yearbook, less than 25% of the state's 4-year-olds were being served by the program in the 2002-03 school year, and most are still from low-income families.

In an Oklahoma evaluation of the Tulsa school district, researchers said that the state's policy of blending disadvantaged and more well-off children in the same classroom contributes to academic benefits for poor and minority children. About 60 percent of the state's 4-year-olds are now served by the state's universal program. The Tulsa evaluation, conducted by William T. Gormley at

### Web Sites & Publications

**Quality Counts 2002: Building Blocks for Success,**  
*Education Week*  
[www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org)

**State Preschool Budgets Cut in Wake of Unprecedented Budget Crises -** W. Steven Barnett  
[www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org)

**Promoting School Readiness in Oklahoma: An Evaluation of Tulsa's Pre-K Program,** Center for Research on Children in the U.S., Georgetown Univ.  
[www.crocus.georgetown.edu](http://www.crocus.georgetown.edu)

**Inside the Pre-K Classroom: A Study of Staffing and Stability in State-Funded Prekindergarten Programs,** Center for the Child Care Workforce  
[www.ccw.org](http://www.ccw.org)

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Georgetown University, showed that children's test scores increased 16 percent after participating in the one-year program and larger gains were shown for poor and minority children. Among Hispanic students, scores increased 54 percent, and language scores rose nearly 35 percent for children eligible for federally subsidized school lunch program.

### Who Provides Services?

Oklahoma's model, housing pre-K programs in schools, points out another issue — determining who will be in charge of running the state-funded programs. Most states have used a mix of community-based preschools, Head Start agencies, child-care providers and public schools to deliver services. This arrangement allows providers who were serving 4-year-olds to continue to do so and recognizes that many public schools are overcrowded and don't have room to add preschool classrooms or age-appropriate playground equipment. But Georgia, Colorado, and North Carolina also use the new state funds for preschool to encourage private, community-based programs to improve quality and meet specific standards for teacher credentials, staff-to-child ratios, and other aspects of their programs. Advocates of the Oklahoma approach say that placing programs in school sites strengthens the link between pre-K and the elementary grades, and—if the child attends the same school for kindergarten, reduces the transitions he or she will make. Having pre-K classrooms in schools also allows more communication between pre-K and elementary teachers about curriculum and student needs. However, if pre-K

teachers don't have to be certified teachers—and aren't paid on the same wage scale as elementary teachers—having them both under the same roof can create conflict. A 2002 study from the Washington-based Center for the Child Care Workforce—which is part of the American Federation of Teachers—found that teachers in school-based programs were generally paid higher and had higher credentials than those working in private non-profit or for-profit centers. Authors of the report, "Inside the Pre-K Classroom," concluded that schools need to make pre-K teachers feel like "equal partners" with teachers of the higher grades. Without support of the principal, "pre-K staff frequently feel unappreciated and unfairly treated," they concluded.

### Teacher Qualifications Determines Quality

State policymakers also decide the required qualifications of teachers in pre-K programs. Oklahoma, for example, set the bar high by requiring teachers to have a bachelor's degree. Georgia, on the other hand, only asked pre-K teachers to have a two-year degree. Over time, however, teachers have exceeded that minimum, and now more than 80 percent of the Georgia teachers have a bachelor's degree. Still, NIEER says 12 states only require teachers to have a Child Development Associate credential, which is widely used in the child-care field.

With a growing body of research pointing to the benefits of teachers with four-year degrees, it's likely that legislators will push for such requirements. Yet with state funds tight, it will be difficult to cover the salary costs of qualified teachers.

### More Web Sites & Publications

**Bachelor's Degrees are Best: Higher Educations for Prekindergarten Teachers Lead to Better Learning Environments for Children,** Marcy Whitebook, University of California, Berkeley  
[www.trustforearlyed.org](http://www.trustforearlyed.org)

**Standards for Preschool Children's Learning and Development: Who Has Standards, How Were They Developed, and How Are They Used?** Catherine Scott-Little and Sharon Lynn Kagan  
[www.serve.org](http://www.serve.org)

**"Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten,"** National Center for Early Development and Learning  
[www.ncedl.org](http://www.ncedl.org)

**"Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation,"** National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education  
[www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)

**"Child Care in Poor Communities: Early Learning Effects of Type, Quality, and Stability,"** Susanna Loeb, Bruce Fuller, Sharon Lynn Kagan, and Bidemi Carrol. *Child Development* January/February 2004; [pace.berkeley.edu](http://pace.berkeley.edu).

**"The State of Preschool: 2003 State of Preschool Yearbook,"** National Institute for Early Education Research,  
[www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org)

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### Questions for Reporters to Ask:

- Where is support for early-childhood programs/universal pre-K coming from — from the early-childhood community, the governor or legislature, the business community?
- How is the program paid for? Are any funds being shifted from the K-12 budget?
- If the program is open to all children, are the neediest families being served? -Who has control over the program? Is it largely school districts and education officials or are child-care associations, private preschool providers, and HeadStart agencies involved?
- What happens in the program? Is it designed to boost literacy or does it have a more comprehensive focus, including health and nutrition, social skills, physical development?
- What are the expectations for teachers in the program? Are they required to have a B.A. and be certified like K-12 teachers, or have something less? Are there efforts to improve teaching quality?  
Is there an evaluation in place to determine whether the program is making a difference in achievement?
- How are parents involved in the program? Are they required to spend time in the -classroom or take on responsibilities? How well does the program relate to low-income or non-English speaking parents?

### Standards - Another Measure of Quality

States also decide what will be taught in pre-kindergarten programs. Georgia allows local providers to choose from a menu of curricula, while some states provide general guidelines about what teachers should cover. Most programs emphasize school readiness skills, including letter recognition and sounds, counting, sorting, opportunities to write, art, and hands-on science activities. Physical activity and social skills such as cooperation and taking turns are also stressed, qualities that kindergarten teachers say help prepare children for formal learning in school.

States have been busy writing standards for their pre-kindergarten programs. California, for example, has standards that apply to all children from birth through age 5 and can be used in child-care settings. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia had or were developing standards for what children in their pre-K programs should be learning, according to a 2003 report by Teachers College, Columbia University and SERVE, a regional education laboratory in Greensboro, N.C. The report showed that most standards focus heavily on language and literacy skills even though experts recommend attention be given to broader cognitive development, physical growth, and social and emotional skills. A second study being conducted by Susan B. Neuman at the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement at the University of Michigan looks at the quality of state pre-K standards in language, literacy, and mathematics. The researchers are examining whether the standards focus on skills, whether they are based on research, and if they are clearly written, comprehensive, manageable, and able to be used in different settings. Even

with the focus on standards, though, little is known about what is happening in classrooms. NIEER's "2003 State of Preschool Yearbook," ranks states on the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds served and the amount spent on preschool. Detailed profiles show how states measure up on 10 quality "benchmarks." The authors concluded that most states are not setting high standards and are not spending enough money to provide even poor children with quality programs. One picture of classroom practice comes from researchers at the National Center on Early Development and Learning, based at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute in Chapel Hill, N.C. Working with researchers at two other universities, the center began the study in 2001, examining programs in Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, New York, and parts of California.

The researchers found that children who attend state-funded pre-K programs make learning gains and continue to make progress once they enter kindergarten. But they also found that many of the classrooms in these programs score in the "mediocre" range on a popular measure of classroom quality, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised. The scale examines classroom space, furnishings and teaching materials, activities, and interactions between the staff members and children. As additional states are added to the study, the results could change as state officials and providers gain more experience. Reporters should monitor these studies and ones conducted by researchers in their states. Over time, a clearer picture of the effects of state-funded pre-K programs will be available.

- Linda Jacobson covers pre-school for Education Week

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## Quality Preschool Indicators

Experts at the National Institute for Education Research have identified 10 aspects of a high-quality preschool experience. The first six focus on process; the other four focus on structure.

- There are positive relationships between teachers and children.
- The room is well-equipped with sufficient materials and toys.
- Communication occurs throughout the day, with mutual listening, talking/responding, and encouragement to use reasoning and problem-solving.
- Opportunities for art, music/movement, science, math, block play, sand, water, and dramatic play are provided daily.
- There are materials and activities to promote understanding and acceptance of diversity.
- Parents are encouraged to be involved in all aspects of the program.
- Adult-child ratios do not exceed guidelines set by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Group sizes are small.
- Teachers and staff are qualified and compensated accordingly.
- All staff are supervised and evaluated, and have opportunities for professional growth.

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