

# Education Reform

November 2007

## States Moving to Universal Pre-K?

With more state policymakers than ever convinced that high-quality early childhood education programs contribute to children's later academic success—and to their state's economic growth—publicly funded pre-K programs continue to be at the top of the education agenda.

Thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia now have some form of preschool program supported by public funds, an actual drop in states since 2002. And in many of those states, efforts are underway to expand services to all children, with some states reaching out to all 4-year-olds and others working to expand to all 3-year-olds as well.

According to "The State of Preschool: 2006," an annual report from the National Institute for Early Education Research, state spending on pre-K programs reached a combined total of \$3.3 billion for the 2005-06 school year, about 10 percent more than the previous year. There's been a 65 percent increase in funding since 2002. And more than 940,000 children were served in 48 programs across 38 states.

According to "Votes Count, Legislative Action on Pre-K, Fiscal Year 2007," a report by the Pre-K Now advocacy group, 31 states increased their budgets a total of \$450 million for pre-K programs.

State leaders also continue to propose spending increases for early childhood programs in their state budgets.

A companion Pre-K Now report, called "Leadership Matters," shows that in early 2007, 29 governors recommended a combined total of more than \$800 million in pre-K funds.

For example, in California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed a \$50 million increase in spending for the state's preschool program, which is targeted to children from low-income families. The recommendation was part

of a three-year, \$145 million expansion of the program.

In Oregon, Gov. Ted Kulongoski asked the legislature for a \$13 million increase to its "Head Start Pre-kindergarten" initiative, which is modeled after the federal Head Start program.

### Sources

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And in New Mexico, Gov. Bill Richardson proposed a \$10 million boost to the state's pre-K program.

In most states, funding for public preschool programs remains separate from the K-12 education budget, and as a result, has been more vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy.

But efforts to tie funding for children in public preschool programs to state school finance formulas—which advocates say allows for annual increases—are increasing.

School districts in Wisconsin, Maine, and Vermont can already enroll 4-year-olds in pre-K through their school funding formula. While they are not required to offer pre-K, the number of districts making use of the provision is increasing every year.

The requirements vary from state to state. In Wisconsin, for example, a district will receive half the state's per-pupil cost up front and then make up the rest locally. In Vermont, there is a similar arrangement, but districts there are also supposed to contract with community-based providers.

In Maine, where it's called a two-year kindergarten program, districts can be reimbursed for a full per-pupil amount if the program runs for at least 10 hours per week.,

Under a change passed in New York in 2007, funding for the state's pre-K program will now be part of per-child funding that school districts receive for K-12 students.

And in Iowa, Gov. Chet Culver signed legislation authorizing a four-year, \$60 million pre-K initiative that will be part of the school funding system.

### The Federal Level

While preschool programs can help prepare children for kindergarten, many policymakers say that early childhood education programs are also a necessary part of their efforts to meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

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In fact, one of the hearings on the federal education law held by the Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind was devoted entirely to the role of preschool.

The federal law "does not adequately address the critical education of children under age 5. This must change," Libby Doggett, the executive director of Pre-K Now, said when she spoke at the event.

In addition, the commission's final report, issued in early 2007, included a recommendation that would require schools that are not making adequate yearly progress under NCLB to conduct screenings on preschool and kindergarten pupils that could help determine what interventions or services they need.

Even though most early childhood education activity has taken place at the state level, some federal policymakers have indicated they are also interested in doing more on the issue.

At her Summit on America's Children in Washington, U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi implied that she would like the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress to be more involved in policy regarding young children's school readiness.

"We also have to have a strong public role," Ms. Pelosi said at the May 22 event. "It's about children, but it's also about America."

### More States Taking Action

While most 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 poor families, similar to Head Start.

The rationale is that wealthier families can afford—and will pay—to send their 3- and 4-year-olds to private preschools anyway.

Limited state funds, therefore, should be used to give children whose parents can't afford preschool the same opportunity.

A few states, however, are essentially treating pre-K as the newest grade in the public education system by opening the classroom doors to anyone, regardless of their family income.

Georgia led the way in 1995, when it expanded its lottery-funded pre-K program for poor children to any family who wanted to enroll a 4-year-old.

And in 2006, the program was serving roughly 75,000 children, or about 51 percent of Georgia's 4-year-olds.

Oklahoma followed, with a program that served over 33,000—or 70 percent—of the state's 4-year-olds in 2006.

And then from the day it opened, Florida's universal pre-K program, became one of the largest, with over 100,000 4-year-olds.

New York also has a statewide program that has always been called "universal" since it began in 1997.

But was sidetracked by a lack of funding increases and, therefore, failed to gradually include more children from higher income brackets.

Only about 29 percent of New York's 4-year-olds are in pre-K programs today.

In early 2007, however, Gov. Spitzer pushed for a \$146 million increase, which brings total funding to \$437 million for FY 2008, and spreads the program to all but nine of the state's 680 school districts. That's up from less than 200 districts.

Other states are also heading in the direction of universal access.

Iowa's new Voluntary Preschool Access program is expected to eventually increase the percentage of children attending pre-K to 90 percent, from the current level of 10 percent.

Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich is pushing for universal access for both 3- and 4-year-olds, and has won annual budget increases from the legislature toward his goal.

## Required Reading

### "High-Quality Preschool: Why We Need It and What It Looks Like"

2002, Linda Espinosa, National Institute for Early Education Research  
<http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/1.pdf>

### "Inside the pre-K Classroom: A Study of Staffing and Stability in State-Funded Pre-kindergarten Programs"

2002, Dan Bellm, Center for the Child Care Workforce  
[http://www.ccw.org/pubs/ccw\\_pre-k\\_10.4.02.pdf](http://www.ccw.org/pubs/ccw_pre-k_10.4.02.pdf)

### "Leadership Matters: Governor's Pre-K Proposals, Fiscal Year 2008"

2007, Pre-K Now  
[http://www.preknow.org/documents/LeadershipReport\\_Apr2007.pdf](http://www.preknow.org/documents/LeadershipReport_Apr2007.pdf)

### "Standards for Preschool Children's Learning and Development: Who Has Standards, How Were They Developed, and How Are They Used?"

2003, Catherine Scott-Little and Sharon L. Kagan, SERVE  
[http://www.serve.org/\\_downloads/REL/ELO/Standards2003.pdf](http://www.serve.org/_downloads/REL/ELO/Standards2003.pdf)

### "The State of Preschool 2006"

2007, National Institute for Early Education Research  
<http://nieer.org/yearbook/>

### "Votes Count: Legislative Action on Pre-K, Fiscal Year 2007"

2006 Pre-K Now  
[http://preknow.org/documents/LegislativeReport\\_Oct2006.pdf](http://preknow.org/documents/LegislativeReport_Oct2006.pdf)

### Websites

National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education  
[www.ncrece.org](http://www.ncrece.org)

National Institute for Early Education Research  
[www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org)

Pre-K Now  
[www.preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org)

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The state currently serves about 14 percent of 3-year-olds and 23 percent of 4-year-olds

A universal pre-K law passed in West Virginia in 2002, and the state has until 2012 to make the program available to all children. About 4 percent of 3-year-olds and 40 percent of 4-year-olds in 2006-2007.

### Still a debate: learning impact vs. cost

Even though more states are aiming to serve children from middle-class families, researchers are still debating whether public preschool programs are as effective for children from more advantaged households as they are for poor children.

In an evaluation of the state pre-K program in the Tulsa, Okla., 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.

The study, conducted by William T. Gormley at 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.

But other experts say that it's more cost-efficient for state policymakers to focus funding on children from poverty-level and working-poor families.

Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, also argues that some studies suggest that poor children benefit more than middle-class children from spending time in preschool centers.

Two different reviews of data from the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, he wrote, show that "there were some sustained cognitive benefits for poor children, especially those going to higher quality elementary schools, but a substantial fade-out for middle-class children."

### Who Provides Services?

Oklahoma's model, housing pre-K programs mostly in schools, raises another issue—determining who will be in charge of running the state-funded programs.

Most states choose to use 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.

States such as Georgia, Colorado, and North Carolina also use this model as a way 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 school-based approach, however, 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 can also allow for 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 said.

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 asks 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.

According to NIEER's most recent "yearbook," 20 states now require pre-K teachers to hold bachelor's degrees.

But while requiring pre-K teachers to have a four-year degree is widely supported by policymakers and many early childhood education experts, the research on whether the bachelor's degree makes a difference in children's achievement is inconclusive.

A recent study led by Diane Early from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill says that at this point there is not a convincing link between a preschool teacher's credentials and children's academic success.

### The Issue is Quality

States also decide what will be taught in pre-kindergarten programs.

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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.

Some teachers also stress physical activity and social skills such as cooperation and taking turns—skills that kindergarten teachers say help prepare children for formal learning in school.

A 2003 report by Teachers College, at Columbia University, and SERVE, a regional education laboratory in Greensboro, N.C., showed that 39 states and the District of Columbia had or were developing standards for what children in their pre-K programs should be learning.

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.

NIEER's 2006 "yearbook" shows that over time, state pre-K programs are improving the level of quality in their classrooms.

Nineteen early childhood education programs in 16 states had made policy changes that enabled them to reach more of the 10 quality benchmarks set by the institute.

The pre-K programs in Alabama and North Carolina met all 10 of NIEER's benchmarks, which include providing comprehensive services, requiring teachers to have a bachelor's degree, and serving at least one meal. Both states reached nine of the benchmarks in the previous report.

Developing early-learning standards, adding vision, hearing, or health screenings, or setting new in-service training requirements for teachers were among the changes made in other states.

Another 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 Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten 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.

The latest results of the study, released in 2005, provided a more detailed portrait of state pre-K classrooms.

Children, for example, spend about a third of their time in class following routines, such as standing in line, washing their hands, and cleaning up. Another third is spent in free-choice activities, and about a quarter is spent in whole-group activities.

According to the observation tool used, they spend less than one-third of their time actually interacting with a teacher, and this type of interaction was infrequent during free play or routines.

Even pre-reading lessons or other literacy activities involved minimal teacher-child interaction, the study shows. The researchers recommend that teachers find ways to better integrate songs, stories, or conversation into mealtime or other daily routines, in order to encourage academic growth.

Reporters should continue to monitor these studies, the National Center's 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.

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## Indicators of Pre-K Quality:

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.

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

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