

Preschool Rocks

Policymakers around the country are investing in preschool.

BY STEFFANIE CLOTHIER AND JULIE POPPE

States are on the move with preschool. Thirty-one have increased funding—more than \$1 billion in the past two years. Illinois and West Virginia are joining Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma in making sure preschool is available to all children whose parents want it, not just for low-income families. Other states are targeting children most at-risk of school failure. And some states are establishing task forces to look at what they can do. But most are doing something.

Research on brain development, concerns about how many children come to kindergarten already behind their peers, and countless studies about the benefits of preschool have made the years before kindergarten a new focus of attention for governors, legislators, economists, doctors, law enforcement officials and researchers. One approach states are taking is to create or expand preschool programs. Forty states now have state-funded prekindergarten programs. They vary in scope and funding, but emphasis in all of them is on preparing children for school. Some focus on all or only at-risk 4-year-olds, others on at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND IT

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of 22,000 children found that children who start school behind, stay behind. Brain researchers and child development experts know that cognitive skills and behaviors are developed

Steffanie Clothier and Julie Poppe are NCSL's experts in early education. They can help provide research or testimony. If you'd like examples of preschool policy approaches, information about other states, financing options or to be connected with an expert in a particular area, please call Steffanie Clothier at (303) 856-1416. NCSL's technical assistance is made possible through a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Putting More Into Pre-K

These 12 states top the list of 2006 spending increases for pre-k programs.

California - \$100 million
New York - \$50 million
Pennsylvania - \$50 million *
New Jersey - \$47.2 million
Illinois - \$45 million *
Kentucky - \$23.5 million
South Carolina - \$23.3 million
Tennessee - \$20 million
North Carolina - \$18 million
Georgia - \$12 million
New Mexico - \$8 million
Connecticut - \$8.7 million
New Mexico - \$8.5 million

*Block grants including preschool
Source: Pre-K Now

very early in life. And they are finding that the achievement gap that's there at the start of kindergarten doesn't go away.

Kids who go to good preschools are less apt to end up in special education classes, repeat a grade or get in trouble with the law. Experts say investing in preschools can increase graduation rates, college attendance and lifetime earnings. Preschool benefits can also go beyond school success to healthy life choices and attitudes about school achievement, smoking or using drugs, and participation in the community. But researchers emphasize that quality matters. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, the impressive short- and long-term outcomes for children are the result of high quality ingredients such as teachers with bachelor's degrees and specialized training in early education, early learning standards, and other features such as recommended student-

to-teacher ratios, class size limits, support services and provider monitoring.

PRESCHOOL FOR ALL

This year Illinois became the first state in the nation to commit to providing preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds who wish to attend, thanks to community and government champions. As a down payment, \$45 million has been appropriated to the state's Early Childhood Block Grant. Preschool is a major component, but leaders also recognized the importance of young children's early environments by funding services to needy infants and toddlers. The block grant includes money for children under 3 who need in-home or center-based care and family support services. The funding will expand over five years to include all 3- and 4-year-olds.

Illinois' recent efforts started in 2003 when Governor Rod Blagojevich and the legislature established an Early Learning Council to draft recommendations that the state has been implementing ever since. The most recent funding increase follows on the heels of a three-year \$90 million investment in early education.

"It is clear that by focusing early in a child's life there is more payoff," says House Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie. "Preschool is enjoyed by so many children that leaving out children puts them at a disadvantage."



REPRESENTATIVE
BARBARA
FLYNN CURRIE
ILLINOIS

Additional Pre-K Resources

- ◆ National Institute for Early Education Research, www.nieer.org
- ◆ National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, www.nectac.org
- ◆ National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, www.ecehispanic.org
- ◆ Pre-K Now, www.preknow.org
- ◆ Starting at 3, www.startingat3.org

Currie has been involved with early education since 1979 and is referred to as the “mother” of the current preschool program. She is optimistic that this recent step will eventually help more middle income families who often can’t afford preschool for their children. Illinois’ five-year plan targets the first funds to those most at-risk, then to children from families with more income. “We are setting a new bar to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds. We won’t be able to help them all today, but we will get there.”

COMBATING POVERTY

In late 2005, a South Carolina court ruled that children were being denied their right to a “minimally adequate” education because of the state’s failure to develop and adequately fund effective early childhood intervention programs. The court’s ruling focused on preschool rather than on deficiencies in K-12.

“The impact of poverty on achievement is not questioned,” said Judge Thomas Cooper, Jr. “Effective early childhood intervention, especially to children who are born into poverty, can make a difference in educational abilities and achievements.”

The General Assembly in 2006 funded a two-year pilot preschool program for at-risk 4-year-olds in the eight counties that were part of the lawsuit. The program will provide



SENATOR
WES HAYES
SOUTH CAROLINA

Preschool Ballot Measures

Although polls show that Americans overwhelmingly believe in pre-school, their views about how to pay for it is a different matter. Last June, California voters defeated a proposition the Legislature placed on the primary ballot. It would have constitutionally guaranteed part-day preschool programs for all California children the year before they enter kindergarten. Californians turned their measure down 61 percent to 39 percent. It would have increased state income tax by 1.7 percent tax for couples earning \$800,000 and individuals earning \$400,000. The measure would have generated more than \$2 billion.

In November, voters in the city of Denver, Colo., narrowly passed a measure to raise Denver sales tax by .12 percent to send the city’s 4-year-olds to preschool and put money into improving the available providers. The measure passed by approximately 1,000 votes.

\$3,077 per child for a full day—more than double the previous spending—with specific funds dedicated to transportation.

“We wanted to make sure children in our poor rural counties have a way to school,” says Senator Wes Hayes, co-chair of the Early Childhood Study Committee.

A stronger state economy made new funding possible for the \$23.7 million project. The new funding will be distributed to both schools and private providers, including child care centers, Head Start and faith-based providers.

A legislative report due in 2008 on how well the project is working will determine whether or not the state will expand preschool to all at-risk children. “We want to learn and make good policy choices. Eventually we want to put this in statute and make it

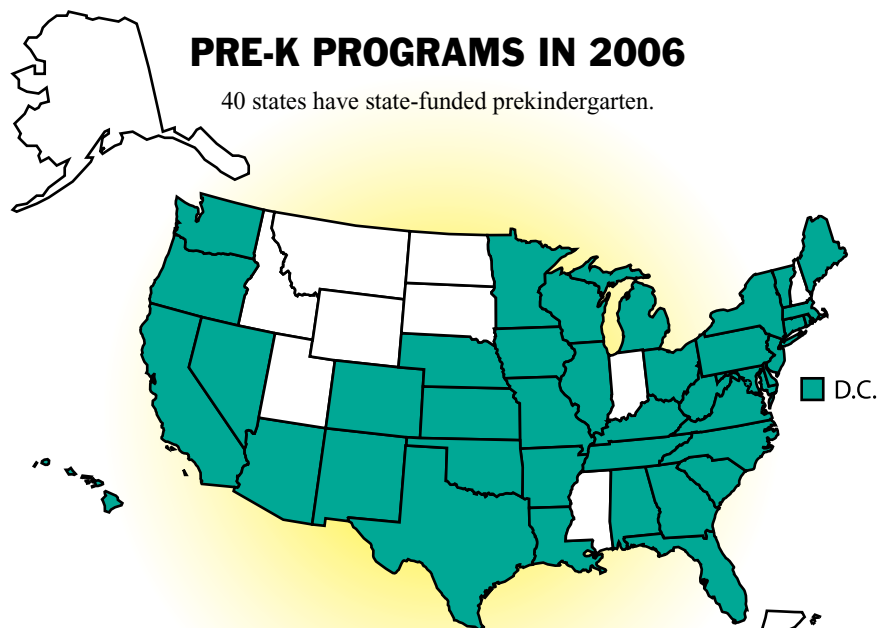
a permanent law,” says Hayes.

PILOTING QUALITY

In Kansas, a new one-year preschool pilot program in six counties is being funded with \$2 million in tobacco settlement funds. The focus is on quality—all classrooms are required to meet certain standards, including teacher qualification requirements and low teacher-to-child ratios. The project will be started in a mix of school- and community-based early childhood programs.

“We wanted to increase quality,” says Jim Redmon, executive director of the Kansas Children’s Cabinet, which focused on early childhood and high-quality preschool as a part of its strategic plan.

“This is the best way to fund preschool with additional money,” says Senator David



Source: NCSL

Wysong who sits on the board of the Kansas Children's Cabinet. "If we had the money, 90 percent of the legislature would put money into pre-K," but he says the state is looking to expand preschool in smaller pieces.



SENATOR
DAVID WYSONG
KANSAS

OTHER STATES CATCHING UP

Many of the 10 states without prekindergarten programs are starting to consider them. Idaho and Wyoming have legislative committees studying early education. Montana is involving business leaders in its efforts.

South Dakota lawmakers have been considering early education issues for the past two years, passing a law to create a task force, proposing a new pre-K pilot, and, most recently, holding a legislative briefing on early education hosted by legislative leaders.

Support is building in the state. Senator Ed Olson, South Dakota's Senate Education chairman, says he thinks there will be some kind of



SENATOR
ED OLSEN
SOUTH DAKOTA

preschool before he leaves office in 2008. Governor Mike Rounds has made access to pre-K part of his proposed education reform initiative. Business and community leaders in Sioux Falls and seven other cities in the state have formed coalitions to develop ideas for early education.

"We want our kids to be as successful as possible," Olson says. "High quality early childhood programs with strong standards and teachers benefit students and the nation as a whole."

But early education debates can be contentious. Groups that oppose government involvement in families' lives believe parents should take sole responsibility for early education. But Olson believes that because South Dakota leads the nation in the percentage of mothers in the workforce and has the highest percentage of children under 6 in child care, "we need to support them."

"If you look at the prison population, most of them are high school dropouts," Olson says. "It makes more sense to spend money on preschools."

"The key is to help policymakers become more aware of the research on brain development and model programs in other states," Olson says. "The results are undeniable. But you'll need to work through the ideology."

Illinois' Representative Currie says her state can be one of those models. "I'm glad Illinois is leading the charge and am confident that more states will join us. The more legislators begin to understand the benefits and importance of early learning, the more states will put focus on quality early learning opportunities for children." 