

THE PRESCHOOL PROMISE

GOING TO PRESCHOOL BENEFITS CHILDREN THEIR ENTIRE LIVES.

CAN STATES AFFORD TO PROVIDE IT TO ALL KIDS?

By Julie Poppe and Steffanie Clothier



If you walk into a good preschool classroom, you might see a teacher reading to a group of kids, children immersed in an art project, little ones playing on a computer or getting ready for a field trip to a nearby museum or public library.

Those children, mounting research shows, will do better in school and are more likely to attend college. As adults they will have better jobs and pay more taxes. They will even be better parents.

The good news is that more and more children go to preschool: in 2002, 66 percent of 4-year-olds attended. Some schools are government supported, others are private. Today, at least 40 states provide state funding for preschool programs, compared to only 10 in 1980.

Parents from all income ranges send their children to preschool, although better educated parents with higher incomes have the highest participation rate.

Preschools are designed to provide education and a safe caring environment. Some states fund programs that incorporate the needs of working parents, sometimes by coordinating their programs with Head Start and child care subsidy programs to ensure full-day services.

READY FOR SCHOOL

One of the striking findings in early education is the size of the achievement gap at the start of kindergarten between children who have gone to preschool and those who have not. That difference hardly ever goes away. It continues in reading and math achievement in the early grades and throughout school and

into the job market. Steve Barnett from the National Institute for Early Education Research—an independent, nonpartisan organization that conducts research and follows state early education policy—says that kids living in poverty are 18 months behind the average kid when they start kindergarten. “This is an incredible amount of time for a school to catch up,” Barnett says. But the achievement gap isn’t just a poverty issue. “The gap continues up the income ladder,” he says. Because of these findings and recent brain research showing that almost 90 percent of brain growth occurs in children by age 5, more lawmakers, economists, business leaders and parents are supporting early education.

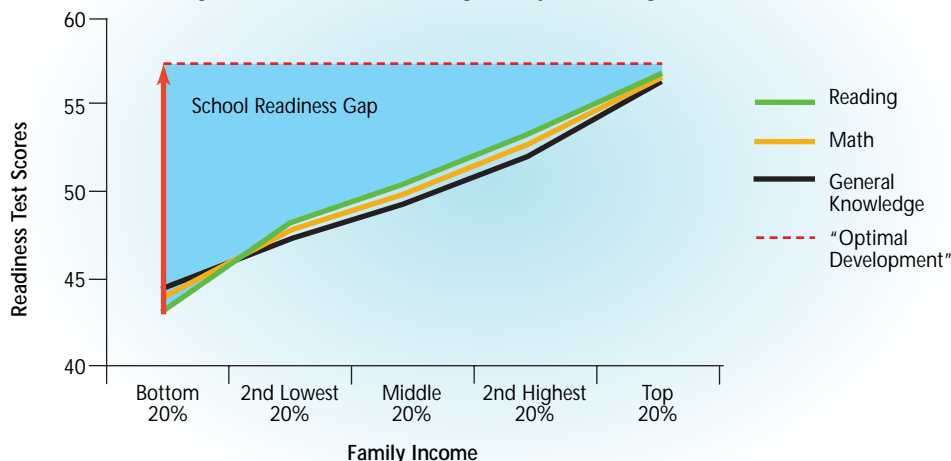
THE RIGHT PROGRAMS ARE KEY

What makes a good preschool program? Proper teacher qualifications and training, small class sizes and teacher-to-student ratios, stimulating curriculum and other services that support families. A good program can improve a child’s achievement over the short and long term. Recent focus on quality has prompted states to consider enhancements. For example, 23 now require preschool teachers to have a bachelor’s degree with additional certification and license.

Most states target their state-funded initiatives to children who are in low-income families or at risk of school failure. Some states are looking to expand their preschool programs in response to state litigation, the need to improve test scores due to No Child

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AT KINDERGARTEN

Family income has a great deal to do with how well a child does on readiness tests when entering kindergarten. The school readiness gap is steepest for children from families with the lowest incomes and continues through middle income families, gradually decreasing as income rises.



Source: Preschool Policy Matters, April 2004, National Institute for Early Education Research.

Julie Poppe tracks preschool policy for NCSL. Steffanie Clothier heads NCSL’s Child Care and Early Education Project.

Left Behind, and the latest research showing early education improves children's school success. Some states have different goals in mind, such as funding and expanding early education programs to reach more working families.

PAYING FOR QUALITY PRESCHOOL

Arkansas has a state-funded preschool program that started in 1991 for low-income children. In recent years, \$40 million in funding has allowed more children to attend. Representative LeRoy Dangeau carried



REPRESENTATIVE
LEROY DANGEAU
ARKANSAS

a bill this session that resulted in an additional \$20 million over the next two years for the continued expansion of the state's program.

Other preschool funding comes from a beer tax (since 2001) that raises about 18 cents on every six-pack, generating \$8 million annually for early education. This April, the Legislature passed a bill to extend the beer tax until June 2007.

Dangeau hopes that by the summer of 2007 there will be a total of \$100 million dedicated for voluntary preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

"When I became a legislator four years ago," says Dangeau, "I had no clue about the importance of early childhood. But I saw the research, including the benefits of preschool over time, and how it is the best investment of our money," he says.

In a recent Arkansas Supreme Court case on school funding inequity, the court recognized the importance of preschool (but didn't mandate it) as part of its ruling. "I think that the court case had an impact on how the Legislature views preschool," says Dangeau. "We see it as the quickest way to improve test scores. The issue is not whether or not to have preschool. The question is how much money to put into it."

Last year, the National Institute for Early Education Research ranked the quality of Arkansas' preschool program very high.

"I am very proud to say that Arkansas

ranked best in terms of quality," says Dangeau. He believes the success is directly tied to legislation passed in 2003 that puts preschool teachers on the same pay scale as K-12 teachers. Any program or school may provide preschool services as long as they meet the state's quality standards, such as one certified teacher per 10 students.

SUPPORTING WORKING FAMILIES

In the mid-'80s, the Illinois legislature established a preschool program for at-risk children. To support working families, the state allows child care centers and Head Start programs that meet standards to provide full-day early education services along with public schools. Local communities determine eligibility; there are an estimated 64,000 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled statewide.

The state has significantly increased funding over the past few years. Since 2003, lawmakers have appropriated \$30 million annually for early education and are looking to do the same this legislative session.

The National Institute for Early Education Research gave the state high marks for quality. Teachers participating in the program must hold an early childhood teaching certificate to be on the same pay scale as K-12 teachers.

In 2003, lawmakers created the Illinois Early Learning Council. It builds on the work the state has already done to develop a high-quality early learning system available

PRESCHOOL POPULARITY

At least 40 states provide state funding for preschool programs.

◆ The first to expand preschool to all 4-year-olds were Georgia and then Oklahoma. Florida, Maryland, New York and West Virginia are in the process of phasing in their programs.

◆ Thirty-six states considered early education bills in 2005. At least 28 states considered expanding preschool programs.

◆ Florida legislators, responding to a state ballot measure, approved legislation for a voluntary preschool program for all 4-year-olds. New Mexico legislators passed a pilot preschool bill with a \$5 million initial appropriation.

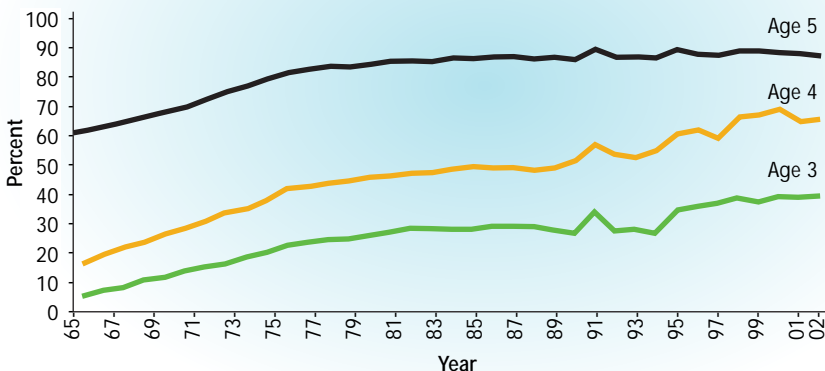
◆ Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota have no state-funded preschool programs, but did consider legislation this session.

to all Illinois children up to age 5. Four legislators currently are members of the council, including Representative Elizabeth Coulson.

Coulson, who has a business background, sits on two of the House Appropriation Committee's subcommittees, Human Services and Education, which make funding decisions for early education. She is also a member of the House Human Services Committee. "I'm a link between key committees that focus on

KINDERGARTEN AND PRESCHOOL PARTICIPATION 1965-2002

Over the last several decades, preschool and kindergarten participation has increased steadily for children ages 3 to 5.



Source: National Institute for Early Education Research.



REPRESENTATIVE
ELIZABETH COULSON
ILLINOIS

early childhood,” she says.

She says that Illinois has been concerned for some time about supporting working families and making sure a strong birth-to-age-5 system is in place that nurtures chil-

RESEARCH AND ECONOMIC PROOF

Solid research backs the premise that investments in early education pay off.

Some of the best known studies include the Perry Preschool Project, the Chicago Child Parent Center, the Abecedarian Project, and a study of Oklahoma’s preschool program. The Perry study’s most recent data are from participants at age 40. They earned higher wages, committed fewer crimes, needed welfare less and were more likely to have graduated from high school than their peers who were not in a preschool program.

The Chicago study results showed better reading and math test scores, more kids graduating from high school, reduced special education placement, less grade repetition and fewer juvenile arrests. Abecedarian showed similar results, with additional findings of increased college attendance and higher achievements of the mothers of the participating children. Oklahoma’s preschool program showed children’s gains in cognitive, language and motor skills with the greatest gains for low-income and minority children.

Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman says productivity can be fostered by investments in young children, particularly children living in poverty or other adverse circumstances. He points to key future workforce skills—motivation, persistence and self control—that are developed early in life. He says the most efficient and cost-effective investments are in the early years.

dren. In 2003, the legislature increased the percentage of funding for birth-to-age-3 programs from 8 percent to 11 percent of the state’s early childhood education block grant. The block grant makes up the state’s funding for preschool education, parental training and prevention initiatives. “The formative years have the most impact on education. This is not just a women’s issue, but it’s also a children’s issue and [in terms of economics and business] an important issue for the whole state,” she says.

Nearly a third of all Illinois 4-year-olds are in a state-funded preschool program and the number is up from the year before. Coulson says early care is a thriving industry that has an impact on Illinois’ economy, and businesses need to be aware of the benefits. Recent research shows that every tax dollar invested in preschool produces \$17 for the economy.

“This session, we continue to focus on quality and funding,” Coulson says. In the last two years, the state has increased preschool spending by \$60 million. “This is a bad budget year for Illinois, but I am optimistic we will find a way to fund another \$30 million for early childhood,” she says.

LEGISLATIVE INVOLVEMENT

During the mid-’80s, Massachusetts set up a state-funded early education program in public schools. Since then, the state has allowed community partnership providers who meet early childhood standards to participate in programs targeting at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds from working families serving almost 16,000 children last year.

During the 2004 session, more than 100 legislators, including leadership in both houses, signed on to a proposal for preschool for all 3-to-5-year-olds to be phased-in over 10 years, at an estimated cost of \$1 billion. Two bills that were eventually enacted laid the groundwork for the expansion by reworking state governance of early childhood programs. One law creates a single department to streamline early childhood programs and to expand preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds. “Hopefully, we will see less duplication of services,” says Representative Patricia Haddad.

She co-chairs the legislature’s Joint Committee on Education and the state’s legislatively created Advisory Committee on Early Education and Care. Nine other legislators

NEED HELP WITH PRESCHOOL POLICY?

NCSL staff have worked in a number of states helping legislators with their child care and early education programs. They provide assistance on program design and financing options for preschool programs.

Legislators interested in help can call Steffanie Clothier in NCSL’s Child Care and Early Education Project, (303) 856-1416.



REPRESENTATIVE
PATRICIA HADDAD
MASSACHUSETTS

participate. They have conducted five public hearings throughout the state. “We had to be a part of the hearings ourselves, because it is nice to read a report, but the passion is different when you are involved,” says Haddad. State early childhood advocates also held meetings throughout the state to educate the public on the importance of early childhood education and full-day kindergarten for all.

Last December, the advisory committee completed a report that identified four key components: developing a workforce, defining quality, delivering the system and evaluating progress. Haddad says the next step is providing a good workforce development program for teachers and providers.

The 2004 legislation also created a new board of early education and care, which will start this July. The commissioners from the boards of Higher Education, Education, and Early Education and Care will each sit on each other’s boards. “We want the commissioners to be talking to one another, which will lead to better communication between these three entities,” says Haddad.

Representative Haddad says people in Massachusetts are starting to realize the importance of preschool and the role that it might possibly play with No Child Left Behind. “If you do not provide the very best for children in the early years, you will continue to see gaps,” she says.