

Preschool Is For Real

Funding is up, as is enrollment, as states continue to invest in high-quality early childhood education to help kids succeed.

BY JULIE POPPE
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Julie Poppe and Robyn Lipkowitz cover early childhood education issues for NCSL's Children and Families Program.

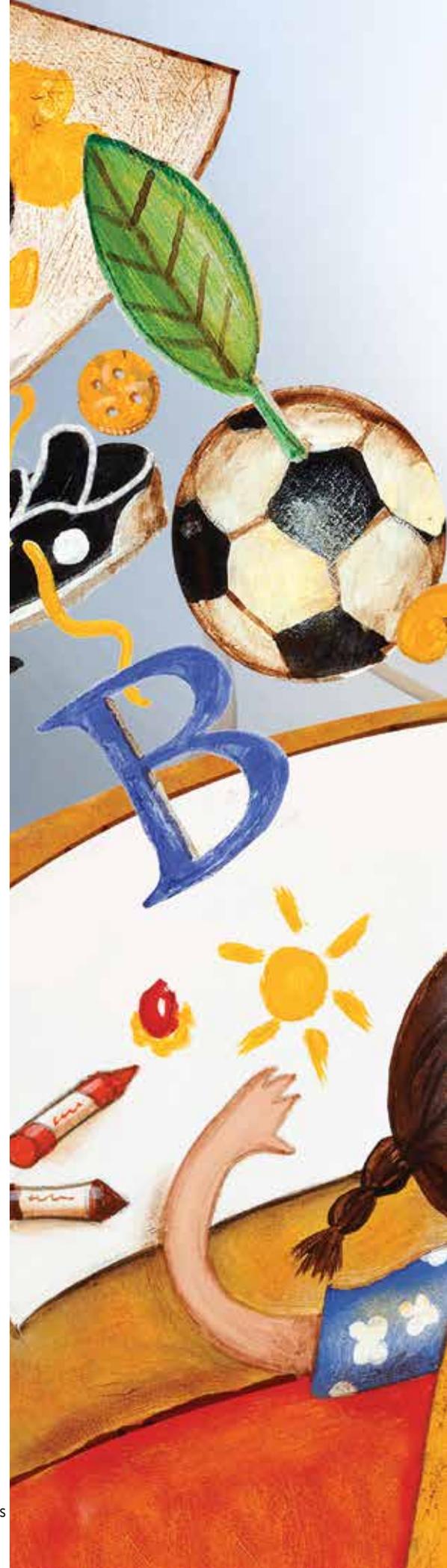
Imagine yourself as a preschooler. Everything's an adventure, from pretending you're a superhero to chasing a butterfly to painting a self-portrait. There is so much to explore, discover and learn at preschool, and it all feels like play—hours and hours of play.

But behind all the fun and games, preschool teachers have one very serious goal: To prepare children for kindergarten and future academic success. To achieve that, they have the daunting task of helping young children learn specific social, emotional, physical, linguistic, cognitive, literacy and math skills, which are defined in state learning guidelines or standards. All this sounds very much like school, although preschool teachers make it all feel like play.

“There's always a push to make preschool look more like school,” says Shari Funkhouser, a preschool teacher with 18 years of experience from Asheboro, North Carolina. “With that comes a push for more data,” she says, “which leads to more assessments. But no test can really measure all the important growth that occurs in preschool.”

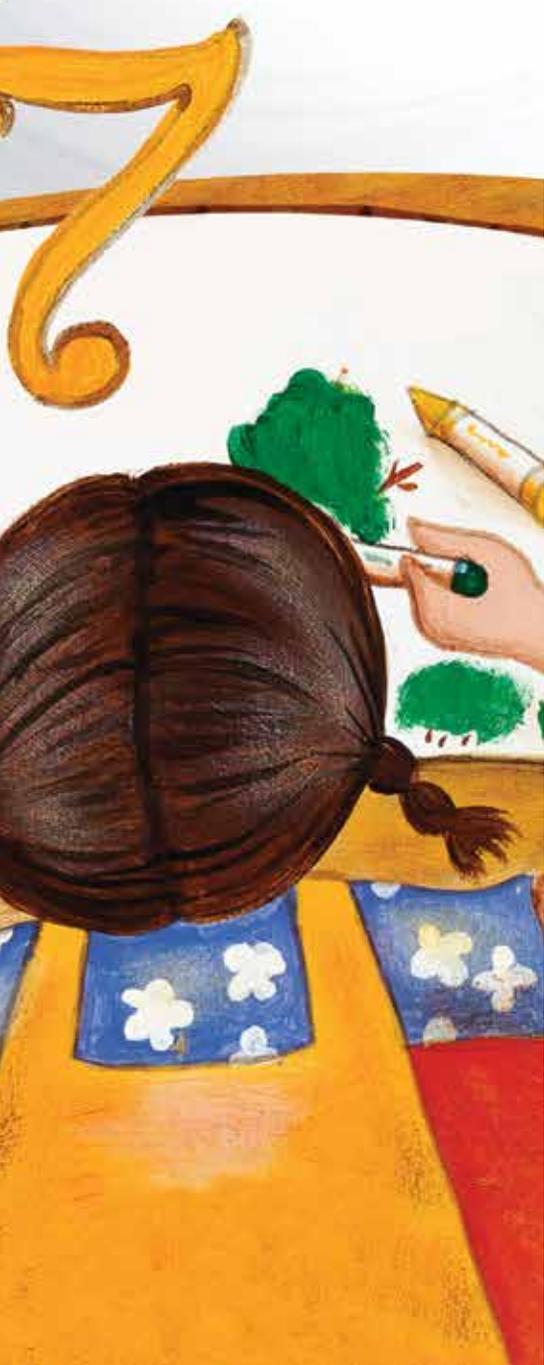
Preschool programs are sprouting up as statewide or pilot initiatives, and public funding is increasing. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia have funded voluntary preschool. Whether it's half-day or year-long, preschool is now available to more than 1.3 million kids, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. States spent \$6.3 billion on preschool last year, compared with \$2.8 billion in 2005.

Nationally, the percentage of children eligible for preschool who actually enrolled rose to



“Getting kids ready for school helps them get ready for life.”

—REPRESENTATIVE SARAH BUXTON, VERMONT



29 percent in 2013, up from 14 percent in 2002.

That still leaves many kids without the benefits of preschool. And an estimated 52 percent of low-income kids and 25 percent of moderate- or high-income kids arrive on the first day of kindergarten unprepared, lacking in many of the skills considered essential to learning.

For those children who don't receive what they need at home, many believe preschool can help.

Why Preschool?

One reason for the recent focus on preschool comes from brain researchers and developmental psychologists who are discovering how critical the early years are for developing healthy brains. That's when the most rapid proliferation of new neural connections occur. These connections provide a foundation on which to learn and grow, and to be physically and mentally healthy.

The most frequently cited reason for the renewed interest in preschool, however, is concern over the widening achievement gap between rich and poor children. The statistics are telling. By age 3, an 18-month gap opens up in language skills between low-income children and their wealthier peers.

Significant differences exist in how parents and children interact based on their socio-economic backgrounds, according to

Betty Hart and Todd Risley at the University of Kansas, who conducted a groundbreaking study in 2003. These differences have an impact on children's language and vocabulary. Researchers calculated that by age 4 the wealthier children had heard 30 million more words spoken than their lower-income peers.

Starting school behind sends most children on a scholastic trajectory that limits their educational choices and affects their future academic and workforce success. Researchers with the Institute of Education Sciences, after studying 22,000 children through fifth grade, concluded that children who begin school behind rarely, if ever, get ahead. Not only do they pay a price, so does society.

“Children who aren't able to access high-quality early learning experiences—for whatever reason—are far more likely to challenge the resources of our education, corrections and social welfare systems,” says Vermont Representative Sarah Buxton (D).

To help school districts, private programs and parents, Buxton supported legislation last year that moved the state closer to universal access. It increased funding for additional preschool hours and set a uniform tuition rate for public and private programs. “Getting kids ready for school,” she says, “helps them get ready for life ... and be happy, smart, stable adults.”

Parents, policymakers and researchers are not the only ones sounding the alarm. Military leaders and business executives are concerned about the growing achievement gap as well. They see far too many young people who lack the basic academic skills needed to perform well in the current job market or to pass military entrance exams. And law enforcement officials say many young offenders are high school dropouts with poor academic skills.

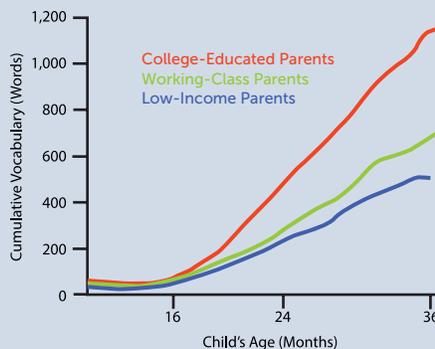
Whose Role Is it?

Along with concerns over the disparities in achievement, however, come concerns over parental rights, big government and a growing “nanny state.”

“The long-term success of early education will depend on preserving ... a firm commitment to parental choice and engagement,” says Katharine B. Stevens

The Word Gap

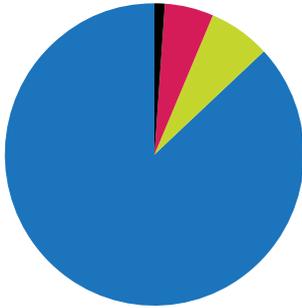
Differences in how parents and children interact based on their socio-economic backgrounds leads to wealthier children being exposed to words much more often than their lower-income peers.



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Funding Sources

The average annual cost per preschool student was \$4,679 in 2014.



- State Contributions 87%
- Local Contributions 7%
- Federal Contributions 5%
- TANF Contributions 1%

Source: *The National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014 Yearbook*

from the American Enterprise Institute.

Maintaining parental choice is essential to many who believe government should stay out of family decisions. Like North Dakota Senator Tim Flakoll (R), chairman of the Education Funding Committee, they believe “parents should be the first teachers of kids.”



Senator
Tim Flakoll
North Dakota

With that in mind, lawmakers in North Dakota funded a new preschool program specifically to support parents—many of whom have recently been drawn to the state by its booming economy. “We have job openings for nearly everyone who needs

work in the state, so this is really helping out these working parents,” Flakoll says.

Legislation that offers parents options is more likely to attract bipartisan support. Several states have expanded publicly funded preschools recently to include private child care centers, community organizations, faith-based centers, military agencies and colleges.

Return on Investment

Preschool can be expensive, and funding—where it comes from and who receives it—can lead to contentious discussions.

From a purely financial standpoint, however, James Heckman, a Nobel laureate economist at the Center for the Economics of Human Development at the University of Chicago, says publicly funding preschool makes sense. The most efficient and cost-effective investments in education are those made in the early years of life, he says. They offer a greater return on investment than programs that target adults, who generally find it more difficult to learn new skills.

To get the biggest bang for the buck, according to Heckman and others, states should invest in the very young. But not just any early education program will do. When it comes to preschool, quality matters.

“Quality is No. 1,” says Mississippi Senator Brice Wiggins (R). “Whether a preschool program has staying power and provides long-term benefits depends on how good it is. Research shows that high-quality, evidence-based programs provide benefits that take hold and lay the foundation for results later on,” Wiggins says. “The better the program, the more long-lasting the benefits.”



“Quality is No. 1.”

—SENATOR BRICE WIGGINS, MISSISSIPPI

It’s not just that good programs improve achievement. Studies have also shown that poorly run programs can actually do harm. It’s well worth it to do what it takes to get schools from not-so-good to great, says Steve Barnett with National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

It’s a simple formula. “If you pay for high quality, programs will produce stronger results,” Barnett says.

But will the improvements last?

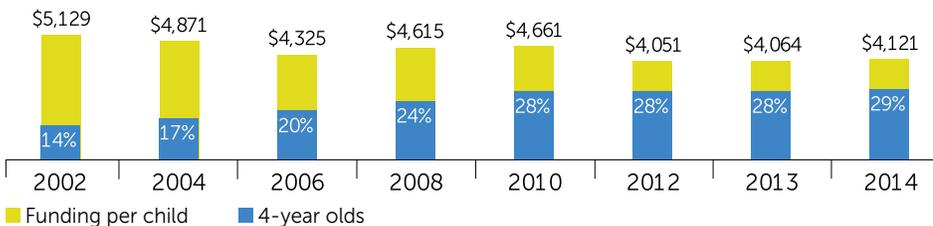
Long-Term Questions

Skeptics say many of the gains made during preschool disappear by third grade—what is often called the “fade-out” effect.

David J. Armor, George Mason University professor emeritus of public policy, argues in the *Washington Post* that “the few top-quality studies out there reveal few, if any, lasting benefits.”

Who and How Much?

The percent of 4-year-olds attending a public preschool has increased while average per-student funding has decreased since 2002.



Source: *The National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014 Yearbook*



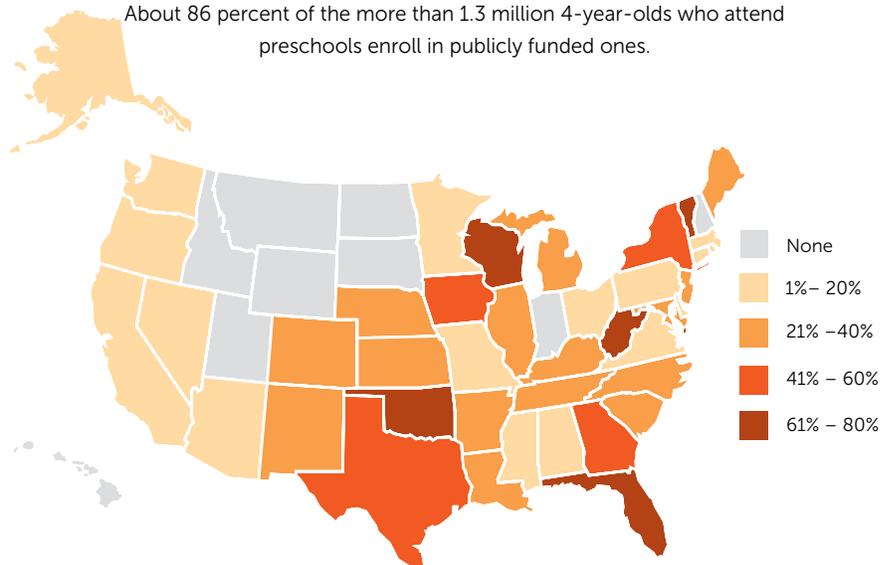
Others disagree. It's difficult to know which skills will diminish over time and which will persist or even appear later. "That is, early measures may not capture the full long-term impact of the program," says Rob Grunewald, economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. The bank got involved in preschool issues over concerns that our future workforce would be ill-prepared and lack the skills needed to lead our country.

Despite concerns, legislation to strengthen preschool in various ways has found strong bipartisan support in most states. "My fellow Republican lawmakers are warming up to the idea, especially preschool's long-term impacts," notes Wiggins.

After assessments of the state's children showed that two-thirds of all 5-year-olds were not ready for kindergarten, Wiggins sponsored legislation in 2013 to provide \$3 million to fund preschool for nearly

Portion of Children in Public Preschools

About 86 percent of the more than 1.3 million 4-year-olds who attend preschools enroll in publicly funded ones.



Source: *The National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014 Yearbook*

Innovative Solutions

Utah has experimented with a couple of interesting ways to address problems of school readiness, grade retention and special education rates in 2014.

To finance a new statewide early education program for more than 3,500 children, lawmakers approved legislation, sponsored by Representative Greg Hughes (R), that creates a School Readiness Board to negotiate “results-based” contracts with private entities.

“We are constantly looking, because of the finite dollars we have in public education, for innovation, efficiencies and smart practices,” Hughes says.

In 2008, the Legislature established a digital in-home preschool program called UPSTART. The program, supported with state funding, recently won an “Investing in Innovation” federal grant. As part of the program, a learning coach contacts families on a weekly basis in English or Spanish to help monitor and improve the child’s progress. Statistics show that, regardless of their ethnicity or socio-economic status, children in the program are making gains in school readiness skills.



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—SPEAKER GREG HUGHES, UTAH

1,800 children.

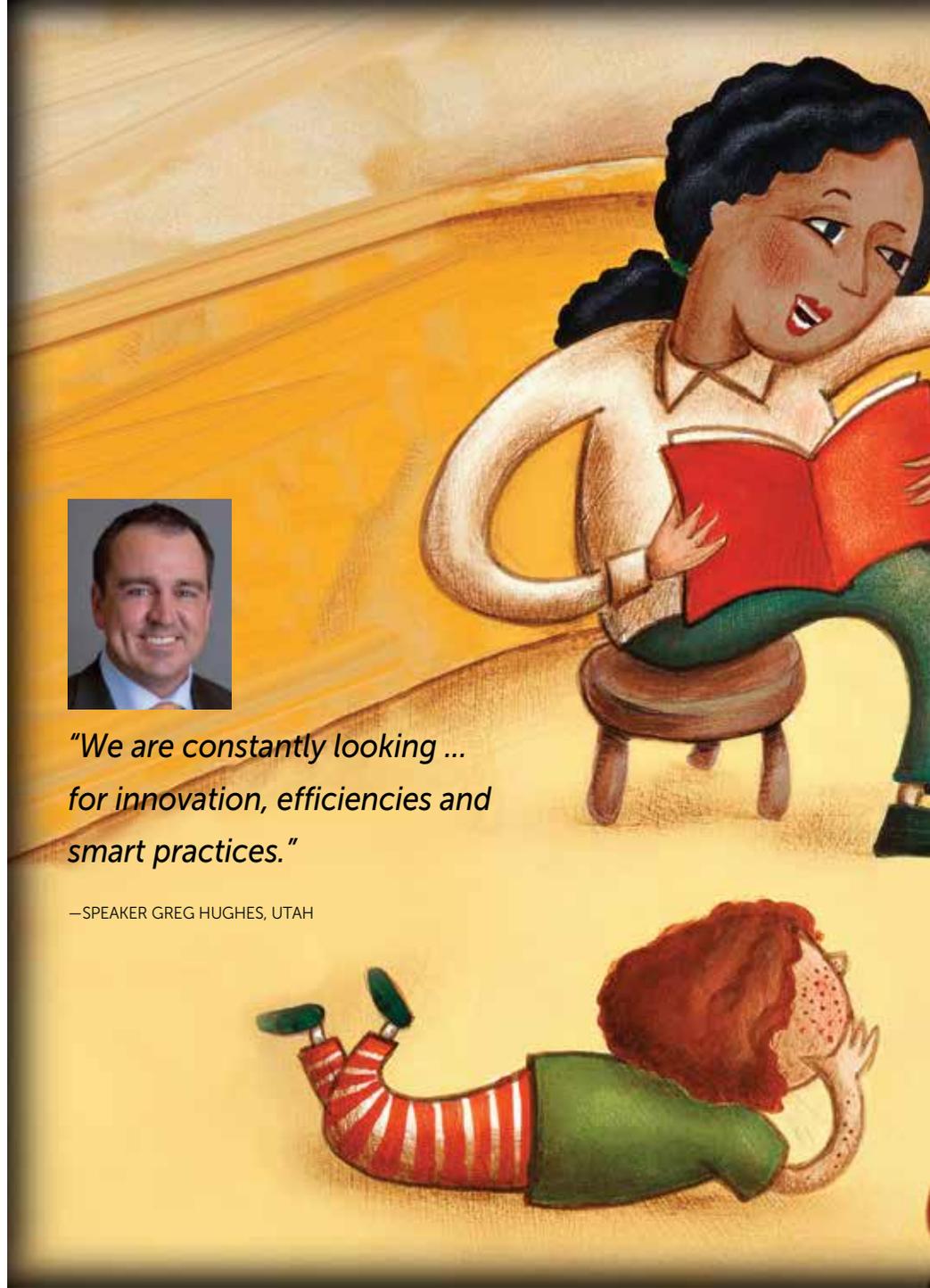
The senator’s interest in early education stems from his time as a state prosecutor, when he saw “too many underage offenders who lacked education.” He believes in the “pay now or pay later” theory voiced by many law enforcement and criminal justice officials.

Big Investments for Little Ones

In the last two years alone, 35 state legislatures and the District of Columbia have increased funding for new and existing pre-kindergarten programs.

California legislators made their biggest investment in more than a decade last year: \$273 million, including \$25 million for professional development for teachers. And Michigan lawmakers, over the last two years and with strong, bipartisan support, have increased funding from \$110 million to almost \$240 million.

Lawmakers in Minnesota, New York and Pennsylvania have also voted to make large investments in their prekindergarten programs in the last two years.



Federal funding increased this year as well after a coalition of philanthropic, business, education, advocacy and elected leaders gathered at a White House Summit to discuss expanding early education. As a result, more than \$220 million in new federal funding was available this year to states with preschool enrollment rates below 10 percent.

Alabama, Arizona, Hawaii, Montana and Nevada received the first development grants. And Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont and Virginia have received expansion grants. The future

of this program is uncertain, however, as Congress has not yet renewed it.

An Eye on Quality

Lawmakers have targeted improvements to areas that directly influence quality, including teacher qualifications. The Institute of Medicine recently recommended that preschool teachers have a bachelor’s degree along with specialized training in early childhood education. Even though more than 30 states already require teachers in public preschools to have a bachelor’s degree, only 57 percent of all preschool teachers do, and only 34 percent of assistant teachers are certified.



The Quest for High Quality

What does a high-quality preschool look like? According to the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, great programs include:

- Comprehensive state standards for what preschool children need to learn
- Lead teachers with bachelor's degrees and specialized training in a prekindergarten area
- Assistant teachers with appropriate certificates
- At least 15 hours a year of professional training for teachers
- Class sizes limited to 20 students
- A staff-to-child ratio of 1-to-10 or better
- Children's vision, hearing and health screenings and referrals
- At least one additional support service for families
- Meals offered regularly
- Adequate monitoring of program quality, including site visits by evaluators

and using state-approved curricula before receiving any of the new grant money. School districts also have to track and report certain data for the first time.

And Mississippi's new prekindergarten program was developed to meet all 10 of Rutgers early education quality benchmarks listed above.

Waiting for the Future

How effective will all this new investment in high-quality preschools be? Finding out will require patience—at least 10 or so years of it. Meanwhile, preschoolers will continue to be preschoolers, playing tag, learning the alphabet, singing songs. They will learn and grow and develop. And those in high-quality preschools will likely show up on the first day of kindergarten, prepared and eager to sail through the next 12 years.

Teachers don't need statistical proof to measure that kind of success. "We know where they were when they arrived and, large or small, we can see the changes," says teacher Funkhouser.

"We know we have made a difference in their futures."

Finding qualified teachers may be difficult. Salaries don't exactly attract people to the profession. Although preschool teachers with bachelor's degrees can make more than \$40,000 a year, depending on the type of preschool, the nation's average salary for all preschool teachers is less than \$30,000.

Some states focused on funding more teacher training and coaching, credentialing community providers or establishing quality rating and improvement systems.

Other reforms targeted class sizes, student-to-teacher ratios and curricula. Indiana lawmakers decided to start with a pilot program focused on quality and evaluation to "make sure we are doing it right," says Rep-

resentative Robert Behning (R), chairman of the Education Committee. Behning's legislation targets low-income children who are not enrolled in Head Start and offers parents choices through public schools, including charter schools, or private providers, including child care centers, private homes or religious groups. The state is funding the program with reallocated federal child care money.

Texas lawmakers now require school districts to meet certain quality requirements, including having certified teachers



Representative
Robert Behning
Indiana