

EDUCATION LINKS

How do we establish universal preschool in a way that builds the early care and education system as a whole?

Background

Several states have established or set as a near-future goal, having universal preschool. Almost every state has some kind of preschool program, at least for ‘at-risk’ or ‘unserved’ four year olds. Among the 45 states with preschool programs, **Georgia** has a universal pre-kindergarten program, serving 60% of 4-year-olds. So does **Oklahoma**, also serving about 60% of 4-year-olds. Several other states are working toward their commitment to universal preschool: **New York** served about 25% of 4-year-olds in 2002; **West Virginia** and **Illinois** are beginning implementation. And **Massachusetts** or **Maryland** will probably be next – Massachusetts has the Early Education for All Campaign and Maryland’s Governor announced universal preschool in the state of the state message in 2003. **California** is working on universal preschool in several counties, including Los Angeles (which itself is larger than many states), and recently held a legislative hearing in Sacramento on universal pre-kindergarten. Also, several states have preschool programs that are in a sense universal, in that they are available to all the preschoolers in a particular school district (**New Jersey**, **Connecticut**). Indiana is the latest state to join the preschool bandwagon: the Governor’s state of the state message in 2004 announced a plan for preschool for at-risk 4-year-olds and full-day kindergarten for all children by 2007.

The spread of preschool is in many ways a welcome development, since it generally means a net gain in funding for early childhood programs - that is, more state revenue is devoted to early childhood. Preschool is almost always funded with state dollars, usually general revenue in the state education budget. In 2002, 45 states invested over \$2 billion in preschool programs through a number of financing strategies.¹

Yet as preschool policy spreads rapidly across the country, legitimate questions arise about what impact this policy change will have on the rest of the early childhood system, the sub-systems of Head Start, child care, etc. Concerns range from outright fear that child care will be put out of business, to concern about what role kith and kin providers might have, to questions about implementation. The vision of an early childhood system means much more than preschool – it is services and supports for all children birth to five, with parents able to make meaningful choices among quality alternatives, all with a well-qualified and well-compensated workforce, etc. The high interest in preschool is an opportunity to advance toward that system.

Preschool legislation and practice in several states offer examples of approaches to enacting preschool that build parts of the unified system we envision.

¹ Mitchell, Anne, “How States Finance Prekindergarten Programs and Estimate Costs,” Remarks to Florida Universal Prekindergarten Council, August 20, 2003, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. See: http://www.upkcouncil.org/docs/products_08202003amitchell.pdf.

- **Program design** Preschool is most helpful in building the system if the current providers of early care and education can participate directly. A fundamental design question is: which entities can provide preschool? The rhetoric around preschool often makes it seem like a public school program. In fact, very few states limit provision to public schools. Most states have measures that permit child care, Head Start and sometimes other entities to provide preschool, assuming they can meet its standards. **New York** requires that at least 10% of the funds are used to contract for preschool; in fact more than 60% are used this way. **West Virginia's** preschool program requires that 50% of funds be contracted to community-based organizations. **Georgia** contracts with both nonprofit and proprietary child care as well as Head Start and public schools to offer preschool. More than half of providers are not public schools. Another aspect of program design is oversight or governance. A collaborative approach is more likely, than a singular one, to address the larger system issues. In **North Carolina**, the More at Four program is jointly managed at the state level by the Department of Public Instruction, the Governor's Office and the Department of Health and Human Services. **Connecticut's** school readiness program is jointly managed by the Departments of Education and Social Services.
- **Standards** The basis for any system is standards: for people, for programs and for children. Many believe that standards are the key to achieving a unified early childhood system, especially if the standards incorporate several levels of practice. Preschool programs often are the catalyst for developing standards and the first program to which the standards are applied. Similarly, establishing and using standards can lead to greater investment. In **Colorado**, Educare has developed a standards-based quality rating system that is being used as the basis for school readiness grants to child care programs in low-performing school districts and for the pilot of a tiered rewards payment system.
- **Professional development** A key element of the early childhood system is a well-qualified and well-compensated workforce. Preschool programs cannot be implemented without qualified teachers (and other staff). Almost no state has a surplus of qualified early childhood teachers just waiting to start working in pre-kindergarten programs. Preschool policy discussions nearly always include workforce development. The policy options can include scholarships for students, release time/pay for substitutes, increased compensation, and incentives to colleges to offer degree programs leading to early childhood certification, among others. Setting up professional development structures is sufficiently complex that it makes sense to do so for the whole early childhood workforce, not just teachers of 4-year-olds in preschool settings. A good example is **North Carolina**, where the More at Four preschool funding pays for T.E.A.C.H. ® scholarships for individuals working toward bachelor degrees and Birth to Kindergarten certification. Another example is **New Jersey**, where the effort to create articulated pathways from community colleges into the bachelor-degree granting colleges benefited all. Funds for scholarships are available to all staff in a program receiving preschool funds, not just the preschool classroom staff.

- ***Children younger than age three*** Preschool statutes can explicitly address the needs of children younger than three. The leading example is **Illinois**, where the Early Childhood Block Grant, which funds the Illinois Prekindergarten Program, also includes a set-aside of 11% of the block grant for programs for children under three and their parents. As the investment in preschool rises, so does the set-aside for children under three.

Suggested Resources

For more information on state preschool policy, see the website of the National Institute for Early Education Research at: <http://nieer.org/>

The National Child Care Information Center includes on its website a host of papers and reports on preschool and links to organizations with databases on preschool policy. Go to: <http://nccic.org/> Click on 'Frequently Requested Information' and scroll down to 'Prekindergarten & School Readiness.'