



School Readiness: A federal agenda in support of pre-kindergarten education

In the last two years, states have nearly doubled their investment in pre-kindergarten for three- and four-year-old children with an increase of more than a billion taxpayer dollars. The investments take the form of more classrooms, higher-paid teachers, full-day programs, and stronger links with other early childhood education including Head Start and center-based childcare. The efforts by state policymakers are grounded in research that shows high-quality voluntary pre-k improves school readiness and academic achievement for all children and saves significant public dollars that otherwise would be required for special education, remedial classes, and even the costs of incarceration.

To assist states in the drive toward high-quality, voluntary pre-k for all three and four year olds, Pre-K Now and other national advocacy organizations are putting the issue of pre-k on the national agenda. In the 1990s, states such as Massachusetts, Kentucky and Maryland led the nation in establishing strong academic standards to improve educational achievement. The standards movement underway in the states led to passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. Similarly, states today are taking the lead in pressing for pre-k for all as a key strategy to ensure success in school. State leaders who are already making significant state investments in pre-k are looking to the U.S. Congress and the Bush Administration to be partners in the movement toward pre-k for all.

The federal government should:

- Amend major education laws to include pre-k for three and four year olds as an integral part of federal support for public education;
- Create a new incentive grant program to encourage state initiatives to expand the capacity and improve the quality of publicly-funded pre-kindergarten.

So the states can:

- Serve more three and four year olds in quality, voluntary programs;
- Produce more highly-qualified, highly-skilled pre-k teachers;
- Ensure stronger collaboration among child care, Head Start, IDEA, and state-funded pre-k education;
- Initiate and evaluate replicable demonstration programs;
- Develop data systems to aide in evaluating and improving pre-k education.

The changes made at the federal level by the No Child Left Behind Act have done much at the elementary and middle school levels to focus attention on the achievement gap. What

the law does not yet acknowledge is that the gap actually begins in early childhood, as a school readiness gap.¹ Research has clearly documented that poor academic achievement is foreshadowed by low cognitive, linguistic and social functioning during the years prior to kindergarten, typically called the pre-k years.² Business groups such as the Committee for Economic Development, policy organizations such as the National Governor's Association and most K -12 education groups have all recognized this fact.³

To further the discussion about a potential federal role to encourage expansions and quality improvements at the state level, Pre-K Now hosted a 2-day discussion in June 2006 to begin to outline what kind of federal assistance states most need. The discussion centered on the potential value of a new incentive grant program. Such issues do not remain static, however, and there has been subsequent and extensive discussion about a broader pre-kindergarten agenda as part of the work of the U.S. Congress in reauthorizing the Head Start program, and reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This paper summarizes the discussions to date and is intended to provide a framework for moving forward with a federal agenda for pre-k for all.

Report from the states: progress and challenges

Research consistently shows that voluntary, high-quality pre-k increases children's school readiness, provides impressive financial returns to states, and produces significant efficiency and productivity gains to educational systems.⁴ As both a sound investment and a proven education-reform strategy, pre-k has won support from state policymakers around the country. Moreover, the proven, lasting benefits to young children have made pre-k a priority for voters, with nearly 70 percent saying that state and local governments should fund high-quality pre-k programs for all.⁵

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, "America's Kindergartners: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Kindergarten, Class of 1998-99, Fall 1998," Jerry West, Kristin Denton, and Elvira Germino-Hausken, 2000.

² National Center for Education Statistics, "Fifth Grade: Findings from the Fifth-Grade Follow-up of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K)," Dan Princiotta, Kristin Denton Flanagan, and Elvira Germino Hausken, 2006.

³ See the following websites for how the Committee for Economic Development, National Governors Association, National Association of School Boards of Education, and the Council of Chief State School Officers have promoted early childhood education in their work:

- www.ced.org/projects/kids.php.

- www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.4096192acba1c8899cdcbeeb501010a0/?vgnextoid=abbb8cc156de1010VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD.

- www.nasbe.org/publications/Early_Childhood_Study_Group/early_childhood_exec_summary.pdf

- www.ccsso.org/projects/early_childhood_and_family_education/

⁴ See William T. Gormley et al., "The Effects of Universal Pre-K on Cognitive Development," *Developmental Psychology* 41, no. 6 (2005); Clive R. Belfield et al., "The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program: Cost-Benefit Analysis Using Data from the Age-40 Followup," *Journal of Human Resources* 41, no. 1 (2006).

⁵ Inc. Peter D. Hart Research Associates, "Voters and Pre-K: A Report of Findings from a National Survey," (Washington, DC: Pre-K Now, 2006).

As state pre-k programs grow, however, new challenges have emerged. Funding, professional development, and expansion of access are only three of the many issues facing state pre-k programs. The federal government can play a critical role in supporting efforts to build, grow, and improve public pre-k programs by helping states address and overcome these problems.

Momentum in the States

As of April 2007, 39 states and the District of Columbia (DC) offer voluntary, state-funded pre-k programs. Of these, three currently provide voluntary pre-k for all four year olds, two are in the midst of multi-year program expansions to serve all four year olds within five to 10 years, one is phasing in pre-k for all three and four year olds, and the rest offer pre-k on a targeted basis.

State funding for voluntary pre-k programs is on the rise nationwide. In Fiscal Year 2007, 31 state legislatures and the DC city council increased appropriations for their publicly funded pre-k programs, up from 26 states in FY06 and a new national record. Over the past two years, state investments in pre-k have grown by more than \$1 billion. For FY08, a record 29 governors proposed a total of more than \$800 million for state pre-k – more than three times the amount proposed for FY07 – which would serve more than 100,000 additional children.

A Bipartisan Issue

Among state legislatures that increased pre-k funding for FY07, 15 were Democrat-controlled, 10 were Republican-controlled, and six were split between both parties. Similarly, in their FY08 budgets, nine out of the 22 Republican governors and 20 of the 28 Democratic governors proposed additional funds for pre-k.

Complex and Disparate Funding

Each state develops its own strategy for financing a pre-k program. For most states, this means a combination of local, state, and federal appropriations, often directed on a student-by-student basis based on categories of eligibility. For these blended-funding states, managing the complicated flow of dollars consumes enormous resources that might otherwise go to classrooms. Intricate reimbursement processes put burdens on providers, and restrictive funding criteria create a precarious situation for children living at the eligibility threshold. Further, annual changes in economic conditions and federal and state appropriations can negatively impact pre-k programs, complicating efforts to expand access or improve quality.

Other states have developed stable and manageable dedicated funding streams through sources such as lottery and gaming dollars, “sin” taxes, and tobacco settlement funds. These sources offer fairly secure revenues that are largely immune from economic trends, but many of these states still have to blend or braid funding to provide the highest quality of

pre-k programs to the greatest number of children possible. Also, pre-k expansion and improvement initiatives can be stymied by strict spending constraints or a reluctance to raise or reauthorize taxes.

Six states include pre-k in their school funding formulas. This strategy not only ties funding to enrollment in a somewhat more stable and secure fashion, it also positions pre-k programs as a part of the state's education continuum. A downside is that funding for new pre-k initiatives such as professional development and quality enhancements are frequently not included in these per-child expenditures.

Inconsistent Quality

Research has shown that high-quality pre-k programs produce the most sizeable gains for children and the best returns to states. The majority of state programs range from moderate to low quality according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) which has identified 10 benchmarks of pre-k program quality. As of 2006, only 13 state programs met eight or more quality benchmarks. Two states, Alabama and North Carolina, met all of the benchmarks. In contrast, 13 programs met five or fewer quality benchmarks.⁶

One of the most essential elements of program quality is the qualifications and skills of the individual teacher. Highly qualified and educated teachers are better equipped to teach young children, provide a safe learning environment, and develop a positive relationship with children. The National Institute of Early Education Research set the standards for an appropriate education level for pre-k teachers at a minimum of a BA degree, the same as K-12 teachers.⁷ Only 18 states plus DC require every pre-k teacher to have at least a BA degree; eight states do not require any college to teach pre-k in their state program. Additionally, all teachers should be certified to teach early childhood education and therefore understand the developmental needs and limitations of young learners. Nationwide, only 28 states require all pre-k teachers to have specialized training in early childhood.⁸

Among the most important quality investments a state can make is professional development in the form of scholarships, continuing education programming, wage enhancements, early childhood curriculum-building incentives to colleges and universities, and provider-reimbursement incentives. Such strategies are critical to attracting and retaining highly qualified and motivated pre-k teachers, but they also take time to pay off and require that dollars be spent at every step along the way. For example, states often have resources to support training or scholarships but then are not able to fund the wage supports needed to hold on to those new and better-trained graduates.

⁶ W. Steve Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2006* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute of Early Education Research, 2007).

⁷ W. Steven Barnett, "Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications," in *Preschool Policy Matters* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2004).

⁸ Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2006*.

Further, while almost every state has developed early learning guidelines or standards for pre-k child outcomes, only 30 report that they have aligned their teacher in-service training with the state standards. Only about half of the states report that curricula is aligned or that children's progress will be evaluated based on them, less than half are aligning their assessments to them, and few report that the standards are incorporated into their state pre-service professional development.

Governance

In most states, pre-k programs have developed in a piecemeal fashion. When an agency is charged with developing services for a certain group of children, they may institute early education programs as part of that agenda. Similarly, another agency, responding to other needs, may respond to a different aspect or a different enrollee group in pre-k. In addition, when funds are drawn from a variety of sources, different governmental bodies are responsible for financial oversight and disbursement.

As a result, states generally do not have a single system of early childhood education. Responsibility and oversight for early care and education programs is scattered across multiple government agencies, funded with different state and federal resources, regulated by different standards, and delivered through both public and private entities to families in local communities. State pre-k exists within this often disorganized and inefficient administrative structure in which efforts are duplicated and funds that might otherwise reach classrooms are spent supporting redundant reporting and management systems. For instance, nationally, 70 percent of children in state-funded pre-k are served in a school setting while the rest are served by for- and non-profit child care centers, Head Start centers, home-based, and faith-based providers.⁹ Pre-k programs that draw funds from a variety of sources (e.g., Head Start, pre-k, child care subsidies) often have to adhere to different assessment and monitoring requirements simultaneously. Not only can this disjointed governance lead to poor program management, it can leave pre-k without a coherent governance system for ensuring and improving program quality.

To improve program management, maximize funding, and ensure quality across the system, states need flexibility, guidance, and good models. While in most states, pre-k is administered by departments such as education, or health and human services, states are increasingly creating new structures that facilitate collaboration among existing early childhood care and education programs. For instance, in Pennsylvania, a new Office of Child Development and Early Learning was created to coordinate early childhood programs including pre-k, Head Start, and child care. The office reports to both the Department of Education and the Department of Public Welfare to facilitate collaboration among programs. Other states, such as Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington, have

⁹ Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2006*.

created new cabinet-level departments that focus on early care and education programs.¹⁰ States that have achieved some success in creating more efficient governance structures have done so with support from leadership at the state and federal levels.

Access

Currently, only Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma provide pre-k for all four year olds in their states. Most state programs are targeted to at-risk children, while others, such as Illinois and West Virginia, have plans to phase in pre-k for all by focusing first on children with the greatest need. Though the economic research indicates that investments in pre-k for all three and four year olds in the U.S. would return an average of 8 dollars for every dollar spent¹¹, they still require substantial up front funds. Additionally, these funds must be sustained over the long term to maintain availability of services.

For many states, the question for expanding access is the most pressing pre-k issue under debate. While a targeted approach may yield the greatest economic returns for each dollar spent, pre-k for all could yield significantly greater net benefits for society because it would serve more children.¹² Further, as the benefits to children become evident, more parents and communities are demanding access to pre-k services. Similarly, as school districts with pre-k programs are increasingly satisfying the requirements of NCLB, local and state level chief school officers are touting program expansion as a key to meeting federal K-12 standards. Finally, of all ethnic groups, Latino children ages three to five have the lowest pre-k enrollment rate.¹³ States with large or increasing Latino populations need to address this gap in participation.

Federal Support Today

Although the greatest recent increases in pre-k funding have come from the states, the federal government has multiple major federal funding streams that states use to support early education including:

Head Start – Primarily funded through federal dollars, although some states supplement their federal share through state appropriations.

The Child Care Development Block Grant – CDBG provides funds for child care for eligible families in every state.

¹⁰ For more information, see <http://www.preknow.org/policy/governance.cfm>.

¹¹ Robert Lynch, *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High-Quality Prekindergarten* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2007).

¹² W. Steven Barnett, "Maximizing Returns from Prekindergarten Education" (paper presented at the Conference on Education and Economic Development, Cleveland, OH, November 18-19, 2004).

¹³ National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, "Para Nuestros Ninos," (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, 2007).

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families – States may transfer TANF funds to child care or spend TANF funds for pre-k if the programs are not already a part of the state’s free public education system and if they serve low-income children.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – IDEA provides funds to states for pre-k for children with disabilities.

Higher Education Act – Higher education scholarships and support can help pre-k teachers obtain a BA degree.

Federal Impact Aid – Impact Aid provides funds to school districts that serve military-dependent children and children residing on Indian lands, military bases, or low-rent housing properties, including pre-k-age children. The Department of Defense operates two similar Impact Aid programs for school districts with significant numbers of military children and, through the Supplemental Impact Aid program, military-dependent children with severe disabilities.

No Child Left Behind/Elementary and Secondary Education Act – NCLB/ESEA funds can be used to support pre-k if the pre-k program is part of a state pre-k system.

- **Title I of ESEA** can be used by states to provide pre-k to at-risk or low-income children.
- **The Early Childhood Educator Professional Development (ECEPD) Program** is the only teaching quality provision of NCLB that applies explicitly to early learning educators. This program provides competitive grants to partnerships providing high-quality professional development to early childhood educators working with children from birth through kindergarten entry who come from low-income families in high-need communities.
- **The Even Start Family Literacy Program** targets illiteracy among low-income families by providing the integration of early childhood education, adult literacy or adult basic education, and parenting education. A portion of the funding for this program is dedicated to migratory agricultural or fishing families.
- **Early Reading First** supports the development of early childhood centers which help low-income pre-k children develop early language, cognitive, and pre-reading skills.
- **Teacher Quality State Grants (Title II of ESEA)** are used by the states to improve teacher and principal quality in high-need districts. Efforts can include teacher training, recruitment, professional development and retention.

A New Federal Agenda

In June 2006, Pre-K Now convened a meeting of over 50 representatives from 20 national organizations and 20 states to develop consensus on how federal financial support could

help state-funded pre-k programs. The goal of the meeting was to develop options for federal policies to enhance and improve early education services and to overcome current challenges. The meeting drew many diverse groups, including representatives from early education (pre-k, child care and Head Start), K-12, higher education, law enforcement, and economic development.

The bottom line from the June discussion is that states can use federal assistance in meeting two overarching goals: building capacity and access (*more* pre-k) and improving the quality of programs (*better* pre-k). Some of the strategies for reaching those goals, as described by state representatives, include replicable demonstration programs, comprehensive evaluation, governance improvements, and collaboration. Pre-K Now recommends that the federal government assist states in pursuing these goals and strategies through federal funding incentives, and through changes in federal law.

In recent weeks other education organizations have put forward their recommendations for federal policy actions, including increased federal investments in high-quality pre-k. The Education Sector and New America Foundation each proposed a new grant program to encourage expansions in state-sponsored pre-k. The Education Sector recommends (*Eight for 2008: Education Ideas for the Next President*) a “Pre-K Incentive Fund” with matching grants to states for “free, high-quality preschool to 4-year-olds from families with incomes below \$50,000 for a family with two children.” The organization suggests states be required to adopt school-readiness standards aligned with K-12 standards; provide a 20% match, and establish an accountability system with developmentally appropriate measures for program impact and quality.

The New America Foundation suggests (*The Key to NCLB Success: Getting It Right From the Start*) converting the No Child Left Behind Act Title V block grant program into a new “2020 Early Education Grant” program focused on expanding access to high-quality programs pre-k through third grade that are characterized by aligned early educator and curricular standards. They propose a three-tiered matching grant system, including initial support for state pre-k-16 councils to work on coordinating state standards; a second tier of grant aid to support pre-k-third grade services for at-risk children; and a third tier of grant aid to fund high-quality pre-k through third grade programs for all children.

Brookings Institution scholar Julia B. Isaacs in a January 2006 paper (*Cost-Effective Investments in Children*) suggests a comprehensive federal investment in “high-quality, half-day, center-based” pre-k for three and four year olds at or below 130 percent of poverty, and partial subsidies for children in moderate and higher income families. Federal funding would be limited to programs meeting national standards in terms of class size and staff qualifications. Other components of her proposal: “wrap-around” child care through the full day and summer, and support for research and demonstrations to refine “the key dimensions of program quality.”

Several members of the U.S. Congress have introduced or announced their intention to introduce legislation in support of pre-k for all. On January 4, Sen. Barbara Boxer introduced S. 152, the “Early Education Act of 2007” to add a new Title X to the ESEA authorizing \$300 million in matching grants to states to “expand the education systems to include early education for all children.”

Head Start

The 2007 reauthorization of Head Start provided an opportunity to advance the “quality” agenda for early childhood education. Both the House Committee on Education and Labor and the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions approved provisions designed to increase the proportion of Head Start teachers who hold a BA degree. Additionally, both committees authorized state early learning councils to serve as coordinating bodies to improve the capacity and quality of early childhood education through stronger collaboration among providers. It is expected that both chambers will approve the reauthorization, and a conference committee will iron out the differences between the two bills, prior to the summer Congressional recess.

No Child Left Behind Recommendations

As the respective education committees in the Congress turn their attention to the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, there are other elements in this critical legislation that offer opportunities to advance the agenda of high-quality, voluntary pre-k for all three and four year olds. In 1994, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* noted the importance of children's access to developmentally appropriate pre-k programs; training and support for parents as their child's first teacher; and adequate nutrition, physical activity, and health care for children. More than six years after those goals should have been met, nearly half of all kindergarten teachers report that children entering their classrooms have problems that make it difficult to succeed in kindergarten.¹⁴

Pre-K Now recommends incorporating a focus on early childhood into the ESEA reauthorization, but with the caveat that the current K-12 accountability provisions in many respects are not appropriate to younger ages. It is important that the curriculum advanced for high-quality pre-k NOT be narrowly focused on early literacy and math skills at the expense of children's early social and emotional development. Extending certain ESEA assessment and program requirements down to the pre-k years could lead to the use of curricula that are developmentally inappropriate for young children. Additionally, the overuse of assessments could drain valuable instructional time. With these serious concerns noted, there are ways in which the ESEA can be used to support the growing pre-k movement and address the overall school readiness crisis.

¹⁴ See Robert Pianta and Martha Cox, "Kindergarten Transitions," in NCEDL Spotlights (Chapel Hill, NC: Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 1998); Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman, Robert Pianta, and Martha Cox, "Teachers' Judgments of Problems in the Transition to Kindergarten," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2000).

1. We suggest a review of every aspect of the law to find ways to extend provisions, where appropriate, to pre-k. For example, just as all K-12 teachers are required under ESEA to have a degree in the subject matter they teach, pre-k teachers should also have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree and training in early childhood development and education.
2. Pre-k is the first step to improving K-12 education so it should be linked to the K-12 school system through aligned child outcome standards and curricula that provide continuity from pre-k to kindergarten. ESEA could significantly impact alignment, provided that increased funding is also forthcoming, by changing the language in Title I to permit any publicly-funded pre-k program at the state or local level to use Title I funds for pre-k if they choose.
3. Unlike Reading First, Early Reading First is very small and its funds flow directly to local programs. We recommend expanding this and sending money through the states to build capacity and assure that information on effective early reading learning and teaching methods is shared with all programs across the state
4. Policy leaders and educators are addressing the need for comprehensive math and science education to fuel our economic competitiveness. As with reading, the foundation for these subjects develops during the early years of life. In addition to the Math Now for Elementary and Middle School program, Congress should approve a new Early Math Now program, similar to the Early Reading First program, that grants funds to the states to create centers of excellence for early math learning.
5. The Title III language instruction program for English language learners should be opened to pre-k students or it should be made more explicit in the law that this is permissible. With Latinos fast approaching 1/3 of our population, we must begin to seriously address the language barrier that often keeps recent immigrant and some Latino children from achieving their potential.
6. Congress should draw attention to the need to integrate children with disabilities into the expanding state pre-k programs. We have laws on the books requiring their inclusion in regular education settings for the significant benefits derived as they acquire language, social, physical, and other skills but this is still not happening as widely as it should.

Pre-K Now provides these recommendations as a starting point in assuring that school readiness becomes an integral part of the signature federal law on public education. We will continue to collaborate with all stakeholders to move the federal pre-k agenda forward in the coming years.

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