

Pre-kindergarten for All Children

Universal Voluntary Pre-kindergarten for Four Year Olds, or Universal Pre-k, is a growing phenomenon in the United States. Universal Pre-kindergarten, the term given to pre-kindergarten programs that are available to all four year olds in a state and offered at no cost to the parents, regardless of income or ability, has come to the forefront in politics, the media, and communities. Commonly referred to as pre-k, various terms are used interchangeably: pre-kindergarten, pre-k, preschool, but the concept of equal access to a quality program without cost to parents is the same.

Preknow, a public education and advocacy organization (Preknow), encourages the use of the term high quality voluntary universal pre-k. This term denotes that enrollment in pre-k is at the discretion of the child's parent/guardian and that the program meets accepted criteria for high quality early childhood programming (National Institute for Early Education Research).

In most states, pre-k is designated for four year olds. A few states extend that eligibility to three year olds; however, three year olds more often than not have to meet minimum eligibility criteria related to developmental ability. In 2007 only Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma offered pre-k to all four year olds. New York, Illinois, and West Virginia have multi-year implementation strategies to bring their pre-k systems to full implementation. Even though a majority of the population supports public funding of schooling for 3 and 4 year olds (Kirp, 2007), eleven states have no state funded pre-k program. The remaining 33 states have pre-k programs with limited enrollment criteria to address the needs of specific populations of children. These criteria are often related to family income and/or the child's developmental and cognitive abilities (Preknow, Factsheets).

Why Pre-k and Why Now?

New findings in brain research, a global economy, lagging math and science scores for U.S. students, and a more solid research foundation on the benefits of early childhood education all have contributed to the growing interest in pre-kindergarten. Brain research in the past decade has intensified the attention on pre-k. Over the past 15 years, medical and neuroscience professionals have published a myriad of research related to brain growth and human development. A summary of the findings include:

- Environmental factors impact how a child's brain grows and develops, actually affecting the brain's "wiring;"
- The interaction between a child's genetic endowment and environmental factors such as nutrition and adult interaction have critical and long term effects;
- Timing matters to the wiring of the brain; and
- Early intervention can promote healthy development and even help children compensate for certain risk factors (Shore, 1997).

Another issue is globalization, the shrinking of our world context. The 21st century ushered in the concept and reality of a global economy. Children in the near future will compete internationally, not locally or regionally, for jobs. The results of international tests of mathematical

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and science skills reveal that 15 year olds in the U.S. rank far behind their peers in most industrialized nations. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study ranked the U.S. 24th out of 29 countries on math and science scores (Programme for International Student Assessment, 2003).

An additional contributing factor to the pre-k movement is the research base that supports the value of high quality programs for young children to the child, education system, and society. Studies have been conducted and replicated that demonstrate an average savings of \$7 for every \$1 invested. Benefits include fewer children identified for special education, fewer children retained, higher graduation rates, better scores on standardized tests, and less involvement with juvenile and adult justice systems. Additionally, some of these projects have followed students for decades to determine that children who received high quality preschool services had better jobs, better incomes and more stable families (The Carolina Abecedarian Project; Schweinhart et al. 2005).

Defining Quality

The National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER), located at Rutgers University, has identified 10 quality standards it uses to rate the quality of pre-k programs in states each year. In the Institute's annual report, *The State of Preschool 2006*, states are rated on whether the state requires comprehensive early learning standards, bachelor's degrees for teachers, specialized early child training for teachers, a credential for teacher's aides, 15 hours of teacher in-service, a maximum class size of 20 students, an adult-to-child ratio of 1:10, screening and referral services, meals provided, and program monitoring.

In 2006, Alabama and North Carolina both had a score of 10/10 quality standards. Kansas and Pennsylvania required 3/10 quality standards. All other states rated somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum. The 2006 NIEER Yearbook states, "The quality of a pre-school education program is the key to determining its educational value" (National Institute for Early Education Research, Yearbook, p. 19).

The Cost of Pre-k

Educating the public about the value of high quality early education is only a part of the task. Good programs are not cheap. Funding sources for pre-k vary from general budgets, to taxes and the lottery. Eight states include funding for pre-k in their public school funding formula. These states are Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia. Most states implementing pre-k have budgets from other sources. These sources include general revenues, lottery or gaming funds, tobacco settlements, "sin" taxes, and dedicated percentages of income taxes.

For most states, the majority of funding comes from general revenues. These funds can increase with need, have flexibility, can be substantial, and are good sources of funding in economically healthy times. Unfortunately these funds are also subject to political whims, vulnerable if the economic health of the state deteriorates, require regular reauthorization by the legislature, and may cause competition between children's programs for funding. Another popular source of revenues is lottery or gaming funds. For example, Georgia's pre-k system, the oldest universal pre-k in the nation, is funded entirely by lot-

tery funds. The positive aspects of lottery funding are the availability of a large amount of resources, no requirement for new taxes, the money is dedicated to eliminate competition among programs, and funding is not reliant of regular legislative approval. On the less positive side, some opponents dislike promoting gambling to fund programs for children. Additionally, the annual revenue amount is not predictable.

The Politics of It All

"Despite the best efforts of the lobbying groups and the overwhelming support registered in the polls, children's needs are not high on the American political agenda" (Kirp, 2007, p. 241). To deliver higher quality pre-k programs as described and recommended by researchers, more research, funding, and political support are necessary. We can only hope that the universal Voluntary Pre-k for four year olds will be implemented in all states. Only time will tell.

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