

# Early Learners

## Many States Expanding Funding for Preschool Programs

States increasingly are funding preschool classes, and are working with private child care providers and the Head Start program to provide access to more 4-year-olds.

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Phillip Mueller doesn't have to look far for a reason states should fund quality pre-kindergarten programs. He sees it regularly in the faces of his five grandchildren—three of them are preschool age.

"It just seems to me that, as I've watched these young people develop and grow ... they're like little sponges," said Mueller. "Early childhood experts will be the first to tell you that's the age where they can learn and pick up so much."

So Mueller, a North Dakota state representative, last year proposed the state fund a voluntary preschool program. The bill passed the House but failed in the Senate, but Mueller said the legislature did take a good first step by placing in state law language that will pave the way for future public preschool offerings in his state.

Officials in North Dakota, and the nine

other states without public-funded preschool programs, don't have to look far for a model. Forty states provide public preschool funding at some level, and seven of those states have or are phasing in pre-K-for-all programs.

"Folks across the country have found out how to complement and supplement Head Start," Mueller said of the federal preschool program targeted to economically disadvantaged children. "I don't envision any kind of a stand-alone program without community involvement."

That vision is similar to the one in Oklahoma, the first state to fully fund universal preschool for all 4-year-olds, not just those from poor families.

### Oklahoma Leads in Preschool

Oklahoma began its universal preschool through a pilot grant program in 1980. The program's success led in 1998 to the establishment of a universal preschool program funded through the state public school formula. Local school districts get money for preschool using the same funding formula as the state uses to send money to local districts for other grades.

Ramona Paul, assistant state superintendent, developed the pilot program that began by serving every interested 4-year-old in 10 Oklahoma school districts. The program was expanded statewide in 1990,

but targeted only those students who met the federal Head Start income eligibility guidelines. It was opened in 1998 to all 4-year-olds.

That's a key to the success of the program, Paul said, because children learn from each other. "If you put a group of people together that have a deficit—you're poor, you're in a minority ... when you look at all those categories, why would you take a group and say you're all alike with the same deficit and we expect you to get better," she said.

Beyond that, Paul believes having a certified teacher in the 4-year-old classroom is a key to providing a high-quality preschool program.

"We like having it through the public schools because of the authority public schools have for the standards," she said. "Public schools have the highest standards that we have in this country (for teacher certification)."

Requiring the same standards as for any other grade ensures stability and quality at the preschool level, Paul said.

Here's how it works in Oklahoma. The state schools budget distributes funding for preschool using the same public school financing formula as for other grades. Oklahoma doesn't require 4-year-olds to attend preschool, but Paul said about 72 percent of eligible children take advantage of the state program. The money is allocated to school districts, which can offer classes

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in the schools, through partnerships with child care centers in the community or a combination of both. The teacher is an employee of the school district, regardless of where the preschool class is located, according to Paul.

By allowing the flexibility to offer preschool in this way, the schools can not only save transportation costs, they can also help elevate the standards in the child care centers. The preschool teacher paid by the public school district must meet state quality standards; that teacher can serve as a model for other teachers in that child care center, which improves quality throughout the center, said Paul.

“You have a huge ripple effect,” she said. “This is a much faster method to bring quality.”

## Making the Grade

Quality is important in not only bringing educational success for the preschool students, but also for selling the program to taxpayers and legislators, who must find funding in what can be tight budget years.

“Given that we have a lot of research about pre-K, if states want the outcomes that are suggested can come from high quality pre-K, you can’t do it on the cheap,” said Holly Higgins, media manager for Pre-K Now, a preschool education advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

Preschool advocates recognize the funding challenges. But Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, said preschool programs should be seen as an investment, not an expense.

“Preschool education really is a long-term investment in economic growth, the quality of their work force and in holding down future state government costs for criminal justice systems, education system, even health care costs,” Barnett said. “I think when you look at it in that perspective, preschool education is one of the things that ought to have a steady place in state budgets rather than waxing and waning from a good year to a bad year.”

For the most part, state officials haven’t retreated from that funding, even as budgets grow tight. Thirty-seven states increased funding for new or existing programs in fiscal year 2008, according to Pre-K Now. Only Arizona and Missouri maintained the same level of funding, while Florida decreased funding for early childhood education. Ten states, in-

## States Lack Programs

Ten states—Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Utah and Wyoming—provide no state funding for pre-kindergarten, according to Pre-K Now, a Washington, D.C.-based public education and advocacy organization.

Hawaii’s Early Learning Educational Task Force in December submitted a 10-year plan to establish a statewide early education system starting with a program for 4-year-olds.

Lawmakers in Indiana and Mississippi last year passed bills related to early childhood education, but included no appropriations for the programs.

New Hampshire approved an increase in state funding for federal Head Start programs for low-income children to support quality enhancements, but does not fund additional students.

## Benchmarks for Quality Preschool

The National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University in New Jersey developed 10 benchmarks for quality preschool programs. They are:

- n Comprehensive early learning standards;
- n Teachers with at least a bachelor’s degree;
- n Teacher training specializing in pre-K;
- n At least 15 hours of teacher in-service;
- n Assistant teachers with at least a Child Development Associates credential or equivalent;
- n Maximum class size of 20 or fewer students;
- n Staff-child ratio of at least 1:10 or better;
- n Screening/referral of vision, hearing and health and at least one support service;
- n At least one meal per day; and
- n Monitoring of classes through site visits.

Only Alabama and North Carolina met all quality benchmarks for 2006, the latest information available. Six states—public programs in Arkansas, Illinois, Oklahoma and Tennessee, as well as nonpublic programs in Louisiana and New Jersey—met nine of the 10 benchmarks.



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cluding North Dakota, don’t fund public preschool.

“There’s a steadily rising tide of evidence and an increasing recognition that future economic success depends on today’s investments in education,” said Barnett. “If you are looking at where you ought to make your next investment in education, the argument for payoff is strongest for young children.”

In addition to the benefits for children, quality preschool can provide economic benefits for families and communities, according to a 2007 Cornell University study. The study found that when parents find a quality preschool program they can rely on, they are more apt to enter and remain in the work force.

The Cornell study is part of a “perfect storm of research” that, combined with advocacy, reports and pressure from the business community, is pushing state officials toward maintaining preschool funding, Higgins said. Last year, she said, 29 governors made preschool funding a priority.

“We have seen some governors say we have a budget crunch but this is a priority,”

said Kathy Patterson, federal policy director for Pre-K Now. “This is an investment states can’t afford not to make.”

## Start Quality, Then Grow

Preschool advocates point out, though, that simply making a financial investment isn’t enough.

“We need to remind ourselves that it’s not about throwing money at the problem,” said Stephanie Rubin, Pre-K Now state policy director. “Without the infrastructure and the training and the systems in place,” programs won’t succeed, she said.

Rubin said the debate in state capitals is no longer whether the state should invest in preschool. “The debate is how do we roll this out gradually or how do we expand the program,” she said. “We’ve moved away from the focus of is this a good idea to how do we do it in a measured and appropriate way.”

Most advocates say if money is tight, states venturing into the preschool arena should start small, with quality. Rubin cites the example of Florida, where voters wanted a pre-K program for all eligible students. Legislators funded a statewide program, but included no quality assurances.

“They serve a huge number of children, but their quality standards are minimal,” Barnett said of Florida. “Their plan is once you have all the kids to now improve the quality.”

On the flipside, Alabama started a small program and increased funding this year. The preschool program in Alabama is one of only two statewide programs to meet all of National Institute for Early Education Research’s 10 benchmarks for quality.

Barnett calls the benchmarks “preconditions for quality.” He said, “They’re not a guarantee of quality, but if you don’t have those you’re going to have a very difficult job providing a quality program.”

The two toughest benchmarks, according to Barnett, are the qualifications for staff and class size because those are the most expensive components of a quality program. Not only must the teacher be state-certified, an assistant preschool teacher would have to meet the same qualifications as an aide at a Title I public school.

“We’re really saying it’s got to be at least as high as you would require for kindergarten or first grade,” said Barnett. “If we need highly qualified teachers for 6-year-olds, we need a highly qualified teacher for 4-year-olds.”

Paul, of Oklahoma, endorses the quality approach. “I would never recommend anybody have anything but the very best standards up front,” she said.

If states have problems funding all children, Paul recommends starting with schools identified as a “needs improvement” school under federal assessment guidelines. That targets a school, she said, and helps all students in that school. The pilot program Paul wrote in 1980 was based on a per-unit, not a per-child, cost. That meant funding was based on how much it would cost to have a classroom. “Depending on how much money you have, that’s how many units we do.”

Oklahoma’s model of tying preschool funding to the K–12 funding formula is gaining ground, according to a new report from Pre-K Now. In fiscal year 2008, 11 states—plus Washington, D.C.—allocated funds for pre-K through their public school systems, according to Pre-K Now. Other states use lottery funds or public-private partnerships to offer quality, affordable preschool, the report said.

“A lot of times,” said Higgins, “it’s improving what is there. It’s not starting from scratch.”

## Tailor the Program

While there are many good models for quality preschool, Barnett said states should look to their own needs before settling on a program.

“The good program is tailored to what your state needs,” Barnett said.

That’s what Mueller hopes to do in North Dakota.

He serves on a subcommittee with other legislators and educators exploring what the state can do to provide pre-kindergarten. Mueller said North Dakota’s financial situation—with a robust farm economy and oil reserves in the western part of the state—may be better than other states. And the rural makeup of the state will require innovation in ensuring preschool is available in all areas, he said.

“Apparently it’s an important thing,” he said. “If we’re only one of 10 states that aren’t doing it, it’s time we did something similar to most of our fellow states across the country in terms of early childhood education. I’m cautiously optimistic that that’s what is going to happen in this next session.”

—Mary Branham Dusenberry is managing editor for State News magazine.