

Why PreK for All?

The United States can't "race to the top" when many children are not even at the starting line.

By Libby Doggett and Albert Wat



Our public schools do far too little during a child's most critical period for healthy development. Children's earliest years are crucial for developing school readiness, and achievement gaps appear well before children set foot in a kindergarten or 1st-grade classroom. Without a strong foundation of early learning, many children start school with a deficit, and teachers spend years trying to help these children catch up.

Consider that, before kindergarten:

- More than 30% of low-income children have no familiarity with print. That is, they do not know that books are read from left to right or where a story starts or ends. Seventeen percent of children from middle-income families and 8% of those whose parents have a bachelor's or higher degree also lack this knowledge (West, Denton, and Germino-Hausken 2000).
- About 60% of low-income children and more than a third of middle-income children do not know the alphabet (Coley 2002).
- Only 6% of poor and 18% of middle-income children understand numerical sequence (Coley 2002).

These statistics illustrate two facts: First, significant gaps in the development and ability of America's children occur before age five. Second, while the gulf is widest between poor and upper-income children, middle-income children also lag behind their more affluent peers when they start kindergarten. The fact is that the cutoff point

LIBBY DOGGETT is deputy director of the Pew Center on the States, Washington, D.C. **ALBERT WAT** is project manager for Pre-K Now, Washington, D.C.

Thinkstock/Stockphoto

at which most states consider a child middle class — or too affluent for publicly funded high-quality prekindergarten — has no meaningful relationship with children’s potential to benefit educationally and developmentally from high-quality early learning programs. To ensure that *all* children have the strongest foundation for success as students, we must reduce these disparities during the early years.

Over 50 years of research, including several recent independent studies, illuminate both the educational and economic development effects of high-quality early education and its potential to address many school-readiness challenges (Wat 2010). Advocates, policy makers of varying political views, and educators have examined this research and are increasingly turning to prekindergarten as a policy solution to lay a strong foundation for academic success.

Forty states and the District of Columbia currently offer a state-funded prekindergarten program. Many of these states consider prekindergarten a critical part of their school reform agendas because they understand that a prekindergarten program aligned with the standards, teaching practices, professional development, and curricula of the early elementary grades can provide a strong start for young children. Moreover, the solid foundation gained through preK can amplify the outcomes of later reforms.

Unfortunately, we have yet to see similar commitment at the federal level. Head Start, the primary federal investment in early education, is offered to only the poorest children, serves only about half of eligible children, and has weak connections to our nation’s larger school-reform strategy. The vast majority of federal education reform resources have focused on the years after kindergarten. But we can’t “race to the top” when so many children are not even at the starting line.

PREKINDERGARTEN FOR ALL?

This evidence clearly shows the importance of investing in high-quality preK for all. Why would we reserve it for a small segment of the population? States may start with preK programs targeted at low-income and other at-risk children, but the research doesn’t support stopping there.

The benefits of high-quality prekindergarten for low-income three- and four-year-olds are well documented and widely accepted. But prekindergarten can significantly improve all children’s cognitive skills. For example, a study of the Tulsa, Okla., preK-for-all program found that middle-income children who attended preK scored 41% higher in assessments of letter-word identification and 17% higher in spelling than their peers without preK (Gormley et al. 2004). High-quality prekindergarten has proven effective in alleviating grade repetition, dropping

out, and special education placement (Belfield et al. 2006; Reynolds et al. 2002). This is especially important because more than half of all children who receive special education or fail to graduate from high school come from middle-income families.

Economists have determined that investing in preK-for-all will pay future dividends, even assuming less impact on middle-income children. Lynn Karoly and James Bigelow (2005) of the RAND Corporation found that if middle- and upper-income students reaped only 25% to 50% of the benefits that low-income children received, a high-quality preK-for-all program in California would still return \$3 for every dollar invested. Robert Lynch (2007), using similar methods, showed that providing preK to all U.S. children would yield \$8 for every dollar spent. And W. Steven Barnett, Kirsty Brown, and Rima Shore (2004) found that preK policies that serve a broader population generate a greater net economic return than a program targeted just to poor children.

Expanding access to state-funded, high-quality preK also provides middle-class parents with more early education options. Private programs are expensive. Especially in the current economy, many middle-income families are facing the “preK pinch”: They earn too much to qualify for publicly funded, targeted preK but not enough to afford high- or even average-quality private programs. In states where family income is a primary criterion for preK eligibility, up to 40% of four-year-olds can be caught in “the pinch.” The result is an untenable choice: stretch the family budget to its limits to afford decent early education or tolerate mediocre programs that may compromise children’s future success (Wat 2008).

Finally, providing preK for all children reflects the principles already embedded in our public schools. The United States has rejected separate systems for students from different backgrounds. If that tenet holds true for kindergarten, it should be true for preK. Offering early education only for poor children will result in a segregated structure in which low-income children attend publicly funded programs while more well-to-do families enroll their children in private ones.

All of these reasons have led a growing number of states to invest in preK for all. In the 1990s, Georgia and Oklahoma became the first states to provide preK for all four-year-olds. Today, Georgia serves 53% of its four-year-olds, and Oklahoma serves 71%. Their programs feature important quality standards and are offered in a mix of public and private settings. Since then, six other states — Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, New York, and West Vir-



To ensure that all children have the strongest foundation for success as students, we must reduce these disparities during the early years.

Offering early education only for poor children will result in a segregated structure in which low-income children attend publicly funded programs while more well-to-do families enroll their children in private ones.

ginia — and the District of Columbia have either enacted preK-for-all programs or passed statutes that establish a timeline for implementation.

As strong as the evidence and support are for high-quality prekindergarten, it is not a silver bullet. School systems can maximize the benefits of preK by deliberately including it as an integral part of their systemwide improvement plans.

PREK IN NEW JERSEY

Leaders in New Jersey have taken the lessons from research and experience to heart. In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court concluded in *Abbott v. Burke* that the state was not enabling all children to meet education standards. One of the remedies was to establish a high-quality preK program in the 31 lowest-income school districts. These programs would be open to all three- and four-year-olds in those districts regardless of their economic background. Although preK began as a legal mandate, state leaders came to understand its place in education reform and its potential to benefit more mixed-income communities, and they took steps to expand access beyond the original *Abbott* districts.

In response to the court's decision, the New Jersey Department of Education established rigorous standards of quality, including small class sizes, low child-adult ratios, comprehensive early learning guidelines, and developmentally appropriate curricula. The state required all preK teachers to have a college education, and it also developed a new "PreK to 3rd" credential to make sure that teachers are well trained in early childhood education. Districts received sufficient resources to provide an array of supports for *Abbott* preK programs, such as early childhood specialists and master teachers.

The state also implemented an intensive literacy program at the K-3 level to "build on and sustain the progress that children make in high-quality *Abbott* preK programs" (Mead 2009: 20). State policy makers recognized that, to maximize preK's benefits, they needed to help districts connect it with reform activities in later grades. Currently, the division is working to apply the *Abbott* program's approaches to teaching and learning at the kindergarten level to facilitate children's successful transition after preK.

How is all this working? The latest *Abbott* program evaluation found significant benefits for participating children, especially those who attended for two years. Researchers tracked student progress through 2nd grade and found that, as compared to those who did not have the same preK experience, participants:

- Showed significant improvements in early language, literacy, and math skills at

kindergarten entry;

- Did significantly better in math, language comprehension, and vocabulary skills through 2nd grade; and
- Were 30% less likely to repeat a grade after one year of enrollment in the *Abbott* program and 50% less likely after two preK years (Frede 2009).

Findings like these convinced state policy makers that high-quality preK should not be limited to the poorest communities. In 2008, then-Gov. Jon Corzine worked with lawmakers to pass the School Funding Reform Act and embed preK investments in the state's education financing structure. The legislation included a plan to offer high-quality preK to *all* three- and four-year-olds — about 18,000 children — in the 84 non-*Abbott* districts with at least 40% of children living at or below 185% of the federal poverty threshold. All other districts will also provide preK of comparable quality to all their resident low-income children.

TRENDS IN OTHER STATES

The New Jersey story reflects a growing understanding among state policy makers that preK is the first step to education reform and a key strategy for turning around underperforming schools. Over the last decade, strong bipartisan leadership from governors, legislators, advocates, and educators gave rise to dramatic increases in funding and enrollment, improved quality, and greater integration of early learning into school reform efforts. From 2002 to 2010, state funding for early education more than doubled from \$2.4 billion to \$5.3 billion (Barnett et al. 2009). At the same time, preK access was expanded to more than 450,000 additional children, an increase of over 60% (Watson 2010).

In the last decade, the number of states meeting eight or more of the 10 National Institute for Early Education Research benchmarks for quality has increased from five to 18. Five states — Iowa, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey, and Rhode Island — added preK to their general school-aid formulas, which are comparatively stable, secure funding sources that adjust with enrollment and integrate early learning into public education. A number of states have implemented governance reforms to increase efficiency and coordination. Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia consolidated administration of the major early childhood programs, while New Jersey and North Carolina created early learning offices to oversee preK-through-3rd-grade alignment.

Recent evaluations in Louisiana, Michigan, New Mexico, and other states show that these policy ef-

forts and increased investments are paying off in higher student achievement. Some of these studies have documented reduced rates of grade repetition and special education placement, which could yield significant savings for school districts (Wat 2010).

PREK AT A CROSSROADS

PreK is a smart policy for turning around underperforming schools, but current economic conditions and political changes pose new challenges for funding, quality, and access, as well as alignment with the broader public education system. New — and renewed — leadership among policy makers and the education community is needed to capitalize on a decade of advancements to solidify preK as an essential part of public education.

Despite expressions of support from a wide range of stakeholders, including a number of national K-12 groups, neither the Obama Administration nor Congress has committed to sustained, dedicated federal funding to integrate preK into the national school reform agenda through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Indeed, the application guidelines for the Race to the Top grant competition classified early learning as only an “invitational priority,” which encouraged but did not award any points for including early education. Moreover, the Administration’s “blueprint” for the reauthorization of the ESEA barely mentions preK.

Gaps in learning and development among low- and middle-income children appear well before kindergarten. Without a robust early education strategy to promote greater access, higher quality, and stronger preK-through-3rd-grade alignment — and without investments to support these activities — we will never close the achievement gap.

There is some good news. As educators and policy makers review the research and accumulate more experience, they are learning that high-quality preK for all children is an indispensable part of an effective school reform strategy. They are also realizing that when teaching and learning practices are coordinated between preK programs and elementary grades, they can maximize the gains children reap in the early years. To fully integrate early learning into a 21st-century education system, we need leadership — and not just from the early childhood field. ■

REFERENCES

- Barnett, W. Steven, Kirsty Brown, and Rima Shore. “The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool for All?” *Preschool Policy Matters* 6 (April 2004).
- Barnett, W. Steven, Dale J. Epstein, Allison H. Friedman, Rachel A. Sansanelli, and Jason T. Hustedt. *The State of Preschool: 2009 State Preschool Yearbook*. New Brunswick, N.J.: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2009.
- Belfield, Clive R., Milagros Nores, Steve Barnett, and Lawrence Schweinhart. “The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program: Cost–Benefit Analysis Using Data from the Age-40 Followup.” *Journal of Human Resources* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 162-190.
- Coley, Richard J. *An Uneven Start: Indicators of Inequality in School Readiness*. ETS Policy Information Report. Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 2002.
- Frede, Ellen, Kwanghee Jung, W. Steven Barnett, and Alexandra Figueras. *The APPLES Blossom: Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) Preliminary Results Through 2nd Grade, Interim Report*. New Brunswick, N.J.: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 2009. http://nieer.org/pdf/apples_second_grade_results.pdf.
- Gormley, William Jr., Ted Gayer, Deborah Phillips, and Brittany Dawson. “The Effects of Oklahoma’s Universal Pre-K Program on School Readiness: An Executive Summary.” Washington, D.C.: Center for Research on Children in the United States, Georgetown University, 2004.
- Karoly, Lynn A., and James H. Bigelow. *The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corp., 2005.
- Lynch, Robert. *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High-Quality Prekindergarten*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2007.
- Mead, Sara. *Education Reform Starts Early: Lessons from New Jersey’s PreK-3rd Reform Efforts*. Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation, 2009.
- Reynolds, Arthur J., Judy A. Temple, Dylan L. Robertson, and Emily A. Mann. “Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 4 (December 2002): 267-303.
- Wat, Albert. *The Pre-K Pinch: Early Education and the Middle Class*. Washington, D.C.: Pre-K Now, 2008.
- Wat, Albert. *The Case for Pre-K in Education Reform: A Summary of Program Evaluation Findings*. Pew Center on the States Research Series. Washington, D.C.: Pew Center on the States, 2010.
- Watson, Sara. *The Right Policy at the Right Time: The Pew PreKindergarten Campaign*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Center on the States, 2010.
- West, Jerry, Kristin Denton, and Elvira Germino-Hausken. *America’s Kindergartners: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99, Fall 1998*. Statistical Analysis Report NCES 2000-070. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000070.pdf>.

Copyright of Phi Delta Kappan is the property of Phi Delta Kappa International and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.