Prekindergarten Initiatives: Efforts to Help Children Enter School Ready to Succeed

Throughout the last two decades there has been a growing interest in the development and education of young children—particularly low-income children—in the years just before they enter school. Early education has been a fundamental part of the education reform agenda since 1989, when the nation's governors and the first President Bush signed the National Education Goals. The first of these goals stated that by the year 2000, every child would enter school ready to learn and that access to a high quality early childhood program was key to meeting this goal. This goal has not yet been achieved, but efforts to help all children become better prepared for school continue. These efforts include prekindergarten initiatives, which are supported through a variety of private and public sources at the federal, state, and local levels.

Children are participating in prekindergarten programs in ever increasing numbers. Yet, low-income children are still much less likely to have access than other children.

- Over half (52 percent) of children ages three to five not yet in kindergarten were enrolled in prekindergarten in 2000.[1]
- The number of children ages three to five enrolled in prekindergarten more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, from 2 million to 4.3 million.[2]
- Although prekindergarten enrollment has been growing among children of all backgrounds, low-income children continue to participate at lower rates than children from higher-income families. In 2000, only 44 percent of children ages three to five, not yet in kindergarten, with family incomes below $15,000 were enrolled in prekindergarten, compared to 65 percent of children the same age whose parents earned $50,000 or more.[3]
- Low-income children who are able to attend prekindergarten rely heavily on publicly funded programs to make this possible. In 2000, over three-quarters (77 percent) of children with family incomes below $35,000 a year who were enrolled in prekindergarten attended public programs, with just one-quarter (23 percent) in private programs. For children with family incomes over $75,000 a year, the pattern was exactly the reverse—77 percent of prekindergartners were in private programs with just 23 percent in public programs.[4]

Prekindergarten is supported by federal, state, and local resources.

- The federal Head Start program provides funds directly to local agencies to support prekindergarten for preschool-age children living in poverty. In FY 2002, federal funding for Head Start was $6.5 billion and the program served approximately 915,000 children.[5]

- Federal grants are provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 619, to support special education and related services for preschool-age children with disabilities and other special needs. In 2000-2001, federal funding for the Section 619 Preschool Program was $390 million and approximately 600,000 children were served.[6]
- Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides federal funds to high-poverty school districts for programs that help children succeed in school. Districts may choose to use these funds to support prekindergarten programs. In FY 2001, approximately $200 million of Title I funds were used for prekindergarten programs, enabling more than 300,000 children to be served.[7]
- Forty-two states invested in prekindergarten initiatives in 1998-1999 (the last time comprehensive data were collected by the Children's Defense Fund), spending a total of approximately $1.7 billion and serving nearly 725,000 children.[8] Since 1998-1999, three additional states (Idaho, Nevada, and North Dakota) have launched small new prekindergarten efforts, bringing the total number of states investing in prekindergarten to 45.[9]
- Local communities often fund prekindergarten initiatives as well, through tax levies, parent fees, foundations, and other sources. In a survey of states with prekindergarten initiatives, about half mentioned that they also had at least a few communities providing prekindergarten programs through their own local initiatives. For example, in Ohio, there were tuition-based prekindergarten programs within 35 school districts under local boards of education.[10] Los Angeles has chosen to devote funds available through a state early childhood initiative, which communities can use for a variety of purposes, to supporting prekindergarten, with the ultimate goal of making it universally available to all three- and four-year-olds.[11]

States play an important role in supporting prekindergarten. However, additional steps are necessary to increase the availability, quality, and accessibility of prekindergarten programs.[12]

States are increasing the availability of prekindergarten, but many families and children still lack opportunities to participate.

- Between 1991-1992 and 1998-1999,[13] state spending on prekindergarten initiatives expanded by nearly $1 billion—from approximately $700 million to nearly $1.7 billion in 1998-1999, or almost two-and-one-half times as much as at the beginning of the decade.[14] During that time, the number of children participating in state-funded prekindergarten programs increased proportionally, from approximately 290,000 to nearly 725,000.[15]
- Three-quarters of state spending on prekindergarten was concentrated in just 10 states in 1998-1999 (California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Texas).
- State spending on prekindergarten initiatives is still not sufficient to ensure that high quality programs are available to all children. Georgia is the only state that invests adequate funds to provide prekindergarten to all children whose families want them to participate. Oklahoma has made significant progress in increasing access to prekindergarten, as it now allows all four-year-olds to be eligible for prekindergarten and reimburses school districts for each child they enroll. However, it is a district's option of whether or not to provide prekindergarten. New York had intended to move towards universal prekindergarten over a period of five years, but efforts to expand the program to include more children have stalled.

- While most states limit eligibility for their initiatives to children in low-income families and children with other risk factors, the states generally are still not able to serve all eligible children. For example, Tennessee's initiative served only 2 percent of eligible children as of 1998-1999. Yet, some states are making efforts to provide prekindergarten to all low-income children. One example is Ohio, where the combination of state and federal resources allows the state to provide a Head Start early childhood experience for nearly nine out of 10 children in poverty.
- Although children benefit from having a stable early childhood experience over an extended period of time, 18 state initiatives do not permit children to be eligible for more than a year. In contrast, both three- and four-year-olds are eligible for 31 state initiatives. Several states serve a broader age group—for example, children ages birth to five.

States are making efforts to ensure the quality of their prekindergarten programs, but further progress is needed to strengthen quality standards.

- Most states have adopted quality standards that address at least some of the essential components necessary for ensuring a prekindergarten experience that contributes to children's healthy and safe development and prepares them to learn. However, many state prekindergarten standards do not address the full range of needs that children and families have, and that affect children's ability to grow and develop. Such needs include proper nutrition, adequate health care, and family supports. Yet, 11 state initiatives have only minimal quality requirements, often consisting primarily of child care licensing requirements and/or school codes—neither of which offer sufficient assurances that children will receive a high quality experience—with perhaps only a few additional requirements. States also vary in the degree to which they promote quality through technical assistance, targeted financial assistance, and monitoring efforts.
- While a few state prekindergarten initiatives have detailed guidelines requiring programs to provide comprehensive nutrition, health, and social services, many states do not thoroughly address all of these supports. State-funded Head Start models, as well as three separate initiatives, have strong comprehensive service requirements that are the same as, or similar to, the requirements of Head Start Performance Standards. Fourteen states do not establish any requirements or offer any encouragement for programs to provide comprehensive services.

Some states have adopted strategies to meet the needs of children with working parents. States have also made targeted efforts to increase access for families with other special circumstances. Yet, a number of states have not done enough to remove the barriers that can prevent families from participating.

- State prekindergarten initiatives are generally structured to provide part-day/part-year programs. This can present a problem for parents working full time, as it requires them to find a child care arrangement for the remainder of the workday and a way to transport their children to child care from the prekindergarten program. Some states are taking steps to address this by coordinating for full-day services with child care programs and other resources.
- Efforts are being made to increase access for all children, including those who do not speak English and those who have disabilities and other special needs. However, families continue to face barriers to their participation, such as lack of transportation to the programs.

State prekindergarten initiatives often involve an array of community partners in providing programs and in collaborative efforts to support children and families.

- The majority of states open their initiatives to participation by a broad range of providers, including child care programs and Head Start agencies. This approach allows communities to take advantage of existing resources and provides them with flexibility both in meeting their overall need for prekindergarten and in responding to the diverse needs of their children and families. However, a number of states use a traditional approach that limits programs to the public schools.
- In many states, collaborative efforts at the state and local level are enabling state prekindergarten initiatives to be coordinated with the federal Head Start program and child care programs as well as with other programs designed to help children and families. These efforts allow states to use limited resources more efficiently in making comprehensive, quality early childhood supports available to children and families. A number of states, including California, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, and North Carolina, have initiatives that place a particularly strong emphasis on collaboration.

In recent years, there have been both steps backward and steps forward for state prekindergarten initiatives.

- Oklahoma has expanded significantly its prekindergarten initiative over the past few years. A 1998 legislative change made all four-year-olds eligible to participate in the initiative if their district chose to offer a program. Following this, enrollment grew quickly and by 2001, more than half of the state's four-year-olds were participating. State funding for prekindergarten in 2000-2001 was $55 million.[16]
- In 2001, Hawaii provided $2.5 million for a new Pre-Plus initiative that will build preschool facilities on public school land and support prekindergarten programs. The programs, which are expected to become accredited within three years of opening, will be targeted to children in families with incomes below 185 percent of poverty, but will not be restricted to this group.[17]
- New York invested $225 million in its Universal Pre-K program in 2001, up from $67 million in 1998-1999. However, the state's plan to expand the program to make it available to all children whose families want them to participate and all districts throughout the state has not yet been carried out. In 2001, the state froze the program, limiting it to districts that were already participating.[18]
- Maryland took a significant step in 2002 when it approved a measure to make all economically disadvantaged four-year-olds eligible for state-funded prekindergarten by 2008.[19]
- In 2002, Florida passed a constitutional amendment that mandates a voluntary, universal prekindergarten program for all four-year-olds in the state. However, this measure included no funding mechanism for the program, which is expected to cost between $425 million and $650 million annually.[20]
- Some states that had been leaders in supporting prekindergarten have replaced a significant proportion of state funds for prekindergarten with unspent federal welfare funds from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant.[21] This has placed prekindergarten initiatives in a precarious position, since these funds may not be available in the future. For example:

  Ohio replaced approximately $75 million of its state funds for Head Start—out of a total of $98 million—with TANF funds and cut the overall budget for the program by $2 million in 2001. In 2002, all funding for the state Head Start program was to come directly from TANF.

Massachusetts used TANF funds to replace $52 million in state funds for its Community Partnerships program in 2001.

- A 2000 New Jersey court decision provided a definition of a high quality prekindergarten program and required the state to ensure that the programs it supported met this standard.[22] The court's role in prekindergarten began with a 1996 settlement in a school finance equity lawsuit (*Abbott v. Burke*). The settlement required the state to provide low-income school districts (referred to as the 30 "Abbott districts") with funds to extend part-day kindergarten to full-day for five-year-olds and offer half-day prekindergarten to three- and four-year-olds. The court continues to have oversight responsibility in implementing the program. In setting quality requirements for prekindergarten in the Abbott districts, the court ordered the state to take several steps:

  Adopt substantive standards describing the educational content of preschool programs.

  Require that teachers in every preschool classroom, whether located in schools or in community programs, be certified.

  Limit class size to 15 students, with one teacher and an aide.

  Require and fund community outreach efforts to inform parents of the availability of preschool programs.

Source Notes

[1] Children's Defense Fund calculations based on data from U.S. Census Bureau. (June 2001). *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 2000* (Current Population Reports P20-533). Retrieved from the Internet at http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/school.html.

[2] T. D. Snyder and C. M. Hoffman. (February 2002). *Digest of Education Statistics 2001* (NCES 2002-130). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

[3] Children's Defense Fund calculations based on data from U.S. Census Bureau. (June 2001). *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 2000* (Current Population Reports P20-533). Retrieved from the Internet at http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/school.html.

[4] Children's Defense Fund calculations based on data from U.S. Census Bureau. (June 2001). *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 2000* (Current Population Reports P20-533). Retrieved from the Internet at http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/school.html.

[5] Data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start Bureau, 2002.

[6] U.S. Department of Education. (2001). *To Assure the Free Appropriate Public Education of All Children with Disabilities: Twenty-third Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

[7] Estimates from the U.S. Department of Education, 2002.

[8] K. Schulman, H. Blank, and D. Ewen. (1999). *Seeds of Success: State Prekindergarten Initiatives 1998-1999*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

[9] H. Blank and A. Mitchell. (December 2001). *The Status of Preschool Policy in the States* (Unpublished paper).

[10] K. Schulman, H. Blank, and D. Ewen. (1999). *Seeds of Success: State Prekindergarten Initiatives 1998-1999*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

[11] C. Rivera. (August 9, 2002). "Preschools to Receive $100 Million," *Los Angeles Times*.

[12] Data on state prekindergarten initiatives from K. Schulman, H. Blank, and D. Ewen. (1999). *Seeds of Success: State Prekindergarten Initiatives 1998-1999*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, unless otherwise noted.

[13] These are the school years for which the Children's Defense Fund conducted comprehensive studies of state prekindergarten initiatives.

[14] The total amount of state funding in 1991-1992 does not include funding for Hawaii's Preschool Open Doors, or for the school-based initiatives in Maine or Pennsylvania since the data are not available. Note that the amount of funding reported here differs from the amount originally reported by CDF in *First Steps, Promising Futures* (1994), because Texas has since provided revised funding data and because the 1991-1992 total has been recalculated to exclude amounts identified as having been provided by sources other than the state, such as federal, local, or private sources.

[15] The enrollment count for 1991-1992 does not include children participating in Florida's Migrant Prekindergarten, Hawaii's Preschool Open Doors, New Mexico's Child Development Program, Vermont's Early Education Initiative, the school-based initiatives in Maine, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, or the Head Start models in the District of Columbia and New Jersey, since the data are not available. Children participating in these initiatives are included in the enrollment total for 1998-1999. However, most of the initiatives are serving relatively small numbers of children.

[16] D. Ewen, H. Blank, K. Hart, and K. Schulman. (2002). *State Developments in Child Care, Early Education, and School-Age Care 2001*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

[17] D. Ewen, H. Blank, K. Hart, and K. Schulman. (2002). *State Developments in Child Care, Early Education, and School-Age Care 2001*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

[18] D. Ewen, H. Blank, K. Hart, and K. Schulman. (2002). *State Developments in Child Care, Early Education, and School-Age Care 2001*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

[19] Information from the Maryland Committee for Children, June 2002.

[20] Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement. (July 2002). *Proposed Constitutional Amendment: Voluntary Universal Pre-kindergarten*. Tallahassee, FL: Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement. Retrieved from the Internet at http://www.cepri.state.fl.us/consitute%20amends.htm.

[21] D. Ewen, H. Blank, K. Hart, and K. Schulman. (2002). *State Developments in Child Care, Early Education, and School-Age Care 2001*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

[22] H. Blank, A. Behr, and K. Schulman. (2001). *State Developments in Child Care, Early Education, and School-Age Care 2000*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.