

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

OVERVIEW

Education is an asset that benefits individuals, families and communities. It is one of the most important determining factors for upward economic mobility and the well-being of a community. Research indicates that the positive effects of early education, including pre-kindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, include higher earnings, higher overall economic growth, a more productive and versatile workforce, better health and lower crime.¹ Policies that promote early childhood development create a foundation for later school achievement, workforce productivity, responsible citizenship and successful parenting.² Pre-K programs prepare children for learning, both in school and later in the workforce, and are vital to a state's economic prosperity.

In fact, investments in high-quality early childhood education programs produce higher returns than even proven investments in K-12 education, yielding as much as \$8 for every \$1 invested.³ About 25% of these benefits go directly to individuals; the remaining 75% benefits society and government in the form of decreased grade retention and higher achievement in K-12, higher tax revenues, lower crime and decreased public assistance payments.⁴ Based on these findings, state support for early childhood education is an investment in overall educational success and economic development, and one that significantly outperforms more traditional investments in business and job creation.⁵

WHAT STATES CAN DO

States can fund high-quality early childhood education programs and ensure access to programs for all children, beginning with the most disadvantaged children and communities. While evidence points to the social and economic benefits of early education, many states do not spend enough to ensure that all children have access to high-quality programs. States also can set guidelines for what constitutes a high-quality program, which can help consolidate fragmented school-readiness options and establish high-quality programming throughout the state.

ELEMENTS OF A STRONG POLICY

Based on the expertise of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and Pre-K Now, CFED considers a state's early childhood education policy to be strong if it meets the following criteria:

1. **Does the state have an established state pre-K program?**^{6,7} Because federal support for early childhood education programs does not sufficiently cover all children, state supported pre-K programs are critical. State supported pre-K programs create opportunities

¹ Dickens, W., Sawhill, I. & Tebbs, J. (2006, April). *The Effects of Investing in Early Education on Economic Growth*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from www.brookings.edu/comm/policybriefs/pb153.htm. Lynch, R. (2004). *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal, and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from [www.epinet.org/books/exceptional/exceptional_returns_\(full\).pdf](http://www.epinet.org/books/exceptional/exceptional_returns_(full).pdf).

² *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children*. (2007, August). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu/content/downloads/Policy_Framework.pdf.

³ Rolnick, A. & Grunewald, R. (2003, March). Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return. *Fedgazette*. Minneapolis, MN: Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. Retrieved from <http://minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Reich, K. (2007, September). The Power of Preschool: Early Investment Yields Solid Returns. *Community Investments* 19:2. San Francisco, CA: The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. Retrieved from www.frbsf.org/publications/community/investments/index.html.

⁶ Barnett, W.S., Epstein, D.J., Friedman, A.H., Boyd, J.S. & Hustedt, J.T. (2008). *The State of Preschool 2008*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), p 21. Retrieved from <http://nieer.org/yearbook/>.

⁷ The criteria used to qualify a state as having its own pre-K program is based on NIEER's research and assessments. NIEER considers states' supplements to the federal Head Start program equivalent to a state-run program if the state assumes responsibility and provides enough funds to appreciably expand access to children across the state.

that prepare young children for school, particularly economically disadvantaged children who are at greater risk of educational failure.⁸ State-funded pre-K programs should be offered in a variety of settings, including private for-profit and nonprofit child care centers, Head Start programs, public schools and faith-based centers.⁹

2. **Does the state pre-K program include high-quality standards?** States should establish high-quality standards for pre-K programs to ensure children have access to meaningful learning environments. To help children develop socially and mentally, states should set high-quality benchmarks for pre-K programs that are proven to nurture children's development. NIEER recommends 10 quality benchmarks that are foundational elements of high program quality, ranging from teacher training to class size to availability of supportive services. States should adopt these standards in their pre-K policies.¹⁰
3. **Does the state provide sufficient funding for a high-quality state pre-K program?**¹¹ Of the 39 states (including the District of Columbia) with state-supported programs, only 18 provide funding sufficient to run high-quality pre-K programs. State per-child spending should meet NIEER's estimates of the necessary amount to provide high-quality programs.¹²
4. **Does the state provide pre-K programs for all?** Providing pre-K programs for all children is essential for closing the school readiness gap. High-quality pre-K can no longer be considered a luxury reserved for upper-income families or a public assistance program for the disadvantaged. Many middle-income children also have a readiness gap when they start kindergarten, which causes high rates of grade repetition, dropping out and special needs placement. Many middle-class families earn too much to qualify for state pre-K programs but not enough to pay for private, high-quality early education, and are forced to choose between financial security and their children's school readiness.¹³ To ensure the greatest opportunity for all children, states should support programs that are accessible to all children.¹⁴

⁸ www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Q_AResearch_based/.

⁹ www.preknow.org/policy/choice.cfm.

¹⁰ A state satisfies CFED's criteria for a strong policy if it meets seven of the following 10 criteria as defined by NIEER: Comprehensive early learning standards; teacher has B.A.; specialized training in pre-K; assistant teacher has C.D.A. or equivalent; at least 15 hours/year in-service training; class size 20 or fewer; staff-child ratio 1:10 or better; vision, hearing, health and one support service; at least one meal; site visits. NIEER, p. 11.

¹¹ "For this analysis, state estimates were constructed from a national estimate in the Institute for Women's Policy Research report *Meaningful Investments in Pre-K: Estimating the Per-Child Costs of Quality Programs* and adjusted for state cost of education differences using the state cost index from the Institute of Education Sciences report *A Comparable Wage Approach to Geographic Cost Adjustment*. A state's per-child spending from all reported sources was compared to the per-child spending estimate for a full- or half-day program, depending on the operating schedule of the state's program. If the program's operating schedule was determined locally, the half-day estimate was typically used. NIEER, p. 154."

¹² NIEER, pp. 13-14.

¹³ Wat, A. (2008). *The Pre-K Pinch: Early Education and the Middle Class*. Pre-K Now. Retrieved from www.preknow.org/documents/pre-kpinch_Nov2008_report.pdf.

¹⁴ Pre-K Now, www.preknow.org.

¹⁵ NIEER, p.4, and correspondence with Jesse Bailey at Pre-K For All DC and Carla Thompson, DC assistant state superintendent of education.

WHAT STATES HAVE DONE

Thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia have established pre-K programs. Of those, 29 have comprehensive, strong quality standards and 18 provide funding at a level sufficient to provide high-quality programs.¹⁵ Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma are the only states that currently make pre-K available to all 4-year-olds. However, five other states and DC have multi-year plans to implement pre-K for all 4-year-olds.

For more information on this policy measure, Early Childhood Education, and more, go to <http://scorecard.cfed.org>.

In the 2009-2010 Assets & Opportunity Scorecard, the 50 states and the District of Columbia were rated on their pre-kindergarten programs. The ratings were based on all three criteria described above.