

# Early Childhood Education



ISSUE  
MEMORANDUM  
2017-05

## Introduction – National Trends

Between 2002 and 2016, state spending on preschool programs in the United States more than doubled from \$3.3 billion to \$6.7 billion, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. The national per-pupil funding average for preschool students in 2016 was \$4,976. Forty-three states provide state-funded preschool programs. South Dakota and six other states, including Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming do not provide state-funded preschool.

## Early Childhood Education in South Dakota

Statistics compiled at the Kids Count Data Center at the Annie E. Casey Foundation show that, in 2016, seventy-six percent of children under the age of six in South Dakota had all available parents in the labor force. That is the highest percentage of any state in the nation; the national average is sixty-five percent. Thus, a high percentage of families with young children in the state are seeking child care and early childhood education opportunities outside the home. Although South Dakota does not have a state-funded preschool program, the state does support early childhood education in several ways.

The South Dakota Early Learning Guidelines were developed to provide a compilation of appropriate skills and knowledge children can attain with support by the time they have finished their preschool years. Children learn these skills primarily through play and experiences guided by parents and by skilled professionals. The guidelines are designed to be used in all settings that include children three to five years of age. They are used by preschool teachers, home and center childcare providers, parents, administrators, early childhood special educators, librarians, and all who work with preschool-aged children. The University of South Dakota partnered with the Head Start State Collaboration Office within the South Dakota Department of Education and other stakeholders to establish the guidelines, which are aligned with the South Dakota content standards for kindergarten.

The South Dakota Birth to Three Early Intervention Program serves children from birth to age three with developmental disabilities or delays and their families. It is an in-home, family-focused system of services and support that is provided to the families who need it.

Since no state-funded preschool program exists, low-income families most often must either rely on Head Start or go without preschool for their children because they simply cannot afford it. Head Start is the federal program under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that promotes school readiness. Head Start enhances the social and cognitive development of children by providing educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services to enrolled children and their families. The Federal Office of Head Start provides grants to local public and private agencies to provide the comprehensive child development services to economically disadvantaged children and families. To qualify for Head Start, a family's income must be at or below the poverty guidelines established by HHS. For example, in 2017, the poverty guideline for a family of three is \$20,420. Children in foster care and children from homeless families also qualify. In addition, ten percent of the enrollment may consist of children from families with an income that exceeds the poverty guidelines who have other special circumstances such as a disability.

South Dakota has sixteen Head Start grantees providing services in every county in the state. In the 2015-2016 school year, the grantees provided services to 3,740 children in the state, ages three to four. In addition, there are nine Early Head Start grantees providing services to families with infants and toddlers ages zero to three, and to pregnant women who meet the required income guidelines.

Unfortunately, the Head Start programs in the state are not always able to meet the demand for services. In Sioux Falls alone, during the 2016-2017 school year, nearly 200 preschool-aged children were on the

waiting list for Head Start. Statewide, the number of children on Head Start waiting lists generally fluctuates between 1,000 and 1,500. Furthermore, the waiting lists do not include children from families who earn too much money to qualify for Head Start, but at the same time cannot afford other preschool options.

Groups in at least two communities in the state have come to the aid of low-income families in need of preschool services. Through a partnership including the United Way, the Huron School District, and several private preschool providers, more than 250 children from low-income families in Huron have been able to attend preschool since 2009. Similarly, in Sioux Falls, a group of community leaders called the Hope Coalition formed in late 2015 to address the need for preschool for all the children on the Head Start waiting list. The group launched its first community preschool program through a partnership with the Sioux Falls School District in the fall of 2016 and served twenty children whose families otherwise could not afford preschool.

Student enrollment data compiled by the South Dakota Department of Education for the 2016-2017 school year indicates that ninety-one school districts in the state had at least one pre-kindergarten program. The total pre-kindergarten fall enrollment for all the public schools in the state totaled 3,291. School districts in the state can choose to offer pre-kindergarten programs, but there are no statewide preschool curriculum standards, and school districts receive no state funding for them. The funding generally comes from the school districts, from participating families in the form of tuition, and from private entities.

Legislators in South Dakota in recent years have considered several legislative proposals regarding early childhood education, but none of them have been successful. A bill introduced in 2005 and another bill introduced in 2017 sought to establish an early childhood education pilot program that would be offered through participating school districts. In 2008, a bill was introduced to allow school districts to establish preschool programs and to receive funding for those programs through the state aid to education formula. A bill to require the South Dakota Board of Education to establish standards for preschool education was introduced in three consecutive years, 2008, 2009, and 2010. Lastly in 2012, and again in 2017, a bill was introduced to establish an early learning advisory council made up of educators,

parents, and state government representatives to assess the needs in the state for high quality early learning programs and to report their findings.

Likely barriers to state-funded preschool in South Dakota include a lack of available funding. The state has endured some tough economic times in recent years and has demonstrated a general reluctance to raise taxes. When funding for education does become available, many policymakers would rather direct that money to the existing K-12 public education system instead of starting a new program. Another barrier is the state's rural nature. Providing preschool to a dispersed population is usually more expensive and more challenging, particularly when it comes to transportation. A third barrier may be the state's low unemployment rate which could make finding suitable staff for preschool programs difficult.

### **Essential Elements for a Quality State Preschool Program**

A 2016 report from the National Institute for Early Education Research identifies the essential elements that researchers have determined must be present to a large extent for a state preschool program to be successful. They divided those elements into three groups.

- The first group creates the enabling environment. The enabling environment must include support from political leadership and a compelling vision and strong leadership from early learning leaders.
- The second group encompasses rigorous, articulated, early learning policies including well-educated and well-compensated teachers, an adult-child ratio of at least 1:11, full day scheduling, two or more adult teaching staff in each classroom, appropriate education standards for preschoolers, effective curriculum, strong supports for the education of special needs children, and strong supports for dual language learners.
- The third group consists of strong program practices including high quality teaching, child assessments that are appropriate and used to inform instruction, data-driven decision-making, professional development to improve teacher performance, and integrated systems of



standards, curriculum, assessment, professional development, and evaluation.

The evidence is strong that only high-quality preschool programs produce large gains in child development, but unfortunately, the quality of preschool programs is highly variable and not always known by parents who are seeking early childhood education for their children.

### **Determining Preschool Quality in South Dakota**

Knowing the quality of preschool programs varies widely, the School Administrators of South Dakota (SASD) in 2015 decided to begin putting together a tool that would help identify excellent preschools in the state. Now, two years later, SASD is ready to launch its Levels of Excellence document that will be used to evaluate preschool programs.

The Levels of Excellence document contains a variety of indicators that will identify where a preschool falls on a continuum of three levels: Proficient, Distinguished, and Exemplary. To utilize the document, the director of a preschool performs a self-evaluation and that is followed by an independent evaluation by a member of SASD. The two will then meet and the results will be tabulated by SASD. The preschool will then receive a certificate indicating the level of excellence that it achieved. The level is good for three years before the evaluation needs to be repeated.

The document was piloted in seven preschools last fall and is now available for use by any preschool program in the state, public or private. The hope of SASD is that it will have a positive impact in the lives of many children in the state, and give parents better access to the information they need in selecting a preschool for their children.

### **The Impact of Preschool Programs on Learning**

The National Conference of State Legislatures noted that in the spring of 2017 a group of leading early childhood education researchers released the findings of their consensus report on the multitude of pre-kindergarten research. They attempted to answer questions such as how long the positive effects of preschool last, and who benefits the most from preschool programs. According to their findings, economically disadvantaged children and dual

language learners show greater improvements in learning at the end of the pre-kindergarten year than more economically advantaged and English-proficient children. Their findings also show that convincing evidence exists that children attending a high-quality preschool program are more ready for school at the end of their pre-kindergarten year than those who do not attend. Improvements in literacy and numeracy are most common. On the other hand, convincing evidence on the longer-term impacts of a high-quality preschool program on academic outcomes and school progress is sparse and often inconclusive. The evidence that does exist often shows that preschool-induced improvements in learning are detectable during elementary school, but it also reveals null or negative longer-term impacts for some programs.

States have worked hard on the design and content of their preschool programs. Ongoing innovation and evaluation is needed to ensure that children participating in the programs are gaining in learning and that the gains are sustained. More complete and reliable evidence on the effectiveness of preschool is needed.

### **The Best State Preschool Programs**

Based on several key elements including a strong base of support, investment in teacher training, and incentives to encourage preschools to meet high quality standards, the Learning Policy Institute identified six states as currently having the best state preschool programs. The six states are Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Washington, and West Virginia.

Georgia's Pre-K Program offers free public preschool for all four-year old children in Georgia. It is the nation's first universal preschool program that is entirely funded by the state lottery. It is offered at participating local public schools or through privately-owned child care establishments. Participation in the program is entirely voluntary so spaces are limited. Not all eligible children are able to attend. The program is most known for its excellent curriculum. Participating schools must choose an approved curriculum and go through a curriculum review and approval process.

Michigan, in 1985, launched its Great Start Readiness program, a state-funded initiative for 4-year old children with factors that put them at risk of



educational failure. Students who participate in the program are found to be advanced in imagination and creativity, in demonstrating initiative, and in retaining what they have learned. Michigan Governor, Rick Snyder, a strong proponent, managed to get the program's budget doubled to \$240 million during the 2014-2015 school year.

North Carolina's Pre-K Program launched in 2001. It is a state-funded initiative that targets children from families whose gross income is at or below seventy-five percent of the state's median income level. The program's success is due in part to its diverse curriculum and the focus it places on all aspects of child development, including emotional and social development, health and physical development, and language and cognitive development.

In 1998, Oklahoma passed a law providing for free access to pre-kindergarten for all the state's four-year old children regardless of income. Since then, the state's universal preschool has been part of the public education system, and accordingly, has the same quality standards applied to it that are applied to all the other grade levels.

One of the first state-funded preschool programs in the country was introduced in the state of Washington. In 1985, the state introduced its Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program. It serves only families with an income of \$26,730 or less per year,

which puts them well below the federal poverty level. The program is especially notable because it provides services such as health, vision, and dental screenings, and health care referrals.

Legislation enacted in 2002 required the state of West Virginia to begin making pre-kindergarten available to all four-year old children by 2012, and the state has done so. In 2016, the state spent \$6,147 in state funds per child to make the program possible. The program is noteworthy for its highly qualified teachers, and the importance it places on including parents in the education of their preschool children.

### Conclusion

Overall, state-funded preschool continues to grow in enrollment, funding, and supports for quality. The evidence is strong that children who attend a quality preschool program reap the benefits of that program in kindergarten and throughout their elementary school years. The evidence showing improved learning in the years following elementary school, however, is sparse and often not as conclusive. Clearly, programs of high quality yield the largest returns, but achieving and sustaining high quality programs is a continual challenge for states. These are just a few of the factors states like South Dakota must consider as they contemplate establishing state-funded preschool programs of their own.

This issue memorandum was written by Clare Charlson, Principal Research Analyst on 11/07/2017 for the Legislative Research Council. It is designed to provide background information on the subject and is not a policy statement made by the Legislative Research Council.

