

## INFORMATION BRIEF

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# Universal Preschool

The Minnesota Legislature has considered bills to create a universal preschool program, but none of these bills have passed. This information brief:

- describes the current state-funded early childhood education programs offered in Minnesota;
  - describes state universal preschool programs offered in other states; and
  - lists some additional states moving toward offering universal preschool.
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In recent years, there have been legislative attempts to create a universal preschool program in Minnesota; however, none of these bills have passed the legislature. Several other states offer what they term universal preschool. Although these programs are all structured differently, they can provide a guide for policymakers interested in creating a universal preschool program in Minnesota.

## Early Childhood Education Programs in Minnesota

Although Minnesota does not have a universal preschool program, the state does offer a variety of other early childhood education programs for children from birth to kindergarten entrance, including early childhood family education, school readiness, Head Start, and prekindergarten exploratory projects. In addition, some school districts offer preschool programs.

**Early Childhood Family Education.** Early childhood family education programs (ECFE) are for children from birth to kindergarten, for their parents, and for expectant parents. These programs include parent education to promote children's learning and development. All ECFE programming requires substantial parental involvement. Districts are encouraged to coordinate ECFE programs with their special education and vocational education programs, as well as with other public or nonprofit agencies providing similar services. ECFE programs are funded with

state aid, local levy, and participant fees. During the 2007-2008 school year, 335 of 340 school districts offered ECFE, the total state aid was \$21.1 million, and total local levy was \$22.1 million.

**School Readiness.** A school district or group of school districts may establish a school readiness program to enable children to enter school with the necessary skills and behavior to succeed. A child may participate in a school readiness program if the child is at least three years old and has had a developmental screening. Children under the age of three-and-one-half can be enrolled if the district determines that serving young children makes the program more effective. Districts may establish a sliding fee for school readiness programs. Fees must be waived for participants who are unable to pay. During the 2007-2008 school year, the state appropriated \$9.987 million for school readiness programs and nearly every district offered the program.

**Prekindergarten Exploratory Projects.** The 2007 Legislature established three prekindergarten exploratory projects to be conducted in partnership with the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation to promote children's school readiness. The three projects are located in St. Paul, Hennepin County, and Blue Earth County. Parents or legal guardians with incomes less than or equal to 185 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (\$32,560 for a family of three in 2008) are eligible to receive allowances up to \$4,000 per child per year to pay for their children's education in a quality early education program. Participating children must be three or four years old on August 31. The parent must use the allowance during the 12 months after he or she receives it to pay for services designed to promote school readiness in a quality early education setting. A quality setting is any service or program that receives a quality rating from the Department of Human Services under the state's quality rating system. For fiscal year 2008, \$2 million in state general funds was appropriated for these projects. This program was a pilot program and did not receive state funding beyond fiscal year 2009.

**School Readiness Service Agreements.** The 2007 Legislature established School Readiness Service Agreements (SRSA) for child care providers who apply to the Commissioner of Human Services, meet certain criteria, and perform services that support school readiness for children and economic stability for parents. The SRSAs allow the commissioner to pay higher reimbursement rates to child care providers than what is typically allowed in the child care assistance programs; the commissioner can reimburse up to 50 child care providers who represent diverse parts of the state and a variety of child care delivery models. Eligible families must be eligible to receive child care assistance (have income less than or equal to 67 percent of state median income), be in an authorized activity for an average of at least 35 hours per week when initial eligibility is determined, and include a child who has not yet entered kindergarten. For fiscal year 2008, \$500,000 in state general funds was appropriated for this initiative. This program received one-time funding for fiscal years 2008 and 2009. However, the program was funded for fiscal years 2010 and 2011 with federal child care and development block grant funds included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

**Head Start.** Head Start is primarily a federally funded program designed to provide a comprehensive family-oriented program that improves school readiness and social competence of children from low-income families. State funds were first appropriated for Head Start programs in fiscal year 1989. Head Start funds do not flow to school districts but instead to the community organizations that are the grantees. In Minnesota, the most common type of grantee

is a community action program. In fiscal year 2008, the state received \$84.7 million in federal funds for Head Start and appropriated \$20.1 million in state general funds.

**Preschool Programs.** Several school districts throughout the state also offer preschool programs on a sliding fee scale based on family income. Since there are no statewide program requirements, the programs vary by district. In addition, these programs are not available in every area of the state since districts may choose whether or not to offer them. These preschool programs are not tracked by the state Department of Education, so there is no information available regarding the number of districts that offer these programs or how they are funded.

The compulsory instruction age in Minnesota is age seven. Public school districts are required to offer kindergarten, but attendance is not mandatory.

## States with Universal Preschool

### Florida

#### Program History

The program began in 2005 after the state passed a constitutional amendment in 2002 requiring voluntary universal preschool for all four-year-olds.

#### Program Description

Two versions of the program exist: (1) school year, consisting of 540 hours with a teacher holding at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) degree; and (2) summer, consisting of 300 hours with a teacher holding at least a bachelor's degree. Children may be enrolled in any program where space is available. Service providers include licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, accredited nonpublic schools and faith-based providers, and public schools. All providers must meet the program's requirements. Sixty-one percent of Florida's four-year-olds attended the program in 2008.

#### Program Funding

The total state budget for universal preschool in 2007-2008 was \$336,469,116 (this number represents total pre-K spending). The total amount spent per child enrolled was \$2,500 in the universal pre-K program, \$8,083 for those receiving preschool services through Head Start. The per-child amount increased 4.6 percent for the 2007-2008 school year. Providers are given a fixed, per-child amount. These sums are distributed through early learning coalitions which also serve as the local program administrators.

#### Program Standards and Requirements

Teacher requirements are as listed above: a bachelor's degree for the summer program and CDA for the school year program. Of the ten quality standards set forth by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), an organization that conducts and communicates research to support high-quality early childhood

education, Florida's program meets only the following four: (1) teaching to a comprehensive set of early learning standards; (2) maximum class sizes capped at 20 (in fact, it has caps of ten for the summer program and 18 for the school year program); (3) staff-child ratios of 1:10 or better; and (4) implementation monitoring (done on a regular basis).

**Other Information**

- Compulsory instruction age: 6
- Structure of kindergarten: The state requires that children receive a minimum of three hours of preschool per day during the academic year (180 days or more). Districts are required to offer kindergarten, though attendance is not mandatory.

**Georgia**

**Program History**

Georgia's universal preschool program began in 1995 and was the first in the nation.

**Program Description**

The program serves all four-year-olds whose parents wish them to attend. The program's services are provided by public schools, Head Start programs, private child care centers, faith-based organizations, military facilities, and state colleges and universities. The program is offered six and a half hours per day, Monday through Friday, during the academic year. Fifty-three percent of the state's four-year-olds attended the program in 2008.

**Program Funding**

The Georgia lottery provides funding for the pre-K program. The total state budget for universal preschool in 2007-2008 was \$325,000,000. The total amount spent per child was \$4,249 for regular preschool and \$7,720 for children enrolled in Head Start. The amount of funding given to each site is determined by the number of students in each class, the teacher's credentials, and whether the program is taking place in a metropolitan or nonmetropolitan area.

**Program Standards and Requirements**

All pre-K programs must use the "Bright from the Start Pre-K Operating Guidelines" and the state's Pre-K Content Standards to guide their instruction practices. These standards align with those used in the state's K-12 education system. An assessment program was implemented during the 2006-2007 school year and provides teachers and parents with two progress reports per year, which are used to track children's progress and provide individualized instruction. Georgia's program meets (or will meet) nine of the ten quality standards set forth by NIEER. The only NIEER-recommended standard not met is the requirement that a lead teacher have a BA. Currently, the state only

requires and an AA degree or montessori diploma.

**Other Information**

- Compulsory instruction age: 6
- Structure of kindergarten: Districts must provide a minimum of four and one-half hours daily during the school year (at least 180 days) and must offer a full-day kindergarten option. Kindergarten attendance is not required.

**Illinois**

**Program History**

The current program has its roots in a program designed for at-risk children that was established in 1985 as the “Prekindergarten Program for At-Risk Children.” In 2006, the state took on the goal of providing preschool for all three and four-year-olds through the “Preschool for All” program.

**Program Description**

Currently, the program focuses on at-risk children and those whose families earn incomes up to four times the federal poverty level. The state hopes to serve all three and four-year-olds by 2012 (about 190,000 children each year). The commitment to offer education to three-year-olds is relatively unique and puts Illinois above other states in terms of access for children under age four. The program is offered in all public school districts, though private providers may apply for funding as well. Twenty percent of all three-year-olds and 31 percent of all four-year-olds are currently enrolled in the program.

**Program Funding**

The total state budget for universal preschool in 2007-2008 was \$309,596,682. The total amount spent per child was \$3,372 for universal preschool and \$7,383 for Head Start preschoolers. Funding for the program comes through the Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant and was increased by \$26 million last year. The program is not really universal yet since funding levels are not sufficient to support such a wide-ranging commitment. However, the program is expected to be fully funded by 2012.

**Program Standards and Requirements**

The program runs two and a half hours each day, five days per week, on the academic calendar. The program meets or exceeds nine of the ten benchmarks set forth by NIEER. The only NIEER benchmark not met involves providing a full meal. Illinois provides only a snack.

**Other Information**

- Compulsory instruction age: 7
- Structure of kindergarten: Attendance in kindergarten is voluntary and schools are only required to offer half-day programs lasting at least two hours per day.

## New Jersey

### Program History

The New Jersey program began after a 1998 court ruling that required the state to provide preschool for all three and four-year-olds in the highest poverty districts. The outcome of the ruling was the Abbott Preschool Program. Beginning in 2007-2008, funding for the program was restricted to children coming from families with incomes up to 300 percent of the poverty level. Although the state is not currently meeting its goal of providing all four-year-olds with a preschool education, the School Funding Reform Act, passed in 2008, moves the process forward by providing a plan to fund full-day preschool for all three and four-year-olds by the 2013-2014 school year. Various initiatives have been added over time to expand preschool access to students not eligible for the Abbott program. They are discussed below.

### Program Description

The Early Childhood Program Aid Initiative offers preschool to four-year-olds through programs that are at least half-day. These programs are most often run by districts, though contracts with private providers or Head Start can be made. There is no family income requirement for the program, which is offered during the academic year. The Abbott program has no income requirement and is offered full-day during the academic year; however, it is only available to students in the state's poorest 5 percent of districts. Sixteen percent of three-year-olds and 26 percent of four-year-olds participate in state-run programs.

### Program Funding

The total state budget for universal preschool in 2007-2008 was \$516,541,421 (this is a summary figure; funding is distributed through the programs listed below). The total amount spent per child was \$10,989 for non-Head Start programs and \$9,212 for children who are in Head Start programs (again, a summary figure). The funding streams below are based on the 2007-2008 school year; new streams will likely be added as the state moves to fulfill its promise of providing universal preschool for three and four-year-olds by the 2013-2014 school year.

- Funding was provided from the state Department of Education to the 31 school districts where 40 percent or more of the children qualify for free or reduced lunch. This funding went to districts, but could be funneled to private centers or Head Start services at the discretion of the district.
- Another source of funding is the state's Department of Human Services, which helps to provide some programs with the means to provide extended care (before and after) services.
- A separate funding stream is provided to 101 school districts whose students are not high-poverty enough to qualify for the

Abbott program but who still have 20 percent to 40 percent of students on the free and reduced lunch program.

- A final funding stream designed to help the state move closer to serving all four-year-olds is the Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI) which began in 2004 and is available (via grant) to any district not eligible for the Abbott program.

### **Program Standards and Requirements**

The Abbott program meets or exceeds nine of the ten benchmarks set forth by NIEER. The only NIEER benchmark not met involves requiring assistant teachers to have a CDA degree.

The Early Launch to Learning Initiative meets and misses the same standards listed for the Abbott program with the exception that it fails to meet the requirement to provide a meal each day.

The Early Childhood Program Aid Initiative meets and misses the same NIEER standards listed for the Abbott program with several exceptions (which are missed): (1) capping maximum class sizes at 20; (2) keeping staff ratios at 1:10 or better; and (3) providing a meal each day.

### **Other Information**

- Compulsory instruction age: 6
- Structure of kindergarten: Kindergarten attendance is voluntary and full-day kindergarten must be offered in Abbott districts (the state's poorest); no minimum number of instructional hours is specified.

## **Oklahoma**

### **Program History**

The Oklahoma Early Childhood Four-Year-Old Program was started as a pilot program in 1980 and gained statewide funding in 1990, though it was limited to four-year-olds eligible for Head Start. In 1998, the program was expanded to serve all four-year-olds regardless of family income.

### **Program Description**

The program may be offered as either a half or full-day, five days per week during the academic year. The decision to be full or half-day is made by the school district. The state has a separate initiative to provide additional services and develop early intervention strategies in its Head Start programs. Currently, all four-year-olds may participate in the program, but no provisions are made for three-year-olds; however, a new pilot program for three-year-olds was started during the 2006-2007 school year. Ninety-nine percent of all school districts offer the program, which is available to any four-year-old whose parents wish them to attend. Oklahoma enrolls 71 percent of its four-

year-olds in state-run preschool, which is by far the highest rate of any state.

**Program Funding**

The total state budget for universal preschool in 2007-2008 was \$139,735,129. The total amount spent per child was \$7,484 for regular preschool and \$6,886 for Head Start. Public school districts receive their funding through the state's school finance formula (reimbursed at the districts' per pupil rates) with consideration for whether full or half-day preschool is being offered. Districts may contract with Head Start or a private center to provide services.

**Program Standards and Requirements**

The program meets nine of the ten NIEER standards. The only NIEER-recommended standard not met is the requirement that a lead teacher hold a BA. Currently, the state only requires that teacher assistants meet requirements set forth under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (which requires a slightly lesser degree than the benchmark).

**Other Information**

- Compulsory instruction age: 5 (though a waiver is available through age 6)
- Structure of kindergarten: Kindergarten attendance is required, though parents may choose to hold their child back and start them one year later (so long as they notify the district superintendent). Districts will be required to offer full-day kindergarten beginning with the 2011-2012 school year. No minimum number of hours is currently specified.

**West Virginia**

**Program History**

The Public School Early Childhood Education Initiative was begun in 1983. The initiative allowed school boards to offer programs for three and four-year-olds. In 2000, legislation was passed mandating the expansion of access to preschool education programs to all four-year-olds by the 2012-2013 school year.

**Program Description**

Any four-year-old child is eligible, though funding currently limits the number of children able to attend. West Virginia requires that half of its programs operate collaboratively with private providers. The program hours differ based on local school district decisions. All programs operate on the academic calendar. Forty-three percent of all four-year-olds participate in the program.

**Program Funding**

The total state budget for universal preschool in 2007-2008 was \$59,452,747. The total amount spent per child was \$7,778 for regular preschool and \$7,037 for Head Start. Funding flows to public school

districts that may choose to subcontract with private providers or Head Start programs in order to provide service.

### **Program Standards and Requirements**

The West Virginia program meets the following NIEER benchmark standards: (1) teaching to a comprehensive set of early learning standards; (2) requiring specialized teacher training; (3) providing at least 15 hours of teacher in-service training per year; (4) capping class sizes at 20; (5) holding staff-child ratios to 1:10 or better; (6) providing screening and referrals for vision, hearing, health, dental, developmental, and support services (only one support service is required by NIEER); (7) providing at least one meal per day; and (8) monitoring program implementation to assure quality. The only NIEER-recommended standards not met are those pertaining to teacher degrees (the state will accept certain certification programs as well as the BAs required to meet the standard) and associate teacher degrees.

### **Other Information**

- Compulsory instruction age: 6
- Structure of kindergarten: Kindergarten attendance is compulsory though under extraordinary circumstances (approved by the appropriate authorities) a student could be allowed to enter first grade by taking a basic skills test. Full-day kindergarten must be offered to all students, and the minimum number of hours required is the equivalent of a full day, every day of the week during the academic year.

## **States Approaching Universal Preschool**

Several other states have taken steps moving them in the direction of offering universal preschool. Below are some examples of what these states have done.

### **Vermont**

Vermont has two programs working in tandem: the Vermont Early Education Initiative, which provides access for at-risk children with family incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level; and the Vermont Publicly Funded Prekindergarten program, which provides voluntary preschool for all children in communities choosing to offer the program. Currently, about 63 percent of communities in the state participate and about 50 percent of all four-year-olds are enrolled in state preschool. The programs meet two of the NIEER benchmarks: holding staff-child ratios at 1:10 or better and providing various screening and referrals.

### **Wisconsin**

Wisconsin's constitution mandates that the state provide free education to four-year-olds. Funding is provided to public schools, which may contract with other providers at their

discretion. Currently, about 40 percent of the state's four-year-olds are enrolled in either the Wisconsin Head Start Program (for low-income or disabled children) or the Four-Year-Old Kindergarten program, which is available to children from any family but is restricted because only 68 percent of school districts offer the program. Funding limitations may have a negative impact on the program, which only meets five of the ten NIEER standards. No increase in funding is planned for the immediate future.

## **Maryland**

Maryland is working to implement results of the Task Force on Universal Preschool Education's 2007 report (recommending full access to four-year-olds), but is currently stalled due to lack of funding. The system in use is limited to children with a family income at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty line.

## **New York**

New York has a Universal Prekindergarten program, which has been operating since 1998. However, despite its goal to provide access to all four-year-olds, funding levels have prevented the percentage of students served from rising over 40 percent. The program, offered through school districts (which also contract with Head Start and private providers), uses a lottery system to select children for enrollment. Although the program presently only meets six of the ten NIEER benchmarks, efforts are underway to adopt comprehensive learning standards.

## **Other States**

A number of other states, such as Maine, Louisiana, and New Mexico, are attempting to offer universal preschool through a patchwork of programs. Most often, some of these programs come with specific income or "at-risk" requirements while others are open to serving any child, but have limited funding and may not be available in all areas. These limitations mean that, although many states are attempting to broaden their reach, some students whose parents would like them to attend a state-run preschool cannot be served.

## Appendix A

### National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) Preschool Quality Benchmarks

NIEER is an organization that conducts and communicates research to support high-quality early childhood education. It has established the following benchmarks for preschool education.

- (1) Teaching to a comprehensive set of early learning standards
- (2) Requiring specialized teacher training
- (3) Requiring teaching assistants to have their Child Development Associate (CDA) degree
- (4) Providing at least 15 hours of teacher in-service training per year
- (5) Capping class sizes at 20
- (6) Holding staff-child ratios to 1:10 or better
- (7) Providing screening and referrals for vision, hearing, health, dental, developmental, and support services (only one support service is required by NIEER)
- (8) Providing at least one meal per day
- (9) Monitoring program implementation to assure quality
- (10) Requiring lead teachers to have a BA

*For more information about early childhood education, visit the education area of our web site, [www.house.mn/hrd/hrd.htm](http://www.house.mn/hrd/hrd.htm).*