Council for Professional Recognition

CDA Child Development Associate® National Credentialing Program

GIVING OUR ALL TO PRE-K FOR ALL:

ROADBLOCKS AND REWARDS

Intense talks are going on nationwide about the importance of pre-K for all. Some of the most knowledgeable voices are coming from the National Institute for Early Education Research, where they recently published the *State of Preschool Yearbook 2022*.[1] According to NIEER's annual report, many states have already taken noteworthy steps to provide free pre-K for every child, regardless of their family's income. And an increasing number of states are offering more opportunities for enrollment, expanding the pipeline of qualified teachers and investing in programs that use best practices in the classroom. Granted, the states have yet to ensure that every child receives the high-quality early learning that builds a solid base for future success. But pre-K for all is on the rise everywhere from Mississippi to Maryland, where it plays a key role in the *Blueprint for Maryland's Future* from the state department of education.[2]

Balancing Costs, Resources and High-Quality Learning

Maryland Governor Wes Moore wants to support the state's youth from "cradle to career," as he pledged while running for office in 2022. "We must build an education system where all students have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of who they are or where they come from," he urged Maryland voters. And a key to young people's success, Moore has long been convinced, is "to build a holistic early childhood infrastructure" for the state.[3] His goal now is to provide free pre-K for all Maryland three- and four-year-olds in the next ten years by raising funding for schools by $3.8 billion each year over the coming decade.[4]

And Moore's plan holds great promise, say child advocates like Doug Lent, communications director for Maryland Family Network, a nonprofit that supports quality child care for children from birth to age five. "It would give parents access to child care who could not normally afford that child care, which means parents can go to work while kids are also receiving the skills that they need to then later on go into the workforce or into education," Lent explained. But a nagging question remains: How can Governor Moore achieve his goal in a way that balances cost, resources and high-quality learning?[5]

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Triumphs in Tulsa

This is a question that many states have also asked during the recent push to expand pre-K for all. All but four states—Idaho, Montana, South Dakota and Wyoming—have a state-run preschool program that reaches some students, most often children from low-income households or those with special needs. California, Colorado, Hawaii and New Mexico recently passed laws to provide access to early learning for all young children. Governors in Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey have also taken the first steps in the same direction. And it's a trend that's caught the attention of Steven Barnett, founder and senior co-director of NIEER, as well as one of the authors of its preschool yearbook.[6] "I don't think we've had a wave like this. That dramatically changes the landscape," he said. Yet preschool for all isn't a new idea. Georgia was the first state to launch a universal pre-K program in 1992, followed by Oklahoma in 1998. And "that's in the distant past," Barnett explained.[7]

Still, the Oklahoma program recently took the spotlight when studies from Georgetown University showed the long-term, positive impact of pre-K for all in Tulsa County. In a paper that appeared in 2022, the Georgetown researchers studied children who attended the program from 2005 to 2006 and found an immediate academic bang, followed by disappointments. In elementary school, children who didn't participate in the program managed to catch up to those who did. But years later in high school, the Tulsa pre-K alums turned out to have an edge over their peers.[8]

The Tulsa alums were taking more challenging classes and more of them were graduating from high school on time, said William Gormley, co-director of Georgetown University Center for Research on Children in the United States and leader of the study. "This is a classic story of a big bounce from pre-K in the short run," he said, "followed by disappointing fade-out in standardized test scores in the median run, followed by all sorts of intriguing, positive effects in the long run and culminating in truly stunning positive effects on college enrollment," a point that subsequent research would reinforce.[9]

In 2023, Gormley led a second study showing that college enrollment was 12 percent higher for Tulsa pre-K alums than it was for those who didn't attend Tulsa pre-K or Head Start. Tulsa pre-K attendance was associated with two-year college enrollment among students of all racial and ethnic

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backgrounds. It also strongly predicted four-year college enrollment among Black and Hispanic students. And these findings have implications for the future of Tulsa alums. In the United States, adults with bachelor's degrees earn twice as much as those with only high school diplomas, while those with associate degrees earn one-and-a-half times as much. The economic value of higher education is clear.[10]

Trending Down in Tennessee

Yet the case for universal pre-K isn't so clear, according to a study of Tennessee public preschools showing that the benefits of attending the program rapidly disappeared. Researchers at Vanderbilt University found that children who took part in the program at first had far more significant gains in literacy, language and math skills than those who didn't attend the program. They were more ready for elementary school, as their kindergarten teachers noted when the school year began. But the positive impact of the preschool program was largely gone by the end of the school year, when their performance was no better than children who hadn't attended the free public program. By second grade, it was worse, and this pattern continued in third-grade achievement tests as the public preschool participants scored lower on reading, math and science tests, besides tending to have more discipline problems. And they were also more likely to have special education designations that dogged them through later school years.[11]

So, what went wrong? The first explanation that naturally comes to mind is that Tennessee had a poor-quality program compared to other states. Yet no evidence exists to show that the program was below average. The only comparison of quality across states appears in Barnett's yearly NIEER reports that identify the ten standards the institute supports and that every state tries to meet. By this yardstick, Tennessee was one of the better programs since it met nine of the standards from 2009 to 2011, the years when the children were enrolled.[12] So, it's reasonable to blame factors beyond the Tennessee program for the children's dismal performance in later years.

Whether early childhood programs have a lasting impact depends on subsequent school environments, according to the sustaining environment thesis. Children's continued progress reflects school environments that extend early learning

Universal Pre-K Early Adopter States

GEORGIA
1992

OKLAHOMA
1998

Adoption in Progress

- California
- Colorado
- Hawaii
- Illinois
- Michigan
- New Jersey
- New Mexico

No State Run Preschool

- Idaho
- Montana
- South Dakota
- Wyoming

and enable young folks to build on their previous knowledge, say proponents of the thesis. One positive experience leads to another, and conditions in schools can boost that progress or they can block it, which appears to have been the case in Tennessee.

Children in Tennessee public preschools were eligible for the program because their families were impoverished. They achieved meaningful gains during the pre-K year compared to children who didn't attend the program. Yet after pre-K, most of them attended poorly resourced and low-performing schools that failed to nurture their early promise. An added issue was likely the failure of the children's kindergarten and later teachers to build on the skills the children brought from their experience of pre-K. Teachers might have focused on the children who most needed attention and covered skills that many of those from the public program had already mastered. So, learning for the more advanced children often took a back seat in the classroom and they were bored.[13]

Tulsa, meanwhile, was prepared to help the more advanced children flourish by the time the members of the study group were starting elementary school. Tulsa preschool staff have clearly recalled how Tulsa elementary school principals and central administration were eager to up their game in 2002 to 2008 when the federal No Child

Left Behind program put pressure on K-12 schools to ramp up their test scores. In response, Tulsa Public Schools launched a summer workshop to show elementary school principals the impact of quality early learning and what it implies for curriculum alignment and adjustment. The stage was set for elementary school principals to enhance their classroom practice in ways that would help the children keep advancing.[14]

The county's strong magnet schools sustained their efforts, as Gormley has pointed out. And these schools also advanced equity, though magnet programs, in general, are subject to the critique that they are disproportionately filled with white and Asian students. This wasn't the case in Tulsa, where low-income Black, Hispanic and Native American children who attended public preschool were also more likely to attend a magnet school. And children who attended the magnet schools were more likely to go to college, whatever their family's income. The Tulsa Achieves program, set up in 2007, offers free tuition for local high school students who wish to enroll in Tulsa Community College. And that, too, was part of a plan to smooth the path from cradle to career for Tulsa children of all backgrounds, Gormley said. "There have been many efforts to include students of color in the pre-K program, and also in the magnet schools," all of which made a concrete difference. "Without those heroic efforts by people on the ground in Tulsa, you might not have seen the very positive long-term effects."[15]

Cutting Corners in the Classroom

These valiant steps stand in stark contrast to what's taken place in New York City, where efforts to expand public preschool are dying in the crib. According to parents and municipal staff, NYC Mayor Eric Adams is "starving" the city's program, a pioneer and once the leading child care system in the nation. Acting in the name of austerity, Adams has called for cuts in some programs to focus on addressing crime, affordable housing and cleaning up the city. One program that he wants to cut is the city's free preschool, which currently costs the city a bit more than $700 million a year and has been projected to rise to about $1 billion with the proposed addition of universal 3-K. Adams's latest budget proposal would nix the extra funding for three-year-olds, effectively cutting the program by nearly $570 million over the next two years. But taking the universal out of universal child care will undermine the aims of the program, critics say. In response, Adams has argued that "as mayor, the buck stops with me. It is my responsibility to keep our city on a stable path."[16]

Still, his actions ignore the impact the cuts could have on the life path of young residents in the city. An assessment done a few years back found that third graders who had taken part in the public pre-K program tested better than those who hadn't and the gap between white children and those of color was narrower among students who attended the public program.[17] And they owed these advances to devoted providers like Mary Cheng, director of child development services at the Chinese-American Planning Council, who oversees care for about 300 early learners across six sites in Manhattan and Queens. These programs are among the roughly 1,200 sites that make up the city's pre-K program, which operates mostly via contracts with mom-and-pop providers and nonprofits, many of which are now going through a severe financial crunch.[18]

Over the past year and a half, the city hasn't paid Cheng's group or hundreds of other providers what it owes them for teaching its youngest schoolchildren—a debt that's about $400 million. Cheng has been fighting to recoup almost $1.6 million for the planning council's work during the 2022 fiscal year. And for fiscal 2023, which began last July, Cheng's nonprofit has received only a sliver of what it's due. "It's not like a failing business because I failed. It's the city failing me," she said in response to the many centers that have opted out of the city system or been forced to close their doors.[19] And these closings are taking place at a time when the early childhood field is still grappling with the flight of providers during the pandemic, leading to a shortage that poses issues for ongoing efforts nationwide to offer free pre-K for all.

Burritos and Bucks

Issues related to finances and staffing also pose roadblocks for the Great Start Readiness Program, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer's plan to offer free preschool to all four-year-olds by the end of her second term. Whitmer's ambitious plan to expand public preschool in her state has met with applause from educators and experts, but it must surmount chronic teacher shortages and pay inequities to build a truly universal program that would add nearly 75,000 more children to the program. Still, if the state can pull it off, there could be "enormous benefits," said Michael Rice, Michigan superintendent of public instruction.[20]

The promise—and potential obstacles—of Whitmer's preschool push are apparent in the area around Kalamazoo, where 130 low-income students, up from 48 in February 2020, are on a waiting list for the Great Start Readiness Program. Meanwhile, the number of local preschool classrooms has shrunk because some providers closed during the pandemic while other providers haven't been able to hire enough teachers, said Rachel Roberts, director of school programming at the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency. "The need is clearly there," she knows from the figures and from experience of her own. "I have friends who have left the workforce instead of paying for preschool or day care. They need to stay home because they just can't afford it."[21]

Filling the needs of parents like this would cost the state hundreds of millions of dollars and that is a lot of bucks, the issue that's killed pre-K expansion under Adams in New York. But the money could move children ahead on the path from cradle to crib, as Superintendent Rice pointed out. "One year of high-quality preschool increases the likelihood that you are literate, graduate from high school and move on to college," he said. "End to end, literally every major life outcome is affected."[22]

One year of high-quality preschool

increases the likelihood that you are literate, graduate from high school and move on to college. End to end, literally every major life outcome is affected.

Still, investments like these only pay off if they lead to "high-quality" programs, cautioned Tim Bartik, a senior economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute in Kalamazoo. And "the key factor affecting educational effectiveness is teacher quality." So, Bartik has argued that Michigan should increase per-pupil funding for preschool to ensure districts have enough resources to recruit

and retain skilled teachers. Finding enough staff and paying them well enough to stay is a major factor in how the expansion would work. “If we’re going to have universal pre-K, we’ve got to stop the exodus of teachers from the teaching profession,” said Sen. Dayna Polehanki, chair of the Michigan Senate Education Policy Committee, “and that’s going to require heavy investment into teacher recruitment.”[23]

That’s also the case in California, which is expected to offer the largest universal pre-K program in the country. By the 2025 to 2026 school year, all four-year-olds will be eligible to enroll in transitional kindergarten or TK, as the state calls its future program. But the success of this plan depends on finding enough staff, and finding more assistant teachers has been a particular challenge. Many school districts are competing for service industry workers — and school salaries are often lower than those for other jobs. “This is Mathematics 101,” said Kevin McCarty, Sacramento assemblyman and architect of the TK expansion. “They can work really hard to craft an amazing four-year-old in a TK classroom, making a little over $15 an hour, or they can help craft the perfect burrito supreme in some areas making $30 an hour.”[24] So, California is trying to bump up teacher pay and build a pipeline at community colleges and universities to provide the public program with the assistant teachers it needs.[25]

Assistant Teachers and the CDA®

They play a key role in the expansion of pre-K for all since most state-funded preschools require two adults in each classroom, typically a lead teacher and an assistant teacher, who’s likely less seasoned but equally essential. Assistant teachers play a key role in the early childhood classroom by planning and implementing educational activities and supporting individual children and small groups. They are also a crucial part of the preschool system in the U.S. and often bring linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity to the teaching profession.[26]

In addition, they must have the skills to support high-quality preschool programs, so many states have seen the value of the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™, issued by the Council for Professional Recognition. In Michigan, for example, preschools can hire an assistant teacher without a CDA®, but that person must have finished at least one credit-bearing course in child development to begin and must complete the credential within two years. In Hawaii, assistant teachers must have a CDA or have completed the coursework for a CDA upon hire. North Carolina stipulates that assistant teachers must have a high school diploma or GED and must hold or be working toward a minimum of a CDA. Similarly, Tennessee requires that assistant teachers show active progress toward completion of a CDA to be rehired. And Oregon provides training/technical assistance to support assistant teachers in obtaining their CDAs within two years of hire.[27]

Back in Maryland, Moore's plan for universal pre-K has also led the state to make a big push to help teachers earn CDAs. The Maryland Family Network, Maryland State Department of Education and Council for Professional Recognition are partnering to provide thousands of Maryland's early childhood teachers with financial support to help them earn or renew their CDA. These financial awards will cover registration and other fees, as well as books required for the program. And the Maryland grant can help Moore make good on his promise while helping teachers reach their promise as professionals in the early childhood field. By earning CDAs, Maryland's child care professionals will expand their career options and have greater knowledge with which to serve young children across the state.[28]

Over 13,000 Maryland teachers have taken advantage of this chance, and that's good news to educators like Berol Dewdney, Maryland Teacher of the Year for 2023. Dewdney knows the importance of having our early childhood teachers grow in their profession, so she understands the value of the CDA. "I learned about the CDA at a professional development webinar that I attended," Dewdney said, "and I understand what the Council does. I also value the Council's work because it maintains high standards of educational practice and helps educators build incredible educational spaces for children. So, we need more opportunities like the CDA for educators to gain access to the learning they need."[29]

Changing the Game for Our Children

Then we must also take steps to ensure that the impact of pre-K for all continues beyond the early childhood classroom, as Dewdney pointed out. "It's a very pivotal moment in Maryland, but also in our country," she said. "There's a lot of energy around pre-K, but there is a difference between honoring and knowing that early childhood and high-quality early childhood education matters and making it happen."[30]

There's a lot of energy around pre-K, but there is a difference between honoring and knowing that early childhood and high-quality early childhood education matters and making it happen.

That means making investments in programs that will pay off by giving children a better future, urged Deborah Phillips, a Georgetown University professor who's worked with Gormley on the Tulsa studies. The research they did revealed that well-trained teachers and support for instruction contribute to strong results. So, Phillips has urged policy makers not to cut corners, as

they're doing in New York City. We should support teachers and give them more chances for professional growth, she urged. "Don't feel like we can start chipping away at the programs."[31]

We should also consider what happens to children as they progress through school, like policymakers did in Tulsa. We must keep the momentum going by building sustaining environments that lead to long-term success. "Universal pre-K without sustaining environments will yield impressive short-term gains but minimal long-term improvements. Universal pre-K with sustaining environments is a potential game-changer," as Gormley has pointed out.[32]

Gormley has said that he's learned two major lessons from a long career studying early childhood education. One lesson is that policy makers need to think carefully about what goes on inside the preschool classroom when designing universal pre-K programs—and redesign K-12 education to ensure favorable outcomes down the road."[33] The other is to wait for positive long-term outcomes to emerge, even when elementary school test scores disappoint, as they did at first among the Tulsa pre-K alums. "Ignore the zigs and zags along the way and focus on where the kids wind up," Gormley said. "The game isn't over until the bottom of the ninth inning."[34] So, we shouldn't play games as we strive to ensure success for children, starting from the cradle all the way to career. We must give our all in the ongoing work to provide quality pre-K for all.

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