

Prekindergarten Initiatives

Research has shown that 80 percent of brain development occurs before age five. While we know that learning begins at birth, many states have seized an opportunity to create early learning programs for preschool age children across the country. The growth of state-funded preK has altered the early childhood education landscape. It has brought billions of dollars in new investment, developed new standards, and heightened attention to the early learning years. Forty states spend nearly \$4 billion annually to reach over one million children each year.

State preK programs are funded, governed, and delivered in a variety of ways, but all aim to prepare preschool age children to be ready for school through additional standards than otherwise required of early learning providers. In most states, these programs target at-risk children for whom research has demonstrated high-quality early childhood education can address the achievement gap. In a few states, “universal” preK programs intend to serve all 4-year-old children, although funding is not always available to meet that goal.

What Our Members Say

“The preK trend has helped draw attention to the need for high-quality programs for young children, but it dramatically shifted focus to just one age group instead of looking comprehensively at child development.”

Of primary importance is that nearly 11 million children are in child care each week while their parents are at work. Children from birth through age five need high-quality early learning environments, and working parents need options. PreK is a piece of the birth-to-five system, not a “silver bullet” for school reform and academic achievement. Children develop across multiple domains from the time they are born, including cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Effective programs for young children must acknowledge and address all the domains of child development.

Building on Existing Programs

The way state-funded preK connects to the existing infrastructure of early childhood programs (child care and Head Start) affects the strength of a state’s early childhood system, the health of the child care sector of the economy, and the cost of the preK program. Maximizing the participation of community-based child care and Head Start partners in the delivery of state-funded preK taps their expertise in working with young children, saves on facility and construction costs, and supports working parents’ need for full-day care for their children. Designing incentives for collaboration right from the beginning between public and private sectors is cost-effective and benefits schools, community providers, and children.

Many partnerships have emerged locally and statewide to support meaningful collaboration. Early learning programs are most successful when they are a collaborative effort between schools, community-based programs like child care, and families. Including providers of high-quality child care programs means including experts in child development in settings where children already are.

ECEC members are implementing preK programs across the country. The programs vary from state to state, but overall our experience is that when the early childhood community is involved in the design and development of a preK program, the multiple developmental needs of young children are prioritized, common ground can be achieved, and a solid program can be implemented. It is important to look at the whole program setting, not just an individual classroom,

and the effects on all children, families, and providers in the wider marketplace when considering preK policies.

The teachers and administrators at ECEC member centers are experts in implementing early childhood programs. ECEC recommends the following in the development of high-quality early childhood programs in the states and at the federal level:

- **Complement and sustain existing programs** – Any new preK proposal should support and enhance the existing initiatives and infrastructure, including child care and Head Start, not create a parallel program.
 - Federal funds should supplement, not supplant, state dollars for early childhood.
- **Promote partnerships** – Legislation should require partnerships with existing community-based partners like child care and Head Start.
 - To encourage meaningful collaboration, states should provide technical assistance to school districts and to community-based providers, and incentivize and reward these collaborations.
- **Meet the needs of working parents** – Keep in mind the needs of working parents as the initiative is designed by including options for full-day, full-year programs. Part-day programs are a barrier to participation for working families, and parents with children of other ages need high-quality care, too.
 - There should also be opportunities for meaningful parent engagement, which benefits the child, parent, teacher, and entire program. Parent engagement is a cornerstone of success for the highest quality early childhood programs.
- **Assure and support qualified and effective teachers** – Classroom teachers are the most important variable in preK program design and delivery.
 - Teacher qualification requirements should be research-based and attainable, but must not substitute for evidence of effective practice.

- When setting qualifications, consider the current education levels of the workforce; the capacity of institutions of training and higher education to produce the quantity and quality of teachers at each level; and the experience and effectiveness of individuals based on a measurable assessment of their interactions and years in the classroom.
- A system of professional development should be available for all early childhood educators regardless of setting (public schools, child care, or Head Start).
- **Encourage efficient and fair administration** – Maximizing public investments begins with smart program design and administration.
 - Offer state-level administration of the preK program including a single, statewide application directly to the state for school districts and community-based providers.
 - To avoid possible conflict of interest, entities which might deliver the program should not determine the recipients of grant funds.

What Our Members Say

“Dollars to support teacher qualifications and career ladders are key. Don’t make ‘teacher qualifications’ a fake barrier to participation by community providers.”

