



State Early Childhood Policy  
Technical Assistance Network

# **On the Path to School Readiness: Key Questions to Consider Before Establishing Universal Pre-Kindergarten**

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## About this Resource Brief

Over the past decade, citizens and lawmakers in several states—supported by such philanthropies as the Pew Charitable Trusts and the David and Lucile Packard and Joyce foundations—have begun to express an increased interest in establishing universal pre-kindergarten programs.

Some states are targeting their efforts to those children identified as least likely to be ready for school—both because of state budget constraints and because research shows such children to be the most impacted by pre-kindergarten programs. Yet the movement toward universal pre-kindergarten reflects a public interest in investing in school readiness for all children and a belief in the value of a universally available pre-kindergarten system.

As this movement grows, it must be emphasized that universal pre-kindergarten represents only one aspect of an early learning system designed to achieve school readiness for children from birth to five. Further, the manner in which pre-kindergarten programs are developed can either support or threaten that broader

agenda. Research, for instance, supports intervening much earlier in the lives of vulnerable children and emphasizes the role health services and other early intervention services play in assuring their healthy development and school readiness.

This resource brief follows a question-and-answer format to discuss key issues that policy makers and advocates need to consider when designing and promoting universal pre-kindergarten initiatives. In particular, such efforts need to recognize the possible systemic impacts of universal pre-kindergarten programs, both positive and negative—including the impacts on existing early care and education programs and on community-building efforts within poor, minority communities.

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## On the Path to School Readiness: Key Questions to Consider Before Establishing Universal Pre-Kindergarten

Well-structured pre-kindergarten programs support child development across all five domains of school readiness that research shows affect school success—language development, cognition and general knowledge, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, and physical and motor development.

A strong research base shows that high-quality pre-kindergarten experiences benefit all three- and four-year-olds and that such programs are most beneficial for low-income and other disadvantaged children. Public opinion surveys show that the general public recognizes the benefits three- and four-year-olds receive from pre-school opportunities and supports, in particular, public funding of Head Start and Head Start-like programs for low-income children.

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As a result, two states (Georgia and New York) have enacted universal pre-school statutes, and a third state (Florida) has established universal pre-school by referendum. In addition, other states and localities have expanded their pre-school programming, and some are considering offering kindergarten for the first time. In the past three years, legislation has been introduced in 20 states to increase access to or to

provide financing for full-day kindergarten. While there is little research to show whether providing a full-day kindergarten or adding a pre-kindergarten program will result in better outcomes for children as they progress through school, there is strong public support for full-day kindergarten, particularly for families where both parents (or the only parent) work.

None of these laudable efforts, however, can ensure that all children, or even more children, will start school “ready to learn.” Low-quality programs, or programs with high teacher-to-child ratios and limited hours, do not produce positive results, and can even cause harm. To ensure that children enter the school system prepared for formal schooling, programs must hire high-quality staff and offer continuous training and staff development, appropriate programming, a planned environment, and other services and supports—including health care, nutrition, early intervention, and family support. Moreover, families should be able to access needed services and supports at the very beginning of their children’s lives, not just when they reach age three or four. Brain research has demonstrated that children’s abilities begin developing at birth and that the most powerful interventions are those made early in life—thus, policy makers are missing the chance to make major contributions to children’s development when interventions begin only at age three or four.

In short, pre-kindergarten is one, but only one, component of an early learning system to support young children, especially those at risk of school failure early in life. Still, pre-kindergarten, established carefully and as a quality program, can improve the school readiness of children. As policy makers consider creating universal pre-kindergarten programs, they should consider the following questions:

## 1. How much can universal pre-kindergarten contribute to preparing all children for school success?

While pre-kindergarten for three- and four-year-olds can be an effective strategy for improving school readiness, other important issues must be addressed to ensure that all children start school ready to learn. These include both learning and developmental supports in the earliest years and health care, nutrition, and early intervention services throughout the early years. By itself, universal pre-kindergarten can only reduce, and will not close, the gap in developmental readiness that exists by the age of three among children of different socio-economic classes and with different needs.

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#### **Learning and Developmental Supports in the Early Years.**

Learning truly begins at birth and continues throughout the first years of life and beyond. Brain research and numerous studies discussed in the National Research Council's seminal work, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (2000), stress the need to start early and to undertake a holistic approach for supporting the development of children. Children need nurturing, supervision, and stimulation in their earliest years of life, as they develop their relationship with the world and long before they begin to speak. Further, the richer their language environment, the more likely they are to develop crucial pre-literacy skills. In fact, the research base on the importance of the earliest years to child development led to creation at the

federal level of Early Head Start, which serves children from birth to age three and their families. Early evaluations of Early Head Start, as well as of other high-quality services to very young children and their families, show promising results, both on pre-literacy skills and other dimensions of child development.

#### **Health, Nutrition, and Early Intervention Supports.**

Research clearly shows that children develop best when their health and nutrition needs are met and any developmental issues that might exist are identified and addressed early. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (better known as WIC), for example, has demonstrated its effectiveness in improving children's health, development, and well-being. Studies have shown that early detection and treatment of both physical and mental disabilities can also be very cost-effective, reducing the need for more costly and less successful interventions and remediation activities in subsequent years.

**The Role of Pre-Kindergarten.** Research shows that, in combination with other supports (Head Start, for example, provides health care and mental health services), pre-kindergarten programs can play an important role in preparing children for school. Since the benefits of high-quality early childhood education programs have been the most pronounced for low-income and other disadvantaged children, some states have considered either targeting early childhood programs at these populations or phasing in universal pre-school starting with the most at-risk children.

Research also has shown that while programs working with three- and four-year-olds can narrow the development and readiness gap between low-income and disadvantaged children and their more affluent and advantaged peers, they cannot close this gap altogether. Even very high quality pre-school programs for very at-risk children do not eliminate the risks

these children face. While several programs have shown strong economic benefits in relation to their programmatic costs (high rates of return), their participants still experience more challenges and subsequent social problems than their age cohorts as a whole. The strongest effects have been found among intensive programs that offer a variety of services to low-income infants and toddlers until they reach kindergarten age.

**The quick answer: Universal pre-kindergarten can be an important component of a system to achieve school readiness but should not be considered a silver bullet. Achieving the goal of school readiness requires the development of many other services and strategies, throughout the earliest years of life and across health, nutrition, and early intervention services as well as among early childhood programs.**

## 2. What do parents want and what will they use?

Children do better in school when their parents understand and support the goals and programs of the school. Parents want their children to succeed in school and, as their children's first teachers, should receive the support they need to help their children enter school ready to learn.

**Culturally Appropriate Programming.** Parents who themselves were not successful in school or have never attended schools in the United States and may not speak English need help in understanding what is expected of them and their children. It is important to engage these parents with ongoing, culturally and linguistically appropriate parent education materials and programs. Universal pre-kindergarten programs can play a very important role in helping parents, as well as children, make the transition to school—

provided they have strong parental involvement components and make explicit efforts to work with schools around transition issues.

**Child care Solutions.** Parents may face logistical barriers to enrolling their children in pre-kindergarten programs, including the reality of their work schedules and child care needs. For example, a two-and-a-half-hour pre-kindergarten program will not meet many parents' child care needs; if it is not constructed with overall child care needs in mind, parents may not be able to get their children to and from the program.

There are several ways to address this problem while not sacrificing the quality of pre-kindergarten programs. One is to partner with child care providers to create a "wrap-around" scenario in which providers take care of children before and after the program. In order to ensure that these providers are able to survive financially, states may have to provide full-day subsidies, despite the time out of care. Otherwise, child care providers' losses can easily result in an inability to balance the cost of care of older children with that of younger children (a problem discussed more fully later in this paper).

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A second solution is to provide a quality pre-kindergarten program within a child care setting. This may require that child care centers meet certain requirements, such as employing highly trained teachers and offering on-going staff training and state-approved materials and equipment. Georgia has successfully used this approach with Head Start and child care programs, thus serving parents' needs while

increasing the quality of its child care settings. For detailed tips on developing a seamless child care and pre-kindergarten system, visit the following website developed by Head Start (it was written for Head Start programs but is applicable to other pre-kindergarten programs as well): <http://www2.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb/>

**The quick answer: Many parents desire pre-school experiences for their children, but pre-kindergarten programs must be culturally responsive and appropriate and must connect as seamlessly as possible with other needs for children, such as child care.**

### 3. What are the key features of good and effective pre-kindergarten programs?

Before states can determine what makes pre-kindergarten programs “good and effective,” they must first determine what goals they want the system to achieve. They may find they have multiple goals, with different goals for different children.

**Diverse Goals, Diverse Program Scenarios.** The terms “pre-school” and “pre-kindergarten” themselves mean different things to different people. For some, they mean bringing academic instruction to ever-younger children to give them an advantage over their peers (this may have either positive or negative connotations). For others, they mean granting children an opportunity to be in intimate social settings with adults from outside their home environment, with a stimulating set of diverse developmental activities, including peer-to-peer interactions. For still others, they mean a little initial exposure, for short periods of time, to the types of settings that children will experience when they enroll in school—such as following instructions from new adults and familiarizing themselves with group-guided activities. Or, they may mean enriched environments that enable

children whose lives have not provided them exposure to strong developmental stimuli to “catch up” in language acquisition, cognition and general knowledge, and social and emotional development.

It is no surprise that existing public and private pre-kindergarten programs today are quite diverse, ranging from those with limited one-on-one involvement and a focus on school orientation to intensive and comprehensive full-day programs that bring state-of-the-art curricula, teachers, and resources to the task.

As states develop universal pre-kindergarten systems, they need to determine core goals for the children they serve and the results they expect to achieve for those children. They then need to establish standards and provide resources for these systems that enable them to meet these goals.

**The “Universal” Versus “Targeted” Debate.** There is no simple answer to the debate over whether services should be “universal” or “targeted” to those most in need. Proponents of universal systems often indicate that only systems universally available to all children can generate the broad public support needed for adequate funding levels—that targeted programs generally remain under-funded and of second-class quality because they do not have this broad support. Proponents of targeted services often respond that universal efforts homogenize what should be diverse responses to different needs and end up providing services and supports geared only to the middle range of needs, doing little or nothing to address gaps between more fortunate and less fortunate children and families.

Rather than trying to solve this debate, states should focus on achieving their particular goals, realizing that this may require varying responses and levels of

involvement for different groups of children. Head Start's comprehensive focus on health care services, for instance, is based on the recognition that many of the children it serves lack access to primary and preventive health care. Pre-school programs serving affluent children, by contrast, may need to identify signs of developmental delay or physical disability but usually do not need to ensure that children receive primary and preventive health services.

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If the goals are to increase the proportion of children starting school without significant delays across any of the five school readiness domains, some children will require pre-kindergarten experiences at least as comprehensive and intensive as those provided by Head Start. Moreover, this population of children is likely to be substantially larger than the population currently eligible for Head Start. The federal poverty level is not a good indicator of whether children are in need of enriched pre-school environments—research shows that many families with incomes well above the poverty level are also under significant stress. Research also shows that vocabulary and language development is significantly delayed among children whose parents have low incomes and limited educational backgrounds, compared with children of parents with higher incomes and education levels. The types of developmental support and instruction provided should consequently vary among children of different socio-economic backgrounds.

**Quality Matters.** Regardless of the degree to which states establish differentiated programs and responses, however, *quality* always matters. High-quality programs are staffed by skilled and caring adults, have teacher-to-child ratios that allow for individual attention when needed, follow a developmental program or curriculum, and are able to identify and address special needs. As the early care literature has consistently confirmed, high-quality early childhood programs can benefit all children, but poor-quality programs can actually do harm. While the gains from high-quality programs are most pronounced for low-income children, particularly in improving school readiness, all children do benefit.

Research also shows that, to be most effective, programs that serve low-income and disadvantaged children need additional enrichments, including a more comprehensive focus that ensures that health, nutrition, and other needs are addressed. Many of the most studied programs are those that serve low-income children, and those with the most recognized positive findings all follow a comprehensive approach, including active engagement and involvement of parents. Pre-kindergarten programs have a unique opportunity to connect with parents and provide them with support and education on child development.

**The quick answer: Good and effective pre-kindergarten programs hire high-quality staff, provide developmental guidance and curricula, provide enriched and comprehensive support to children who need additional attention, and involve parents. This does not mean that all programs need to look alike. Such standards can provide for great diversity among types of pre-kindergarten settings and providers, as well as for different degrees of involvement for children in varying circumstances.**

#### 4. How can states help develop the workforce needed for effective pre-kindergarten programs?

Pre-kindergarten teachers and staff need the skills necessary to achieve states' goals for pre-kindergarten programs and meet their standards of quality. This requires substantial pre-service education or training in child development and early care and education—as well as access to in-service supervision, professional development, and support. The research clearly shows that the ability of teachers or caregivers to provide developmentally appropriate experiences contributes substantially to the quality of children's development within an early care and education setting.

**A Shortage of Skilled Staff.** Currently, there is an insufficient supply of skilled teachers and child care providers to meet the needs of a universal pre-kindergarten system. States need to establish explicit strategies to develop the skills of teachers and caregivers—which will require addressing compensation issues, providing incentives and supports for existing providers to expand their skills, and developing professional and/or paraprofessional training, education, and certification opportunities.

**Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Care.** Every state in the union is becoming more diverse. Particularly within the child population, states are experiencing an increasing array of cultures, languages, and backgrounds. At the same time, professionals with degrees in child development and early childhood education are disproportionately white and non-Latino. As states develop their standards and credentialing systems for pre-kindergarten programs, they must ensure the cultural and linguistic appropriateness of the pre-kindergarten workforce. Particularly in poor

neighborhoods, developing a skilled local workforce can serve as a community and economic development tool as well as contribute to quality pre-kindergarten programs. Such efforts require explicit, and sometimes nontraditional, approaches to recruiting staff and assisting in their professional development—yet they can provide multiple benefits to the community and to young children's development.

Research has further shown that pre-school programs which recognize children's home languages as well as English, and which enhance their guidance and instruction with an emphasis on dual-language learning, can produce strong benefits. Rather than a disadvantage, dual-language learning can be an asset—children learn two languages and receive a strong foundation for general learning throughout life, through the enhanced brain functioning and development language acquisition provides.

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**The quick answer: States can develop the workforce needed for effective pre-kindergarten programs through a concerted and conscious effort to build the professional competency of this field while addressing the need for a diverse workforce that reflects the backgrounds, cultures, and experiences of young children and their families.**

## 5. With what other systems should pre-kindergarten programs connect in serving young children?

All children have basic needs for stable and competent parenting, health and nutrition, early detection and treatment of any special conditions, and a safe and supportive environment. Pre-kindergarten programs, however, cannot be expected to help families meet all of these needs—other systems are expressly designed for many of these purposes. When establishing universal pre-kindergarten programs, policy makers must consider how the pre-kindergarten system can and should connect with these existing services, including, at a minimum: (a) early intervention and family support services; (b) health, dental, and mental health care services; and (c) schools, particularly regarding the transition from pre-kindergarten into school.

**Connections to Early Intervention and Family Support Services.** Research underscores the overwhelming influence of both family well-being and children's own physical and behavioral characteristics on school readiness and success. Attending to concerns in these areas may require special responses.

Pre-kindergarten programs can link with family support programs and services, as appropriate, to help address family stresses and issues impacting child development. While pre-kindergarten programs should reach out to involve, listen to, and inform parents, they can do little to address such issues as maternal depression, domestic violence, or a chaotic home environment. Instead, they can partner with local family support programs that help families address such concerns and access appropriate services.

It is particularly important that states address the education and support of at-risk parents, especially teen parents, during their children's earliest years of

life—even before they are of pre-school age. All new parents are anxious and need education and support as they adjust to their new roles, but some parents need more help than others to recognize the basics of child development. Supporting such parents—through such resources as family support programs and services—should be part of an overall strategy to achieve school readiness.

Pre-kindergarten programs can link in similar ways with early intervention services. All states have early intervention programs, established under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that provide special education services for children from birth to age five. These services include both diagnosis of developmental disabilities and delays among young children and services that can address identified disabilities and delays. Universal pre-kindergarten programs need strong working relationships with local special education programs to ensure children are screened and follow-up services are provided to address any disabilities or developmental delays.

**Connections to Health Care, Dental Care, and Mental Health Services.** A number of the most vulnerable children will arrive at pre-kindergarten without ever having had a comprehensive health screening, even if they are eligible for Medicaid or S-CHIP. They may have vision or hearing problems, asthma, lead poisoning, obesity, or juvenile diabetes, or be victims of or witnesses to violence. They may also have severe dental problems. Children with health care needs such as these may have difficulty attending to educational lessons—their basic needs should first be addressed.

Programs serving disadvantaged children should link with health care providers, dentists, and social service and mental health agencies to ensure that

comprehensive health services are provided to all children—whether through private insurance programs or under Medicaid and/or S-CHIP. Child care and pre-kindergarten providers should build working relationships with and receive technical assistance from these partners, who can provide on-going developmental assessments and make sure that identified needs are addressed.

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**Transitions to School.** One aspect of preparing children for kindergarten and formal schooling is planning for their positive transition to school. Pre-kindergarten programs should work with both families and school staff to ensure a smooth transition, including transferring information about children’s unique needs and strengths to kindergarten teachers.

**The quick answer: Universal pre-kindergarten programs should be viewed, first and foremost, as part of a system of services for young children and their families. They should connect with early intervention, family support, health, dental health, mental health, and special education services, as well as school systems, to ensure that children receive the services and supports they need to learn and grow.**

**6. How can the potential negative consequences of establishing a universal pre-school system be anticipated and avoided to create a high-quality system of child care and pre-school services for all young children in each community?**

Establishing universal pre-kindergarten not only makes pre-kindergarten experiences available to all children, including those who were not previously in child care or pre-school; it also increases the options available to parents who already place their children in child care or pre-kindergarten. Some parents are likely to select the new pre-kindergarten services for at least part of their child’s early care and education experience.

**The Effect on Child Care Centers.** If states choose to provide pre-kindergarten programs primarily through new service providers, such as schools that previously have not provided early care and education, there almost certainly will be displacements within the early care and education industry. Many family daycare providers and child care centers serving infants and toddlers also serve three- and four-year-old children—in fact, they often can provide the infant and toddler care only because of the revenue and support they receive from serving older children. More than 75 percent of the cost of care in centers is for staff salaries, and lower ratios of staff to children are necessary to care for infants and toddlers. If older children leave these centers for pre-kindergarten programs, the centers’ and family daycare providers’ financial stability can be threatened, to the point of jeopardizing their ability to provide infant and toddler care—which is already scarce in many communities.

States such as Georgia, which have partnered with Head Start and other early childhood programs in providing pre-kindergarten, are avoiding many of the disruptions created by establishing pre-kindergarten through new providers. If states support current early care and education providers in becoming pre-kindergarten providers themselves and improve their overall compensation, their infant and toddler programs can be placed on firmer ground. The quality

of care they provide to all children—not just those in the pre-kindergarten program—is also likely to be enhanced, since training can be shared among all staff.

**The Effect on Child Care Staff.** Even if the financial viability of existing providers were not affected by universal pre-kindergarten, staffing for all programs serving children from birth to age five would be affected. If new public pre-kindergarten programs recruit staff through higher compensation, they would take the most skilled teachers away from existing child care and early care and education programs. For this reason, attention to staff training and workforce development as well as adequate compensation throughout the network of caregiving providers is important.

**Public-Private Partnerships.** If the major impact of universal pre-kindergarten is to create quality pre-kindergarten programs while reducing the quality of existing early care and education programs, little will be gained overall. Indeed, those children experiencing lower-quality care at young ages will enter pre-kindergarten less ready to take advantage of it. And vulnerable children, who may not attend part-day pre-kindergarten programs if their parents need full-day child care, will enter kindergarten even farther behind. In short, states need to establish universal pre-kindergarten in the context of the existing early care and education system, recognizing that the ultimate goal is to provide quality care for children in all settings.

States must be careful as they consider their multiple goals, since the need for quality child care for infants and toddlers is acute. States want to improve the quality of child care for young children, and they also want to improve school readiness. They can achieve both of these goals with a public-private strategy for pre-kindergarten.

**The quick answer: States must make conscious efforts to plan and design universal programs that result in neither reduced quality nor the loss of availability of child care for infants, toddlers, and other children not in pre-kindergarten classes. States can avoid such negative consequences by creating public-private partnerships with existing providers to improve the quality of existing care while also making available universal, high-quality care.**

## 7. How should states approach the financing of a universal pre-kindergarten system?

Establishing universal pre-kindergarten could mean requiring all children to participate—in essence, moving the compulsory school attendance age for children down to age three or four—but it generally has meant providing universal access to pre-kindergarten on a voluntary (though strongly encouraged) basis. Many parents already enroll their children in pre-kindergarten programs, paying for the costs of the programs themselves. Often, these are full-day programs that also meet parents' child care needs.

**Full Funding versus Sliding Scale.** As states develop universal pre-kindergarten financing strategies, they must consider whether to fully fund pre-kindergarten programs, as they do kindergarten in public schools, or to institute a sliding fee structure based on each family's ability to pay. The cost of the system will depend heavily on this decision. It is clear, however, that parents of many children who could most benefit from pre-kindergarten experiences do not have the resources to pay any of the costs. Therefore, any sliding fee schedule must start at a relatively high income level and low payment rate, if a substantially greater number of children are to be served than are served by a program today.

**Teacher Compensation.** In addition, states must consider how much to compensate teachers and how much support to provide to develop universally available quality programs. There is strong evidence that increasing the compensation for early care providers is an essential element for recruiting skilled staff and for retaining them. Low pay ensures high staff turnover—which not only increases the difficulty of managing programs but also jeopardizes the continuity of teacher–child relationships and increases training costs.

**A Phase-In Approach.** Establishing universal pre-school requires substantial new investments and the time to build the workforce necessary to do the job well. States may choose to phase-in universal pre-kindergarten programs, but they should do so with a commitment to building the infrastructure to ensure that, at some point, quality programs become available to all children. Whether states begin in a certain geographic area, or with a focus on serving those with the most to gain from pre-kindergarten experiences, their strategy should provide for eventual full-scale implementation. Whatever the approach, they must not sacrifice quality—or outcomes will also be sacrificed. Rather, they must fund the program to the degree shown by research to create positive results.

**The quick answer: States must determine whether to make pre-kindergarten programs available free for all children or on a sliding-fee schedule based on ability to pay. Where states choose to phase in the system, they should develop strategies to ensure that, over time, it can be fully funded.**

## Conclusion

Brain research, the first national education goal of children starting school “ready to learn,” the new high-stakes testing standards, and the commitment to

closing the achievement gap under the federal No Child Left Behind Act have given much greater visibility to the importance of ensuring that “all children start school ready to learn.”

Pre-kindergarten programs, particularly those that serve vulnerable children most likely to start school behind their peers, can be powerful contributors to achieving this goal. Yet they should not be sold as a “silver bullet.” Instead, states should establish multiple strategies that rely on an interconnected system of services and supports for young children and their families—from prenatal care through the transition into school.

Brain research points to the critically important first three years of life and the need for primary and preventive health services and consistent, nurturing parenting. Research also clearly supports the need for early detection and treatment of physical and mental difficulties—both to ensure developmental progress and to avoid more costly and chronic future health problems and needs. Addressing these universal needs requires much more than can be achieved through universal pre-kindergarten programs, even those that are comprehensive and seek to identify and address health and social needs.

In short, universal pre-kindergarten is an important component of an overall strategy to achieve school readiness—and a significant step that states should consider taking. But states should not stop with the consideration of pre-kindergarten. In addition to establishing universal pre-kindergarten programs, states should also seek strategic ways to help build other aspects of an overall early learning system and to view this work in the context of young children’s full developmental needs.

# On the Path to School Readiness: Key Questions to Consider Before Establishing Universal Pre-Kindergarten

## Take-Home Messages

### 1. What is the role of pre-kindergarten programs?

Pre-kindergarten programs provide developmental support and instruction to children, usually four-year-olds in the year before they enter into kindergarten. They are most beneficial for poor and other disadvantaged children. As a sole strategy, pre-kindergarten programs can reduce, but not close, the gap in readiness that disadvantaged children demonstrate as they enter school. They are most effective when they are part of a system that promotes good parenting, health care, child care, and attention to special needs from birth to school entry.

### 2. What do parents want from pre-kindergarten programs?

Parents want their children to be successful in school and life. Most parents understand the benefit of pre-kindergarten programs. Many have work responsibilities that require full-day child care, however, which makes their children's participation in a part-day pre-kindergarten program problematic. To meet these families' needs, pre-kindergarten programs should consider partnering with child care providers or providing "wraparound" child care services themselves.

### 3. What are the characteristics of good pre-kindergarten programs?

Good pre-kindergarten programs have: skilled staff, high staff-to-children ratios, adherence to a developmental curriculum, the ability to recognize and address special needs, and attention to involving and supporting parents in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner.

### 4. How can states help develop the workforce needed for effective pre-kindergarten programs?

States must train and support teachers in providing quality early childhood care; currently, there are not enough trained teachers. They must adequately compensate staff to reduce turnover. And they must recruit and train teachers who reflect the growing diversity of the nation's youngest population. Supporting people from poor and minority communities to step into pre-kindergarten careers can strengthen the programs and the communities they serve.

### 5. How should pre-kindergarten programs relate to other early childhood services?

Children develop best when they and their parents receive comprehensive support. Pre-kindergarten programs can strengthen the entire support system by developing good working relationships with:

- Health care, dental care, and mental health care service providers
- Child care centers, family daycare homes, and Head Start and other pre-school providers
- Parenting and family support programs
- Special health and disability services
- Elementary schools

**6. What are the unintended negative effects of establishing a universal pre-kindergarten program—and how can they be avoided?**

Moving four-year-olds from child care to new universal pre-kindergarten programs may cause financial failure in some child care programs. This may result in less available child care for infants and toddlers, which is already in short supply. Further, child care centers may be weakened if the best teachers leave for better salaries in a universal pre-kindergarten system. Allowing existing programs to qualify as partners and providers of pre-kindergarten programming offers the potential to improve the entire system.

**7. Who should pay for a universal pre-kindergarten system?**

Various models for financing can work, but each will have different costs. If fees are charged, sliding-fee schedules and other provisions must be set at levels that do not place hardships on any families. When programs are phased in to soften the budget impact, a long-term strategy must ensure completion of all phases.

## Overall Take-Home Message

Universal pre-kindergarten is one component of a set of strategies required to improve the school readiness of children. From birth to school entry, children's development in the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical domains is enormous. Parents need support from the beginning to understand the astounding

ability of their children to learn and grow and how they can support that process. As the time for formal schooling approaches, parents also need to understand what is expected of them and their children.

Children need good health care, which can identify and treat early some of the causes of later developmental delay, such as lead poisoning and asthma; those children with developmental delays require early intervention programs so that they can achieve at their highest level. Children also require good nutrition, stable and safe housing, safe neighborhoods, quality child care at all ages, dental care, mental health care (when needed), and parents who are sober and provide homes without violence. All children need a consistent, loving, nurturing, and appropriately stimulating home environment. Most parents both want and work to provide this type of environment for their children.

Universal pre-kindergarten fits into this roadmap to school readiness as one important support, but it cannot overcome the very real problems some children and families face during the important early years of development. And even if high-quality pre-kindergarten programs are put in place as one part of a system of care for children during the early years, any benefits they produce will not be sustained unless children then continue on into high-quality K-12 schools.





# SECPTAN

## About the SECPTAN Network

The State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN) provides current information about early childhood policy initiatives to state policymakers. It assists them in assessing the best available evidence and information about effective policies and practices on early childhood issues. The network is managed by the Child and Family Policy Center with funding from The Ford Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. For more information about SECPTAN, contact Charles Bruner, Network Director, or Sheri Floyd, Network Manager at [www.finebynine.org](http://www.finebynine.org)

## About this Monograph Series

This monograph is part of a SECPTAN publication series on early childhood issues. Other papers in this series include:

- **A Compendium of Multi-State Early Childhood Initiatives**
- **Measuring Children's School Readiness: Options for Developing State Baselines and Benchmarks**
- **School Readiness Policy and Budgeting: Template for Collecting State Baseline Information**
- **Child Welfare and School Readiness—Making the Link for Vulnerable Children**
- **Financing School Readiness Strategies: An Annotated Bibliography**
- **Seven Things Legislators (and Other Policy Makers) Need to Know about School Readiness**

- **Health Care and School Readiness: The Health Community's Role in Supporting Child Development—New Approaches and Model Legislation**

These publications are available online at [www.finebynine.org](http://www.finebynine.org) or by contacting the Child and Family Policy Center.

## About the Child and Family Policy Center

The Child and Family Policy Center was established in 1989 by former Iowa Legislator Charles Bruner, Ph.D. to better link research and policy on issues vital to children and families, and to advocate for outcome-based policies to improve child well-being. The Center is active both statewide and nationally. In Iowa, the Child and Family Policy Center assists the state and communities in developing integrated, community-based, family-focused and results-accountable services, particularly for vulnerable children. CFPC also produces a variety of reports, case studies, concept papers, and technical assistance tools on systems reform and community building that are widely used across the United States.



[www.cfpciowa.org](http://www.cfpciowa.org)

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