

Pre-K

(What Exactly Is It?)

Perhaps you have heard about the pre-K movement. It's been discussed in journals, featured on TV reports, and talked about at trainings and advocacy sessions. Even in this year's presidential and gubernatorial races, you're likely to hear the candidates debating how much support or expansion pre-K programs should have.

But if you're like many of us, you may only have a fuzzy understanding of what pre-K is. As a preschool teacher, you're bound to have questions.

Here are some typical questions and their answers.

What makes a pre-K program different from other programs for preschoolers?

Pre-K programs are a distinct group of programs designed specifically to make sure that preschoolers are ready for kindergarten and will be succeeding in school by third grade. All pre-K programs have three characteristics in common. They are (1) governed by high program standards, (2) serve 4-year-olds or sometimes both 3- and 4-year-olds, and (3) focus on school readiness.

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Do pre-K programs have to be affiliated with public schools?

No, but close to 70% of state-funded pre-K programs are administered by public school systems (Gilliam 2005). The rest are delivered through community agencies including Head Start



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grantees and private providers. Many states work with high-quality community providers to have them participate in the state pre-K program.

What is “universal pre-K”?

The term *universal pre-K* means that pre-K programs are available to any child in a given state, regardless of family income, children’s abilities, or other factors. Several states are on the path to funding universal pre-K.

States with pre-K programs that are not universal have targeted audiences, either children from families with low incomes or children from families with various risk factors that could affect their learning. In Arkansas, for example, in addition to family income level, eligibility is based on children having one or more of the following risk factors: a teen parent, developmental delay, low birth weight, limited English proficiency, placement in foster care, a parent on active military duty, or family violence.

Must all eligible children attend the pre-K program in their state?

No. Eligible families can choose to send their preschoolers to pre-K, use other early childhood education options, or keep their preschoolers at home.

Do pre-Ks work?

Many research studies link children’s high-quality preschool experiences and success in school and later life. Recently researchers from Georgetown University studied Oklahoma’s universal pre-K program. The researchers found significant benefits for children from both low-income and middle-income homes. As a group, the Oklahoma children attending pre-K programs had better reading, math, and writing skills than children who attended Head Start programs or did not go to a public preschool program (Gormley et al. 2008). Likewise, an ongoing evaluation of New Mexico PreK found significant gains in children’s math and early literacy skills (Hustedt et al. 2008).

Other studies show similar positive results. For example, one study found that children attending state-funded pre-K programs in five states (Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia) gained significantly in early language, literacy, and math development (Barnett, Jung, et al. 2007).

What else do we know about state-funded pre-Ks?

States implement and deliver pre-K programs in many different ways. Currently 38 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia offer some level of pre-K programs (Barnett, Hustedt, et al. 2007). The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has developed a 10-point quality standard checklist for evaluating pre-K programs:

1. Comprehensive early learning standards
2. Lead teacher must have a BA degree
3. Lead teacher must have a specialization in early childhood education
4. Assistant teachers must have a CDA equivalent
5. Teachers must complete at least 15 hours of in-service training each year
6. Maximum class size of 20
7. Staff-child ratio of 1:10 or better
8. Vision, hearing, and health screening and referral are required, along with at least one family support service
9. At least one meal per day is offered
10. Required site visits by state monitors

In 2007, NIEER found that the pre-K programs in two states—Alabama and North Carolina—met all of the quality

benchmarks, and the pre-K programs in eight other states (Arkansas, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington) met nine of the 10 benchmarks.

What does this mean for you?

All preschool educators can be advocates for establishing or expanding funding for pre-K programs. If you live in one of the 12 states that have not yet launched a pre-K initiative, you can

rally support. In most states, advocacy groups lobby state legislators to increase state funding of pre-K programs. Many state and local affiliate groups (AEYCs) include funding for high-quality pre-K in their policy advocacy agendas.

It is an exciting time in American public education. The pre-K movement is applying what we know about the effects of high-quality preschool education to support and enhance young children's development.

For more information . . .

Does your state have a pre-K program? If so, you may want to find out the following.

- What does your state spend per child in pre-K?
- What qualifications do teachers need for pre-K?
- Does your state pre-K program serve 3- and 4-year-olds or just 4-year-olds?

You can find answers to these and other questions in NIEER's State Preschool Yearbook at <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>.



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