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State Kindergarten Policies

Straddling Early Learning and Early Elementary School



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Many policy makers overlook the critical kindergarten year as they look to preschool, universal prekindergarten, or comprehensive education reform to boost student achievement. Part of the reason for this may be that kindergarten is not firmly established either as an integral part of the K–12 system or as an integral part of states' emerging systems of early care and education. Kindergarten in the United States straddles both worlds.

Given kindergarten's history, this is not surprising. Kindergartens were first introduced in this country as nurturing, play-based programs, intended to enhance children's cognitive, physical, and

social development to smooth the transition into formal schooling (Bloch 1987; Pianta & Cox 1999b). As programs expanded in the early 20th century, kindergarten teachers sought professional status and began to affiliate themselves with the primary school, not with the social welfare day nursery movement (Bloch 1987). Today, as a consequence, kindergarten is pulled between the developmental, child-centered focus of early care and education and the academic achievement focus of the formal K–12 system. This is nowhere more apparent than in state policies related to kindergarten.

Although the general public considers kindergarten as a standard beginning year of the American K–12 education system, the following analysis of states' kindergarten policies shows that they are not well aligned with the policies of early elementary school (grades 1 to 3, primary). Further, kindergarten is a critical transition year for children leaving early childhood education programs (prekindergarten, child



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care, family child care, Head Start, and other programs). The analysis also shows that states' kindergarten policies are not well aligned with state policies that support early learning programs.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's work launched a conceptual and research base—as well as a practical understanding by families, teachers, and early childhood professionals—that care and learning opportunities provided to children younger than age eight are different from, but critical contributors to, later forms of education and school success (Peterson & Felton-Collins 1986). Indeed, because of the unique period of child development during the first eight years of life, some researchers predict that the primary school of the future “is likely to run from age 3 through 3rd grade” (Pianta & Cox 1999b, 364). Whether or not school systems actually change, it is important to consider how existing early learning programs and early elementary schools can provide continuity and smooth transitions for all young children.

The intent of this article is not to argue the critical role of kindergarten in young children's early learning. Rather, by providing current state-level policy descriptions of kindergarten in the 50 states, it highlights how kindergarten straddles two worlds. State policies do not describe how kindergarten is actually being implemented in communities, schools, and classrooms. They do, though, define the public's expectations of accessibility, equity, and quality held for *all* children: “policy functions to provide society with information about itself, its decision makers, and its priorities” (Gallagher 1999, 352).

Clear state-level policies establish a foundation for program implementation; they identify the kinds and quality of programs that should be made available—not just to some children but to all children. The policy descriptions in this article can inform state and local policy makers about potential policy changes that will better position kindergarten as an integrated strategy for ensuring all young children become well prepared to succeed in school and in life.

Defining kindergarten

Without a national common standard for defining kindergarten, it is difficult to reliably compare policies, programs, and outcomes across states (Vecchiotti 2003). Some states define kindergarten by the number of hours a child attends each day, while other states measure by the total number of hours a child attends during a school year. By both measures, there is wide variation across states. For example, statutory definitions of half-day kindergarten range from 165 hours per academic year (North Dakota) to 577 hours per year (Missouri) and from two hours per day (Alaska, Illinois, Vermont) to four hours per day (Tennessee).

Although there is a public perception that a full-day kindergarten is the same length of day as the rest of elementary school, only 16 states define full-day kindergarten by statute. The states that require the *most* class time for full-day kindergarten programs exceed by more than 30 percent the time required by states with the *least* time in full-day kindergarten. For example,

- while Illinois constitutes full-day kindergarten as four hours per day, Alabama, Louisiana, and Oklahoma require six hours per day for full-day kindergarten;
- while Wisconsin defines full-day kindergarten as 1,050 hours per academic year, Florida requires only 720 hours per year for full-day kindergarten.

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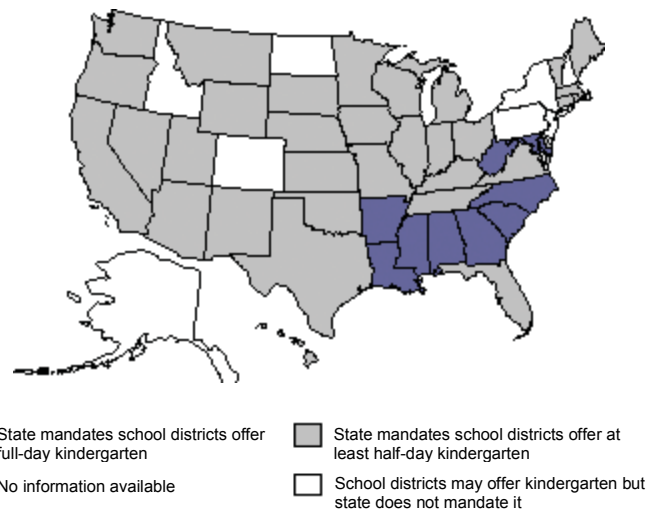
When kindergarten length is not well-aligned with that of other early learning programs, many children in working families often cope daily with multiple settings.

Not only are these varied definitions problematic in terms of aligning with grades 1 to 3, but also they do not align with efforts under way in early learning communities to provide options for children whose parents work full-time and therefore need a high-quality program that provides care and learning opportunities for eight or more hours per day. When kindergarten length is not well-aligned with that of other early learning programs, many children in working families often cope daily with multiple settings (for example, home, before-school care, kindergarten, after-school care, extended-day care).

Kindergarten provision and attendance

Even though, nationally, 98 percent of American children attend at least a half-day of kindergarten before entering first grade (NCES 2000), most states do not require children to attend kindergarten, and eight states (Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Pennsylvania) do not require school districts to offer kindergarten. Only 14 states require age-eligible children to attend at least a half day of kindergarten. Similarly, only nine states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia) require school districts to offer full-day kindergarten, and two states (Louisiana and West Virginia) require that children attend full-day programs. (In Louisiana, if a child does not attend a full-day kindergarten program for a full year, he or she is required to take a readiness test before being allowed to enter first grade.) See figure below.

States Mandating School Districts to Offer Kindergarten in 2004



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In this sense, from a policy perspective, kindergarten is more like early learning programs for three- and four-year-olds; access to publicly funded programs is not guaranteed and attendance is not required. At a minimum, a consistent state policy about district offering of kindergarten helps ensure an equitable distribution of programs and prevent large variation in program access from one school district to another within a state. Likewise, a consistent state policy on student attendance in kindergarten helps ensure that all children begin first grade with similar opportunities to gain the social and cognitive skills that contribute to academic success.

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While children typically turn five before or soon after entering kindergarten, state policies about kindergarten entrance age vary widely:

- Five states (California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Michigan, Vermont) have cut-off dates between December 1 and January 1. This practice leads to a robust mix of four- and five-year-old kindergartners.

Kindergarten Entrance Age by State

Child must be five on or before this date	State
January 1	Connecticut, Vermont ¹
July 1	Indiana
August 1	Missouri ² , Ohio ³
August 15	Alaska
August 31	Delaware, Kansas, Washington
September 1	Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, West Virginia, Wisconsin
September 2	Utah
September 10	Montana
September 15	Arkansas, Iowa, Wyoming
September 30	Louisiana, Nevada, Ohio ³ , Tennessee, Virginia
October 1	Kentucky
October 15	Maine, Nebraska
October 16	North Carolina
October 31	Maryland ⁴
December 1	Michigan
December 2	California
December 31	District of Columbia, Hawaii ⁵
Local Decision	Colorado, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania

¹ Vermont districts may choose to set the kindergarten entrance date between August 31 and January 1.

² Missouri law differs for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan school districts; metropolitan districts may establish kindergarten entrance age on or before any date between August 1 and October 1.

³ Ohio allows districts to choose either September 30 or August 1.

⁴ Maryland is raising the entrance age over three years as follows: 2004–05 school year: October 31; 2005–06: September 30; 2006–07: September 1.

⁵ In Hawaii, beginning with the 2006–07 school year, the entrance age will be five on or before August 1.

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- Thirty-five states have kindergarten entrance cut-off dates between August 31 and October 16. These policies lead to fewer four-year-olds entering kindergarten, but classrooms do have a combination of four- and five-year-olds each fall.
- Three states (Alaska, Indiana, Missouri) have cut-off dates on or before August 15. While legislative intent cannot be determined without additional research, these states apparently want to ensure that all children turn five before they enter kindergarten.
- Another six states (Colorado, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania) leave the entrance-age question up to local district decision.

Since 1984, 14 states have raised the entrance age, thereby ensuring that more children are five or older before beginning kindergarten. In the same time period, no state has lowered the kindergarten entrance age. Here again is an example of how kindergarten policy is disconnected from the realities of early learning opportunities. Raising the kindergarten age means that some children miss out on an entire year of learning. Because most states' policies do not guarantee all children access to publicly funded prekindergarten programs, children lack guaranteed access to an enriched early learning program during the year in which they would have been enrolled in kindergarten.

Quality of kindergarten

One of the enduring discussions about kindergarten—indeed, about education as a whole—is quantity versus quality. Should children spend more time in class (as measured by hours per day, days per year, or total years of schooling)? Or should the in-class time be improved (for example, with increased standards, developmentally appropriate practice, better-trained teachers, or a means for assessing and improving student performance)? While the debate is likely to continue, quantity should not be confused with quality. More hours alone in class are not sufficient. The *quality* of the kindergarten experience is fundamental to the ultimate impact on young children and their success in school and in life.

Much recent research on early learning programs highlights the primary importance of program quality in positively impacting children's intellectual, language, physical, social, and emotional development (Helburn 1995; Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). Similarly, research in K–12 education stresses the importance of overall school quality in promoting higher student achievement (Borman et al. 2002). State kindergarten policies addressing quality issues, defined in the following sections as program standards and teacher qualifications, vary widely.

Standards and kindergarten

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires each state to establish its own academic content standards for what students in grades 3 through 8 and in high school should know and be able to do in core content subjects. At the same time, prompted in part by Good Start, Grow Smart, the Bush administration's early childhood initiative, most states now have early learning standards that define expectations for what young children should know and be able to do before they enter kindergarten (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow



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2003). Underlying the standards movement is the premise that, by defining the desired content and outcomes of children's education, states will set high expectations for *all* children to learn and will provide guideposts comprised of information to families, teachers, and policy makers about how to promote children's positive development and learning.

Although kindergarten is not addressed directly in NCLB and Good Start, Grow Smart accountability efforts, many states have developed kindergarten standards. Unfortunately, they seldom align with the states' standards for prekindergarten/early learning programs or standards for the early elementary grades. A recent survey conducted by the Education Commission of the States of the 50 state departments of education reveals that

- 12 states have kindergarten standards that are integrated into a K–3 framework;
- two states (Florida and Maine) have kindergarten standards that are integrated into a prekindergarten–2 framework;
- 13 states have separate kindergarten standards;
- 12 states have no kindergarten standards.

Eleven states did not respond to the question.

Teacher qualifications and kindergarten

A growing body of research—in both K–12 education (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein 1999; Allen 2003) and early childhood education (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001; Barnett 2003)—shows that the educational qualifications of teachers have a clear impact on young children's learning and development. The Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, appointed by the National

Research Council, recommends “that a college degree *with specialized education in child development and the education of young children* ought to be required for teachers of young children” [emphasis added] (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns 2001, 276). In recognition of the need for qualified teachers, the Association of Teacher Educators and NAEYC recommend the establishment of specialized early childhood teacher certification standards for teachers working with children from birth through age eight (ATE & NAEYC 1991). To that end, NAEYC has just launched Associate Degree Program Accreditation for colleges.

Unfortunately, there is a serious mismatch between the teaching qualifications expected of professionals who teach children five years old and older in kindergarten and elementary school and those who teach children four and younger in early learning programs. Many early learning professionals who work with young children—especially in child care programs—are not required to hold any degree or certification (LeMoine 2004). In contrast, most kindergarten teachers are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree and teacher certification or licensure if they work in public schools.

To address this disparity between early learning and kindergarten teacher qualifications, there has been much discussion and advocacy nationally to require all teachers in early learning programs to hold bachelor's degrees. However, this alone will not solve the mismatch. There is also a mismatch of expectations for kindergarten teachers. Many states do not require that kindergarten teachers hold certification in early childhood development and/or education:



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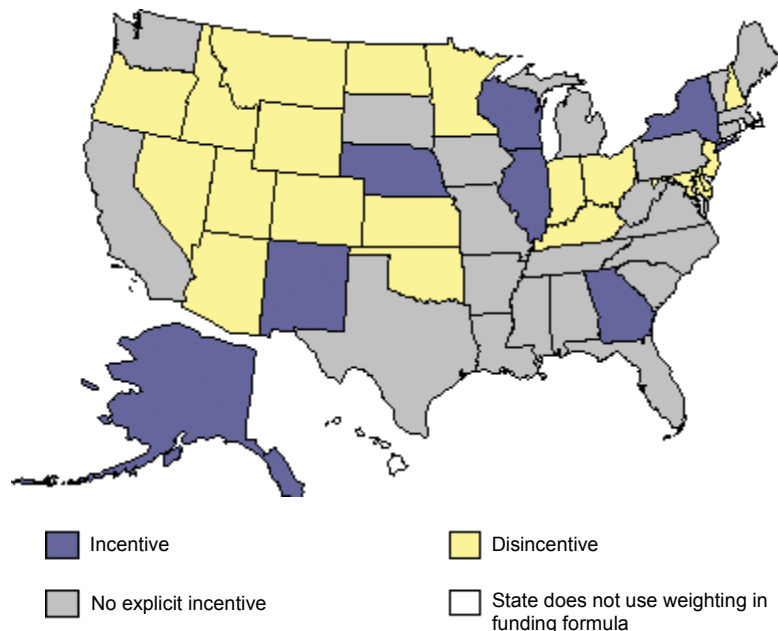
- three states (Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Oklahoma) require that kindergarten teachers possess certification or training in early childhood education;
- one state (Illinois) requires, via statute, that kindergarten teachers hold *either* an early childhood certificate *or* an elementary certificate;
- one state’s statute (Maryland) requires that kindergarten teachers complete “at least one course in child development”;
- although teacher certification may be addressed in states’ rules and regulations, all other state *statutes* are silent on the issue of kindergarten teacher certification in early childhood development and education.

Full-day kindergarten and state funding

Funding and the state policies surrounding it are particularly crucial for full-day kindergarten. As is often true with many public policy priorities, funding determines implementation. Like funding for grades 1–12, state funding for full-day kindergarten is established in state policy as part of each state’s K–12 education funding formula.

With or without policies requiring school districts to offer full-day kindergarten, states can offer funding incentives for full-day kindergarten. An incentive exists when the state-provided kindergarten funds are equal to or greater than the funding for first grade. An explicit incentive for *full-day* kindergarten exists when the state provides more funding for full-day programs than for half-day programs. When there is no difference between the funding amount for half- and full-day kindergarten programs, but the amount is greater than that provided for first grade, there is an incentive but not an explicit *full-day* incentive. States create a disincentive for districts to offer kindergarten when they provide no difference in the funding amount for half- and full-day programs and the funding level is lower than that provided for first grade. (See figure below.) Across the United States,

State Funding Formula Provides Incentive to Offer Full-Day Kindergarten



An explicit incentive for full-day kindergarten exists when the state provides more funding for full-day programs than for half-day programs.

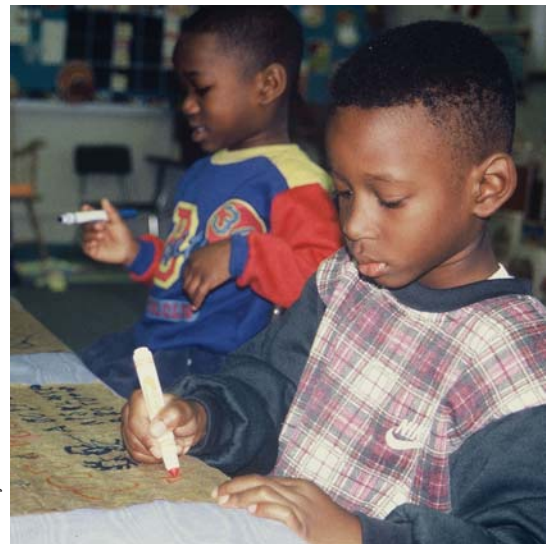
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Despite the widespread misconception of a common K–12 education system, discrepancies across the states in kindergarten policy show that kindergarten is indeed overlooked and that first grade is really the first common educational experience for all children in this country.

- seven states (Alaska, Georgia, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, and Wisconsin) provide an explicit incentive to offer full-day kindergarten;
- 21 states provide funding incentives for districts to offer kindergarten but offer no explicit incentive for them to offer *full*-day kindergarten;
- 19 states provide a disincentive to districts to offer full-day kindergarten.

Clearly, in states in which full-day kindergarten funding is less than funding for a full day of first grade, state finance policies do not align kindergarten with the early elementary grades. In many states, funding for full-day kindergarten is akin to funding for prekindergarten and other early learning programs: it is provided as a targeted, categorical, or grant-based program to only a select number of districts and/or students. States use targeted programs for a variety of reasons—as an interim strategy for phasing in funding and implementation of universal access; to provide a full-day kindergarten experience to children who have risk factors associated with school failure; or to serve specific geographic areas with high numbers of children who are identified as “at-risk.” Twelve states currently use categorical programs to help fund full-day programs:

- three (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New York) target funding to districts that have never before offered full-day kindergarten programs;
- seven states (Colorado, Connecticut, Minnesota, New Mexico, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin) assist districts in providing full-day kindergarten to at-risk students;
- Wisconsin targets funds for full-day kindergarten to one school district (Milwaukee);
- Rhode Island has three different categorical programs intended to improve student achievement by increasing access to full-day kindergarten.



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Conclusion

These variations in state policy show that kindergarten is neither guaranteed nor uniform across the United States. Despite the widespread misconception of a common K–12 education system, discrepancies across the states in kindergarten policy show that kindergarten is indeed overlooked and that first grade is really the first common educational experience for all children in this country. Similarly, there is little continuity and alignment of state policies that address the learning of children younger than age eight. Public policy creates the foundation for equitable and high-quality program delivery, and state policy makers are in a pivotal position to take a comprehensive view of kindergarten policies to provide a coherent continuum of education for all young children.

If this country is serious about closing achievement gaps and leaving no child behind, states must align public policy for kindergarten with the policies that support children’s learning experiences both before and after the kindergarten year. All children deserve high-quality learning experiences that provide a strong foundation for success in both school and life.

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The policy data in this article are based on research conducted by Education Commission of the States between 2002 and 2004, including a comprehensive review of statutes related to kindergarten in all 50 states, a survey of kindergarten specialists in each state department of education, and an in-depth study of district-level kindergarten efforts in six states (California, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Ohio). This research was funded by a grant from the Foundation for Child Development.

To see what your state's kindergarten policies are, go to <http://www.ecs.org/kindergarten>. Online resources are updated as state policies change.

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