



Voices for Virginia's Children

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Pre-K: Growing Trend

Increasingly Popular with Politicians and Voters

Most states, Virginia included, are investing more in the education and development of our youngest citizens. Data documenting the importance of children's development before kindergarten, the significant numbers of children entering school without basic readiness skills (at least 20% in Virginia¹), and the economic impact of investing in early education (a return on investment of 16%²) have led forty states to invest in publicly funded pre-K programs as their next step in building a comprehensive early care and education system. Pre-K programs, typically with a stronger emphasis on school readiness, are often politically popular. More people understand the relevance of an educational setting for children the year or two before they enter kindergarten, than for younger children. Some programs access existing funding streams (Head Start, Title I, subsidized child care funds), so there is a funding base to build upon. In Virginia, Head Start and the Virginia Preschool Initiative are the main components of a Pre-K program in the Commonwealth.

Seven of the forty states (GA, IL, NJ, NY, OK, WV and WI) have adopted the goal of quality, universal pre-K (UPK), ultimately with the capacity to serve all children in the designated age groups, always subject to parents' voluntarily choosing to enroll their children. No state has yet realized that goal, although two, Oklahoma and Georgia, are approaching it.

Universal Pre-K: Smart Investing in Early Education

Is Pre-K for all children, or for a subset of children, often those from low-income families or other high risk groups? Serving only children from low income families requires less funding than serving all children. Art Rolnick, Minneapolis Federal Reserve chair who identified the 16% return on investment for early education, argues that UPK programs should first target the children at highest risk, because it is there states get the highest rate of return on their investment. Incremental steps toward a universal program include targeting low-income families, enrolling only four year olds, and beginning in school districts where higher percentages of children are at risk. Some states, however, have found that creating a program that could serve all children was essential for gaining the political support necessary to get the program approved. Florida advocate David Lawrence, retired publisher of the *Miami Herald*, argues that unless state programs include the middle class, they will never have a constituency powerful enough to ensure that they are well-funded and permanent. Programs that target low-income children will miss many children at-risk of school failure. While poor families have proportionately more problem learners than more affluent families, the majority of children who reach elementary school unprepared to learn are from families living above the poverty line.³ A Georgetown University evaluation of UPK in Tulsa, Oklahoma found that children in Pre-K substantially outperformed those children not in Pre-K on three cognitive measures; the findings were true for every race and every socioeconomic group.⁴

Do the Pre-K programs operate solely in the public schools or in a combination of public schools and community based child care programs? Studies of the Oklahoma model (mainly public schools) and Georgia (much more heavily in community based programs, such as private non-profit or for profit centers, Head Start programs, and family child care homes) underscore the difficulty of maintaining as high quality standards when the much more diverse community based programs are included. Students in Oklahoma showed much stronger improvements than in Georgia. Yet, the emergence of mixed delivery models in which pre-K is delivered in community-based settings and schools is significant for the future of early childhood education because it had the potential to break the traditional barrier between early education and child care policies and address the needs of children in working families in a coordinated way and strengthen the quality of community-based child care programs. Programs for older children often help carry the costs for more expensive care for younger children in child care programs. If those older children are diverted to public school programs, child care programs will be all the harder pressed to afford to provide care for younger children.

What quality standards are required? Teachers educated and compensated at the same level as K-12 teachers, small class sizes, low teacher:child ratios, and services to families are the key factors

of quality in Pre-K. All are closely tied to the cost of the program. Is it best to serve as many children as possible, even if the funding does not support the ideal quality standards or is it better to ensure that all programs are of the ideal quality even if fewer children are served? Many states begin with lower quality programs and then work to improve it. If programs are started at less than ideal quality, research would predict that the outcomes for children would not be robust. Without evidence of a positive impact on children, programs might be ended rather than funded at the level needed to produce strong outcomes.

How is the program funded? Some states work at creatively blending Head Start, Title 1, Child Care and Development Fund block grant dollars, and additional state appropriations. Oklahoma and Illinois (\$90 million boost by current governor) are funded by state general revenues, Arkansas supplements general fund dollars with revenue from an increased tax on beer. Georgia funds its program through dedicated proceeds from a lottery.

How does the program address the needs of working families? Programs that operate on the public school calendar (part year, part day) pose problems for families where parents work on a full day, year round basis. Only five states require that the Pre-K programs they are contracting with address working families' needs for a longer day. Conflicting policies governing use of funds for Head Start, child care, and state-funded Pre-K programs or unwillingness to give up turf to build a seamless system for families often complicate collaboration across programs that could meet the needs of children and their working parents.

Next steps in Virginia

Fund Virginia Preschool Initiative at a level to support quality. In 1994 when the VPI program was designed, per pupil funding of \$5400 was considered strong funding for a high quality program. The funding level has not changed since 1994. Research indicates that in 2005 dollars, it takes about \$10,000 per student to meet the standards of quality necessary to produce the desired impact on the school readiness of preschoolers. There is no evidence that incremental investments work. In other words, research does not support the idea that funding at half the ideal would at least produce half the outcomes.

Help break down the barriers that hinder full utilization of the program. The \$5400 per pupil cost is divided between state and local responsibility based on the Department of Education composite index of local ability-to-pay. Many localities do not provide the local match to provide the program or to serve 100% of the eligible children, either because of lack of will or lack of finances, or both. Other localities, strapped for space or other resources, choose not to provide the program.

Maximize funding streams in support of Pre-K. Federally funded Head Start and state-funded VPI serve largely overlapping populations (although VPI has less restrictive income criteria). In many localities in Virginia, the two programs are competing for the same children, sometimes leaving harder-to-serve children out of both programs, sometimes supplanting federal funds with state funds, or at least not operating most efficiently. Some localities are exploring creative and legal ways for the two programs to work seamlessly together. Leaders in Head Start and VPI (and the Virginia Department of Education) can continue to implement strategies to optimize how the two systems can work together. When more progress is made with Head Start and VPI, other opportunities are available to include child care funding in the mix as well.

Require, monitor, and report key quality elements of all VPI programs. In recent years, the Virginia Department of Education has provided stronger oversight of the quality standards of the Virginia Preschool Initiative. These efforts should be continued and improved. As an important part of improving public education and public will in support of early education, the results of that monitoring should be reported and available to the public in a way readily understood.

Notes:

¹PALS-K Scores, *No Time to Waste, Indicators of School Readiness*. Voices for Virginia's Children, 2004.

²Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, "Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return," *Fedgazette*, March 2003.

³Steve Barnett, conference remarks, Legal Momentum's Family Initiative and the MIY Workplace Center, 2004.

⁴William Gormley et al. The Effects of Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program on School Readiness, www.crocus.georgetown.edu, 2004.