

States getting serious about pre-K programs

Playtime is over: Delaware explores ways to improve preschool education

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In a growing number of classrooms around the country, 4 is the new 5 and preschool the new kindergarten.

Hoping for a payoff of better schools and sharper students, states are aggressively expanding publicly funded programs to the youngest students -- 4 or even 3 years old.

And turning away from play-oriented day care, states are setting new academic standards, including class sizes and teacher credentials, to provide higher quality education before the first day of kindergarten.

Led by states such as Florida, Maryland and North Carolina, enrollment in public pre-K by 4- and even 3-year-olds jumped 40 percent from 2001 to 2006.

Excluding federal Head Start programs for poor children, the pre-K landscape now spans 38 states, including Delaware, and includes nearly 1 million children, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

In Delaware, state dollars pay only for low-income and at-risk children. Modeled after Head Start, the state's Early Childhood Assistance Program began in 1994 to expand access to comprehensive early childhood services to 4-year-olds through Head Start programs, public schools and private agencies. Ninety percent of ECAP children must have family incomes below the federal poverty line, and all must have identified disabilities or risk factors.

The program had 843 children enrolled in the 2005-06 school year. State leaders have no plans to extend it to all children.

"There's a substantial fiscal component to expanding those preschool programs," said Jim Lesko, the Delaware Department of Education's early childhood education associate.

Delaware spent \$5.3 million on ECAP in the 2005-06 school year, or \$6,261 per child -- the sixth-highest per-child amount in the nation, according to the Rutgers institute. Federal Head Start funding for 2004-05 was \$6,008 per child. In 2005-06, 1,538 children took part in the program.

State officials say they recognize the importance of early childhood education.

"We know that having children come into kindergarten with a set of skills that prepares them to be successful in kindergarten is likely to lead them to do better in all their academic areas," Lesko said.

Illinois seen as leader

Yet only 5 percent of Delaware children younger than 5 -- about 2,760 children -- are enrolled in nationally accredited preschool programs, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Some Delaware initiatives, including the Vision 2015 reform plan, have sought greater state investment in preschool education. Lesko said his department is working with Vision 2015 and Delaware Office of Early Education leaders, seeing promise in a future public-private partnership.

Vision 2015 leaders point to Illinois as a national leader. The Preschool for All legislation passed there in 2005 made it the first state with plans to offer voluntary, high-quality preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds. The \$45 million appropriated for fiscal year 2007 funded education for 10,000 more children, with the plan calling for a five-year, phased-in expansion requiring another \$45 million a year and serving 190,000 children at full implementation.

Most early childhood education experts stress that the quality of the program is as important as access.

At nationally accredited Bayhealth Child Care Center in Dover, every child is assessed and has a portfolio. As children meet skill milestones -- such as learning to brush their own teeth -- the skills are checked off, and educators move on to developing the next ones.

"There may be 20 children in a classroom working on 20 different things," Director Brenda Kibler said. "We are not just in the business of child care, but we are in the business of child development."

It's not only such short-term benefits that advocates of publicly funded pre-K are counting on. They point to studies that suggest students who spend significant time in pre-K are likelier than their peers to behave in school, graduate from high school and be productive citizens.

"A good pre-K program has a chance to change the climate in a lot of schools, to make schools safer places, to really reduce disruptive behavior in classrooms and benefit all children," said Steve Barnett, director of the Rutgers institute.

In Delaware, leaders have worked to strengthen academic standards, teacher preparedness and center quality.

Delaware implemented a mandatory curriculum framework for state-funded pre-K in 2003 that aligns with the state's K-12 standards.

"We've identified what sort of learning opportunities children need to have that will make them more likely to be successful when they enter kindergarten," Lesko said.

State leaders also hope to boost Delaware's preschool programs by better training the educators leading them. In addition to more professional development programs, the state has strengthened licensing requirements for programs that work with young children. Delaware also is piloting a rating system for preschools.

Not all agree

Skeptics agree preschool programs can have long-term benefits for low-income children who might not otherwise be exposed to enriching experiences found in more affluent homes. But they say proponents overstate the benefits. And they challenge the wisdom of devoting dollars to richer kids whose learning gains, they say, are not nearly so dramatic or long lasting.

"Quality preschool gives a lasting boost to children from poor families," said Bruce Fuller, director of the Policy Analysis for California Education, an independent policy research center based at University of California-Berkeley and Stanford University. "But middle-class children only benefit slightly, and by fifth grade, the effects have washed out."

Academic arguments aside, many states view preschool as an attractive place to spend taxpayers' money. Several states, including Iowa, New York and Oklahoma, either offer schooling for most 4-year-olds or are in the process of doing so, Barnett said.

Nationally, public pre-K serves about 3 percent of all 3-year-olds and 30 percent of all 4-year-olds, slightly more than the number of children in Head Start, the federal program started 40 years ago for the country's poorest children, according to the institute.

Though offered at some level in many states, pre-K attendance is not mandatory. All but eight states, in fact, do not require children to attend school until age 6, according to the Education Commission of the States.

A number of Democratic presidential candidates have added their support, proposing billions so states can create or widen quality pre-kindergarten programs that would give tens of thousands more 4-year-olds a chance to go to class.

In Maryland, preschool enrollment rose from about 11,000 in 2001 to more than 24,000 in 2006. The state funded the expansion by increasing aid to school systems, paid for in part by raising the cigarette tax.

But not every state is willing to pay extra.

California voters rejected a massive expansion of state-funded preschool in 2006 after opponents, including Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, said it would cost too much and require a tax increase.

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