

# Open the Preschool Door, Close the Preparation Gap

*By Sara Mead*

**D**ecades of research have produced reams of compelling evidence that preschool is a sound public investment. Children who attend prekindergarten programs that prepare them to read and build cognitive, verbal, and social skills go on to do measurably better in school and life than their peers who do not. They score higher on academic achievement tests, they get better jobs, and they are less likely to become dependent on welfare or engage in criminal activity. These trends are particularly noticeable among disadvantaged children. When those factors were taken into account, studies of high-quality preschool experiments in Michigan and North Carolina found that investments in preschool delivered a seven-to-one return over time.

So, if preschool is such a good investment, why does America today have only a patchwork early education system that allows many children—particularly poor and minority children—to fall through the cracks? More than 60 percent of children under 6 (and a higher proportion of 3 and 4-year-olds) spend at least some time in childcare. But many are in daycare arrangements that amount to little more than babysitting. Other programs purport to be preschool, but in fact have unqualified teachers and minimal academic focus. This is a tremendous missed opportunity, and one that has the worst consequences for poor and minority children. Poor children—those who *most* need additional learning opportunities—are actually the *least* likely to attend preschool. Among children entering kindergarten in fall 1998, less than one-

half from the most disadvantaged families—47 percent—had ever attended preschool, including Head Start or daycare centers. In contrast, 59 percent of non-poor children, and 65 percent of those from the most affluent families, attended preschool. So the problem is two-fold: Too many children who need it do not attend preschool, and even many who do attend preschool are not learning as much as they should.

The result is a significant preparation gap between poor and middle-class children, and between minority and white children.<sup>1</sup> Teachers say one-quarter of kindergarten students lack basic social, motor, academic, and emotional skills.<sup>2</sup> And while two-thirds of all entering kindergarteners can recognize letters of the alphabet, only 39 percent of the most disadvantaged children can. Similar gaps exist between

white and black or Hispanic children, and in cognitive areas that are important for children's school readiness, including math, health, social skills, and attitudes toward learning.<sup>3</sup> The impact of these differences is staggering; children in the highest socioeconomic quintile score 61 percent higher on tests of cognitive skills than those in the lowest quintile.<sup>4</sup> And researchers estimate that these preparation gaps account for one-half of the dramatic academic achievement differences that exist between black and white students later in their schooling—a gap

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that, on average, is the equivalent to four grade levels by the time of high-school graduation.<sup>5</sup> Policymakers cannot afford to squander the opportunity to provide all children—particularly disadvantaged children—the chance to attend high-quality preschool programs that prepare them to succeed in school and life. Yet, the problem is not a lack of concern for young children. In 2004, the federal government spent nearly \$8 billion on Head Start—its flagship preschool program for poor children—and other early childhood education programs, and states spent billions of additional federal dollars on childcare under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Childcare Development Fund (CDF) programs to support welfare reform.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, 46 states offer some type of publicly funded preschool program.<sup>7</sup> But these programs simply cannot meet the challenge of preparing all children to succeed in school. For starters, both Head Start and most state programs serve only a small percentage

of preschoolers and lack resources or funding to keep up with demand.<sup>8</sup> Further, many early childhood programs focus as much on providing daycare as education. They simply do not include the intense early learning activities disadvantaged children need to close the school preparation gap with their peers. Despite making significant improvements, children in Head Start still leave the program far below the national average in key skill areas.<sup>9</sup>

The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act marked a sweeping federal effort to ensure that all children reach high standards in their K-12 education. Now it is time for an equally bold national initiative to make sure every child enters school ready to learn. In an age when learning is more closely linked than ever to economic success, a serious commitment to equality of opportunity demands that our society guarantee children in low-income and working families the same access to quality early learning that affluent families enjoy.

Achieving this progressive goal will require a new partnership between the federal government and the states. Washington should make a substantial new investment in early learning, but rather than impose a one-size-fits-all template, federal policymakers should leave it to the states to design their own programs. This should not simply mean giving states a blank-check block grant, as the Bush administration has proposed for Head Start. Instead, federal early childhood investments need to be expanded, but also made more accountable. Our goal should be a performance-based system, where federal funding is contingent on both state compliance with broad quality standards and demonstrated progress toward closing the preschool preparation gap.

By linking greater public investment to greater accountability for results, we can break the left-right deadlock that has stymied progress toward equal access to high-quality early learning for all children. Conservatives frequently bemoan the uneven quality and uncertain outcomes of Head Start and other preschool pro-

grams, but they have been reluctant to spend more to improve quality or serve more children. Liberals, for their part, typically support greater investments in children, but show less alacrity when it comes to demanding more academic rigor and accountability from preschool programs. Americans deserve better than a false choice between quality without investment and investment without quality. Ensuring all children enter school prepared requires both funding, as liberals advocate, *and* reform, as conservatives argue.

Unlike elementary and secondary education, the federal government provides the majority of public funding for early childhood care and education programs. Thus, federal policymakers have a unique opportunity to drive reform. Washington is also a more likely source for funding increases needed to stimulate reform than cash-strapped states. By making smart investments to expand preschool access and ensure high quality and outcome standards, policymakers can prepare more children to succeed in school and improve returns on current preschool investments.

There is no getting around the fact that universal preschool access is expensive, however. PPI estimates that providing high-quality, free preschool for all needy 4-year-olds who want it, while subsidizing the costs of making preschool affordable for working families, would cost state and federal governments approximately \$9.2 billion annually. And, while equity and long-term economic benefits suggest the investment will pay off in time, present federal deficits and state budget crises make such a significant new initiative a tough sell.

Nonetheless, there are promising political signs. New research has drawn attention to the importance of early learning, and Americans increasingly recognize the need for children to receive greater developmental and early academic support both in and outside the home. Smart policymaking can help lawmakers expand preschool access and improve quality at more

palatable costs than many preschool supporters and opponents estimate. And, despite budget crunches, a number of states are leading the way with promising initiatives to dramatically expand access to preschool. Oklahoma, Georgia, and New York all have universal prekindergarten programs in place that provide high-quality early learning opportunities to every 4-year-old whose family wants them. Evaluations in both Oklahoma and Georgia have found significant positive impact from these programs, especially for the most disadvantaged children. And Floridians passed a referendum in 2002 requiring that every child in the state be offered preschool access by 2005. Nationally, a recently formed group, the Trust for Early Education, has launched a public relations and advocacy initiative aimed at drawing federal, state, local, and private support to make universal prekindergarten a reality for all American 4-year-olds. Yet, despite the growing consensus that all children deserve a chance to attend preschool, that goal is unlikely to be achieved without sustained, catalytic national action.

## **A Performance-Based Plan For Universal Preschool**

In this report, PPI calls for a national commitment to universal access to quality preschool for all 4-year-olds. The system we envision would be built on these key elements:

- ❑ **New federal investment:** The high cost of quality preschool—from \$4,000 to \$6,000 annually for a 4-year-old—puts it out of reach of low-income families and is a significant financial strain for middle- and working-class families.<sup>10</sup> As long as preschool remains financially out of reach for a large number of families, quality reforms to existing programs will have limited impact. At a minimum, states and the federal government should ensure that all poor 4-year-olds can attend high-quality preschool free of charge.

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But because preschool is so costly, many middle-class families also need help. In addition to current state and federal programs, a new federal investment of \$8.1 billion annually, coupled with a 12 percent annual state match of \$1.1 billion, will enable states to offer preschool to all poor children and help non-poor families afford quality preschool if they want it. Better coordination of existing early childhood funding streams and reduced costs for remediation later in school could offset some of these costs.

- ❑ **State flexibility:** The federal government is uniquely positioned to provide the funding and the pressure to stimulate reform, but states are better suited to design preschool programs that meet families' diverse needs and coordinate preschool with K-12 education and childcare programs. Rather than create a new federal bureaucracy or a one-size-fits-all, top-down solution, a smart national preschool initiative should set clear guidelines to ensure access and academic focus—but defer to states on specific curricula and program delivery models, including community and faith-based providers if states choose.
- ❑ **Preschoolers first:** While every moment from birth onward affects children's development, policymakers need to target limited resources where they can have the greatest impact. Too often, trying to address too many aspects of early childhood at once means doing none well and creates opportunities for children to fall through the cracks. By ensuring that all 4-year-olds have an opportunity to attend quality, pre-academic preschool, regardless of income, policymakers can focus early childhood resources where there is the strongest research on effective practices and the greatest parental preference for out-of-home learning opportunities. If states ensure that

all poor 4-year-olds whose families want preschool are being served, they could take advantage of flexible funding streams to expand preschool down to 3-year-olds or invest in other early childhood programs.

- ❑ **Strong pre-academic curricula:** Early learning research shows not only that young children are capable of acquiring early literacy and math skills, but also that those who do are better prepared to read and succeed in school. States should ensure that prekindergarten programs draw on this research, which has identified effective techniques and curricula that prepare children for academics.
- ❑ **Qualified teachers:** Raising the quality of preschool teachers is critical. The research shows that teachers with bachelor's degrees and some early childhood training or experience are most effective at preparing children to succeed in school.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Head Start and many state early childhood programs do not require that teachers have a bachelor's degree. As a condition of federal assistance, lead teachers in federal and state-funded prekindergarten programs should be required to hold bachelor's degrees and have specific training or experience in early childhood education. States should have considerable flexibility in defining the latter.
- ❑ **Accountability for results:** States and programs that receive federal funding need to be accountable for the quality of services they offer. But they also need to be held accountable for their performance improving developmental outcomes for children. This does not mean using standardized assessments like those in K-12, or tying assessment to consequences for individual children. That would not be developmentally appropriate in preschool. Instead, indi-

viduals who both know the child and are trained in how young children learn should evaluate children's performance on school readiness tasks in a natural context and environment. Tests should be sensitive to potential cultural bias and young children's short attention spans, and ideally include multiple observations over time. Researchers have identified key school readiness abilities that children need in the areas of language, literacy, pre-math, and social and emotional development, and there are a variety of tests that effectively assess children's grasp of these skills,<sup>12</sup> as well as non-test alternatives, such as recorded observations over time.

Because states must improve student achievement under NCLB, they have a strong incentive to improve school readiness. A performance-based federal preschool investment would require states to measure how well preschool programs are preparing children for school and demand improvement if they are not. In addition, the federal government must hold states accountable for closing preschool participation gaps by increasing the number of disadvantaged children in high-quality preschool. While there are no perfect preschool assessments, and more research in the field is clearly needed, universal preschool programs that demand assessment can help address this by spurring research to develop better models.

- ❑ **Compatibility with Head Start:** Rather than undermining Head Start and other state and federal investments in early learning, universal prekindergarten must seek to complement and strengthen them. Head Start plays a critical role in serving the most disadvantaged children who need the full range of comprehensive health, nutritional, social, and other services. But many children who do not need these services do

need additional preschool and academic opportunities to prepare them to succeed in school. An expanded early learning investment would free Head Start to focus on providing quality, comprehensive services to the neediest children. In addition, a smart early learning initiative should also improve the quality of services Head Start offers to poor preschoolers by including funding and requirements for Head Start to raise standards for teacher quality and curriculum, and offering alternative preschool options for poor families. Although most disadvantaged 4-year-olds would attend either prekindergarten or Head Start, states could also choose to work with local Head Start grantees and combine resources to provide two years of high-quality preschool for poor children who need more support. State-run universal preschool could provide the resources and infrastructure for states to improve early childhood coordination without undermining Head Start.

## **Why Preschool is a Smart Public Investment**

There is substantial evidence that quality preschool programs designed to build school readiness effectively improve children's school performance and other life outcomes.<sup>13</sup> More than 30 years ago, the High/Scope Perry Preschool program provided high-quality preschool for very poor children. In addition to immediate cognitive gains, long-term follow-up found that children in the program had better academic achievement, higher employment rates, and reduced criminal activity and welfare dependency through age 27.<sup>14</sup> The Carolina Abecedarian study found similar benefits.<sup>15</sup> Not only do such programs improve children's lives; in the long run, they actually save the taxpayers and public money through reduced welfare, crime, and remedial education spending. In fact, prekindergarten can help increase tax revenues

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in the long run, as successful prekindergarten graduates usually go on to work and pay taxes later in life.<sup>16</sup> All told, researchers estimated that, over time, every dollar spent on the Perry Preschool

program saved the public \$7.<sup>17</sup>

The High/Scope Perry Preschool and Carolina Abecedarian projects were highly controlled randomized trials that provided very intense, high-cost services to small numbers of children. But Chicago’s Child-Parent Center (CPC) program demonstrates that more scalable programs also yield results. The CPC uses federal Title I funds to provide half-day preschool and additional support in the first years of school for thousands of poor and at-risk children. Tracked through age 20, CPC children had higher academic achievement, higher incomes, and lower special education, dropout, and juvenile delinquency rates than a comparison group. The program is ongoing, and more recent cohorts of CPC children also show positive results.<sup>18</sup> A recent study of Oklahoma’s universal prekindergarten program also found significant results, particularly for African American and disadvantaged students.<sup>19</sup>

The value of preschool is also reflected in the considerable parental demand for it: Nearly two-thirds of children from the most well-off families attend preschool, and even 47 percent of children whose mothers do not work outside the home attend preschool.<sup>20</sup> This should hardly be surprising. As academic standards for elementary school have risen in recent years, public school kindergarten programs increasingly have come to incorporate what used to be first-grade curricula, particularly in the area

of reading skills. As a result, children now need educational preparation, similar to what was once taught in kindergarten, before they start public school, to enable them to handle kindergarten.

### ***What Works in Preschool***

Evaluations of these and other successful preschool programs, combined with cognitive science research on how young children learn, have generated substantial evidence about the characteristics of successful preschool programs. This research gives policymakers and practitioners the tools to ensure that well-implemented preschool programs can be effective. Here is what works:

- ❑ **Solid pre-academic curriculum.** Child development experts once theorized that young children were incapable of learning early academic skills, such as letters, numbers, and early reading, and that exposure to academic concepts could even be harmful. But more recent research demonstrates that young children are capable of learning far more complex skills and ideas than previously believed, and developing pre-academic skills helps them succeed later in school. Good preschool classrooms do not look like elementary school classrooms, but quality prekindergarten is not limited to finger painting and naptime, either. Research on various preschool programs suggests that a variety of curricula and teaching approaches, from child-centered approaches to back-to-basics models, can be effective in preparing young children to succeed in school. It is important, however, that preschool programs have some form of planned curriculum of activities and goals for young children’s learning.

And regardless of the philosophical approach, most successful preschool curricula intensely focus on developing children’s lan-

guage use and skills. Because language and reading are a gateway to much of the learning children do throughout their lives, language development, familiarity with books and print, and other early reading skills are especially important, and there is a strong body of research showing how preschool programs can develop those skills.<sup>21</sup> Preparing children to succeed in school also requires developing their early math and other academic skills, as well as the social, motor, and emotional competencies that allow them to function in a school environment.

- ❑ **Teacher quality.** Teacher quality is critical in preschool, because successfully teaching students a quality preschool curriculum depends almost entirely on the quality of interactions and relationships between students and teachers. Not surprisingly, teacher education and verbal abilities are related to outcomes for preschoolers. Specifically, research shows that teachers with a bachelor's degree and knowledge of how young children learn are most effective.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the importance of developing trust and relationships with teachers for young children means that teacher stability and retention also determine program quality.
- ❑ **Smaller class sizes and better student-teacher ratios.** Research suggests that smaller class size and lower ratios of students to teachers are more conducive to the types of interactions that support children's development, and correlate with better outcomes for children. Some programs, however, have been successful at both preparing children and closing achievement gaps using much larger class sizes with highly trained (master's degree level) teachers.<sup>23</sup> Different programs have obtained positive results with different class-size and staffing configurations, but the National Association

for the Accreditation of Young Children recommends a maximum of 20 pre-kindergarteners, with at least two adults (two teachers, or a teacher and an aide).

- ❑ **Safe, nurturing physical environments and resources.** Quality preschool programs need to provide safe, healthy physical environments with adequate resources (including books, toys, and other materials) to allow children to participate in, and teachers to plan, a wide variety of activities to tap children's interests and develop their emerging abilities.
- ❑ **Not just childcare.** Childcare is important, but it is not the same as preschool, nor does it serve the same purpose. Childcare is any setting in which a child is cared for by someone other than a parent. Preschool programs specifically focus on preparing children for school. In addition to adequate care and nutrition, disadvantaged children need structured preschool experiences that specifically focus on mitigating gaps in their early learning opportunities and preparing them to succeed in school. Such programs have school-readiness or early childhood education as a primary goal; have standards and a research-based curriculum focused on developing children's early reading, math, social, and emotional skills; and are taught by qualified teachers.

There is substantial research on what makes for quality prekindergarten programs, but this research also shows that a variety of approaches can be successful. The most critical feature of quality early childhood programs—rich interactions between teachers and children—is incredibly difficult for policymakers to guarantee or measure. This suggests that, rather than heavily regulating preschools, restricting delivery mechanisms, or dictating curricular approaches, policymakers should put in

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place the necessary structural elements—access for disadvantaged children, adequate resources, and an assurance that teachers have a bachelor's degree—and ensure programs meet basic health and safety standards. Beyond that, preschool programs should have considerable flexibility to make their own decisions about curricular and pedagogical approaches, class size, and other issues, and parents should be able to choose among a variety of programs. By setting strong accountability and outcome goals and not compromising essentials, policymakers can give parents and educators greater freedom in how they achieve those goals.

### ***How Today's Childcare and Preschool Systems Operate***

Families, states, and the federal government are making significant investments in early childhood care and education. But unlike elementary and secondary education, which is provided free of charge to families and paid for primarily by state and local government, the bulk of preschool spending comes from parent payments.

And among those parents who are best able to afford it, nearly two-thirds of their children attend preschool.

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The largest share of public spending on early childhood care and education comes not from states or localities but the federal government. In 2000, the General Accounting Office identified 29 federal pro-

grams providing some type of early childhood education and care at a cost of \$9 billion (in FY1999). However, three federal programs—Head Start, the Childcare and Development Fund (CDF), and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)—account for most federal early childhood spending. And TANF and CDF provide childcare funding primarily to support welfare reform, not to support children's development (although some parents certainly do use them to purchase preschool for their children). The major federal program focused on early childhood education is Head Start, funded at \$6.8 billion in FY2004. Investment in Head Start grew substantially in the 1990s, but the Bush administration has allowed Head Start funding to stagnate, while also proposing cuts to other early childhood programs.

Although they provide a smaller share of prekindergarten funding than the federal government, states have significantly increased their involvement and spending in recent years. Since 1990, 46 states have created their own preschool initiatives. Some of the most promising early childhood initiatives come from Oklahoma, Georgia, and New York, which have already committed to offer universal, high-quality preschool.<sup>24</sup>

These states demonstrate that universal preschool programs can have a positive impact even while applying divergent strategies. Oklahoma's program achieved positive results by working through the public school system and holding preschool teachers and classes to the same standards as elementary schools. Georgia used a diverse delivery system of pre-existing suppliers, and set lower standards for teacher quality, but mandated that all programs teach proven, scientifically based curricula in order to achieve results.

### ***The Shortcomings of Today's Childcare and Preschool Systems***

Despite promising steps in some states and localities, our patchwork national system of fed-

eral, state, and family investments in childcare and early education allows too many children to fall through the cracks. Many children spend their days in low-quality daycare and babysitting arrangements that do not support their social and cognitive development, and may in fact hinder them. Many of these children actually need more than just quality care to foster healthy, normal development; they also need extra learning support to make up for disadvantages at home. In many cases, their parents are poorly educated and less able than middle-class families to provide resources that support their development. Poor children have fewer books in their homes, are less likely to be read to, and watch more TV. By age 3, the average poor child has heard an estimated 30 million fewer words than her more affluent peers.<sup>27</sup>

Early childhood programs like Head Start were created to mitigate these disparities by

providing additional enrichment and services for disadvantaged preschoolers. Millions of children have benefited from Head Start's nutritional, health, and other services, and evaluations indicate that Head Start offers better quality programs than other childcare options available to poor families.<sup>28</sup> But the persistence of dramatic preschool preparation gaps for poor and minority children shows that these programs are not enough.

Poor children—those who *most* need additional learning opportunities—are actually the *least* likely to attend preschool. A National Center for Education Statistics study of entering kindergarteners found that only 47 percent of children from the most disadvantaged families had attended either preschool or Head Start. In contrast, 59 percent of non-poor children and 65 percent of those from the most affluent families (highest socioeconomic quintile) attend preschool.

## Georgia Universal Prekindergarten (Universal Pre-K)

Started in 1993 by then-Gov. Zell Miller, Georgia's Universal Pre-K program is funded with earmarked proceeds of the state lottery. Any 4-year-old in the state is eligible to participate. The program makes use of a diverse delivery network, including public schools, private and nonprofit preschool programs, and Head Start agencies. The Office of School Readiness (OSR), a separate state agency created to administer Universal Pre-K, approves organizations to serve as providers and funds them on a per-pupil basis. To be accepted as a state Universal Pre-K provider, programs must meet basic health and safety regulations, employ teachers with either a Child Development Associate credential or a degree in early childhood education, and limit class size to 20 students. Programs with higher teacher quality and other standards receive funding at a greater rate. Further, all programs must use an OSR-approved, scientifically based school readiness curriculum. Programs may select curricula from a variety of pre-approved national programs or submit locally developed curricula to OSR for approval. Seventy-five percent to 80 percent of Georgia 4-year-olds are enrolled in either Head Start or Universal Pre-K. A study by researchers at the University of Georgia found that Universal Pre-K students improved school readiness scores relative to national norms, and that Universal Pre-K eliminated skills gaps between Universal Pre-K students and the generally more affluent children whose parents selected privately funded preschool.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 1: *Childcare and Preschool: Not the Same Thing***

Both preschool and quality childcare serve young children and can provide supervision to help parents work while also providing developmental supports to help children learn. But preschool and childcare are not the same thing.

	<b>Childcare</b>	<b>Preschool</b>
<b>Description</b>	Any arrangement where children are cared for by someone other than their parents.	Educational setting designed specifically to foster young children's development and prepare them to succeed in school.
<b>Typical Environments</b>	Center-based childcare or daycare, care by a relative, care by non-parent in child's own home (e.g. babysitter or nanny), family daycare home (care in the home of another family). (Low-income families are more likely to use relative or family home care; more affluent families are more likely to use center-based care.)	Head Start Program, center-based childcare center, private preschool program, public school.
<b>Examples of Government Programs to Support</b>	CCDF TANF Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit	Head Start Early Reading First Even Start
<b>Purpose of Programs</b>	Subsidizing cost of childcare to help parents work or attend school.	Provide academic, social, and developmental enrichment to help children succeed in school.
<b>Regulation</b>	Varies from state to state; generally minimal. Basic health and safety standards for centers, some states also set staff ratio and credential requirements. Little or no regulation for relative care. Home care is often unregulated.	Varies from state to state. State programs typically have some curriculum and education standards. Private preschool often subject to same regulation as center-based daycare.
<b>Age of Children Served</b>	Birth through school age; young school-age children also need "wrap-around" care during after-school or non-school hours.	Three and 4-year-olds; "young five's" who may not be ready for kindergarten yet.
<b>Characteristics of Quality Programs</b>	Safe, nurturing physical environment; child-appropriate toys and resources; low child-staff ratio; low staff turnover; activities stimulate and support children's development; a better educated, more experienced staff correlates with better quality, but a bachelor's degree is not necessary.	Safe, nurturing physical environment; child-appropriate toys and resources; low child-staff ratio; low staff turnover; and planned curriculum of activities designed to prepare children for school. Important components include: language development: introduction to letters, print, early reading; introduction to early math ideas; development of self-control and social and emotional skills. Lead teachers have at least a bachelor's degree and understand young children's development.

## Oklahoma's Universal Prekindergarten Program

In 1998, the Oklahoma legislature instituted a universal prekindergarten program in the state by passing legislation that allowed public school districts to receive state per-pupil aid for each 4-year-old they enrolled in preschool. Over 90 percent of the state's districts responded by offering voluntary prekindergarten programs for 4-year-olds, and 65 percent of Oklahoma 4-year-olds are enrolled in the program. Because prekindergarten is offered by the public school districts, teachers in the program meet the same requirements as other elementary school teachers in the state, and must hold a bachelor's degree and certification in early childhood education. Within these and other requirements applying to public schools generally, however, Oklahoma prekindergarten programs are free to make their own choices about curriculum and issues, such as class size. A recent study by researchers at Georgetown University found that the program had significant positive effects on children's cognitive and language assessment scores, particularly for African American children, whose test scores improved on average 17 percent, and Hispanic children, whose scores improved by 54 percent.<sup>26</sup>

When Head Start was created 40 years ago, most children, regardless of income, did not attend preschool at all, so the program really was intended to give disadvantaged children a "head start" on learning to help close gaps with more affluent peers. But today the influx of women into the workforce and increased understanding of the importance of early childhood learning mean that preschool also has strong appeal for middle-class and affluent families, many of whom see it as essential for school success. So, instead of a giving a boost to disadvantaged children, Head Start and similar publicly supported preschool programs at best give poor children access to the same preschool opportunities as more affluent children.

Many of the programs that serve poor children are more focused on childcare than education and do not deliver the intensity or quality of services needed to compensate for educational deficits. Head Start centers and state early childhood programs vary greatly in their quality. Some are excellent, but on the whole students' developmental results suggest that neither Head Start nor many other private and public early childhood programs are of suffi-

cient quality. While these programs have tremendous promise, they can achieve that potential only if quality and curriculum standards are raised and the resources are put in place to back them up.

Both conservative and liberal experts, including Diane Ravitch, Ron Haskins, and Isabel Sawhill, argue that Head Start has only limited lasting impact on cognitive development, because it lacks a strong national curriculum and focuses too little on academic skills. Although Head Start children's early academic and other skills improve during the course of the program, most still enter school well behind their more advantaged peers.<sup>29</sup> State programs, in part because they are newer and far from monolithic, have received less criticism than Head Start, but there is little evidence that they are, overall, more effective. Many states do not even evaluate cognitive or achievement impacts for their early childhood programs.<sup>30</sup>

Prekindergarten programs generally have fewer resources and lower standards than other levels of public education. Further, because most cannot serve all children who would benefit, preschool programs face pressure to stretch

resources thin to serve as many children as possible, rather than focus on quality to ensure that children learn. In particular, preschool programs often fall short on both teacher quality and curriculum.

All states require kindergarten teachers to hold bachelor's degrees, but barely half of state prekindergarten programs do so. Head Start requires only a Child Development Associate Credential. (One-half of all Head Start teachers must have at least associates degrees.<sup>31</sup>) In addition, high teacher turnover rates hinder the stable and caring relationships with teachers that are important to facilitate young children's learning.<sup>32</sup> As long as Head Start and preschool teacher salaries average less than one-half of public school teacher salaries—the average preschool teacher makes \$20,000 or less—improvements in teaching quality are unlikely.<sup>33</sup>

Poorly qualified teachers are ill equipped to deliver the solid school readiness curriculum that disadvantaged children need. But many preschool programs do not really strive to develop the skills, particularly early literacy and other pre-academic skills, that children need to succeed in school. Head Start has no national curriculum or guidelines for early literacy, math, or other pre-academic skills, and the national Head Start standards in these areas are too vague to give practical guidance to curriculum choices. Further, despite scientific evidence about how young children learn and the importance of early learning, some early childhood practitioners and advocates remain committed to outdated concepts of child development that are hostile to instruction in academic skills for young children. Unfortunately, such views do a disservice to disadvantaged children, because they lack opportunities to develop school readiness skills at home, even as the importance of developing children's language, literacy, math, social, and emotional skills has become a key concern for middle-class and affluent parents.

In addition, initiatives and advocates concerned with young children focus not only on

early education and preschool but also on improving childcare for infants, toddlers, and older children, as well as preschoolers. Both childcare and preschool play an important role in fostering children's development and can help parents juggle the demands of work and family. But carelessly combining preschool and childcare under one umbrella may inadvertently undermine preschool quality by measuring preschool programs against the wrong yardstick. Compared to other childcare settings, many early childhood education programs offer significantly superior quality care but still do not do enough to ensure disadvantaged children are prepared to succeed. Because of this confusion, many programs that policymakers, parents, and the public think are preparing children for school are not.

### *Head Start and the Challenge of Ensuring Quality*

Aside from entitlement programs, Head Start is perhaps the most popular federal program. Both liberals and conservatives support it. Despite that widespread support, however, early childhood experts and policymakers of both parties recognize a need to strengthen Head Start's quality and outcomes to better prepare disadvantaged children to succeed in school. There is far less agreement about the specifics of what constitutes quality and how to improve outcomes.<sup>34</sup>

In the 1998 Head Start reauthorization, Congress and the Clinton administration took a number of steps to improve Head Start quality and outcomes, including: raising teacher education standards to require one-half of all Head Start teachers to have associates degrees; increasing funding and dedicating a percentage of new funds to quality improvement; and requiring Head Start programs to provide for children's cognitive, language, and social development, including literacy and numeric skills. Under the Clinton administration, the Depart-

ment of Health and Human Services (HHS) also began taking steps to close some poorly performing programs. However, Head Start's teacher quality and curriculum standards remain inadequate, and Head Start still serves only three out of every five eligible children.

In early 2003, the Bush administration proposed converting Head Start into a state block grant program.<sup>35</sup> The administration also sought to increase emphasis on pre-literacy skills; codify a national assessment of Head Start students (which HHS had already begun implementing under executive authority); and link assessment performance to Head Start program accountability. Equally notable was what it did not include: significant funding increases to improve quality or expand enrollment.

Not surprisingly, the Bush administration met with opposition. Converting Head Start into a block grant was unpopular even among many of the conservative Republicans and governors expected to support the idea, as well as among early childhood advocates and analysts who argued states would lower standards and reduce overall resources for early childhood. Many Head Start advocates support stronger school readiness goals but fear that the administration's proposals, which focus almost exclusively on improving the cognitive and pre-academic components of Head Start, would undermine social, health, nutritional, and other comprehensive services for Head Start students and their families.

The administration's other goal—improving program accountability and academic focus by implementing a National Reporting System (NRS) assessment for all Head Start 4-year-olds—is a worthy one. Ultimately, the best measure of early childhood education programs' success is the longer-term academic and life outcomes of participants. But holding programs accountable for how they serve children today also requires some short-term performance measures. Unfortunately, the administration's shoddy implementation of the NRS has produced problems that could undermine efforts

to make Head Start more accountable.<sup>36</sup> Assessing the performance of Head Start programs and young children is an incredibly complex task. Young children's development is highly varied, both between children and for individual children across time, and the type of standardized test used with older children is not appropriate

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***“Both childcare and preschool play an important role in fostering children’s development and can help parents juggle the demands of work and family.”***

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for preschoolers. Yet, despite the widely acknowledged complexity and contentious nature of assessment for small children, the administration allowed the assessment to be developed and implemented rapidly and inexpensively.

As a result, the NRS assessment has numerous technical and design flaws that have raised concerns of both testing and early childhood experts. Some test items appear to be culturally or economically biased, and others are poorly constructed posing confusing questions, for example, or presenting no single clearly correct answer. There are no provisions to include children with disabilities in the assessment (despite the fact that, by law, 10 percent of the children Head Start serves have disabilities). A Spanish version of the test is available, but other children with limited English proficiency are not included in the accountability system.<sup>37</sup> Further, trained, skilled individuals are essential to administer any assessment of young children, and it is not clear that the brief trainings provided to some Head Start teachers are sufficient, particularly given the low levels of education of many Head Start teachers.

Criticisms of the NRS assessment as a “high stakes standardized test”<sup>38</sup> are misleading, however. Rather than the fill-in-the-bubble image this phrase suggests, the NRS assessment is

delivered one-on-one via interaction between a trained adult and a child. Moreover, the assessment has no stakes for individual children and is not the sole criterion for program funding decisions.<sup>39</sup> Some criticisms reflect resistance to accountability or ideological opposition to testing or academic instruction for young children. But by failing to invest in thoughtful implementation, the administration has only given fuel to those who do not want Head Start to be held accountable for academic outcomes.

In 2003, the House of Representatives passed, by only a one-vote margin, a Head Start

reauthorization bill that included an eight-state block grant demonstration. The bill also included provisions to raise requirements for teacher qualifications, increase Head Start's pre-literacy and academic emphasis, and require instruction based on scientific research. The Senate has not yet passed a Head Start reauthorization bill. Like the House bill, a bipartisan Senate committee bill seeks to increase state coordination, teacher qualifications, academic focus, and accountability in Head Start, but it takes a different approach on many of these issues. Unlike the House, the Senate committee bill does not

**Table 2: Additional Investment Required to Fund Universal Access to Preschool (at full scale)**

	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Target Percent Participating in Prekindergarten or Head Start</b>	<b>Cost Per Child</b>	<b>Total Cost</b>
<b>Cost of providing free, high-quality preschool for all poor 4-year olds</b>	678,300	100%	\$7,524	\$5,103,529,200
<b>Cost of subsidizing the cost of high-quality preschool for non-poor 4-year-olds</b>	3,311,700	65%	\$4,514.40 (Average 60% Subsidy)	\$9,717,720,012
<b>Total cost to provide high-quality preschool to all poor 4-year-olds, and preschool access for all non-poor 4-year-olds who want it:</b>				\$14,821,248,212
<b>Less current Head Start spending:</b>				\$6,774,848,1640
<b>Additional investment needed:</b>				\$8,046,401,048
<b>Additional investment needed to ensure all Head Start teachers have at least a bachelor's degree:</b>				\$1,200,000,000
<b>Total new investment needed for universal access to quality preschool:</b>				\$9,246,401,048
<b>12% State investment:</b>				\$1,109,520,000
<b>88% Federal investment:</b>				\$8,136,882,800

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/>; National Institute for Early Education Research, <http://nieer.org/>; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Head Start Bureau's Budget and Policy, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/budget/>.

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include any form of block grants, but it does endorse the administration's implementation of the National Reporting System.

While the outlook for further movement in 2004 on this politically contentious legislation is unclear, the eventual Head Start reauthorization undoubtedly will increase focus on school readiness, strengthen teacher-training requirements, and encourage greater coordination with states and K-12 education. National block granting or large funding increases appear unlikely. Some of these changes seem promising. Others raise legitimate concerns. But what is most notable about prospective reforms is how incremental they are. Conservatives are no longer calling for the abolition of Head Start, but in the face of block grant proposals, state budget crises, and a growing federal deficit, liberals are fighting a rear-guard action to preserve investments in Head Start, state prekindergarten, and childcare, rather than seeking dramatic expansion or quality improvement.

## **Beyond Tinkering to Universal Prekindergarten Access**

Closing preparation gaps to ensure that all children enter school ready to learn will require more than rhetoric about the importance of early childhood, and more than tweaking existing programs. Disadvantaged children need high-quality prekindergarten to make up for early learning opportunities they do not get in their homes and communities. In light of the high cost and low quality of many preschool and childcare offerings, middle and working-class families also struggle to find and pay for programs that will foster, rather than undermine, their children's growth. A sustained national effort—including federal, state, and local commitments—to provide all 4-year-olds an opportunity to attend high-quality prekindergarten programs for free

or at an affordable cost would be a significant and necessary first step toward expanding access and raising the overall quality of prekindergarten. In addition, as both two-income and single-parent families are increasingly common, such an investment is a useful complement to other initiatives to help parents balance work and family life.

As the global economy demands more skills from workers, federal and state policies and investments have been expanded to help more individuals pursue post-secondary and graduate education. These investments, while important, have not been balanced with comparable attention to young children, despite research showing that well-designed preschool programs can improve the effectiveness and the return on other education investments down the road. As our public schools work to meet the challenges of NCLB, it is time to readjust this balance so that children enter school prepared to succeed.

### ***Practical and Developmental Reasons to Focus on Preschool***

Research documenting children's development between birth and age 3 has focused public attention on these ages. While early child development is both rapid and critical, there is not substantial evidence that *programmatically targeted* interventions targeted to young children in those years are any more effective than those focused on the preschool years.<sup>40</sup> Because there are more measurable outcomes from preschool, a better knowledge base of what works in pre-

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***“The best measure of early childhood education programs’ success is the longer-term academic and life outcomes of participants. But holding programs accountable for how they serve children today also requires some short-term performance measures.”***

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***“Money alone is not sufficient. Programs that cut corners on quality also do not generate impressive results.”***

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results, preschool initiatives, particularly those linked to K-12 standards and follow-up, are a more promising approach for government investment than earlier interventions.

Further, a coherent universal preschool strategy is more equitable than initiatives scattered across the 5-and-under age range. Smaller initiatives that do not serve all children who need preschool cannot close achievement gaps, and competing small initiatives create openings for inefficiency. The General Accounting Office has identified a variety of areas of overlap or gaps among existing federal programs, and state audits have uncovered similar issues.<sup>41</sup> Preschool also has broader political appeal than other types of early childhood investments. Family preferences about how to care for young children vary greatly, but preschool can have educational benefits for children whether or not their mothers work, and there is strong demand for preschool education even among families where mothers are at home.<sup>42</sup> And focusing on the educational benefits of preschool allows policymakers to provide real help to families struggling to balance the demands of work and family, without getting into the tricky ground of debating whether or not mothers of small children should work outside the home, or whether government should support them in doing so.

Investment in preschool does not preclude broader efforts: Policymakers can support a diversity of approaches to address early childhood and school readiness, including expanded family leave, healthcare subsidies, targeted tax cuts to help families with the costs of raising

paring children at this age, and some evidence that sustaining interventions into the first school years improves re-

children, and after-school programs, as well as childcare programs and regulation. But policymakers with limited resources must weigh those investments and target public initiatives where they will have the greatest impact. Preschool is a logical and effective place to start because, if policymakers are diligent about school readiness and standards, universal preschool programs can help to address families' childcare needs while having the dual impact of improving children's academic outcomes and long-term overall success.

### ***What Universal Access to Prekindergarten Would Cost***

While money alone is not sufficient, preparing children for school will require a real investment to expand preschool access and raise quality. One lesson from early childhood research is that programs that cut corners on quality also do not generate impressive results.<sup>43</sup> But as long as preschool remains financially out of reach for a large number of families, quality reforms to existing programs will have limited impact.

Investing in preschoolers is not cheap. For example, the National Institute for Early Education Research suggests that universal preschool—fully financed preschool for every 3-year-old and 4-year-old in the United States—would cost \$68.6 billion annually, compared to more than \$370 billion in spending on elementary and secondary education.<sup>44</sup> However, quality preschool could be made *universally accessible*—free for poor children, and affordable for working and middle-class families—at a fraction of this cost.

Confusion about preschool and childcare has also dissuaded policymakers from bold preschool initiatives: Providing full-day, full-year services for all children from birth through school age and beyond, at the resource intensity required for successful preschool, is prohibitively expensive.<sup>45</sup> However, the assumptions behind such figures should be carefully considered,

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because high-cost predictions too often stymie efforts to improve both preschool and childcare.

The first thing to understand about prekindergarten cost estimates is that most of them assume not only that a program would be fully financed for all children, but also that all 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds would be enrolled—despite the fact that many parents, for a variety of reasons, may prefer other early learning options. Even one-third of children from the highest socio-economic families (who presumably value education and do not face financial barriers) do not attend preschool. Extending the same preschool options to all families is not the same as requiring all young children to attend preschool.

The second thing to understand is that a number of widely cited estimates for universal preschool include the cost of comprehensive services and/or full-day, year-round care. These supports are important, particularly to ensure that poor children with working mothers can participate, but they address issues separate from preschool, and not all children need them. Further, there are separate funding streams for the care and other services disadvantaged children need.

Finally, most universal preschool cost estimates fail to take into account either the current local, state, federal, and philanthropic investments in early childhood or the substantial share of spending by parents themselves. Government should make sure that all families, regardless of income, have the same access to high-quality preschool. But that does not mean that all families need the same amount of support for access. Poor children should be eligible to attend quality prekindergarten free of charge, but states should be able to use preschool funding creatively to make quality preschool accessible and affordable to working and middle-class families without paying the entire cost. A system of universal access to prekindergarten would help states integrate disparate federal,

state, local, private, and parental funding streams, and thus produce efficiencies, improve services, and lower the additional cost.

Taking all of these factors into account dramatically lowers the costs of universal prekindergarten. If states set up universal preschool systems that are free for the poorest students and charge a sliding fee for working, middle-class, and more affluent students, the costs could be further reduced, depending on the match. Even including the estimated \$1.2 billion required annually to fund the professional development and competitive pay needed to ensure that all lead Head Start teachers have bachelor's degrees, the costs would be less than many estimates.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, a new investment of \$9.2 billion annually (above current federal programs) would fund grants to enable states to offer preschool to all poor children and help non-poor families afford quality preschool if they want it. If all states were required to meet the average effort that states are currently investing in prekindergarten, the costs to the federal government could be reduced by more than \$1 billion, to about \$8.1 billion annually.<sup>47</sup> A larger match could further reduce federal costs.

It is also important to note that these costs would not be immediate, but would phase in over time. Because there is currently an insufficient supply of high-quality preschool opportunities, building universal prekindergarten to scale would require several years to ensure enough time for teachers to be trained and for quality new programs to develop and grow. As a result, funding for universal prekindergarten in initial years would need to be only a fraction of the cost when fully realized. In addition, as universal prekindergarten becomes more established, some existing federal programs aimed at young children may no longer be necessary. Congress and the related agencies should regularly investigate potential redundancy between universal prekindergarten and other programs, and use these findings to close down redun-

dant or overlapping programs and redirect the funds to offset the costs of universal prekindergarten. Better coordination and reduced costs for remediation later in school could also offset some costs.

### ***How to Design a Performance-Based Preschool Access System***

To close preschool preparation gaps and ensure that all children enter school prepared to learn to high standards, the federal government, states, and individual prekindergarten programs must take a variety of steps:

**The federal government** should commit to a significant financial investment of \$8.1 billion annually in performance-based grants for states to provide free or affordable high-quality preschool to all poor and middle-income children.

**States that accept prekindergarten funding** must in exchange be held accountable for: (a) investing state funds equivalent to at least the current national average state effort in preschool, (b) closing the preschool participation gap between poor and affluent children, and (c) creating the conditions to foster high-quality preschool, including:

- ❑ Setting statewide school readiness standards aligned with the state's K-12 standards to ensure that children are prepared to succeed in kindergarten. At a minimum, these standards should cover pre-literacy and math skills as well as cognitive, motor, social, and emotional development;
- ❑ Holding federal- and state-funded prekindergarten programs accountable for quality and outcomes, including provisions to close down programs that fail to prepare children to succeed in school;

- ❑ Increasing the percentage of poor children who attend prekindergarten and making progress on closing the gap between the percentages of poor and affluent children benefiting from preschool; and
- ❑ Providing state funds equivalent to the current average state expenditures on prekindergarten programs.

Because states are already required to improve student achievement under NCLB, they face a strong incentive to ensure that preschool programs are accountable and improve school readiness.

**Programs and providers** in this state-funded universal prekindergarten access initiative must be held accountable for:

- ❑ Employing highly qualified lead teachers who have, at a minimum, bachelor's degrees and training or experience in early childhood education (with considerable state flexibility in defining the latter);
- ❑ Selecting or developing scientifically based curricula emphasizing a strong focus on developing children's language, pre-literacy, and other early academic skills, as well as social, motor, and emotional competencies. States and the federal government can, and should, be agnostic about the specific curriculum and approach programs take, as long as they are based in scientific research about how children learn and address key elements of school readiness; and
- ❑ Participating in state accountability systems that monitor quality in both services and children's school readiness.

**Head Start** must continue to play an important role in providing comprehensive early childhood services, including preschool, to needy

children. And since local Head Start grantees are established in their communities, it makes little sense to throw out this existing infrastructure if current grantees are willing to adapt to meet high-quality prekindergarten standards. Because the children Head Start works with are among the most disadvantaged, they will continue to need comprehensive health, nutrition, and other “wrap-around” childcare services even with universal access to preschool. For this reason, it is important to maintain Head Start’s focus on comprehensive services.

But not all children who would benefit from preschool need comprehensive services. When Head Start was created, many of the programs that now help poor families with job skills, childcare, and health care did not exist. Now that welfare reform has expanded access to these services for poor families, it is time to reconsider how Head Start can best serve the children who need it the most.

As the federal government’s primary investment in young children’s development, Head Start has grown to bear a burden of serving a broader population of children than need its services. By providing affordable alternatives for children who need prekindergarten but not comprehensive services, universal access to prekindergarten can allow Head Start to refocus specifically on the most disadvantaged children who truly need the full range of comprehensive services.

As part of this redefinition, policymakers should take a thoughtful look at the services Head Start provides, its eligibility and enrollment, budget, and grantees to make sure that the way funding is used aligns with a more targeted mission.

It is also clear that children in Head Start, who have greater learning deficits than their less-disadvantaged peers, need more in the way of academic support than many Head Start programs now offer. Because Head Start serves the neediest children, it is particularly crucial

that policymakers take steps to improve Head Start’s academic quality, including:

- ❑ Requiring programs to adopt the scientifically based curriculum of their choosing;
- ❑ Requiring—and providing the funding to ensure—that all Head Start lead teachers have at least a bachelor’s degree;
- ❑ Holding programs accountable for student outcomes, using either state prekindergarten accountability systems or a strengthened NRS. Implementation of the NRS should be suspended or barred from use for program evaluation until the administration has invested the time and effort to create a quality assessment that addresses concerns raised by testing experts and more comprehensively assesses the full range of student outcomes addressed by Head Start; and
- ❑ Increasing choice and respecting the preferences of the most disadvantaged families by providing alternative high-quality options through universal prekindergarten.

In addition to allowing Head Start to refocus on serving only the most needy children, universal access to prekindergarten will bolster Head Start, rather than displace or undermine it. Universal access to prekindergarten will also stimulate the development of better early childhood accountability models, strengthen standards of quality and information for early learning programs, and provide greater choice in preschool for poor families.

**Policymakers** should meanwhile continue to address a range of steps to improve early childhood development. These should include supporting parental leave for parents of infants, improving health care access for young children, and expanding tax benefits targeted to

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help low- and moderate-income families with the costs of raising children.

## Conclusion

There is widespread recognition of the importance of early childhood learning, and a strong public appetite for increased public support to ensure that young children enter school ready to learn. National surveys find that 87 percent of voters think state governments should provide funding so that all children can enroll in preschool.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, state budget constraints and disagreement about specifics have for too long meant that policy debates produce only incremental tinkering with existing programs or a default reliance on the status quo that leaves too many children unprepared.

Research shows that quality preschool improves children's life chances and benefits society by improving long-term education outcomes

and earnings; reducing crime, teen pregnancy and welfare rates; and reducing the costs of special and remedial education. Through these benefits, high-quality preschool can actually save the public as much as \$7 for every \$1 spent.<sup>49</sup> Further, in the global, knowledge-based, modern economy, it is increasingly critical that our schools equip all children with a higher level of skill than was required in the past. Americans are demanding more from our public schools through NCLB. Making sure children enter school with the preparation and skill to learn is an important step toward meeting this challenge. More fundamentally, our national commitment to equal opportunity and merit-based advancement is undermined when large educational achievement gaps exist even before children enter school. Government cannot fully level the playing field, but universal access to prekindergarten is a way to provide starting blocks to the most disadvantaged children so they can compete on an equal footing.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., R. C. Pianta and M. J. Cox, "Teachers' Judgments of Problems in the Transition to Kindergarten," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Measuring children's socioeconomic status is a standard procedure in social science research on education that uses a composite score including household income and parents' education levels and occupations. Lee and Burkum, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Coley, *op. cit.*; Lee and Burkum, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Jencks, Christopher, and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, Brookings Institution Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Includes funding for Head Start, Even Start, Early Reading First, IDEA preschool, and IDEA infants and toddlers programs specifically focused on preparing young children for academic success. States and school districts also choose to spend federal IDEA and Title I funds to provide preschool for disadvantaged and disabled children. In addition, federal government provided billions of dollars to states to support childcare through the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), but these funds are primarily focused on helping families to participate in the workforce, and not on ensuring early education experiences for children. In 1999 the General Accounting Office identified some 29 federal programs that provided early childhood education and care as a program purpose, at a total funding of some \$9 billion in 1999. The vast majority (over \$8 billion in 1999) of these funds for early childhood purposes were from Head Start, CCDF, and TANF.

<sup>7</sup> "At the Starting Line: Early Childhood Education Programs in the 50 States," *American Federation of Teachers*, December 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Statistics used throughout this paper likely overstate the percentage of children who participate in preschool programs, because the major national data collection sources on this topic do not separately report information on children who participate in preschool. Instead, they include both children in preschool and those in "center-based care" in one category. While center-based care overall is of higher quality than other forms of care, there is great variation; many childcare centers are of low quality, and the primary focus of these programs is not early childhood education but providing childcare to allow parents to work. So the percentage of children receiving high-quality early learning is likely to be substantially lower than these statistics suggest. Because evidence on childcare suggests that poor and low-income children are also more likely to be in low-quality care, the gaps are also likely larger than these data indicate. They are used here because they are the best national information available and they are the data commonly used in these debates. One important step the federal government could take to improve early childhood education would simply be to support better data collection of information on the number and percentage of children in quality preschool programs, rather than combining this with some forms of childcare.

<sup>9</sup> Administration for Children and Families, "Strengthening Head Start: What the Evidence Shows," *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, 2003, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/StrengthenHeadStart03/index.htm>.

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<sup>13</sup> Currie, Janet, "Early Childhood Intervention Programs: What Do We Know?," *Brookings Institution*, April 2000, <http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/es/research/projects/cr/doc/currie20000401.htm>.

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- <sup>21</sup> See, for example, the National Research Council reports: "Eager to Learn, Educating our Preschoolers," and "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children," for a summary of much of these findings.
- <sup>22</sup> Whitebrook, *op. cit.*
- <sup>23</sup> Hirsch, Jr., E.D., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, Doubleday, 1996.
- <sup>24</sup> "At the Starting Line: Early Childhood Education Programs in the 50 States," 2002.
- <sup>25</sup> Henry, Gary T., et al., "Report of the Findings from the Early Childhood Study: 2001-02," *Andrew Young School of Policy Studies*, Georgia State University, August 2003.
- <sup>26</sup> Gormley and Phillips, 2003.
- <sup>27</sup> Lee and Burkum, 2002; Zill, Nicholas, and Jerry West, "Entering Kindergarten: A Portrait of American Children When They Begin School: Findings from The Condition of Education 2000," *National Center for Education Statistics*, U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Coley, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, U.S. Department of Education, as cited in *Condition of Education*, 2002; Hart, Betty, and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe," *American Educator*, Spring 2003, [http://www.aft.org/american\\_educator/spring2003/catastrophe.html](http://www.aft.org/american_educator/spring2003/catastrophe.html).
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- <sup>29</sup> Henry, *op. cit.*
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- <sup>31</sup> Head Start requires all teachers to have a Child Development Associate credential, and one-half of teachers are required to have an associate's degree. (A CDA requires less education and training than an associate's degree.) Twelve states require teachers in their preschool programs to have a CDA, five require an associate's degree, two require some other combination of coursework less than an associate's degree, and 21 require a bachelor's degree. Most states do not set educational requirements for private preschool or childcare providers. (Source: National Institute for Early Education Research).
- <sup>32</sup> Bowman, Barbara T., M. Suzanne Donovan, and M. Susan Burns, eds., *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*, Academy Press, 2001.
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- <sup>34</sup> Zill, *op. cit.*
- <sup>35</sup> Head Start currently operates through direct federal grants to a range of local government, private and nonprofit agencies.
- <sup>36</sup> Miesels, Samuel J., and Sally Atkins-Burnett, "The Head Start National Reporting System: A Critique," *Young Children*, January 2004.
- <sup>37</sup> A version of the test is available in Spanish, but there are no accommodation provisions for children who speak a language other than Spanish or English, of whom thousands participate in Head Start and who will not be tested.
- <sup>38</sup> Miesels and Atkins-Burnett, *op. cit.*
- <sup>39</sup> One topic of contention in the current reauthorization is whether assessment results should play any role in Head Start funding decisions. Unlike in the past, when Head Start programs were designated essentially in perpetuity, barring evidence of severe failures, both the House bill and that currently before the Senate would require Head Start programs to re-compete for grants on a regular basis and/or show evidence of outcomes and program quality as a condition of maintaining funding. The House bill specifically does not subject Head Start programs to the new NRS assessment nor does it make Head Start program funding contingent on test results. The administration has stated that it does not intend to base Head Start funding decisions "solely" on NRS assessment performance, but has been vague and to some extent contradictory about whether and to what extent the assessment will be a factor in funding decisions.
- <sup>40</sup> Currie, *op. cit.*

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<sup>41</sup> "Early Education and Care: Overlap Indicates Need to Assess Crosscutting Programs," *General Accounting Office*, April 2000; "Idea of the Week: Budgeting for Results in School Readiness," *Democratic Leadership Council*, 2001, [http://www.ndol.org/ndol\\_ci.cfm?contentid=3135&kaid=131&subid=207](http://www.ndol.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=3135&kaid=131&subid=207).

<sup>42</sup> For example, 47 percent of children whose mothers do not work outside the home attend preschool programs. Denton and West, 2002; "Condition of Education," 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Currie, *op. cit.*; Whitebrook, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> "Cost of Providing Quality Preschool Education to America's 4-Year Olds," *National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey*, 2004, <http://nieer.org/resources/facts/index.php?FastFactID=5>; overall k-12 spending is from 1999-2000. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, cost estimates for the cost of "universal preschool" by Doug Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute.

<sup>46</sup> National Institute for Early Education Research, <http://nieer.org/resources/facts/index.php?FastFactID=5>.

<sup>47</sup> According to the American Federation of Teachers, state prekindergarten programs currently serve about 12 percent of 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds nationally. If all states were required to meet this level of effort by funding at least 12 percent of the cost of universal prekindergarten, that would reduce required federal expenditures by some \$1.1 billion, to \$8.1 billion annually. States could be required to devote an aggregate \$1.1 billion to universal prekindergarten.

<sup>48</sup> National Institute for Early Education Research. Poll Conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Market Strategies for National Institute for Early Education Research, November 29-December 31, 2001.

<sup>49</sup> Reynolds, Arthur J., Judy A. Temple, Dylan L. Robertson, and Emily A. Mann, "Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program," Report presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Prevention Research, June 1, 2001, <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/cbaexecsum4.html>, Barnett, 1996.

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