



Pre-K: Shaping the System That Shapes Children

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INTRODUCTION

This year, states will add almost one billion additional education tax dollars to their budgets as politicians in more than twenty states consider moving toward a Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) system. Although a spirited debate has taken place over the advantages to children of a pre-K education, there has been little or no debate on how, rather than whether, to offer early-childhood education (ECE). Because of this lack of discussion and study, many states are implementing well-intentioned policies in a flawed manner that could cause more harm than benefit.

The availability of prekindergarten education has increased steadily over the past four decades. While traditionally, government tailored these programs specifically for children with various disadvantages, ranging from socioeconomic to learning disability-related, there has been increasing interest in recent years in expanding pre-K opportunities more

universally. A number of factors are responsible for the nationwide surge in funding for pre-K programs. These factors include:

1. concerns about children's "school readiness" and subsequent academic achievement;
2. advances in early brain development research, which has shed light on the plasticity and learning capacity of the young brain;
3. the increasing proportion of working mothers and their need for child care;
4. concerted and well-funded efforts by pre-K advocacy groups; and
5. economists' promotion of pre-K as an economic development strategy.

Education researchers disagree on the long-term efficacy of pre-K, but they do generally agree that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from high-quality child care and early

education programs. Poor children are more likely to perform poorly in their classes and on tests of cognitive ability,² repeat grades or drop out of school, and experience serious emotional and behavioral problems.³ The consequences of these failures loom large on these youth and their communities. The reported poverty rate among high school dropouts was 22.2 percent in 2000, compared with a 3.2 percent poverty rate among those with at least a bachelor's degree.

In this paper, we look at pre-K options in light of K-12 public education and higher education systems and consider how best to offer early-childhood education services to those who need them most.

CREATING A SOLUTION OR A SYSTEM

The United States today provides education in three distinct models: 1. Community-based not-for-profit, for-profit, and faith-based organizations provide two-thirds or more of early care and education up to age five, with resources allocated through parental choice. 2. Public schools provide almost 90 percent of K-12 education, with resources allocated through school districts. 3. A diverse mix of public, private, and religious schools typifies the higher education system, with the resources allocated by student choice. As state legislators consider investment in pre-K, the choice of the right model carries enormous implications not only for parents and their children but also for the competitiveness of their state and country in a globalized economy.

The failure of K-12 schools to provide adequate services to many children underlies many scholarly and political debates. Observers often focus their attention on the fact that U.S. students perform poorly compared with students from other countries, or they ask why the K-12 system leaves so many poor children behind. The most recent trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggest that public

school proficiency rates remain low despite some improvements in benchmark fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics proficiency and a smaller improvement in reading proficiency in these same grades.⁴ Major structural problems remain, however, and the students for whom the system works the least well are predominantly poor and minority students. Jay P. Greene, head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, found that in the class of 2003, approximately 78 percent of white students graduated from high school with a regular diploma, compared with 55 percent of black students and 53 percent of Hispanic students. Though educational prospects have improved somewhat for black students over the past twenty years, they still lag behind prospects for white students, according to data from the National Center on Education Statistics. For Hispanics, the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, there is little evidence of academic progress.

Reflecting the universal desire to provide high-quality educational options for every child, the bipartisan "No Child Left Behind" legislation imposed new accountability requirements on public schools. One requirement is that public schools consistently failing the state's performance criteria must allow students in those schools to transfer to better-performing public schools if space is available. Enough space to accommodate all those students who want to transfer is never available. For example, in 2002, only 194 slots in better-performing schools were available to the 30,000 Baltimore schoolchildren attending failing schools. In Los Angeles, failing schools enrolled 223,000 students while no slots were available in better-performing schools. There is not adequate space in better-performing public schools to accommodate demand.

In contrast to this broken system, America's system of postsecondary education is the world's envy. Here, students are free to use public funds in the form of

Pell Grants or other similar public stipends at either public or private institutions. For example, a college student in Boston can decide for himself whether to take his publicly funded Pell Grant to the University of Massachusetts, Boston College, Brandeis University, or Harvard. Additionally, the federal government supports tens of thousands of students through government-subsidized long-term loans. This demand-side support stimulates a competitive supply of higher education: a diverse array of public, private, and religious colleges available to meet the needs of prospective students. Moreover, the system adapts and improves in response to the choices made by students.

CURRENT EFFORTS

Every state today provides funding, often with substantial federal assistance, for early care and education. A large portion of these funds supports work: in a welfare-reform world, single mothers must work to receive help and cannot work without child care. Funding for child care in many ways mirrors higher education support: middle-class parents receive a tax credit; and lower-income parents receive vouchers, often with parents paying the difference.

Federal Child-Care Efforts

Federal officials made early child care an issue to reflect the principle that government should support parents' efforts to enter the workforce. Extensive government funding subsidizes child care, albeit insufficiently, so that mothers (i.e., custodial single parents) with young children can work. Increased rates of women in the workforce generally drive the need for affordable child care. To accomplish its goal of helping mothers work, Congress uses various federal programs, including the following:⁵

- Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG): CCDBG provides funding of \$4.8

billion in the form of vouchers and constitutes the core child-care program for low-income families.⁶

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): States have the option of using their TANF dollars to provide child-care support over and above the CCDBG grant. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) estimates that, in 2004, states redirected \$3.3 billion in TANF funds to child care.⁷ These funds also flow as vouchers.
- Dependent Care Tax Credit: The dependent care tax credit allows parents a credit of up to 30 percent of care (up to almost \$5,000 per year for a family with two children). According to IRS estimates, this benefit equates to about \$2.7 billion a year.⁸ As a credit, this benefit operates similar to a voucher, facilitating maximum parental choice.
- Head Start: This program helps prepare children for school by funding a broad array of social and health services. Currently, \$6.8 billion is appropriated for early child care, including education, nutrition, health, and social services.⁹ This program currently does not provide much parental choice, and Congress is struggling with how to create more accountability and better results in this program.

Other federal programs delivered through states, such as Title XX and IV-E of the Social Security Act as well as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, also provide some child-care resources, often for children with special needs or for foster children or in conjunction with other services.

State Investments in Early Education

Twenty governors mentioned pre-K or early-childhood education in their 2005 State of the State addresses, and twenty-six state legislatures proposed increased investments in their state's pre-K programs for FY06. Proposed increases to state budgets for

2006 total just over \$600 million, excluding the Florida effort discussed below, the largest single-year jump in funding for state pre-K programs since 2001. In comparison, just eleven governors had proposed increases to their state's pre-K programs in 2004. Only nine states have no state-funded pre-K program at all (see Appendix B).¹⁰

Promotion of these programs generally begins with recognition of the obstacles facing poor and minority children, but often extends to universality across all income groups. In this latter case, advocates argue for middle-class subsidies not because they are particularly necessary but because these subsidies would ensure the durability of assistance to children who need it most. Such was the rationale leading to the huge California "Reiner" UPK initiative that voters rejected in part because it proposed to spend significant sums on children already enrolled in parent-pay programs. Thus, research about which children benefit most from pre-K, voters' preferences, and state budget constraints all suggest that priority should be given to children who would benefit most from early interventions as states move toward more pre-K funding. This will increase their opportunities in life and reduce the risk of a permanent underclass of hopeless and uneducated Americans.

No matter how well-intentioned the state officials are in authorizing such investments, how this new money is spent carries enormous implications. Funding should be driven through the existing successful system of high-quality early care and education. As Darcy Olsen, president of the Goldwater Institute, states: "America's flexible approach to early education gives children a strong foundation. Skills assessment at kindergarten entry and reports by kindergarten teachers show a large and increasing majority of preschoolers are prepared for kindergarten. The effectiveness of the current system is also evident in early test scores. At age ten, U.S. children have higher reading, math, and science scores than their European peers who

attend the government preschools cited by advocates as models for the United States."¹¹

As states reach out to help more children, they must consider a disquieting reality: U.S. students, while better prepared than most of their international competitors up to third grade, slip in performance in public schools as they progress through the elementary grades. This crucial point leads to two obvious questions. First, if the early child-care system works, and the only problem is that children from economically challenging circumstances cannot afford high-quality pre-K, why not fund their participation in the current system? And second, why combine a currently effective pre-K solution with an often ineffective K-12 system? Sound policy would maintain market-based elements of the existing pre-K and avoid "governmentalizing" pre-K, forcing a delivery model that would be less effective and potentially disastrous for a number of reasons, five of which we outline below.

1. Unused capacity currently exists.

To address the problem of limited space, legislators who are interested in adding two more grades to the public school system suggest capital programs to help add classrooms, thus increasing the cost significantly. Pre-K proponents at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) note, "New capacity will have to be created as we move to greater availability of state-funded pre-K." In contrast, private and community-based providers possess additional space (around 30 percent more) for students with vacancy rates in many states. These public school physical constraints, coupled with the state and local fiscal constraints, have led some advocates for increased public investment in early education to compromise with their legislative opponents and skeptics by supporting the use of public funds for these young children to attend private schools. In nearly every state that decided to add publicly funded instruction for young children, physical and fiscal constraints led to some

accommodations, including utilization of private providers. Many states have chosen to allow for parental choice through vouchers or tax credits. Indeed, in the last two years, the Democratic governors of Pennsylvania, Iowa, and New Mexico have accepted systems based on vouchers or tax credits in order to obtain legislative approval of their proposals for greater investments in early education.

2. Moving four-year-olds to government schools will be financially crippling for many families.

Child care is expensive—generally ranging from \$5,000 to \$8,000 per year. This already considerable expense will increase appreciably for younger children if four-year-olds leave for government schools. A state program that provides early education only in the public schools will draw four-year-olds into “free” government schools. This is bad news for small community child-care providers and parents of children under four because such a policy will put some providers out of business while driving up child-care costs for parents. This cost shifting occurs because “free” pre-K will drive up already high vacancy rates in many centers and because state regulations increase teacher-pupil ratios as a child’s age increases. The majority of states (twenty-eight) require a staff-child ratio of 1:10 (or better) for three- and four-year-olds, while infant ratios are generally set at 1:3.¹² The presence of four-year-olds helps offset the higher costs for younger children. This threat recently led an official of a National Council of La Raza affiliate to express concerns that if California causes four-year-olds to leave Latino community-based providers for public school, it is reasonable to expect that many earnest and caring family centers would be forced to close their doors.

3. Students benefit from the parental involvement that accompanies choice.

Facilitating parental involvement enhances educational outcomes. A Georgia State University

report noted that parental involvement during prekindergarten “can promote children’s school readiness and is associated with higher academic achievement and fewer behavior problems through adolescence, at least in low-income families. It can also lead to greater parental involvement in elementary school, which is associated with higher achievement for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds.”¹³

Harvard University’s Robert Putnam, the social capital expert and author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, notes: “Kindergarten reform was brought to the U.S. at the turn of the last century and was initially a great source of social capital, entirely non-governmental in sponsorship. (The ‘teachers’ were all passionate volunteers and they sponsored classes and clubs for moms while the kids were attending the classes.) However, once the program was transferred into the public school system, the professional pressures from regular teachers led to the kindergarten teachers having to become more ‘professional’ and less sensitive to the social dimensions of what they were doing, and ancillary activities (mothers’ clubs and so on) were greatly reduced.”¹⁴

These observations, of course, do not lead to the conclusion that states should eliminate funding for pre-K and reinstate sheer volunteerism, but rather the realization that how a state delivers early-childhood education will affect parental participation. The issue is simply who should tell a four-year-old where to go to school: the state or his parents. If parents retain the right, they will be more involved in the school. This participation results both from convenience, such as the school’s distance from work or home, and from the personal responsibility that flows from the selection. Sometimes advocates for UPK fail to recognize the real-life needs of families. It should be clear that a four-year-old’s education cannot be configured

separately from other essential family concerns, such as child care, transportation, individual characteristics of the child, and sibling issues. Allowing parents to choose where their children attend school recognizes that these factors play an important part in determining whether a working mother can participate. School selection represents an important first step in connecting family and school.

4. Families need discretion in deciding what is best for them.

Families face very different circumstances. Allowing a choice of schools facilitates the best solution for each parent. As stated by the advocacy group Pre-K Now, “Families may select a private or non-profit center-based program that also offers care before and after the pre-K program hours, is located near their work or a grandparent, or provides a special Montessori or Reggio Emilio program.” Parents will more easily be able to blend the multiple ECE funding streams when they have maximum choice.

Recent surveys reflect overwhelming voter support for parental choice, suggesting the significance of deferring to parents on the issue of placement. In a poll conducted by United Ways of Texas, 67.9 percent of Texas voters agreed that delivering state-funded high-quality prekindergarten education programs in settings other than school buildings is important.¹⁵ Community Solutions of Ohio commissioned a similar poll that revealed an even greater interest in the preservation of choice in pre-K delivery: 74 percent of Ohioans surveyed believe that state-funded early care and education programs should be available in a setting other than a school building.¹⁶

5. Competition produces quality.

Contemporary research indicates that competition has a positive impact on educational quality. A recent

study found that the positive effects extend to both private and public schools and that both “appeared to respond to the incentives of competition.”¹⁷

Not all parents need to be informed consumers to create sufficient competitive pressure to force continuous school improvement. Informed, marginal shoppers can influence quality across a delivery system. Like marginal consumers, parents visit schools, ask questions, and evaluate performance criteria in order to choose a school for their children.¹⁸ Their informed behavior affects the marketplace disproportionately as schools strive to respond to these parents. Assigning children to a government school would erode this healthy competition.

Market competition also causes providers to differentiate their products. For young children, the research on what works and exactly how it works continues to evolve. This is one reason that parents intuitively choose so many different approaches for their young children. Different approaches work for different children. Public schools rely on administrative and political structures to establish teaching techniques and curriculum and arrive at a narrow set of standardized approaches to apply across state schools. Many scholars argue that bureaucratic rules and political interest groups restrict government schools from appropriately tailoring pedagogy and curriculum. Conversely, scholars argue that private schools are more responsive and effective at teaching because they must react more directly to parental demands as translated through the marketplace.¹⁹ Given the rich variety of instructional approaches for young children, avoiding this bureaucratic hindrance should be a fundamental consideration when a state chooses an approach to pre-K. Competition guarantees that the education market will address all niches.

While a large body of research²⁰ supports the need for greater competition in the K-12²¹ education system, the pre-K system operates in an entirely dissimilar political and institutional framework, where competition currently reigns. Legislators and governors thus face the question of whether they should facilitate the existing competitive market or “governmentalize” the whole pre-K system.

WHAT STATES SHOULD DO

Any state’s answer to the “how to offer pre-K” question should build upon the rich competition that now exists and should be modeled after the current U.S. higher education system. Over 80 percent of children receive early care and education in nongovernmental centers. In fact, “the vast majority (29) of states with a program are delivering prekindergarten according to ... [a] mixed-delivery model that includes schools and community-based settings (and) privately operated child care.”²² The proposed investments in pre-K by states across the country can greatly affect the direction of this educational market.

A government agency involved in the delivery of a public service, except in unusual circumstances, cannot fairly administer a competitive system. Successful private and community-based education reduces the demand for supply from government schools, and vice versa. In the competitive outsourcing world, a major challenge in conducting public-private competition is attempting to create an arm’s-length transaction between the purchaser and the provider. There must be a distinction between the in-house department and public employees who oversee competition and monitor subsequent service delivery (the purchaser) and the in-house department and public employees who compete to provide the service (the provider). To ensure the integrity of public-private competition, in-house departments and public employees should not perform both purchaser and provider

functions.²³ William Eggers, of Deloitte Consulting and a public-private partnership expert, concludes: “For managed competition to be perceived as equitable by the private sector, a firewall must be created between the government as purchaser and government as service provider. From the private sector’s standpoint, organizational separation is essential to maintaining confidence that the public sector is serious about having a level playing field. The best way to create a firewall between the government as purchaser and the in-house unit provider is to institutionally separate the purchaser and provider. ... The purchaser/provider split allows policymakers to receive more objective policy advice.”²⁴

Whether in education or other public services, systems in which a provider can authorize, license, and regulate its competition undermine many would-be competitors in the public sector. These include charter schools restricted by their chartering boards from fully and fairly competing against government schools; and transportation agencies, such as Caltrans,²⁵ that change rules for outside providers bidding on a contract. In education, regulatory neutrality is required to establish a market that helps parents make the best decisions for their children.

Public schools benefit from the advantages of no taxation, subsidized overhead, and the donation of certain indirect costs such as custodial services and, often, pensions. A more troublesome advantage, however, is the fact that in some states, government schools may receive funds to build new classrooms when an oversupply of spaces with licensed child-care providers already exists. Funding schools instead of education wastes tax dollars. If a supply shortage exists, the per-diem payment could be set in a way that sustains the borrowing necessary to build new classrooms. Given state resource limitations, wrestling pre-K into government-run schools, while ignoring existing capacity, makes little sense,

especially if the government-run schools threaten the viability of private providers. The best way to take advantage of current capacity, while controlling costs, is through a publicly funded system of choice that would allow parents to choose the best early-childhood education environment for their children, whether run by a government, nonprofit, or for-profit provider, so long as the provider complies with certain standards.

States should build upon the foundation of the existing early care and education system. At the same time, every effort should be made to maximize the public goals—to better prepare children for a lifetime of learning and advancement—that justify new early-childhood education expenditures. This approach recognizes the shift in government from sole monopolistic provider to catalyst for a network of providers, utilizing private funding and mixing it with funding from state, local, and federal governments. Such “governance by network” typically includes measurable performance goals, assigned responsibilities for each partner, and the structured flow of information across public and private boundaries. The ultimate goal is to produce enhanced public value far greater than the sum of what government—or any of the other players—could accomplish without collaboration.²⁶ Network-centric governance entails vast benefits, including specialization, innovation, flexibility, and increased reach, as well as serious challenges.

To meet challenges, government needs to ensure quality, affordability, and access instead of controlling the delivery system itself. Managing the network requires different technical skills for state officials. A government manager’s job used to be relatively straightforward management of a program or service. Professionalism meant applying rules in a systematic, standardized, and highly structured manner. By comparison, managing in a networked environment demands an entirely different set of competencies, including the ability to negotiate, to

manage variations across boundaries, and to encourage flexibility while demanding accountability. In this new approach to governance, states investing resources in pre-K should consider the following issues to maximize efficacy:

1. **Educational standard setting.** States assuming that inputs lead to quality outcomes may overregulate the pre-K system. Extremely low teacher-student ratios, for example, often drive up costs substantially for parents—without producing better educational results. California previously experienced a teacher shortage and eroded education quality because of this type of overregulation.
2. **Visibility and transparency.** Better access to information produces better decisions, which reduces risk. Greater transparency allows government officials to monitor services with clarity and immediacy. Parents need accessible, comprehensible, and comprehensive information relating to pre-K providers. The state needs to produce disaggregated online information to help parents choose providers based on qualitative differences.²⁷
3. **Health and safety.** In states today, an extensive regulatory and inspection regime exists regarding health and safety requirements for child-care centers; these requirements should suffice for pre-K as well. Rational regulations, fairly enforced, will facilitate quality.
4. **Assessments.** State funding of pre-K should require simple assessments. In this way, quality outcome data would be available to help parents choose schools while helping regulators identify and terminate inadequate programs. Dr. Susan Landry of the University of Texas developed a promising outcome assessment that uses results from teacher-conducted assessments

produced from an easy-to-use, handheld, wireless device with carefully monitored and evaluated data.²⁸

5. **Citizen-centric systematization.** In setting up a new state system, public officials need to be sensitive to the great variety of parental circumstances. Generally, government organizes these processes for the convenience of the bureaucracy, not of the citizens. Officials make decisions based on the prerequisites of the agency without regard for customer needs, while driving up their costs. A system that allows parents to make informed choices, while providing maximum flexibility and variety, would fulfill this goal.
6. **Accountability.** State and local officials must insist on accountability when private providers use public funds. A state-operated back-office system attached to new devices can track which child is in which school each day through a smart card, providing tracking, financial record keeping, ease of payment, and management reports that can be distributed to applicable contract monitors. Advancements in technology allow for accountability that was impossible a few years ago. A state can set up one system that supports and monitors the results in all schools, whether public or private, using data generated as parents swipe their cards at the provider when checking in a child for the day.

CONCLUSIONS

Across the country, politicians and academics continue to debate the efficacy of universal pre-K services while expending little or no energy on the fundamental question of how to provide these early education services. Policymakers can expand the current open market while insisting on high standards and helping parents become informed

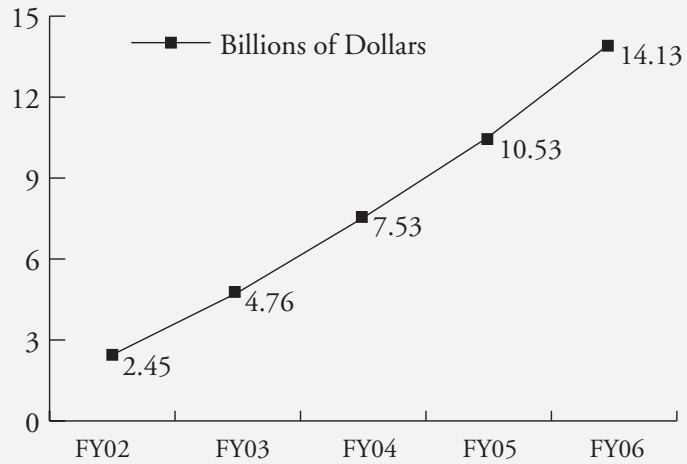
consumers (resembling the higher education model), or they can incorporate these three- and four-year-olds into the existing K-12 system. These are high-stakes questions, not just in terms of dollars but also in terms of human capital development. U.S. children, most of whom start in private early child care and education, outperform much of the world until the third grade; but these same U.S. children slip against the global benchmarks almost every year from third grade to eighth grade in the public K-12 system. Yet, curiously, in many states, lobbyists and legislators push for funding to flow to these underperforming school districts to expand their “markets” to include three- and four-year-olds.

Education policy and experience suggest that government does more good by establishing rules and assessment procedures, providing information, and funding children, than by using its power to override parental choices by inducing young children to attend government-run schools. Further, when government asserts itself over parents in choices concerning very young children, it intrudes on fundamental family decisions. It counterproductively distances parents from their children’s schooling and undermines the benefits of substantial state investments.

The current decentralized pre-K system produces good results. By maximizing the current mixed-delivery system for pre-K services, aligning it more closely with the successful system of higher education than the K-12 system, everyone will benefit. Such a solution ensures that quality community centers will remain in business, poor children will get a better start toward college and work, and parents will exercise important control over and participation in the education of their children. Children facing the challenges of poverty or difficult family circumstances need more help not fewer options.

APPENDIX A:

CUMULATIVE PRE-K FUNDING IN 50 STATES AND D.C.



Source: Info from Votes Count: Legislative Action on Pre-K Fiscal Year 2006, Pre-K Now, November 2005.

APPENDIX B:

TABLE I. ANTICIPATED FUNDING CHANGES FOR FY 2006

State	Anticipated FY2006 Funding
Alabama	Flat funding of state pre-K
Alaska	Increase of .16%
Arizona	Increase of .052%
Arkansas	Increase of 39.06%
California	Flat funding of state pre-K
Colorado	Increase of 38.74%
Connecticut	Increase of 6.8%
Delaware	Increase of 8.2%
Florida	New program with first-year funding of \$387 million
Georgia	Increase of 4.9%
Hawaii	Increase of 156.2%
Idaho	No funding of state pre-K
Illinois	Increase of 12.33%
Indiana	No funding of state pre-K
Iowa	Flat funding of state pre-K
Kansas	Increase of 6.25%
Kentucky	Flat funding of state pre-K
Louisiana	Increase of 40.5%

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED). ANTICIPATED FUNDING CHANGES FOR FY 2006

State	Anticipated FY2006 Funding
Maine	Anticipated 1.875% increase
Maryland	Flat funding of state pre-K
Massachusetts	Increase of 1.94%
Michigan	Flat funding of state pre-K
Minnesota	Increase of 4.53%
Mississippi	No funding of state pre-K
Missouri	Increase of .68%
Montana	No funding of state pre-K
Nebraska	Increase of 76.19%
Nevada	Increase of 3.45%
New Hampshire	No funding of state pre-K
New Jersey	Early Childhood Program Aid received flat funding (\$30 million); Early Launch to Learning Initiative received a decrease in funding (from \$15 million to \$4 million); Abbott preschools projected to receive an increase (from \$444.7 million to \$455 million).
New Mexico	New program, nonrecurring funding of \$5 million
New York	Flat funding of state pre-K
North Carolina	Increase of 30.33%
North Dakota	No funding of state pre-K
Ohio	Increase of 23.09%
Oklahoma	Anticipated 13.28% increase
Oregon	Increase of 1.88%
Pennsylvania	Increase of 60.98%
Rhode Island	Flat funding of state pre-K
South Carolina	Flat funding of state pre-K
South Dakota	No funding of state pre-K
Tennessee	Increase of 250%
Texas	Anticipated 6.675% increase
Utah	No funding of state pre-K
Vermont	Though state funding of the Early Education Initiative decreased slightly (1.51%), due to public school grants toward pre-K, pre-K program funding will probably increase.
Virginia	Increase of 33.52%
Washington	Increase of 6.67%
West Virginia	Increase of 12.93%
Wisconsin	Anticipated 25.58% increase
Wyoming	No funding of state pre-K
District of Columbia	Increase of 11.79%

Most info from Votes Count: Legislative Action on Pre-K Fiscal Year 2006, Pre-K Now, November 2005.

APPENDIX C: “GOVERNMENTALIZATION” OF PRE-K

Some of the nation’s most effective advocates for universal pre-K programs also support legislative and regulatory requirements sure to increase the government’s role in early education programs. For example, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has created a “quality pre-K checklist,” by which it has begun rating all state-funded pre-K programs. Not surprisingly, the areas of focus all involve the potential or necessity for greater government involvement in the enterprise of pre-K. Its checklist values inputs such as class size, staff-child ratios, professional development requirements, curriculum standards, and the provision of family support services. These items are traditionally part of the inputs used to assess government programs; they are not necessarily the criteria used by parents to assess the outcomes of private education programs.

In comparing the NIEER checklist with our own recommendations, it is clear that the NIEER standards focus on setting educational standards and issues of health and safety. The checklist does not create visibility and transparency in the pre-K system; it neither suggests appropriate assessments, such as DIBELS, nor addresses the needs of various parents who would be interested in accessing pre-K services. A system that maximizes parental involvement by allowing them to choose the right early educational environment for their children will prove to be the most transparent, providing the information necessary for informed decisions. Two examples of successful pre-K choice are evident in Florida and New Jersey.

APPENDIX D: FLORIDA’S VOLUNTARY PRE-K PROGRAM

The 2005–06 school year marked the beginning of Florida’s Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program.²⁹ Mandated by a 2002 voter-approved constitutional amendment, VPK allows parents to send their children to any private or public pre-K program free of charge. In December 2004, the Florida legislature enacted the largest parental-choice pre-K program in the nation. Children can receive \$2,500 each to attend public or private pre-K programs. When summer 2006 enrollments are included in first-year enrollment figures, the number of children benefiting from VPK services will top 100,000. The bulk of these children, more than 85,000, attend private preschools. A school-year program consists of 540 instructional hours, and a summer program consists of 300 hours. Parents have complete control over which provider to use. Private providers must have state-approved accreditation, a Gold Seal Quality Care designation, or the approval of a local early-learning coalition.

NEW JERSEY’S COURT-ORDERED VOUCHERS

In 1998, the New Jersey Supreme Court cited the need for early education to remedy the socioeconomic disadvantages of low-income children living in thirty urban districts and equalize the educational starting points of urban three- and four-year-olds with their suburban peers. The court further stipulated that the program should be implemented with all speed and that local providers be used whenever possible. Early on, providers were almost entirely private, though the public schools have since begun participating. Providers upgraded curricula and facilities to enhance early education. Parents choose the provider, space permitting, though the district remains the fiscal custodian of the funds.

ENDNOTES

¹ Stephen Goldsmith is also associated with Knowledge Learning Corporation, a private provider of early childhood education and care.

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⁴ NAEP results available online at: <http://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.

⁵ Michele Friedman, Coalition of Human Needs, as cited in the Almanac of Policy Issues, available online at: http://www.policyalmanac.org/social_welfare/childcare.shtml.

⁶ "Child Care Assistance in 2004: States Have Fewer Funds for Child Care," Center for Law and Social Policy, December 1, 2005.

⁷ Child Care and Development Fund, Fiscal Year 2005, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁸ Federal Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, Total Spending 2002, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

⁹ Head Start Program Fact Sheet, Fiscal Year 2006, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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