



Promoting Health and Cost Control in States:

How States Can Improve Community Health & Well-being Through Policy Change

Universal Pre-kindergarten Programs

Background

A universal pre-kindergarten (pre-K) program is publicly funded preschool offered to 4-year-old children regardless of family income, the child's abilities, or any other eligibility factors.² Access to high-quality early childhood education programs can positively impact a child's health, academic achievement and social development.^{3,4,5} Children who attend high quality pre-K programs tend to have fewer behavioral problems in school and are better prepared to transition to kindergarten, which can contribute to future academic success.⁶ Overall, participants of high quality pre-K programs are more likely to live longer and healthier lives.

Universal pre-K programs enhance the well-being of children of all socio-economic backgrounds.⁷ However, some of the benefits have been more pronounced among children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs.⁸ Prioritizing equitable access to high quality pre-K programs for rural and disadvantaged children can help close achievement gaps in those children's education.

Behavioral Benefits of High-Quality Pre-K

- Fewer behavioral problems in school
- Lower adolescent crime rates
- Lower teen birth rates
- Reduced risk of:
 - alcohol and drug misuse
 - aggression and violence

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What is Universal Pre-K?

- A universal pre-K program is publicly funded preschool offered to all 4-year-old children regardless of family income, the child's abilities, and other eligibility factors.¹ Each state can define its scope of "universal" eligibility and program focus by establishing eligibility criteria.

How does Universal Pre-K Improve Health

- Research suggests that high-quality pre-K programs improve children's academic outcomes, such as reading, language, and math skills and reduce physical and behavioral health issues including obesity. Later, these same children have reduced risk for alcohol and drug misuse, depression, and adolescent pregnancy as they age.

What is the Economic Impact?

- High-quality universal pre-K programs have been shown to be cost-effective over time, providing benefits to program participants, taxpayers, and society through reductions in healthcare and education spending, and increased earnings for program participants.

Despite the positive impact of high-quality pre-K programs, only 33% of four-year-olds are enrolled in a state-funded pre-K program as of 2018.⁹ Currently, eight states and the District of Columbia provide state funded pre-K to more than 50% of their state's 4-year-olds. Of those nine, only three states and D.C. offer pre-K to more than 70% of their four-year-olds.¹⁰ Six states do not offer any state-funded pre-K programs.¹¹

What Are States' Role?

State legislatures can expand access to state-funded, high-quality pre-K programs and set funding and eligibility requirements. States can also ensure the quality of pre-K programs by establishing teacher qualifications, minimum number of hours per day, as well as health and learning standards. Legislatures can also ensure proper curricula alignment to help children smoothly transition from pre-K into primary school. Additionally, states can set eligibility requirements that prioritize children from low-income households or disadvantaged backgrounds to promote equitable access to quality pre-K programs.

Linking Health and Education

Universal pre-K programs are linked to positive health and educational outcomes.¹² Children who attended state-sponsored pre-K demonstrated improved cognitive abilities, language, math, and reading skills.^{13,14} There is also evidence that the quality of pre-K programs can affect future academic achievement. One study showed that children in higher quality pre-K programs demonstrated higher academic achievement at age 15, compared to children who had enrolled in lower quality programs.¹⁵ In the long-term, benefits of universal pre-K include reductions in teen birth and interactions with the criminal justice system throughout a participant's lifetime.^{16,17}

States that have implemented universal pre-K programs have seen positive results among participants. In Oklahoma, state-funded universal pre-K demonstrated stronger effects for Latino, Black, and poor children.¹⁸ Georgia's universal pre-K program expanded program access and positively impacted disadvantaged rural children most, who showed improvements in math and reading test scores.¹⁹

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

- Improved reading, language, and math skills
- Lower drop-out rate
- Reduced need for special education



Investing in pre-K Yields Economic Benefits

Studies indicate that pre-K programs are cost-effective. The benefits from children's increased future earnings and reduced public spending exceed the cost of pre-K programs.²⁰ One study of Los Angeles' preschool programs found that approximately half of the cost of the program would be recouped through reductions in public spending on Medicaid and other social programs as a result of better health outcomes associated with expanding pre-K programs.²¹ Therefore, the benefits of offering state-funded universal pre-K programs extends to taxpayers in addition to the children participating.²²

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

- Reduced financial burden on families
- Social benefit-to-cost ratio: \$4.63:1
- Reduced spending on Medicaid and other social programs
- Children's future earnings may exceed the cost of pre-K programs

TAKEAWAYS FOR MULTIPLE AUDIENCES — COMMUNICATING THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF UNIVERSAL PRE-K PROGRAMS

Policymakers

- Pre-K programs help children lead healthier lives.
- State-sponsored pre-K programs are cost-effective, increase future earnings and reduce public spending.
- Improved academic and social development of participants reduce the burdens on health, education and justice sectors.
- Expanding access to pre-K can have the greatest impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Legislators can ensure the quality of programs by setting requirements for teachers' qualification, funding, number of instructional hours, and health and learning standards.

Public Health Advocates

- Pre-K programs decrease participants' risk of developing chronic diseases and behavioral problems.
- Reduces risk of adolescent substance misuse, teen pregnancies, and STDs.
- Enable participants to lead longer and healthier lives.

Educators

- Pre-K children are better prepared for primary school cognitively and socially.
- Students are less likely to have behavioral problems in later years.
- Students may perform better academically and be less likely to drop out.

Communities

- Pre-K programs support K-12 education success.
- Decreases teen violence and crime.
- Tuition-free, state-sponsored pre-K programs help address economic disparities by increasing access and reducing the economic burden for families.

Business

- Pre-K programs lead to higher high school graduation rates may contribute to a greater pool of qualified candidates.
- Life-long health benefits mean a more productive workforce.



Interested in learning more about Universal pre-K and other evidence-based policies? Visit the PHACCS website to read the full report and other policy briefs for our 13 recommended policies.

Endnotes

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