

2026 Legislative Priority: Preschool

Background: Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP), started in 2007, grew to serve 25,330 four-year-olds by 2019-20. Enrollment dropped by 2,453 students during COVID, but has since rebounded, now funding 24,311 students in 2023-24 school year (DE [SVPP Fact Sheet](#) Winter 2025). In addition to the SVPP, public school preschools serve an additional 5,104 students with other funding sources. Although Iowa ranks 5th in the nation in 4-year-old access to PK, there are still over 4,000 fewer PK students than first graders, leaving 12% of children out of quality PK. Reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade is critical. Quality PK helps students reach this State goal.

Why does preschool matter? Sarah Daily, *Initiatives from Preschool to Third Grade: A Policymaker's Guide*, shows that quality PK prevents costly outcomes. (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, October 2014). The [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) quotes studies on long-term ROI: another study shows improved behavior and social skills. The Journal of Research in Childhood Education, [The Long Term Benefits](#), 2017, demonstrates for low-income students in quality PK compared to peers without it, the PK group had fewer behavior issues, referrals, better attendance, initially more special education in kindergarten (identified earlier) but less special education services by 4th grade than the control group.

The Perry Preschool Project documents \$17 savings for every dollar invested. The majority of states now view access to high-quality PK programs as a critical long-term economic investment in future workforce. Education Commission of the States, Oct. 2014:

<http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf> Six rigorous, long-term evaluation studies have found that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs were:

- 25% less likely to drop out of school.
- 40% less likely to become a teen parent.
- 50% less likely to be placed in special education.
- 60% less likely to never attend college.
- 70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

Labor Market Benefit: In addition to fostering student success, full-day PK significantly contributes to increasing labor market participation. Although preschool, with certified teachers and a rigorous curriculum, is not child care, both similarly improve labor participation of young parents. When children have a safe place to be, parents work more, miss less work, and increase productivity. Iowa has a child care shortage. Four-year-olds in child care who could experience full-day PK would free up a child care slot for another child. In "[Child care and parent labor force participation: a review of the research literature](#)", the study shares empirical evidence from a free universal PK program implemented in Washington, D.C.; "the percentage of mothers with young children participating in the labor force increased by 12 percentage points—10 of which were attributable to universal preschool." Another [study of the D.C. program](#) concludes: "Using both a synthetic control method and a difference-in-differences analysis, this study finds increases in maternal labor force participation are strongly linked to the district's implementation of universal preschool."

Barriers to Expansion. SVPP funding is paid entirely with state funds, based on the prior year's enrollment count. Unlike funding for K-12 budgets, there is no adjustment for enrollment growth (on-time funding modified supplemental amount.) Hold harmless budget provisions and programs to support early literacy are more important than ever in supporting Iowa's youngest students. Short of transferring a few unexpended categorical funds into the flexibility account, districts are prohibited from using general fund dollars to pay for PK expenses, leaving parent pay or grant funding as the only remaining options. For non-English-speaking families, PK is critical, but the 0.5 weighting is not enough to cover the costs of translators, staff and materials, let alone the full-day program to jump-start early language development. Transportation is also a barrier; half-day PK requires funding for additional routes. The DE's SVPP Fact Sheet also shows that Iowa ranks 39th in state spending on access to PK. With other states providing full day programming, especially for students with additional needs, it is no surprise that they are spending more. Iowa should be providing for these students, too.

Workforce and Childcare: Full-day preschool with a 1.0 weighting for lower-income and non-English-speaking 4-year-olds is a win-win-win: 1) a win for students with improved outcomes, 2) a win for the business community with increased labor participation and improved childcare access, and 3) a win for taxpayers as students with quality PK are 50% less likely to experience long-term special education costs typically borne by property taxpayers. Quality preschool is an excellent example of the maxim, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Quality Preschool:

Iowa's preschool program, initiated with strong support from the business community nearly a decade ago, should generate 1.0 weighting for full-day programming, including early childhood instruction combined with wrap-around services and childcare for low-income and non-English speaking students. Districts must retain flexibility to offer a variety of program options, reflecting student and community needs and staffing capacity, including half-day and full-day preschool, or a combination of early childhood education and child care when necessary to provide a full-day environment to minimize transportation and workforce barriers.

Quality preschool programs deliver a proven return on investment for both student achievement and taxpayers, while also freeing up childcare slots for younger children. Full-day preschool allows parents to fully participate in the workforce. Plus, it is good for students. Six rigorous, long-term evaluation studies have found that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs were 25% less likely to drop out of school, 40% less likely to become a teen parent, 50% less likely to be placed in special education, 60% less likely to never attend college and 70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime (*Source: Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf> Oct. 2014*). Quality Preschool is one of the best prevention investments a state can make in supporting a quality workforce and saving taxpayers the expense of poor educational outcomes.

Additionally, schools should be allowed to use General Fund dollars or generate spending authority to pay for preschool expansion.