

UEN 2025 Priority Issue Brief: Preschool

Background: Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP), first implemented in 2007-08, grew to serve 25,330 four-year-olds by the 2019-20 school year, then dropped by almost 2,500 students during COVID. Participation in the SVPP has rebounded some, funding seats for 23,360 students in the Fall of 2024, based on the enrollment count of students in SVPP in October 2023. SVPP enrollment was lower than the count of first graders in the same school year by about over 11,300 students, meaning nearly a third of students may not have been served in a quality preschool. Studies estimate that young children from low-income families may hear between 4 and 30 million fewer words than children from professional families, creating a vocabulary gap that can impact later literacy development (Gilkerson/Lena Research Foundation 2017 and Hart and Risley 1995 respectively). Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is critical. Quality preschool helps students reach this important benchmark.

Why does preschool matter? The Perry Preschool Project, 40 years later, documents \$17 savings for every dollar invested (earlier findings of \$8 saved for every dollar invested are also often cited). Once considered a strategy just to support working parents with childcare needs, 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, <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf> Oct. 2014: *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.

Sarah Daily, *Initiatives from Preschool to Third Grade: A Policymaker's Guide*, shows reductions in costly outcomes that quality preschool prevents (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, October 2014). In the Learning Policy Institute's research, [Untangling the Evidence on Preschool Effectiveness: Insights for Policymakers](#), 2019, with a rigorous evaluation of 21 public PK programs, "finds that students who attend high-quality preschool programs reap benefits that can last throughout their lives, and are more prepared for school and experience substantial learning gains in comparison to children who do not attend preschool. 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 preschool compared to low-income students 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.

Barriers to Expansion. SVPP funding is paid entirely with state funds, based on the prior year's enrollment count. Unlike the regular program enrollment for K-12 budget purposes, there is no adjustment for enrollment growth known as on-time funding modified supplemental amount if more PK students are served than in the prior year. Hold harmless budget provisions and programs to support early literacy are more important than ever in supporting Iowa's youngest students to academic success. 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, preschool is critical, but, the 0.5 weighting is not enough to cover the costs of translators, staff and additional materials, let alone the full-day programming that would jump-start early language development. Transportation is also a barrier; half-day PK requires additional routes, very costly to school districts that might otherwise provide transportation.

Labor Market Benefit: in addition to fostering student success, full-day preschool programs significantly contribute to increasing labor market participation. It's important to clearly state that preschool, with certified teachers and a rigorous curriculum, is not synonymous with child care. However, providing child care and preschool improves labor participation of young parents in the same way. When children have a safe place to be, parents often opt into more employment, miss less work and increase productivity. Iowa has a childcare shortage. Any four-year-olds in childcare who could experience full-day PK would free up a childcare 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., which states "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 that these increases in maternal labor force participation are strongly linked to the district's implementation of universal preschool."

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 academic success down the road, 2) a win for the business community when parents can fully engage in employment and freed up childcare slots can serve waiting lists enabling other parents to work, and 3) a win for taxpayers as students with quality preschool are 50% less likely to experience the costs of long-term special education typically borne by property taxpayers. Quality preschool is an excellent example of the maxim that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

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, as determined by student and community need 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 and allowing parents to fully participate in the workforce: 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.