

# 1 Pre-Kindergarten Education

The Urban Education Task Force recommends launching a high-quality pre-kindergarten program in Rhode Island, starting with a pilot program in 2009 and continuing with full implementation after the pilot, giving priority to children in communities with low-performing schools and low literacy performance in fourth grade.

## Introduction

Research has consistently shown that three- and four-year-olds who attend a high-quality preschool are more successful in kindergarten and beyond – both academically and socially. Several longitudinal research studies have shown that providing access to high-quality preschool is one of the most cost-effective investments government can make. Momentum is building across the country to improve access to high-quality preschool programs. Many states have launched major pre-K education initiatives in recent years. Until recently, Rhode Island was one of only twelve states without a state-funded pre-K program.

Participation in preschool education has been steadily increasing during the past decade for young children from middle- and upper-income families. Nationally, 66 percent of four-year-olds and more than 40 percent of three-year-olds were enrolled in a preschool education program in 2005. However, enrollment in pre-K remains highly unequal. Many of the children who might benefit the most from pre-K participation do not attend. Families with modest incomes (under \$60,000) have the least access to preschool education.

The quality of preschool education is critically important. Only high-quality programs produce lasting positive outcomes for children. High-quality pre-K classrooms are staffed by

a well-educated, appropriately compensated teacher and teaching assistant with a small group of children (twenty or fewer). Teachers use a variety of teaching strategies to engage children in carefully designed, play-based learning opportunities to foster development of language, literacy, math, and social skills.

Pre-K benefits children, their families, and their communities. From improved academic outcomes to the economic savings for schools and states, the benefits of high-quality pre-K are irrefutable. The following summary of the benefits of pre-K from the national organization Pre-K Now, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, highlights some of the research findings about the positive impact of high-quality pre-K education (see appendix 1S for sources and more detail).

## Successful Students

- Children who attended a pre-K program had higher high school graduation rates (Chicago).
- Pre-K helped children do better on standardized tests as fourth-graders (Michigan).
- Pre-K reduced grade repetition as fifth-graders (Maryland).
- Pre-K reduced the number of children placed in special education (Chicago).

## Responsible Adults

- Pre-K reduced crime and delinquency at age eighteen (Chicago).
- Pre-K lowered rates of teen pregnancy (North Carolina).
- Forty-year-olds who attended pre-K had higher rates of employment, higher wages, and more stable families (Michigan).

## Stronger Communities

- Every dollar invested in high-quality pre-K saves taxpayers up to seven dollars in remedial and special education, welfare, and criminal justice services, according to a number of studies.
- Pre-K improves efficiency and productivity in the classroom in areas such as following directions, problem solving, and joining in activities, all of which allow teachers to spend more time working directly with children and less on classroom management.

## Promising Work under way in Rhode Island

In 2007, RIDE and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT formed a Pre-K Exploration Committee that brought early childhood leaders together to review research and best practices for pre-K in other states and to share ideas on how to launch a pre-K program in Rhode Island. In June 2008, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed the Rhode Island Pre-Kindergarten Act, which directs RIDE to engage in a planning process for a Rhode Island pre-K program, including a pilot/demonstration pre-K program and plans for scaling up the program after the pilot stage is completed. During fall 2008, the Commissioner of Education appointed a Pre-K Planning Committee to do additional work to design the components of the pre-K program in keeping with the required elements set forth in the law.

The core premises for the pre-K program, based on RIDE's recommendations and the Pre-Kindergarten Act, are as follows:

- Pre-K enrollment will be voluntary (children will not be required to attend).
- Pre-K will be offered in a variety of settings, including childcare, Head Start, and public schools (this is referred to as a mixed-delivery-system model).
- Rhode Island's pre-K program will start with a high-quality pilot pre-K project and expand over time.
- The ultimate goal is universal pre-K for all three- and four-year-olds; however, the program will provide pre-K for children in the highest-need communities first (those with high concentrations of low-performing schools).
- Pre-K programs need a consistent and stable funding stream sufficient to meet quality standards. Several states fund pre-K through their state education-aid funding formulas.
- Rhode Island's pre-K program quality standards will meet or exceed the pre-K standards of the National Institute for Early Education Research, including a lead teacher with a BA and specialized training in early childhood education and an assistant teacher with a CDA or equivalent.
- Children aged four will be enrolled in the pilot.

The Pre-K Planning Committee completed its work in December 2008 and sent its recommendations on pre-K program design for the pilot Pre-K Demonstration Program to the Commissioner for consideration by RIDE. The target date for the launch of the Demonstration Program was set for fall 2009.

The Governor included \$700,000 in funding for the Pre-K Demonstration Program in his FY2010 budget, and the General Assembly included this funding in the budget that was passed in June 2009. In addition to this funding, the Providence and Central Falls school departments contributed additional Title I stimulus funding in order to add three additional classrooms. RIDE put forth a request for proposals for the Pre-K Demonstration Program and received over twenty proposals from a variety

of possible program sites, including childcare centers, Head Start programs, and schools and chose sites for the first pre-K demonstration classrooms in July 2009. These pre-K classrooms began operations in fall 2009 and are serving more than 100 children from urban and urban-ring communities. To ensure that the Demonstration Program meets high quality standards, the National Institute for Early Education Research will conduct an evaluation.

## Recommendations, Action Steps, and Partner Responsibilities

**RECOMMENDATION** Move beyond the Demonstration Program to implement pre-K in Rhode Island using a mixed-delivery system (childcare, Head Start, schools).

Priority should be given to children in communities with low-performing schools and low literacy performance in fourth grade, given that high-quality pre-K is a core educational strategy for closing the achievement gap that appears at kindergarten entry.

The Task Force recommends that pre-K programs be designed to address the needs of English language learners. Task Force members note that to close the achievement gap it will also be important to start interventions at birth, including high-quality infant/toddler childcare, health care, and child development services. The Task Force also supports progress toward full-day kindergarten in Rhode Island's school districts as a related strategy.

Moving forward, it will be important to build greater support for the work already going on in Rhode Island on this issue and to use communications and other avenues to increase political support for this work.

## Accountability and Sustainability

We will know if this work is successful based on the evaluations of the Pre-K Demonstration Program that will be conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research, along with ongoing evaluations to measure the gains that participating children make in terms of language, literacy, early numeracy, and social and emotional development. RIDE will be responsible for the ongoing monitoring of this work, in partnership with Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and other community partners.

The federal government will provide new funding opportunities for early education in the form of Early Learning Challenge Grants that are expected to provide \$10 billion in new federal funding to states over the next ten years to support state efforts to expand early learning opportunities, especially for low-income and disadvantaged children. This will be an important new funding stream to support Rhode Island's efforts. Another federal funding opportunity is Title I dollars from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that can be used to fund pre-K in Title I school districts. Thirteen states fund pre-K through a mechanism within their state education funding formulas, and the Task Force recommends that, as Rhode Island adopts a funding formula, a method for funding Pre-K be included.