

Universal Preschool Defined

Information for Indiana Legislators, Policy Makers, and Media

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Overview

This topic is receiving state and national attention. It is now discussed by the Governor of Indiana, Joseph Kernan, Indiana legislators, the Indiana Education Roundtable, policy makers, higher education, the media, and the public. This series of briefs provides information that can support effective decision making.

The series includes:

Briefing Paper 1: Universal Preschool Defined

Briefing Paper 2: Prekindergarten Programs Offered by Indiana School Corporations

Briefing Paper 3: Universal Preschool Models

What is Universal Preschool?

Universal preschool is publicly funded early education for children who are younger than kindergarten age. Universal preschool is sometimes called universal prekindergarten or UPK.

- It is universal—available for every child of the eligible population.
- It is preschool—for young children, typically three- and four-year-olds.
- It is education—the primary focus is on child learning.
- It is provided under the auspices of one or more agency of state government, most often the department of education.
- It is offered for voluntary attendance—participation in a program is the parent's decision.



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"Promoting strong families and communities for ALL children through education and research"

Why is Universal Preschool discussed?

1. *Disadvantaged children, as a group, begin kindergarten with fewer cognitive skills.*
2. *Analyses of state pre-k show improved readiness for participating children.*
3. *Neuroscience reveals the enormous changes taking place in children before the age of five which open or close windows of development.*
4. *Investment in high quality early childhood programs has shown savings of \$7.00 for each \$1.00 invested.*

Why is Universal Preschool an important topic of discussion for Indiana?

Indiana is concerned about providing a quality education for its children. It is reflected in our education standards, ISTEP testing, and our focus on *No Child Left Behind*. However, some children who enter Indiana schools have already been left behind. There are a variety of reasons this happens. "Before even entering kindergarten, the average cognitive score of children in the highest SES [socio-economic status] group are 60% above the scores of the lowest SES group" (Lee & Burkham, 2002, p. 2). These are children who may not have had adequate nutrition to support development. They have not had appropriate early learning experiences, have not handled books, heard stories, used a crayon, or played with other young children.

It is clear that high quality early education contributes to children's development and readiness for school. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) report on state-funded prekindergarten stated: "Children who attended state-funded prekindergarten programs [had] higher scores in several areas compared to children who did not attend the programs" (2003, p. 9). At the end of preschool and kindergarten, children who attended prekindergarten had higher cognition and language scores. In elementary school, children who attended prekindergarten had higher academic achievement, reduced grade retention and better school attendance.

Brain research has revealed that the years from birth through age five are critical in children's development. Two of the most important reasons are first, the rapid development of neurons and synapses during these years and second, the selective pruning which follows when unused synapses are lost. The scientific research published in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods (2000)* by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine describes how the course of a child's devel-

opment may be impacted by influences in the environment. Opportunities to encourage the breadth and trajectory of children's cognitive and social development can be provided or lost. Lost opportunities may yield delays in development and readiness for kindergarten.

Investment in quality early education is effective in reducing later expenditures. Research shows that when high quality programs are implemented, including a parent education component, there is an average savings of \$7 for each \$1 invested (Barnett, 2003). These returns result from a reduced need for specialized school services, better reading and math scores, greater likelihood of employment as adults, greater earnings, later child bearing, and fewer incarcerations. These are benefits for individuals and for society.

What does Universal Preschool look like?

There is significant variation in how universal preschool is implemented. Each state establishes its program based on parameters that it sets.

States define the population of children who are eligible to attend. Preschool is universally available for children within that population. Preschool may be offered to all four-year-old children in the state. Some programs are geared for all three- and four-year-olds who are at risk based on parents' socio-economic status or risk for school failure. In some instances, states add toddlers and twos to the program. States sometimes choose to offer preschool in certain areas of the state, for example metropolitan areas.

Children may attend preschool full-day or part-day, full week or part week, and during the school year or all year around. Programs are provided in public schools or in a combination of public school settings and subcontracts with Head Start, nursery schools, and child care centers. Programs may have a built-in parent program. Other states offer programs with expanded services; for example, health services similar

to those provided by Head Start and others offer wrap-around child care to provide families with full-day services.

States adopt different approaches to delivering pre-school programs. States place governance in departments of education, children, family and social services, or others. Funding solutions are also varied.

Universal Preschool Examples

Michigan

- **Children served:** Four-year-olds at risk of school failure (25,700 in 2002-03)
- **Purpose:** Enabling children to enter school ready to learn
- **Schedule:** Four half-days or two full days in the academic year
- **Location:** Public schools with subcontracts to Head Start and child care agencies
- **Teacher degree requirement:** BA or AA with CDA

Georgia

- **Children served:** All four-year-olds (65,900 in 2002-03)
- **Purpose:** Learning experiences for kindergarten readiness
- **Schedule:** Full days, full weeks, academic year
- **Location:** Public schools, child care centers, pre-schools, and early childhood programs
- **Teacher degree requirement:** AA or Montessori certificate

Illinois

- **Children served:** Three- and four-year-olds (53,000 in 2002-03)
- **Purpose:** Learning experiences for kindergarten readiness
- **Schedule:** Half days, full weeks, academic year
- **Location:** Public schools, child care centers, pre-schools and early childhood programs
- **Teacher degree requirement:** BA

Kentucky

- **Children served:** Three- and four-year-olds (18,800 in 2002-03)
- **Purpose:** To help schools achieve accountability standards
- **Schedule:** Minimum 2½ hours up to 6 hours per day, full weeks, academic year
- **Location:** Public schools or Head Start programs
- **Teacher degree requirement:** CDA

(Barnett, Robin, Hustedt, & Schulman, 2003).

What is the extent of implementation across the US and among our neighboring states?

Georgia and the District of Columbia offer universal preschool for all four-year-olds. Louisiana, New York, Oklahoma, Florida, and West Virginia have enacted legislation providing for the development of universal preschool with dates set for full-implementation. "Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have designed, implemented, and funded their own prekindergarten programs on a large scale." (US Dept. of Health & Human Services, 2003, p. 3). This includes our regional neighbors Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and Kentucky.

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