

Preschool For All

Investing In a Productive and Just Society

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All children deserve the opportunity to start school ready to learn. Their own future success and the well-being of society as a whole depend upon it. Yet the United States still relies on a haphazard and piecemeal set of preschool arrangements that does not give all children equal access to early learning programs.

CED Trustees have long argued that the development and education of all children from the earliest stages of their lives must be a national priority. In *Preschool for All* we focus specifically on access to preschool learning opportunities that prepare all children for school.

We believe that it is time for the United States to acknowledge society's stake in and responsibility for early education, as it long has for older children, by making publicly-funded prekindergarten, offered by a variety of providers, available to all children age 3 and over whose parents want them to participate. This goal can be accomplished in the most timely and equitable way through a strong federal/state partnership that expands access to high-quality learning opportunities and links providers and programs into coherent state-based early education systems.

Shortcomings in Today's Approach to Early Learning

Young children have untapped potential for learning.

Research increasingly indicates that prekindergarten children have much greater capacity to learn than was previously recognized. Too many of these children, however, spend their time in child care settings that do not expose them to activities that take full advantage of this capacity.

Access to early education is limited and uneven.

Because the United States still views financing education and the care of young children as primarily a family responsibility, early learning opportunities are unavailable to many children. Children of higher-income and better-educated parents are the most likely to have the advantage of formal early education.



Early education and care aren't integrated.

Since the parents of most young children are employed, they need to know not only that their children are learning but they are also being well cared for during the working day. Public policies for education and child care are poorly integrated, however, and lack a comprehensive vision that encompasses both the goals of school readiness and support of working parents.

The United States lags other countries.

While the United States continues to debate about increasing its investments in young children, other industrialized countries have already recognized the wisdom of such investments. Many nations far surpass us in making early learning opportunities available to all.

Public investment is inadequate.

Progress has been slow on meeting the needs of young children because the nation has been unwilling to make public investments necessary to give all children the strong start they need as they enter school.

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Moving Toward Early Learning Opportunities for All

CED calls on the federal and state governments to undertake a new national compact to make early education available to all children age 3 and over. CED's vision of universal preschool calls for states to play the lead role by expanding preschool opportunities and integrating their diverse array of providers and programs into coherent systems. We call on the federal government to provide incentives for and assistance to states constructing high-quality early learning systems through significant subsidies tied to the development of state strategic plans and timetables and dependent on holding state preschool services to acceptable standards. States should be free to choose their own approach to prekindergarten as long as the approach is consistent with the following 5 principles.

(1) Access. Children age 3 and up whose parents want them to enroll should have access to preschool programs that meet recognized standards for fostering education and school readiness along with social and physical development in a safe environment.

The federal government, which already is and should continue to be a major source of early education funding, should ensure that basic standards of program quality are in place by creating an independent body to review state-developed and other standards for early education and certify those that are acceptable.

(2) Delivery. Preschool education consistent with recognized standards should be obtainable from a variety of providers, with parents choosing the setting most appropriate for their child's and family's needs.

A diverse array of providers (e.g., public preschools, Head Start, nonprofit and profit-making child care centers) already enrolls many young children.

Current providers should be given the opportunity and means to upgrade their services to prekindergarten standards. Policy makers should encourage providers to integrate prekindergarten and child care. They should also structure public subsidy programs to offer incentives to providers to supply higher quality child care.

(3) Financing. While states should be responsible for ensuring universal access to prekindergarten and tying diverse providers into coherent systems of early education, the federal and state governments should share responsibility for financing early learning.



To encourage equitable access across the nation, the federal government should provide funding sufficient to cover children from lower-income families by creating a new federal-to-state grant program and should also provide states with financial assistance to develop the infrastructure needed for universal access. States should ensure that places are available in approved preschool programs for all children age 3 and up whose families want them to attend. While eventually states should be responsible for the costs of preschool for all children not covered by federal support, as an interim step states could, by using income-based fee schedules, share these costs with families.

(4) Infrastructure, quality improvement, and oversight.

In addition to subsidizing direct preschool costs, the federal and state governments should make resources available to improve staff and facilities and provide technical assistance and monitoring. Universal, high-quality preschool will require many new facilities and qualified teachers. Without explicit attention from policy makers, shortages of teachers and classrooms will hamper the expansion of preschool programs. States must also have the capacity to monitor preschool systems that use diverse providers in order to identify and assist those that are not meeting established standards.

(5) Data and research. The federal and state governments should improve data collection to ensure that comparable and reliable information is available on access, costs, and outcomes and should support research to expand our knowledge about the most effective characteristics of early learning programs.

Federal and state policy makers must develop unified data collection systems capable of providing comprehensive information on children's participation in early education and related services. Moreover, while research has already provided important insights into the learning capabilities of young children and raised critical questions about the adequacy of existing programs, much remains to be learned about which policies and practices will most effectively and efficiently support early learning.

For too long, the United States has paid lip service to the importance of preschool opportunities that prepare children for school without undertaking the level of investment needed to turn promise into reality. For the sake of both the children and of our society, it is time to make good on the commitment to provide early learning opportunities for all.