

Pre-Kindergarten for the Modern Age:

A Scalable, Affordable, High-Quality Plan for Texas

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Recent evaluations show quite clearly that large-scale, publicly funded pre-k programs have significant benefits for children's school readiness skills and future academic achievement. Importantly, these results come from today's state-funded pre-k programs, operated at scale in various states across the country.

They are not from the usual suspects - dated and small-scale experimental projects that are typically cited as evidence of the benefits of preschool, but are not cost-sustainable or scalable. That we now see the benefits of public pre-k is good news for many states, including Texas.

Notably, recent evaluations have demonstrated that gains can be sustained through elementary school and beyond. Although fade-out of program effects had been cited previously as evidence of preschool's limited effectiveness, it is now clear that fade-out is far more likely a function of the stunning variation in quality of programs than in the value of pre-k per se.

Recent and rigorous research evaluations from multiple states, including studies of Texas programs, demonstrate that academic gains can be maintained at least through third grade and in many instances, beyond. Of note, in some evaluations the benefits of pre-k extend into early adulthood, with improved outcomes such as educational attainment and cognitive performance.¹

In other words, the most current research indicates that high-quality pre-k programs can lead to significant and sustained gains for young children. Based on recent programs and rigorous research, there is no longer any question that publicly funded pre-k programs hold enormous potential for closing skills gaps, both in the short and long-term.

What Makes Pre-K Programs Effective?

Years of effort have now made publicly funded preschool available to very large numbers of at-risk children. This means that the issue is not just access, but access to programs that really work in providing early education experiences that produce accelerated and sustained learning gains, especially for low-income children and English language learners.

Fortunately, we also now know which program elements produce high-quality in early education and real impact on certain key readiness skills. Successful programs systematically improve outcomes for children by focusing very intentionally on the elements of high-quality early learning that matter most, which can be divided into two categories: process quality elements and structural quality elements (see chart below).

It is important to note that although the impact of any one of these elements in isolation is unlikely to produce significant improvements, it is the combination of these research-based elements into a coherent and well-designed program that can produce significant and sustained results. All of these elements require political leadership and ongoing support in order to be implemented and sustained.

Elements of Effective Pre-K Programs	Definition
<p>② Focus on Quality: Teacher-Student Interactions</p>	Observing, measuring, and training teachers on interactions that (a) are warm and supportive, (b) support classroom organization and management, and (c) focus on academic and linguistic instruction.
<p>⑤ Curriculum and Standards</p>	Research-based, developmentally appropriate curricula and materials for teachers to use that are in alignment with clear learning goals that prepare children for kindergarten and beyond.
<p>⑤ Professional Development</p>	Continuous feedback on teacher-child interactions with effective curricula. Helping teachers engage in interactions that matter most for children’s learning while delivering the curriculum as intended.
<p>⑤ Full-Day Enrollment</p>	Full day programs (6 hours minimum) for children who are at risk for school failure.
<p>⑤ Adult-Child Ratios</p>	Maximum ratios of 1 teacher to every 10 students. Teacher-aides present in the classroom.
<p>⑤ Credentials and Wages</p>	B.A. and an Early Learning Credential; competitive wages to retain high-quality teachers.
<p>② Using Data and Measurement to Drive Instruction</p>	Centralized data reporting systems. Frequent measurement of children’s progress and teacher behaviors. Solid direct measurements of children’s entry and exit skills.
<p>⑤ Political Leadership and Support</p>	A precondition to any successful statewide program; elected officials must provide policy and funding support to ensure long-term positive outcomes.

② Process Quality ⑤ Structural Quality

How Does Texas Measure Up?

The most rigorous evaluations of Texas pre-k come from two studies investigating the relation between public pre-k attendance and elementary school outcomes.² Both studies compared third grade outcomes between eligible children who attended public prekindergarten versus those who did not.

Although the results for Texas pre-k benefits are promising and show that attendance in public preschool is associated with benefits for eligible children—in particular with respect to retention and special education—the overall effects on achievement remain modest.



The extreme lack of measurement and data collection makes it hard to know if pre-k in Texas is working, and how to make targeted improvements in quality. No pre-entry or final direct measurements of children’s skills are required, making it hard for teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to understand how children are progressing across the pre-k year. And, measures of teacher-student interactions are not currently in place uniformly, making it hard to determine which classrooms are engaging in effective practices and which classrooms may need additional help.

Moreover, Texas does not currently collect data on the number of hours per day or hours per year that students participate in pre-k, leading to wide variability across programs and data collection. All eligible children served by Texas pre-k are from at-risk families and so are likely to benefit from increased time in pre-k. However, because the state is only required to fund half-day programs, there are many children who are not receiving sufficient time in pre-k to truly benefit and sustain gains. For low-income children, those for whom English is not spoken at home, or children who are significantly behind, more exposure to high-quality pre-k is critical to achieving learning gains on state tests.

In addition, the Texas Education Agency is currently entirely lacking in sufficient staff to provide effective oversight and management for a high-quality statewide pre-k program. It was recently noted that, "No state with a pre-k program has less state-level capacity (in terms of absolute numbers of staff) to monitor and oversee pre-k than does Texas – even states as small as Delaware."³

Taken together, this lack of data and focus on proven quality elements makes accountability and reliable results nearly impossible. Therefore, Texas needs a solid plan for improving quality and implementing uniform measurement, data collection, and oversight to make targeted and financially sound decisions to improve the state's public pre-k program.

Texas Pre-K Fast Facts

Eligibility for free half-day Pre-K:	Enrollment	Demographics
(a) Economically disadvantaged	114,686 HALF-DAY STUDENTS	65.2% LATINO/HISPANIC
(b) English language learner		14.97% WHITE
(c) Homelessness	112,395 FULL-DAY STUDENTS	14.97% AFRICAN AMERICAN
(d) Current or former foster child		5% OTHER
(e) Child of an active military parent/parent killed or injured on active duty		
Economically Disadvantaged		Male
 87%		 51%

Source: Texas Education Agency, based on the 2012–13 school year

Elements of Effective Pre-K Programs	How Does Texas Stack Up? An Evaluation of Public School Pre-K Statewide Requirements and Funding
Focus on Quality: Teacher-Student Interactions	No
Curriculum and Standards	Partial*
Professional Development	No
Full-Day Enrollment	No
Adult-Child Ratios	No
Credentials and Wages	Partial**
Using Data and Measurement to Drive Instruction	No
Political Leadership and Support	Partial***

* While Texas has pre-k guidelines, they are voluntary, which means there is little uniformity with respect to quality across the state.
 ** Texas requires a B.A. and regular PK-6 credentialing; no Early Learning Credential required. Wages are on same local pay scale as K-6 teachers.
 *** The Texas Legislature initially supported the creation and growth of pre-k, but defunded the pre-k grant in 2011 and has not focused on quality or increased funding in recent years.

Recommendations

In order to create greater alignment between the research base and Texas pre-k policy and practice, we recommend legislators consider the following policy changes to improve the quality of the Texas pre-k program:

Fund High-quality, Targeted Full-day Pre-K

Providing full-day programs for all currently eligible pre-k students is a key aspect of improving the Texas pre-k opportunity. Research shows that children with risk factors benefit from more time in pre-k, and more time in a high-quality pre-k environment will lead to greater and more sustained gains for these students. Multiple evaluations have shown that the benefits of high-quality pre-k outweigh the costs. Providing the funding to enable districts to offer high-quality, full-day pre-k will produce dividends for the state in the years ahead.

Implement Structural Quality Elements to Improve Pre-K Quality

- *Required Early Learning Standards and Proven Curricula.* The state should formally adopt the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines and provide a list of curricula that covers literacy, language, math, and self-regulation in alignment with these standards. The result would be a state-approved “menu” of proven effective tools for classrooms and corresponding developmentally appropriate measures that track children’s skills upon pre-k entry, across the year, and at the end of pre-k.
- *Require Targeted Pre-k Specific Professional Development.* Professional development for teachers and front-line staff should be a priority, and must be targeted and focused on skill development and feedback to early childhood teachers. The state should require that a specified number of professional development hours be dedicated to early childhood-specific knowledge and skills development, and that a minimum number of professional development hours involve clinical practice and coaching. This programming should be aligned to focus on high-quality teacher-student interactions and training in effective use of curricular tools.
- *Require effective adult-child ratios.* Adult-child ratios should be capped at levels that consistently relate to children’s outcomes in pre-k. Research suggests that adult-child ratios as close to 1:10 as possible are most beneficial for children’s learning goals and needs.

Require Uniform Measurement, Data Collection and Oversight to Ensure Quality

- *Require Pre-k programs to participate in uniform measurement and data collection under the Texas Student Data System.* Currently, this participation is optional for pre-k providers. The TSDS should collect all relevant structural information, such as demographic information, hours in learning day/hours per year, class-size, and funding sources,
- *Require districts to collect and report data regarding children’s learning and teachers’ skills.* Data regarding structural elements is not enough, and knowing about measurements of children’s learning and observations of teacher-student interactions is crucial to understanding the efficacy of programs. Districts should be able to choose from a list of approved monitoring programs, and the resulting data should be housed in a central warehouse with reports and feedback to districts and state leaders.
- *Provide sufficient staff to ensure effective program management and oversight.* Sufficient staff at the Texas Education Agency will be important for making sure that policies are implemented effectively and in concert. This will ensure that increased services expand with high quality services. The formation of an early advisory council within TEA would ensure that resources are used efficiently and implemented in concert.

Sources

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- ² Andrews, R. J., Jargowsky, P., & Kuhne, K. (2012). *The Effects of Texas’s Targeted Pre-Kindergarten Program on Academic Performance*. National Bureau of Economic Research.

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- ³ The Texas Taxpayer and Student Fairness Coalition v. Williams, Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, FOF 556 (August 28, 2014).



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