



Policy Brief

The Case for Universal Pre-Kindergarten in Vermont

Traci Sawyers, March 2014

PROBLEM

Here is a fact. Expanding access to high quality early childhood education is among the smartest investments that Vermonters can make. The academic success of a child depends heavily on how ready he/she is for kindergarten.^{1, 2} There are many interpretations of what constitutes “readiness.” Vermont’s definition of children’s readiness includes five domains: 1) social and emotional development, 2) communication, 3) physical health and cognitive development, 4) knowledge, and 5) approaches to learning (e.g., enthusiasm for learning, persistence, curiosity).³ Overall, only 62% of the Vermont children included in the 2012-13 Vermont Kindergarten Readiness Survey administered by elementary schools were rated as “ready for kindergarten” in all five domains.⁴

High quality full-day Pre-kindergarten, best known as Pre-K, followed by full-day kindergarten, are critical tools for improving student achievement.⁵ For years, Vermont has been committed to publicly funded Pre-K and in 2007, passed Act 62, a statute which provided state funding and established “early education,” or “prekindergarten” to mean services designed to “provide early development and learning experiences based on Vermont’s early learning standards for children who are three to five years of age and to those five-year old children who are not eligible for or enrolled in kindergarten.” This Act acknowledged the provision of early education through high-quality private providers as “one of the most crucial elements

supporting the strength and stability of the system serving young children.”

However, state funding of current Pre-K programs in Vermont is limited to 10 hours per week. And it's not just the dosage, but a lack of quality benchmarks in the Pre-K regulations. Vermont’s Pre-K has not shown a real change in school readiness since its implementation and only addresses 4 of the 10 National Institute for Early Education Research quality benchmarks. Further, 38 towns and/or villages throughout Vermont still do not offer Pre-K at all. And many towns have low participation rates, lotteries for a limited, random selection of participants or simply do not have enough qualified providers. As of FY12, the Agency of Education estimated that 36% of age-eligible children participated in publicly funded Pre-K.⁶ Though no state has achieved this rate, most states and research studies have used an 80% participation rate to represent universal access.⁷

BACKGROUND

The main difference between Pre-K programs and other high quality early education programs is that Pre-K usually serves *only* 3 to 5 year olds; most states serve only 4-year-olds. High quality early education is high quality education, despite the different titles. “Universal” means that all children are eligible, regardless of family incomes or geographic location. However, Pre-K is voluntary. Families can enroll in these programs, enroll in other early education options or keep preschoolers at home. Across the U.S., publicly

funded Pre-K is generally administered and overseen by a state agency. In Vermont, it is administered jointly by the Agency of Education and Agency of Human Services, Department for Children and Families. In most states, it is administered solely through departments of education, which typically have higher standards for staff qualifications and continuing education.

Programs can be based in public elementary schools or through innovative partnerships with private community agencies for these services. Vermont's Pre-K law, Act 62, included provisions to encourage a diverse delivery system to support families.

Another factor in establishing the importance of early education is the overwhelming research about brain development; how crucial and sensitive this period is prior to school entry. It creates either a strong or weak foundation for a child, in school and throughout life. Without a strong foundation, children can fall behind, and with each year that passes, it becomes harder to catch up.⁸

Over the past five decades, many studies such as the Perry Preschool Study; New Jersey's Public Pre-K Program, the Abecedarian Project; the Chicago Longitudinal Study; and the 'Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes' Study, have shown that full day, high-quality early childhood education increases the likelihood that children—from *disadvantaged backgrounds*—will succeed in school and beyond.⁹

For more than eight years, the National Institute for Early Education Research, an independent research group associated with Rutgers University, has conducted an evaluation of the full day Abbott Pre-K programs in New Jersey, and found significant impacts on children's language, literacy, and math skills at kindergarten entry. Further, Abbott alumni, now in fourth and fifth grade, showed those gains continue throughout elementary school. Children who attended Abbott Pre-K were also less likely to be held back a grade or diagnosed with learning disabilities.¹⁰ It is important to note that the program requires all

educators to have a BA in early education, participate in extensive professional development, implement specific curricula, and are funded at levels closer to public education for K-12 for programs operating 6 hours per day for the school year.

Looking at other states with high Pre-K access rates for four year olds, Oklahoma and Georgia have found increased test scores – and in particular cognitive and language scores, at school entry. And, the benefits go beyond the individual and family level. Georgia has predicted a savings to juvenile justice, welfare and education. Oklahoma has predicted returns of at least 3 to 4 dollars for every dollar spent on Pre-K.¹²

It is important to note that Vermont's public Pre-K program supported by the Education Fund caps at 10 hours a week, and these studies are based on full-day programs.

WHAT IS BEING DONE

In 1987, the state legislature established the Early Education Initiative (EEI) in the Agency of Education to prepare at-risk preschool children for success in kindergarten and beyond. EEI coordinates with community programs to serve children who are ineligible or inadequately served. More than half of these programs are partnerships between community-based providers; such as child care centers, Head Start, and Parent-Child Centers and it reaches an estimated 1,000 children annually. EEI funding has been limited to \$30,000 per grant since its inception causing the number of children served to decline. The Agency of Education also has an Early Essential Education (EEE) program which provides early childhood special education services for children three to six years old with disabilities, and the Agency of Human Services offers Children's Integrated Services (CIS), for pregnant women and families with children from birth to six in need of early childhood health, mental health, home visitation, Part C-early intervention, and specialized child care. EEE and Part C are federally-funded with additional local support; EEI relies on state funding only.

In addition, Building Bright Futures (BBF), Vermont's public/private partnership and Governor appointed state early childhood advisory council, provides a network of 12 regional councils throughout Vermont intent on aligning community-based planning and leadership with state-level policy. Increasing access to full day, high quality early education for three- and four-year-old children is one of BBF's main priorities.

Currently, Pre-K is offered in a variety of settings: in center-based child care programs, home-based child care programs, Head Start classrooms, private schools, and public schools. School districts often partner and contract with qualified early education programs (defined in statute). And while most of the Pre-K ranges from 6 to 10 hours per week, a few towns including Putney and Manchester have made it a priority to fund full day Pre-K.

By Vermont's definition found in Act 62, a "qualified" provider is one that meets the following quality standards:

- Licensed by the Vermont Child Development Division (CDD) and in good regulatory standing;
- Accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), or have 4 or 5 STARS in Vermont's Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS), or have 3 STARS with an *approved* plan to obtain 4 STARS within 3 years);
- Uses curricula aligned with Vermont's Early Learning Standards;
- Provides opportunities for parent participation;
- Has a licensed early childhood educator or early childhood special educator. In the case of registered family homes, the requirement is to have at least three hours per week of regular onsite supervision by a licensed educator, which can be used in lieu of the provider possessing the license.

Adhering public Pre-K implementation to quality standards has been a large, comprehensive effort taking several years and involving many stakeholders from the public and private sectors. But there is still much work to be done. It is not only an issue of the number of hours a child spends in a Pre-K program. Research consistently highlights the importance of "high- quality" in order to achieve the benefits Pre-K offers and impact Vermont's school readiness rates.¹³

RECOMMENDATIONS

All age-eligible Vermont children – no matter where they live – have a right to high quality Pre-K. Studies have repeatedly shown that this will improve their academic success and positively impact Vermont schools. Currently, the majority of towns in Vermont offer public Pre-K, but not all. Recommendations to support universal access to Pre-K in Vermont include:

- Pass H.270 (currently being decided upon in the Vermont 2014 legislature) which will provide universal Pre-K in Vermont. This bill will require all school districts to provide funding and/or pay tuition for at least 10 hours of Pre-K for 35 weeks annually for all eligible children whose parents choose to enroll them in a prequalified program. It also eliminates the current two year funding lapse between the start of a Pre-K program and when the district receives funding. This causes a tax rate increase and therefore creates a financial incentive *not* to start a Pre-K program unless a district gets philanthropic support to cover start up. The bill also encourages more Pre-K providers to reach higher quality standards. Policy organizations, the advocacy community, government agencies, and Governor Shumlin all support this bill's passage as an important step toward universal high quality early education for all three and four year old Vermonters.
- Explore additional funding options beyond the Education Fund. Other states have used Special

Funds such as lottery, or tobacco tax. Colorado is imposing tax on recreational marijuana sales which could fund education or other purposes. In his FY14 budget, President Obama also called for an increase in federal tobacco tax to fund Pre-K programs – which may also offset the cost of universal Pre-K in Vermont.

- Ensure that Pre-K focuses on enhancing social and emotional development and early academic achievement of young children. Young children who gain cognitive skills benefit from the resulting confidence. Until recently, toxic stress and its long term impact was not widely understood and therefore, social and emotional health in young children has been overlooked. All five domains in readiness, mentioned earlier in this brief, are surveyed and equally important to academic and life success.
- Continue to increase the quality of Vermont's Pre-K with a focus on teacher-child relationships, and elements such as class size and teacher qualifications. These are critical factors in a program's effectiveness. Ensure Vermont is meeting all the National Institute for Early Education Research benchmarks for quality.
- Provide administrators and teachers with ongoing technical assistance and training to implement and sustain effective curricula and master kindergarten readiness survey administration. Pre-K is only successful if it is high quality, accessible to all, and supported by educators who provide an enriching learning experience for all children. Administrators also must have additional skills to provide coaching, supervision, and teacher evaluation.
- Be bold and innovative with funding. Leverage, coordinate, and integrate federal, state and local funding streams and programs to improve

Vermont's system of high quality early childhood education. Pre-K can be provided in any school, community based organization, state-funded preschool program, Head Start, and childcare home or center.

- Continue to examine the "dosage" of publicly funded Pre-K in Vermont. Again, the studies referenced in this brief are based on high quality, full day programs. And from a practical perspective, a program that is only 10 hours per week (or less) is difficult for parents who work full-time to access. Transportation and the need for additional care are *significant* barriers to part time Pre-K for working parents. Similarly, two years of participation in high-quality Pre-K vastly increases the impact on school readiness, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Remember that "readiness" is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities. Children need to be "ready" to take advantage of the learning opportunities of formal schooling, but schools also need to be ready to meet the diverse needs of today's children who enter school. Communities need to be ready to support families with safe routes to school, playgrounds, low crime rates, community cohesion, and in prioritizing access to high-quality early education programs. Most important, supporting parents as children's first and longest lasting teachers, and creating a community culture where all children receive adequate preventive and ongoing health care.

As stated earlier, many rigorous studies have linked high quality preschool programs with kindergarten readiness and future school and life success. Universal Pre-K is for all Vermont's children and is sound policy. The benefits far exceed the cost, and it's an investment that can't wait.

Sources:

- ¹ Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M., Espinosa, L, Gormley, W, Ludwig, J., Magnuson, K., Phillips, D., Saslow, M. *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education*, Society for Research in Child Development (2013)
- ² Barnett, W.S., *Expanding Access to Quality Pre-K is Sound Public Policy*, National Institute for Early Education Research (2013)
- ³ Vermont Department of Education (2013)
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Mead, S., *Quality Pre-K Starting Early to Close the Achievement Gap and Boost Student Achievement*, Stand For Children Leadership Center (2012)
- ⁶ This figure reflects the children who are counted by school districts for their Average Daily Membership (ADM). A full head count including children not counted for ADM and children in the Early Essential Education Programs raise the participation rate to over 45%.
- ⁷ Goodman-Bryan, M. *Pre-K Matters*, The Urban Child Institute (2012)
- ⁸ Boyd, J. Barnett, W.S. Bodrova, E. Leong, D. Gomby, D. *Promoting Children's Social and Emotional Development Through Preschool*, National Institute for Early Education Research (2007)
- ⁹ American Federation of Teachers, *Early Childhood Education: Building a Strong Foundation for the Future* (2002)
- ¹⁰ Barnett, W.S., Jung, K., Youg, MJ and Frede, E, *Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study: Fifth Grade Follow-up*, National Institute for Early Education Research (2013)
- ¹¹ Goodman-Bryan. M (2012).
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Goffin, S, Regenstein, E. *Using Pre-K to Advance Education Reform: Opportunities for State Advisory Councils*, The Pew Center on the States (2011)

About These Policy Briefs:

This is one in a series of monthly issue briefs designed to focus our collective attention on issues that affect our young children and families. These briefs, as well as an annual *How Are Vermont's Young Children?* Report are part of an initiative by Building Bright Futures Early Childhood Advisory Council and connected to the Vermont Early Childhood Framework recently unveiled at Governor Shumlin's Early Childhood Summit in 2013- to remind ourselves, in every aspect of daily life, to ask the question: "How are the Children?" For more information, call Building Bright Futures at 802-876-5010 or find out more on line: www.buildingbrightfutures.org)

About Project LAUNCH:

Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health) is a federal initiative funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Vermont Department of Health (VDH) received a five-year SAMHSA Project LAUNCH grant in 2012. Project LAUNCH is being piloted in Chittenden County and is grounded in a comprehensive view of health that addresses the physical, emotional, social, cognitive and behavioral aspects of well-being. Building Bright Futures serves as the grantee of VDH for LAUNCH implementation.

About the Author:

Traci Sawyers holds a M.A. in public policy from Tufts University and has 25 years experience in child and family policy, maternal/child health and behavioral health. In these areas, she has been a writer, lobbyist, researcher, planner, program administrator, consultant, facilitator, grant writer/administrator, elected official, and organizational director. She is currently the Early Childhood Health Policy Expert for Building Bright Futures and Vermont's Project LAUNCH initiative.

