

IOWA POLICY INSTITUTE WHITEPAPER

An Analysis of the Benefits of State-Funded Preschool

Taking Another Look at Iowa's
Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2010 Iowa gubernatorial election, Iowa’s Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP) program became a noteworthy topic as Governor Chet Culver and former Governor Terry Branstad debated not only the effectiveness of the program but whether the government should play a role in providing preschool to Iowa’s families. After the November elections in which Branstad was elected to a fifth term as governor and the Republicans gained control of the House, preschool continued to be a major policy topic. In December of 2010, GOP house members provided an initial list of cuts they plan to make to the state budget during the 2011 legislative session. Among the cuts listed was Iowa’s state-funded preschool program—the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program, or SVPP. Soon a debate ensued in the media between those on the left and the right regarding the long-term effectiveness of preschool. Those on the right were easy to dismiss the benefits of preschool, while those on the left were easy to boast of preschool as almost a cure-all solution for education and social problems.

This whitepaper will give an overview of state-funded preschool programs in the United States and in Iowa (the SVPP) as well as examine the effectiveness of early education and preschool on children’s developmental outcomes.

UNITED STATES

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) estimates that 25 percent (or approximately 1.2 million) of 4-year olds in the United States participated in a state-funded preschool program in 2009.¹ Overall, nationwide spending and enrollment increased from the

¹ 2009 data is used because 2010 data is not yet available.

previous year but both varied between individual states. Total enrollment in both public (state-funded preschool and Head Start) and private programs for 4-year olds was estimated to be around 74 percent. State spending averaged \$4,143 per child.²

Thirty-eight states have some form of state-funded preschool and of those 32—or 84 percent— have an income requirement in order to be eligible for services. Thirty-one states determine hours of operation locally while 10 operate full-day programs and 10 operate half-day programs. Participation rates vary greatly by state and 12 states support no state-funded preschool program. Chart 1 shows the 10 states with the highest participation rates and the 12 states that do not offer a state-funded pre-k program.³

<i>Chart 1</i>	
10 States with Highest Participation	Percentage of 4-year olds participating in state-funded preschool
Oklahoma	71
Florida	67
Georgia	53
Vermont	53
West Virginia	51
Wisconsin	48
Texas	45
Arkansas	44
New York	43
South Carolina	38
States that do not offer state-funded preschool	
Alaska (pilot program)	New Hampshire
Hawaii	North Dakota
Idaho	Rhode Island (pilot program)
Indiana	South Dakota
Mississippi	Utah
Montana	Wyoming

² National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). (2009). *The State of Preschool 2009, State Preschool Yearbook*. Rutgers, NJ: Author.

³ 2009 data represented.

most failed benchmarks for teacher and assistant qualifications. California, Texas and Florida failed the most benchmarks.⁵

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Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP) was initiated in 2007. The program is intended to provide access to preschool for all Iowa 4-year olds. Children who are 4 years of age and live in Iowa are eligible to participate. Programs are funded through public school districts but schools may contract with other preschool programs. These partners can include other public programs such as Head Start or private programs, including faith-based organizations. For children that are not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, school districts may use a sliding payment scale.

According to the Iowa Department of Education, 13,666 Iowa 4 year-olds were enrolled in SSVP in the 2009-2010 school year and an estimated 21,354 will be served in 2010-2011. In the 2010-2011 school year, 326 of 361 districts were expected to participate in the program which includes 150 new districts alone. Total funding for the program was \$48 million in 2009-2010 and estimated to be 64 million in 2010-2011.⁶ According to NIEER, Iowa ranks fourteenth (out of 38) in the United States for participation rates among 4-year olds, and twenty-ninth in state spending.⁷

As previously stated, programs that participate in the SVPP may contract with other preschool programs to deliver services to participants. Chart 2 gives the number of community programs that SVPP districts were expected to collaborate with in 2010-2011.⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Iowa Department of Education. (n.d.) *Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four-Year Old Children: Fact Sheet*. Des Moines, IA: Author.

⁷ National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). (2009). *The State of Preschool 2009, State Preschool Yearbook*. Rutgers, NJ: Author.

⁸ Ibid.

<i>Chart 2</i>	
COMMUNITY PARTNER	2010-2011
Licensed community-based child care or preschool	33
Faith-based preschool	15
Non-public accredited schools	7
Shared Visions ⁹	7
Early Childhood Special Education	108
Head Start	13

While it is too early to tell the long-term impact of participation in SVPP on children’s development, the Iowa Department of Education has some preliminary results. In 2009, kindergartners who participated in the SVVP as 4-year olds were more proficient in literacy skills than those who did not participate. Sixty-five percent of those who attended a SVVP program were measured as proficient compared to 61 percent who did not participate in the program. These findings were more salient for children living in poverty. Fifty-five percent of children measured as proficient on the literacy test compared to 50 percent of those who did not participate in the program.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the report from the Iowa Department of Education only listed results for the literacy test so no data can be analyzed regarding cognitive or math skills. While no statistical analysis was done on this data to determine whether the levels of proficiency for program participants were statistically significant from those who did not, the data suggests that children who participate in SVVP programs perform better academically in kindergarten. It should be noted that the program has not been around long enough to determine the long-term impacts on participants.

⁹ Shared Visions was started in 1989. Public schools, Head Start programs, private programs (included faith-based) can apply for grants to help fund program activities. In each classroom, 80% of children must qualify for free and reduced lunch with the other 20% qualifying based on risk factors such as low birth weight or a parent in prison.

¹⁰ Ibid.

According to NIEER, Iowa met 8 out of 10 of their quality benchmarks in 2009. See Chart 3 for a summary of the analysis.¹¹

<i>Chart 3</i>	
Benchmarks Met	Benchmarks Not Met
Comprehensive early learning standards	Teacher degree (BA; Teacher and CDA)
Teacher specialized training (pre-k specialization)	Assistant teacher degree (CDA or equivalent)
Maximum class size (20 or lower)	Meals (at least 1 per day)
Staff-child ration (1:10 or better)	
Screening/referral and support services (vision, hearing, health; and at least one support service)	
Teacher in-service (at least 15 hrs. per year)	
Site visits	

EFFECTIVENESS OF STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

Much of the debate surrounding state-funded preschool programs rests on whether or not such programs are beneficial to children’s long-term developmental and academic outcomes. Policymakers on both ends of the political spectrum cite research to back up their perspective on the issue. Research on early childhood education experiences and children’s developmental outcomes can generally be broken down into three categories: 1) research that shows the relationship between child care quality and children’s outcomes; 2) research that shows the relationship between participation in early intervention programs (e.g. Perry Preschool Project, Carolina Abecedarian Project) and children’s outcomes; and 3) research that shows the relationship between participation in state-funded preschool programs and children’s outcomes. It is important to make the distinction between these three areas because oftentimes policymakers will mix the research findings when discussing the benefits of state-funded preschool. While all three are inextricably linked, caution should be exercised when making direct comparisons between the three.

¹¹ Ibid.

In terms of child care quality, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development is a landmark study that has followed a group of children from birth in order to determine the long-term effects of child care quality on child outcomes. Recently released findings from the study show that children who participated in high quality child care programs have higher cognitive and academic achievement and lower problem behaviors at age 15 than those who did not.¹² While this study does not directly study state-funded preschool, it shows that high-quality, early education experiences have long-term benefits to children. These findings have been corroborated by other studies.¹³

Early intervention programs serve children who are deemed at-risk. At-risk may include having a developmental delay, living in poverty, being born at a low-birth weight or having a parent that is incarcerated. Services typically target both children and families and may be delivered through a variety of mechanisms including high-quality child care and home visits. These services usually begin at birth. Several landmark programs have provided evidence of the long-term effectiveness of these programs and the research on these programs has been grounded in sound methodology which includes the use of experimental designs. Two well-known programs are the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Perry Preschool Program. Long-term effects (through adulthood) of these programs on participants include not only higher cognitive and academic achievement, but less grade retention, lower incarceration rates and higher graduation rates.¹⁴ ¹⁵ Investing in these programs has been shown to be cost-effective, returning more money to taxpayers than what was

¹² NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? Results from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. *Child Development*, 81(3), 737-756.

¹³ Peisner-Feinberg, E.S., and Burchinal, M. (1997). Relations between preschool children's child care experiences and concurrent development: The Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 43(3), 451-477.

¹⁴ Campbell, F. A., Ramey, C. T., Pungello, E. P., Sparling, J., & Miller-Johnson, S. (2002). Early Childhood Education: Young Adult Outcomes from the Abecedarian Project. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 42-57.

¹⁵ Schweinghart, L., Barnes, H., & Weikart, D. (1993). *Significant benefits: The High Scope Perry Preschool Study through age 27*. Ypsilanti, MI; High Scope Press.

invested.^{16 17} In a meta-analysis of 123 studies on early intervention (all were experimental studies), Camilli and colleagues (2010) found children who attended preschool have better cognitive, academic, and social outcomes later in life.¹⁸

Last are studies that evaluate specific state-funded preschool programs. The findings of these studies are illustrated in Chart 4.

<i>Chart 4</i>	
State	Findings
(Five State Study) MI, NJ, OK, SC, WV	Positive impacts on language, literacy, and math. ¹⁹
New Jersey	Positive impacts on language, literacy, and math through 2 nd grade (last evaluation period). ²⁰
New Mexico	Positive impacts on language, literacy, and math. ²¹
Louisiana	Positive impacts on language, literacy, and math through kindergarten. ²²
Oklahoma	Positive impacts on literacy and math. ²³
Tennessee	Positive impact on language, literacy and math through 1 st grade for poor children. Some fadeout effects at 2 nd grade. ²⁴
North Carolina	Positive impacts on reading and math through third-grade for poor children. ²⁵

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Duncan, G.J. & Magnuson, K. (2006). Costs and benefits from early investments to promote human capital and positive behavior. In N.F Watt, C. Ayoub, R.H. Bradley, J.E. Puma, & W.A. LeBouef (Eds.), *The Crisis in youth mental health: Early intervention program and policies* (pp.207-228). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

¹⁸ Camilli, G., Vargas, S., Ryan, S., & Barnett, W.S. (2010). Meta-analysis of the effects of early education interventions on cognitive and social development. *Teachers College Record*, 12(3).

¹⁹ Wong, V. C., Cook, T. D., Barnett, W. S., & Jung, K. (2008). An effectiveness-based evaluation of five state pre-kindergarten programs. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 27(1), 122-154.

²⁰ Frede, E., Jung, K., Barnett, W. S., & Figueras, A. (2009). *The APPLES blossom: Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES), Preliminary results through 2nd grade*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

²¹ Hustedt, J. T., Barnett, W. S., Jung, K., & Goetze, L.D. (2009). *The New Mexico PreK Evaluation: Results from the initial four years of a new state preschool initiative. Final report*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

²² Ramey, C. T., Landesman Ramsey, S., & Stokes, B. R. (2009). Research evidence about program dosage and student achievement: Effective public prekindergarten programs in Maryland and Louisiana. In R. C. Pianta & C. Howes (Eds.), *The Promise of Pre-K* (pp. 79-105). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co.

²³ Gormley, W. T., Jr., Phillips, D., & Gayer, T. (2008). Preschool programs can boost school readiness. *Science*, 320, 1723-1724.

²⁴ Strategic Resource Group. (2010). *Assessing the effectiveness of Tennessee’s pre-kindergarten program: Second annual report*. Columbus, OH: Author.

²⁵ Peisner-Feingberg, E.S. & Schaaf, J.M. (2010). *Long-term effects of the North Carolina More at Four pre-kindergarten program: Children’s reading and math skills at third-grade*. University of North Carolina: FPG Child Development Institute.

In summary: 1) high quality child care is linked to long-term positive outcomes for children, 2) early intervention program are linked to long-term positive outcomes for children, and 3) several recent studies on state-funded preschool programs show they have an initial positive impact on participants and some studies show these impacts persist through early elementary while others show that the effects of preschool fade out or diminish by the third or fourth grade.

CONCLUSION

Critics of state-funded preschool programs are quick to point out the “fade out effects” — those effects that fade out over time— as found in the Tennessee study. However, one factor that may impact fade out effects is that children who attend state-funded preschool programs are more likely to attend low quality elementary schools. Preschool was never intended nor designed to be a panacea where participation makes up for low quality education in elementary school. Based on several of the aforementioned findings, state-funded preschool programs are doing what they are intended to do: prepare children for kindergarten. Furthermore the findings on child care quality and early intervention strongly suggest that high-quality, well-designed preschool programs can have long-term, positive effects on children’s outcomes.

Based on the data it would be difficult to suggest Iowa lawmakers should completely scrap the State Voluntary Preschool Program in order to save the state money. While the short-term costs may seem steep to some policymakers, the potential long-term benefits must be considered. When state-funded preschool is discussed, two questions that naturally arise for many conservative policymakers are 1) what is the role of the government in education and family life, and 2) what is the role of government in providing preschool to families?

These questions of ideology cannot be answered by science. The impact of family income, maternal education, and the home environment are all important to consider when examining children’s long-term outcomes and are beyond the scope of the current paper. However, conservatives should not completely dismiss the science and research that provides fairly strong evidence for the benefits of public investment in preschool, particularly for low-income children. Moving forward, policymakers on both ends of the political spectrum should commit to supporting a comprehensive evaluation of the SVPP.

Incoming Governor Branstad seems warm to the idea of keeping the SVPP but making participants pay using a sliding fee scale.²⁶ While this may not be the solution policymakers on either side of the aisle desire, it may be the most viable option considering Iowa’s current political and economic climate.

²⁶ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-ia-branstad-educatio,0,2376759.story>