

# ISSUE PAPER



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## Prekindergarten in Texas

### **Background**

The term, prekindergarten (Pre-K), refers to a year or two of structured learning for three- and/or four-year-old children. It is often used interchangeably with the term pre-school, which refers to various forms of nursery school and daycare. However, the term Pre-K, conveys a direct connection to the K-12 school system and formal programs for early childhood education. Pre-school, on the other hand, is a more general term used to refer to a variety of early care and education programs.<sup>1</sup>

### **Research**

Numerous studies have shown children participating in high quality Pre-K programs are more likely to graduate from high school, perform better on standardized tests, less likely to repeat a grade, and less likely to require special education services.<sup>2</sup> Research also suggests that students accessing high-quality Pre-K programs have better alternatives later in life. They have better job prospects, are more financially independent, and avoid welfare and crime.<sup>3</sup>

### **Pre-K in Texas**

In 1984, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 72, which established the Texas prekindergarten program requiring school districts to provide half-day education-based programming to four-year-old children. The purpose of this program is to develop skills necessary for success in the regular public school curriculum, including language, mathematics, and social skills.<sup>4</sup> Over the years, the legislature has voted to expand eligibility to participate in this voluntary program. Texas' publicly funded Pre-K initiative boasts the largest total enrollment of any state funded Pre-K initiative in the country with 763 districts offering the program and more than 214,000 students participating during the 2009-10 school year.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pre-K Now, ABCs of Pre-K, <http://www.preknow.org/resource/abc/prekvspreschool.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> Pre-K Now, The Benefits of High Quality Pre-K, <http://www.preknow.org/advocate/factsheets/benefits.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Schulman, Karen, (2005) Overlooked Benefits of Prekindergarten, NIEER Policy Report <http://nieer.org/docs/?DocID=123>

<sup>4</sup> Texas Education Code 29.1532

<sup>5</sup> Texas Education Agency 2009-10 Data

### **Eligibility**

Currently, school districts must offer a half-day prekindergarten program if at least 15 eligible four-year-old children are identified. Those students who qualify for public school Pre-K include: children unable to speak and comprehend the English language; students deemed educationally disadvantaged (eligible for free and reduced lunch program); those that are homeless as defined by federal law; a child whose parents are either on active military duty, in an activated reserve unit, or who were killed or wounded while serving on active duty; and children in the Texas foster care system.<sup>6</sup> A Texas school district may extend its pre-kindergarten program to include three-year-old children who meet eligibility requirements. In addition, districts may also allow other students to attend Pre-K on a tuition basis.

### **Pre-K Funding**

School districts are provided Foundation School Program funding to provide Pre-K services, if the district has 15 or more four-year-old eligible children, but districts have other funding options.

#### **State Funding**

Texas funds half-day Pre-K programs through the Foundation School Program (FSP). FSP funding is calculated and distributed on the basis of district-level average daily attendance aggregates.<sup>7</sup> According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in fiscal year 2010, the ADA averaged \$3,650 per eligible student totaling an estimated \$702.5 million.

#### **Prekindergarten Early Start Grant**

School districts and open-enrollment charter schools may apply to TEA for the Prekindergarten Early Start Grant (previously called the Prekindergarten Expansion Grant). It is designed to allow districts to continue funding existing full-day Pre-K programs or establish new Pre-K programs at campuses that did not previously operate such programs. TEA data shows there were 263 Prekindergarten Early Start Grantees during the 2009-10.

#### **Community Funding**

Some districts have sought grants or joined forces with community partners to find funding to provide a full-day program; however, these districts still are only granted FSP funding for a half-day program for those students who qualify under Texas law.

#### **Tuition**

While districts may not charge eligible students to attend public school Pre-K, but they may charge tuition for students who do not qualify unless doing so interferes with serving students who are eligible for the program. School districts do not collect FSP funding for students who pay tuition, and may not adopt a tuition rate higher than necessary to cover the cost of providing the program, including any costs associated with collecting, reporting, and analyzing data.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Texas Education Code 29.153

<sup>7</sup> Texas Legislative Budget Board (July 2007): Early Childhood Care and Education Programs in Texas.

<sup>8</sup> Texas Education Code 29.1531

## **Quality**

The National Institute for Early Education Research finds that the *quality* of a Pre-K program plays a critical role in determining its value to the children who attend it and the taxpayers who support it. Research shows that students who attend a high-quality Pre-K program perform better in school, are more likely to graduate, and earn higher wages. Measures used to gauge the quality of a Pre-K program include: curriculum, teacher qualifications, and teacher-child ratios and class size.

### **Curriculum**

In 1995, the Texas Legislature prohibited the adoption of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Pre-K programs. Instead, TEA provides voluntary guidelines which are designed to be a resource to help teachers define and implement a comprehensive curriculum.

### **Teacher Qualifications**

Those teaching Pre-K in public schools must have a bachelor's degree, be certified, and pass a criminal background check.

### **Teacher-Child Ratios & Class Size**

The Texas Legislature revoked the State Board of Education's authority to adopt rules relating to student-teacher ratios in prekindergarten programs in 1995. However, school districts are encouraged to maintain student-teacher ratios in Pre-K programs that, at a minimum, do not exceed the 22:1 ratio required for kindergarten through fourth grade.

## **Coordination of Services**

Before establishing a new Pre-K program, a school district must consider the possibility of sharing use of an existing Head Start or other childcare program (including private providers) site by establishing a contract with community-based organizations to provide public Pre-K.<sup>9</sup> If school districts are contracting with a private entity for the operation of the district's Pre-K program, then the private entity must meet minimum applicable childcare licensing standards adopted by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services.<sup>10</sup>

## **Anticipated Issues**

Advancing Pre-K is high on many legislative agendas. In Texas, legislation has focused and is expected to continue to be focused on six areas:

- **Increasing eligibility:**  
Advocates would like for more students to be eligible for public school Pre-K. For example, supporters have suggested that the children of first responders (police officers, firefighters, and emergency personnel) should be eligible for free public school Pre-K.

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<sup>9</sup> Texas Education Code 29.1533

<sup>10</sup> Texas Education Code 29.1532

*Practical considerations from a school board's perspective:* If the legislature expands eligibility to include additional children, school districts would have to add additional teachers and classes. Districts may have to add facilities to meet the mandate.

- Expanding the class day from half-day to full-day:  
Advocates would like for the state to require districts to offer full-day Pre-K in hopes that more eligible students would participate in public school Pre-K. Advocates argue some eligible students are not participating and receiving the benefits of a Pre-K education because it is offered only half-day and transportation is a factor for struggling and working families.

*Practical considerations from a school board's perspective:* Currently, districts receive only half-day ADA funding. If the state were to extend the class day to full-day, districts would need ADA funding for the full-day to offer instruction. For some districts offering Pre-K for students in the morning and then again in the afternoon could present challenges. Districts would be required to hire additional teachers and secure additional facilities which would likely not be paid for by the state.

- Limiting class size and/or establishing ratios for teachers/aides to students:  
Advocates want legislators to pass legislation limiting class size and/or mandating teacher/student ratios. Some groups want to see the ration as low as 1:10.

*Practical considerations from a school board's perspective:*

Districts currently are not required to meet class size limits; however, TEA encourages districts to aim for 1:22. If the state mandates a class size limit for Pre-K, districts may have to hire additional teachers and secure classroom facilities of which would likely not be paid for by the state.

- Establishing a voluntary universal Pre-K program:  
Advocates want all children to have access to a high-quality Pre-K education, regardless of a family's income. In 2007, the Legislative Budget Board released a report estimating that the cost for universal full-day Pre-K for four-year-old children in Texas would top \$1.9 billion (\$1.2 billion in state costs and \$752.0 million in local costs).

*Practical considerations from a school board's perspective:*

If the state opts to expand Pre-K to all four-year-old children in Texas, school districts will have to hire additional staff and likely build additional facilities.

### **National School Board Association**

The National School Board Association (NSBA), an organization whose membership is comprised of school board members from around the country, is urging Congress to expand access to and funding for high-quality, voluntary Pre-K programs for all three- and four-year-old children. The rationale:

- The need for effective Pre-K programs is critical to increasing student achievement and closing the achievement gap in public schools.
- Programs that provide children developmentally appropriate stimulation early on can help to improve their school readiness and academic performance in the later grades.
- As the accountability benchmarks that states and districts have set under No Child Left Behind become ever more difficult to meet, Pre-K has emerged as an effective strategy to ensure that every child who enters kindergarten will be prepared to undertake a challenging curriculum and meet high standards.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Research shows students are more likely to graduate from high school, perform better on standardized tests, less likely to repeat a grade, and less likely to require special education services if they participate in a quality Pre-K program. In this age of increasing accountability standards, giving children a Pre-K foundation better prepares them for a K-12 education in the public school system and reduces the need for academic interventions. A Pre-K education also provides students with an opportunity that research shows gives students better job prospects and alternatives for a brighter future.

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<sup>11</sup> National School Board Association  
<http://www.nsba.org/FunctionNav/AboutNSBA/NSBAGovernance/Resolutions.aspx>