

Making Pre-kindergarten Work for Low-income Working Families

by Rachel Schumacher, Katie Hamm, and Danielle Ewen

Introduction

A growing number of state leaders believe that it is essential to expand high-quality early learning and development opportunities for all young children before they reach kindergarten. A key component of this strategy is providing access to voluntary, high-quality pre-kindergarten programs, especially for low-income children. As of 2006, 38 states and the District of Columbia had one or more programs meeting the definition of pre-kindergarten used by the National Institute of Early Education Research

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(NIEER). In the 2005-2006 school year, states reported spending about \$3.27 billion in state and federal funds on pre-kindergarten initiatives. These initiatives vary considerably in their design, quality standards, and number of children served.¹ Across the country, state pre-kindergarten programs serve 20 percent of four-year-olds and fewer three-year-olds; most children served are concentrated in just a few states.² Over the last few years, a number of governors have announced their intention to expand pre-kindergarten.³ Yet for states to improve the chances of children who might otherwise start school at a disadvantage, pre-kindergarten programs must be designed with their families in mind.

It is critical that pre-kindergarten policies promote healthy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank The Joyce Foundation for making this paper possible and for the foundation's early leadership on the importance of expanding working families' access to pre-kindergarten programs.

We are indebted to the pre-kindergarten program administrators in the 29 states whose programs are highlighted in this paper. They took time from their busy schedules to participate in the data collection process on which this analysis is based. This paper grew out of CLASP's previous report *All Together Now: State Experiences in Using Community-based Child Care to Provide Pre-kindergarten*, which would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of co-authors Katherine Hart and Joan Lombardi. Thanks also to Helene Stebbins for her work in helping conduct interviews.

While CLASP is grateful for all assistance and funding related to this paper, the authors alone are responsible for its content.

child development *and* be supportive of the needs of low-income working families. More than one in five children under

age six (22 percent) live in a low-income working family.⁴ Seventy-seven percent of low-income three- and four-year-old children with employed mothers are already in some type of regular non-parental care arrangement;⁵ this presents both an opportunity and a challenge for state pre-kindergarten

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In this brief, we use the term “pre-kindergarten” to refer to a set of state programs that provide early education for three- and/or four-year-old children. However, since children are constantly learning from their surroundings and caregivers from birth, “early care and education” refers to any non-parental program—including child care centers, family child care, Head Start, preschool, and pre-kindergarten. The term “community based” is meant to describe early care and education programs provided in non-school settings.

policymakers. While low-income children stand to gain the most from early care and education initiatives, working families may not be able to access programs that are not responsive to their needs.

The opportunity to make state pre-kindergarten programs work for working families is often lost. The vast majority of state pre-kindergarten programs offer part-day services

limited to the school year. While the extent to which low-income working parents want full-day, full-year pre-kindergarten programs is not known, for many families, such programs are not even a choice. The vast majority of states require a minimum of 2.5 to 3.5 hours per day, on a school-year calendar. Three states require programs to operate for at least 30 or 32 weeks per year. Twenty-seven states leave the hours of operation to local discretion, and 18 states do the same with the operating schedule (i.e., nine- vs. 12-month programs).⁶ Most states target pre-kindergarten to children defined as “at risk” or low income,⁷ but only a few tailor policies and programming specifically to serve children in low-income working families. This is true despite the fact that 42 percent of young children under age six live in low-income families—defined as those families with earnings below 200 percent of poverty—and 81 percent of low-income children under age six have at least one employed parent.⁸

States can help working families who rely on child care access state pre-kindergarten programs by including community-based child care settings in the delivery of pre-kindergarten. This model has the

potential to break the traditional barrier between pre-kindergarten and child care policies and to address the needs of children in working families in a coordinated way, as well as to improve the various early care and education settings where children of working families already spend significant time. Although the vast majority of states now allow pre-kindergarten to be delivered in community-based early care and education settings, simply allowing this option does not in itself guarantee that low-income working families’ needs will be met. A handful of states are working to realize these opportunities, but more could be done. This paper is based on a review of the first in-depth national research on the 29 states that, as of 2004, allowed mixed delivery in their pre-kindergarten programs. The review focused on promising practices and ideas for improvement. This paper:

- provides evidence that policymakers need to review their pre-kindergarten initiatives to ensure maximum access for children in working families, especially low-income children;
- describes some models states and localities are using to be responsive to low-income

working families' needs by delivering pre-kindergarten in community-based settings; and

- highlights key strategies to address the needs of low-income working families and examines the extent to which state pre-kindergarten policies currently do so.

ABOUT THE ALL TOGETHER NOW STUDY

This paper draws on data from CLASP's national study of state pre-kindergarten programs that are delivered in community-based early care and education settings.⁹ The study was made possible by the generous support of The Joyce Foundation. At the conclusion of the study period in November 2004, 29 states were operating a pre-kindergarten program using a mixed delivery model. Data were collected from in-depth reviews of state Web sites, legislative history, published documents, and interviews with state pre-kindergarten administrators (using a survey protocol that we developed). This paper focuses on a subset of the survey that asked about policies to support low-income working families. CLASP is in the process of gathering 2007 program year data for future release.

Why Focus on the Particular Needs of Low-income Children and Their Parents in Designing Pre-kindergarten Programs?

There are three key reasons for state policymakers to include a focus on vulnerable children and their low-income working parents as they design pre-kindergarten programs:

- Low-income children need and benefit the most from high-quality programs;
- Low-income parents need access to reliable early care and education programs to help maintain employment; and
- Current investments and programs are not sufficient to ensure access to stable, high-quality early care and education for low-income children.

Low-income Children Need and Benefit the Most from High-quality Programs

By the time they enter kindergarten, many low-income children are already behind their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. During early childhood, low-income children face a number of risk factors that threaten healthy development and learning, including low birth weight, stunted

growth, obesity, and lead poisoning—all of which are associated with physical disabilities, reduced IQ, and grade repetition.¹⁰ Low-income parents tend to have higher rates of depression and stress,¹¹ which can impact children's well-being.¹² Socioeconomic status is also related to language development opportunities. An in-depth study of verbal interactions in the home found that by age three, children with professional parents have heard approximately 11 million words in the previous year, compared to 3 million words for children with parents who receive welfare.¹³ Such differences in the early years have an impact on later development: at kindergarten entry, children in low-income families score below other children on measures of pre-reading and pre-mathematical skills.¹⁴

Well-designed and well-implemented early care and education programs can improve outcomes for all children, particularly those in low-income families.¹⁵ High-quality programs also should address other risks to child development by helping parents access necessary services for themselves and their children, such as medical and dental care, mental health services, nutrition, family sup-

port, and services for children with disabilities.

A study of pre-kindergarten programs in six states indicates that at the end of the pre-kindergarten year, low-income children show improvement in the areas of vocabulary, spoken language, and early math skills.¹⁶ Longitudinal research suggests high-quality early care and education that begins early in children's lives and provides comprehensive services—including family support, health, and social services—has long-term benefits for low-income children. An analysis of three early childhood programs with positive impacts into adulthood found that these programs generally began early in the child's life and at least by age three.¹⁷

Research demonstrates that successful programs work closely with parents and provide comprehensive services focused on the child's cognitive, emotional, and physical development over several years. The federal Head Start program, which provides early education and comprehensive services to poor preschool children following federal Program Performance Standards, has been linked to lower rates of grade retention and special education, higher high school graduation rates, and fewer

instances of juvenile delinquency and crime.¹⁸ Further evidence suggests that Head Start is most effective when children begin to participate early in their lives. A recent outcome study of the Head Start program found the most positive outcomes for children who also received Early Head Start services from birth through age three.¹⁹ Thus, if the goal of a

state pre-kindergarten program is to improve the odds for children in low-income working families, that can only be achieved by ensuring the pre-kindergarten program meets high program standards. And, reaching poor children as early as possible with a high-quality, comprehensive approach may lead to greater gains.

HIGH-QUALITY, COMPREHENSIVE PRE-KINDERGARTEN POLICIES:

- ✓ **have sufficient funding to attract and retain highly qualified teachers with compensation commensurate with competitive positions in public schools**
- ✓ **address the developmental needs of all children, particularly those who may be more likely to experience risk factors associated with poverty**
- ✓ **include comprehensive services for families needing them, including developmental screenings and follow-up treatment; child health, mental health, and nutrition services; and access to a medical home, family support, parental involvement, and home visiting**
- ✓ **have infrastructure supports to ensure ongoing monitoring and quality improvement, technical assistance on all aspects of the program, and program assessment**
- ✓ **include strategies to help children transition to kindergarten**
- ✓ **include children with special needs in settings with normally developing children and provide supports to teachers and parents to help all children reach their full potential**
- ✓ **appropriately serve culturally and linguistically diverse children by employing bilingual and bicultural staff and by increasing training for staff, including cultural competency and teaching strategies for English Language Learners**
- ✓ **are designed to be responsive to the needs of working parents, ensuring that full-workday options are available to families needing them—through planning, coordination, and collaboration with other community, state, and federal programs**

Low-income Parents Need Access to Reliable Early Care and Education Programs to Help Maintain Employment

The majority of parents with young children work; therefore, they have to arrange care for their children. Most families that are low income include a year-round, full-time worker.²⁰ In 2002, 64 percent of single, low-income mothers with children under the age of six were employed.²¹ That number may increase, as new legislation requires more families receiving public assistance to participate in work activities. In 2006, Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, which included significant changes to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. As a result, many states may have to increase the number of families receiving TANF who participate in work activities—and many of these families will have increased need for child care.²²

Paying for high-quality child care programs while parents work can pose a significant burden for low-income working families. The average annual cost of full-time care for a four-year-old child ranges from \$3,016 to \$9,628 across the states; and in most regions of the country, the monthly average child care cost for two children of any age exceeds the

average cost of rent.²³ Poor families living at or below the federal poverty level spend an average of 25 percent of their total income on child care, and low-income families earning between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty level spend 14 percent. Families earning more than 200 percent of poverty spend just 7 percent of their total income on child care.²⁴

Low-income parents often lack job flexibility and access to paid leave. They are in particular need of reliable and consistent child care arrangements, and they may need flexible arrangements to cover changing work hours each week.²⁵ Low-income parents are twice as likely as higher-wage earners to have to miss work due to a child's illness or failed child care arrangement.²⁶ For these families, securing reliable, high-quality, and comprehensive early care and education is critical not only to ensuring the safety and healthy development of their children but also to becoming and staying employed.²⁷ Research shows that low-income mothers who receive assistance in paying for child care are more likely to maintain employment, stay off welfare, and earn higher wages.²⁸

Since low-income working parents may work nonstandard

hours, their need for stable, quality early care and education may not be met by the part-day, school-year programs typical of most state pre-kindergarten programs. Among low-income workers, 25 percent of part-

While low-income children stand to gain the most from early care and education initiatives, working families may not be able to access programs that are not responsive to their needs.

time workers and 20 percent of full-time workers work non-standard hours.²⁹ The occupations that are most likely to require nonstandard work hours—including cashiers, food service staff, and janitorial workers—are predominantly low wage.³⁰ Women with children under age five are more likely than other workers to have varying hours or to work nontraditional hours, including weekends and evenings.³¹ In addition, limited access to personal vehicles and lack of good public transportation may make it difficult for low-income parents to transport children to early care and education programs, especially if they need to travel to multiple child care arrangements.³² While not every family needs a full-day, full-year pre-kindergarten opportunity, it is important that families who do need such programs have choices for obtain-

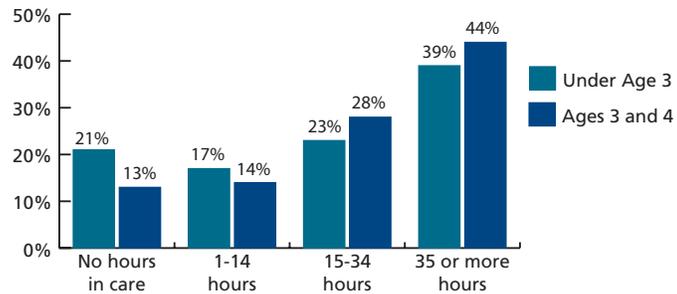
ing them, and that state policy-makers assess low-income working family needs and design their early learning initiatives to partner accordingly with the array of caregivers in low-income children's lives.

A review of available data demonstrates the extent and variety of care arrangements for low-income children. Nearly seven in 10 children under five in low-income families with a working mother (69 percent) are regularly in non-parental care. Among all children under age five with employed mothers, nearly 40 percent are in care for 35 hours or more per week, including 39 percent of infants and toddlers and 44 percent of preschool-aged children (see Figure 1).³³ Children in low-income families are also likely to be in child care arrangements for longer hours than children in families that are not low-income (see Figure 2).

Most preschool-aged children with employed mothers are already in some type of child care arrangement. Center-based child care is the most common arrangement for all three- and four-year-old children with employed mothers. However, low-income children are more likely than other children to be in parent or relative care and less likely to be in center-based

FIGURE 1

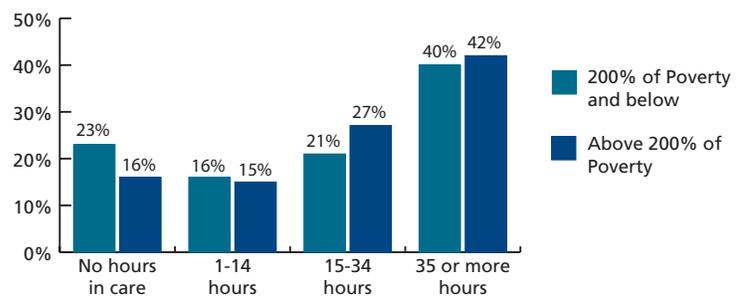
Hours in Child Care for Children Under Age Five with Employed Mothers, by Age



Source: Jeffrey Capizzano and Gina Adams, *The Hours That Children Under Five Spend in Child Care: Variation Across States, 2000*.

FIGURE 2

Hours in Child Care for Children Under Age Five with Employed Mothers, by Income



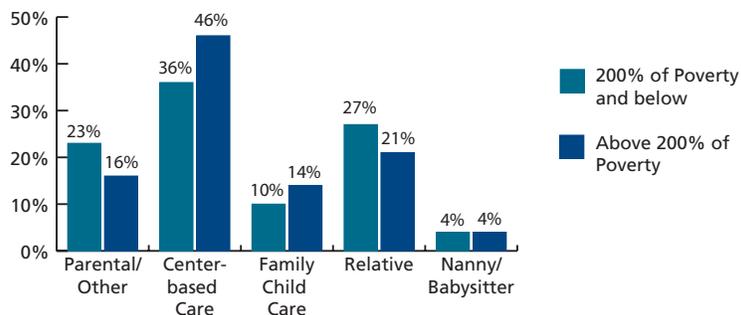
Source: Jeffrey Capizzano and Gina Adams, *The Hours That Children Under Five Spend in Child Care: Variation Across States, 2000*.

or family child care (see Figure 3, p.7).³⁴ Many children are in multiple child care arrangements throughout the day. Forty-three percent of three- and four-year-old children with employed mothers are in two or more regular non-parental child care arrangements each week.³⁵

Current Investments and Programs are Not Sufficient to Ensure Access to Stable, High-quality Early Care and Education for Low-income Children

Given that low-income children of working parents already participate regularly in early care and education settings, to what extent are current investments and programs meeting their

FIGURE 3

Primary Child Care Arrangements of Children Ages Three to Four with Employed Mothers, by Income

Source: Jeffrey Capizzano and Gina Adams, *Children in Low-Income Families are Less Likely to be in Center-Based Child Care*, 2003.

needs for stable, high-quality, and comprehensive services? Low-income parents face several barriers to accessing stable, enriching early care and education programs for their children. Unfortunately, federal and state investments intended to help address these needs are inadequate.

Federal resources for early care and education programs are limited. Child care subsidies are available to some low-income families through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). However, the Government Accountability Office found that between 2001 and 2005, 19 states restricted eligibility or made other changes limiting low-income families' access to child care help.³⁶ In 2004, spending on

child care fell nationally for the first time since the passage of welfare reform in 1996.³⁷ The impact of this decline was felt by families—the number of children served by state child care subsidy programs dropped steadily from a high of 2.45 million children in 2000 to 2.3 million children in 2006. If funding remains at the current level, participation is projected to fall further to 2.0 million by 2010.³⁸ In 2005, CCDBG served an average of 604,800 children ages three to five per month—36 percent of all children served by CCDBG. Sixty-seven percent of these children were served in center-based child care.³⁹ An additional 27 percent were cared for in a child care home, and 6 percent were cared for in their own home.⁴⁰ The federal Head Start

program provides comprehensive early care and education services to poor children (i.e., those in families earning up to 100 percent of poverty). Yet in 2005, just 52 percent of eligible children received Head Start services. In the same year, Early Head Start, which serves children birth to age three and pregnant women, served just 3 percent of eligible children.⁴¹

At the state level, nearly 950,000 children are in state pre-kindergarten programs. These programs reach 20 percent of four-year-olds and about 3 percent of three-year-olds. Fifteen states serve less than 10 percent of their four-year-olds,⁴² and many of those children who are served are in other early care and education arrangements as well. Additional investments in state pre-kindergarten programs that build on and strengthen existing community-based child care resources have the potential to help fill the gap in child care and early education for low-income working families. Pre-kindergarten in community-based child care settings can promote affordability, accessibility, and quality.

Serving Children of Low-income Working Families Using the Community-based Pre-kindergarten Strategy: What Can Be Done, and What are States Doing?

In 2004, CLASP interviewed officials in 29 states that use a mixed delivery system that includes community-based child care providers. The survey included a set of questions designed to elicit information on this and other policy strategies to make pre-kindergarten accessible to low-income working families. The majority of states do not have explicit discussions in their legislation or regulations of extending the pre-kindergarten day, coordinating with the child care subsidy program, or helping working families. States did report a range of approaches to supporting low-income working families, either through requirements for the pre-kindergarten program itself or through encouraging partnerships with child care and other family support agencies in the communities.

The following is a list of CLASP recommendations for addressing the needs of working families in state pre-kindergarten policy, drawing on findings and illustrative state policy examples from the *All Together Now* study. States can:

- 1) Mandate in state law or policy that pre-kindergarten programs concentrate on reaching children in low-income families
 - 2) Require that a minimum proportion of pre-kindergarten opportunities be delivered in existing community-based early care and education settings
 - 3) Require delivery of high-quality pre-kindergarten for full workday, full year to low-income families; and coordinate policies at the state level to provide sufficient funding
 - 4) Allow flexibility and set payment levels adequately, so that community-based providers can more easily combine child care subsidy funds and pre-kindergarten funds to reach children in low-income working families with high-quality, extended-day and full-year programs
 - 5) Provide transportation to pre-kindergarten, whether in public schools or community-based settings, in order to make it easier for low-income working parents to access pre-kindergarten and school readiness activities for their children
 - 6) Support working families' choice of family child care, while ensuring that children in these settings can participate in pre-kindergarten programs
 - 7) Connect health and family support services to pre-kindergarten programs, in order to make it easier for busy working parents to access supports on behalf of their children
 - 8) Offer voluntary, high-quality pre-kindergarten as one key component of a comprehensive birth to five early care and education policy agenda
- 1) Mandate in state law or policy that pre-kindergarten programs concentrate on reaching children in low-income families.**

A specific mention in law or policy requirement of the need to serve children from low-income working families in pre-kindergarten sends a clear signal of state priorities to administrators and local programs. In addition, an explicit focus on low-income working families may encourage creative efforts to reach out to this population, including provision of extended-day and full-year services. The vast majority of state programs provide pre-kindergarten exclusively to children who are considered to be at risk or are from low-income families.

States target low-income children in several ways, including:

- *Requiring all or most participating children to be from low-income families*

Washington State requires that priority be given to children from families with the lowest income, those 110 percent or less of the federal poverty level, and those receiving cash benefits under the TANF program. Up to 10 percent of children may be from families who do not meet income eligibility requirements, provided the child is determined to have other risk factors.

- *Requiring that a certain percentage of participating children be from poor or low-income families*

Iowa requires at least 80 percent of children served to be from families earning below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (approximately \$26,845 for a family of four in 2007).

- *Prioritizing children from low-income families at intake*

California prioritizes children from families earning the lowest income, in addition to children in child protective services. Among families with the same income, priority may be determined

by the presence of additional risk factors.

- *Including low-income status as one of several qualifying risk factors*

Colorado serves children who lack overall learning readiness due to significant family risk factors, including low income, homelessness, an abusive adult residing in the child's home, drug or alcohol abuse in the child's family, a teen parent at the time of the child's birth, low parent educational attainment, and frequent relocation.

- *Targeting funds to geographic areas with a large proportion of children in low-income families*

New Jersey's Abbott pre-kindergarten program is open to all three- and four-year-old children in 31 primarily urban, low-income districts.

Arkansas prioritizes school districts based on several criteria, giving preference to areas in which less than 75 percent of fourth graders are proficient in math or literacy and those with a high percentage of children eligible for free or reduced lunch.

- *Allowing localities to determine how to prioritize children based on local need with an overarch-*

ing goal of preparing at-risk children for school

Illinois serves children who are identified as having multiple risk factors through a locally determined screening process. The state suggests that localities prioritize children with the greatest number of risk factors, which may include low income, teen parent families, or children from homes in which English is not the primary language.

Simply allowing pre-kindergarten to be delivered in community-based early care and education settings does not in itself guarantee that low-income working families' needs will be met.

A few states either have or are working toward universal voluntary pre-kindergarten programs, open to all children in the state, regardless of family income or background. In this model, it is still critical that efforts be made to reach and serve low-income working families.

- 2) **Require that a minimum proportion of pre-kindergarten opportunities be delivered in existing community-based early care and education settings.**

A minimum proportion requirement can ensure that some parents are able to choose pre-kindergarten in a child care setting. It also sends a clear signal that community-based providers—who have experience meeting the needs of working parents—are a critical part of the pre-kindergarten delivery system. While a few states (**Arizona, Michigan, New York, South Carolina, and West Virginia**) have already implemented policies to ensure that some proportion of pre-kindergarten be delivered in community-based settings, most allow the state agency, school district, or locality to decide whether to include child care programs. In states where decisions are left to the local level, the use of community-based child care to deliver pre-kindergarten can vary considerably from community to community.

States use different strategies to ensure a minimum proportion of slots are in community-based child care settings:

- *Requiring a minimum percentage of pre-kindergarten slots in community-based child care settings in the authorizing legislation*

New York requires that a minimum of 10 percent of each school district's grant must be used to collaborate

with existing early childhood programs, including family child care homes, within the school district. At present, about 60 percent of children are in non-school settings.⁴³

West Virginia plans to implement a universal pre-kindergarten program open to all four-year-old children in the state by 2012, at which point at least 50 percent of classrooms must be provided in community-based programs.

- *Using a separate funding stream exclusively for pre-kindergarten programs in community-based child care*

Michigan designates a separate funding stream to support community-based pre-kindergarten.

South Carolina's 4K program funds community-based pre-kindergarten programs and uses a separate funding stream for a school-based program.

- 3) **Require delivery of high-quality pre-kindergarten for full workday, full year to low-income families; and coordinate policies at the state level to provide sufficient funding**

Without a policy that specifies what portion of pre-kindergarten

settings should be able to provide full-workday, full-year services, there is no guarantee that delivering pre-kindergarten in community-based settings will result in such opportunities. Without adequate funding, community-based programs may not be able to meet the pre-kindergarten standards and will not be able to participate.

While communities and programs may wish to exceed the minimum requirements and offer pre-kindergarten that mirrors the standard of at least 10 hours offered by child care providers year round for working families, *no state* currently provides enough resources or assistance with pre-kindergarten payments to meet pre-kindergarten standards for this much time. Some states have extended the hours and days that pre-kindergarten covers, beyond the typical approach. For example, states are:

- *Requiring all pre-kindergarten programs to operate for at least a full school day (six hours or more) and allowing pre-kindergarten funds to be used to provide these services*

Arkansas requires programs to operate for at least seven hours per day.

- *Requiring a portion of pre-kindergarten programs to oper-*

ate for a full workday and year round

Connecticut requires that 60 percent of pre-kindergarten slots offer services for at least 10 hours per day and 52 weeks per year. The state provides 75 percent of the cost of a full-day program and assumes child care subsidies and parent copayments will constitute the remaining costs.

- *Mandating and funding pre-kindergarten and extended day services full day and year round*

The **New Jersey Abbott program** operates for ten hours per day and at least 245 days per year (see box).

- 4) **Allow flexibility and set payment levels adequately, so that community-based providers can more easily combine child care subsidy funds and pre-kindergarten funds to reach children in low-income working families with high-quality, extended-day and full-year programs**

CLASP recommends that states require and pay for full-workday pre-kindergarten options for children in low-income working families, but this goal may be a long-term one for many states. Given this reality,

there are two fundamental steps states can take to increase the ability of providers to put together enough resources to provide full-workday services to children in low-income working families in a coordinated way. First, ensure that the amount paid for pre-kindergarten is sufficient to support the standards being demanded for the program for the time required. Then, review state pre-kindergarten and child care subsidy policies to allow flexibility to put these funding streams together to cover the cost of a full-workday, full-year program for children in low-income working families that need it.

In regard to per-child spending for pre-kindergarten, states vary considerably; in 2005 the average was \$3,551. According to NIEER, this funding level, adjusted for inflation, has decreased over time.⁴⁴ Many states set pre-kindergarten payments too low to pay for the cost of providing the program even for a partial day, hoping that programs will be able to blend funding from other sources to balance their books. Some even reported that the funding level was intentionally set lower by as much as half.

Along with making it harder for programs to meet quality program standards, setting pre-

FUNDING PRE-KINDERGARTEN AND EXTENDED-DAY SERVICES FULL DAY, ALL YEAR

The New Jersey Abbott Program

Abbott Pre-kindergarten is targeted to 31 low-income school districts and provided on a voluntary basis to all three- and four-year-old children within each district.

Programs are required to offer a pre-kindergarten program that operates at least six hours per day and 245 days per year to all three- and four-year-old children in the 31 most disadvantaged districts in the state. In addition, programs must provide extended child care services for a total of 10 hours per day, as well as summer and holiday hours.⁴⁵

State agencies developed policies to coordinate education and child care subsidy funding streams and policies at the state level to allow programs to access both sources of funding. In 2005, the state Department of Education provided \$10,361 per child for the six-hour pre-kindergarten day. The Department of Human Services provided an additional \$3,700 per child to extend the day to 10 hours.⁴⁶

The Department of Education requires that 6.5 hours of the day meet pre-kindergarten standards. The other hours must meet the Department of Human Services requirements for child care providers serving subsidy-eligible children. The Department of Education does not monitor whether programs adhere to the Abbott standards for the other portion of the day and year.

kindergarten payments below cost may reduce the likelihood that programs are willing and able to take on the task of put-

ting together funding streams that can stretch to provide high-quality, comprehensive, full-workday, full-year pre-kindergarten for children in low-income working families. It is also possible that setting pre-kindergarten payments too low may inadvertently reduce incentives to provide full-day, full-year, high-quality programs by encouraging child care providers that normally provide full- or extended-day services and wish to be part of pre-kindergarten expansion to alter their programs to provide just the minimum number of hours required for pre-kindergarten, or to offer back-to-back part-day sessions.

The next step is for states to make it easy for providers to layer child care subsidy dollars on top of pre-kindergarten payments to provide high-quality, comprehensive pre-kindergarten for the highest possible percentage of time that low-income children of working parents are in their care. In other words, rather than seeing the day as part learning and part custodial care, the highest program standards should apply to the whole time children are present. To do this, states will want to consider policies that:

- *Allow programs to receive the full-day child care subsidy and the entire pre-kindergarten*

payment when needed to pay for the cost of a quality program for an extended day and year. This issue is important for community-based providers, since they most often lack the infrastructure resources available to public school-based pre-kindergarten and may need additional funding beyond what they can capture from parent fees or state child care subsidies to meet pre-kindergarten program standards—especially to attract and retain credentialed teachers. When child care subsidy reimbursement rates are too low, providers may not accept children receiving subsidies, or they may compromise the quality of care. As of 2006, 10 states have payment rates based on 2001 child care costs, and the majority of states do not set payment rates equivalent to the cost of most child care options available in the community.⁴⁷ State policies can make it easier for child care programs to put child care and pre-kindergarten funding together and to ensure that all these funds go toward the cost of providing a high-quality program.

Connecticut requires a minimum of 60 percent of programs in each school readiness council area to be full day and full year (i.e., 10

hours per day, 52 weeks per year), based on local needs assessments. Funding is not coordinated at the state level, but programs are allowed to put pre-kindergarten funding together with child care subsidy dollars on their own initiative. Pre-kindergarten funding provides \$7,500 per child to a full-day, full-year program and expects that a combination of child care subsidies and parent fees will cover the rest of the state's projected cost of \$10,000 per child for full-day and full-year pre-kindergarten services. Providers can receive both full-time child care subsidies and full-day, full-year pre-kindergarten payments for qualifying low-income working families.

In **Delaware**, if a provider cares for a child for more than four hours a day in addition to the four hours provided as pre-kindergarten, then the program can receive a full-day child care subsidy payment and full pre-kindergarten funding for the same child.

In **North Carolina**, county child care subsidy offices can pay up to 75 percent of the full-day child care subsidy for a six-hour-a-day pre-kindergarten program. If the provider cares for the child

beyond the six required hours for a full workday, up to 100 percent of the subsidy can be requested.

In **Wisconsin**, the Department of Workforce Development implemented a policy authorizing subsidy payment for all the hours that a child is in a blended program.

- *Use provider contracts, rather than vouchers, to ensure a guaranteed stable source of child care subsidy funding to programs trying to plan for and maintain a set year of a full-workday and full-year pre-kindergarten program.* Federal CCDBG rules allow states to use contracts as well as vouchers as part of a mixed delivery system of child care subsidies.⁴⁸ In 2005, 15 states and the District of Columbia reported to the federal government that they used contracts or grants in addition to vouchers.⁴⁹ A contract can be made between a state and a child care provider prior to service delivery, indicating that the provider will make available a certain number of slots, which will be paid for by the state so long as contracted state program or attendance conditions are met. Payment may be made prior to or after service provision, and the rate can be set by negoti-

ation between the state and the provider. States may also set different requirements for programs to be eligible to receive a contract.

In **Oregon**, the Department of Human Services supplements the state pre-kindergarten program by awarding full-day child care subsidy contracts to participating programs so that some programs can provide full-day, full-year services to low-income families. In 2002, the state used about \$1.9 million of the child care budget (which includes CCDBG, TANE, and state general funds) for this purpose. Programs must have reasonable cost-allocation plans. The average per-child pre-kindergarten payment was \$7,716 for the 2001-2003 biennium. Programs are required to provide a minimum of 3.5 hours of classroom time that meets pre-kindergarten standards, which are modeled on the Head Start Program Performance Standards and include education, health, and family support requirements. Children in contracted pre-kindergarten programs retain their child care eligibility for the full year, regardless of changes in family income or status.

- *Change state-set child care subsidy policies that are a hindrance to providers trying to develop seamless pre-kindergarten programs full workday and year round.* As stated before, states have significant flexibility in setting many critical CCDBG policies, which can make it harder or easier to blend and braid funding with other sources, particularly those that are less linked to parental work status or family income. For example, federal guidelines say that states can align the eligibility period for child care subsidies with the program year of a collaborative pre-kindergarten program for children accessing both pre-kindergarten and child care subsidy assistance.⁵⁰ Aligning eligibility periods between child care subsidies and the pre-kindergarten program ensures that children's learning opportunities are not disrupted. Also, it allows providers to budget knowing that children will not be deemed ineligible in the middle of a program year.⁵¹

Illinois created a special child care collaboration program for families participating in a community-based pre-kindergarten program and receiving child care subsidies. The program allows

three rule exceptions to child care regulations: annual eligibility redetermination (as opposed to the usual six months), 90 days to look for a new job and remain eligible for subsidies (as opposed to 30), and ongoing eligibil-

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ty for TANF families that have specified in their TANF Responsibility and Services Plan that the parent and child will participate in the early education collaborative program.

- *Provide technical assistance and guidance to help local programs navigate the various funding streams needed to fund extended-day pre-kindergarten*

In **Wisconsin**, the Department of Public Instruction developed a funding guide to help local collaborations between schools, child care, and Head Start agencies. *Financing Four-Year-Old Kindergarten in Community Approaches* includes examples of how programs can allocate costs (and responsibilities) among participating partners, along

with examples of contracts and partnership agreements that designate who provides and pays for each service.⁵² The state also developed a cadre of “community collaboration coaches” to help develop partnerships among schools and other community-based early care and education programs to provide pre-kindergarten.

5) Provide transportation to pre-kindergarten, whether in public schools or community-based settings, in order to make it easier for low-income working parents to access pre-kindergarten and school readiness activities for their children

Pre-kindergarten programs are more likely to reach low-income working families when they are accessible in the community. However, not all areas have local schools, centers, or Head Start programs that can provide a setting for pre-kindergarten. Low-income working parents are less likely to have the transportation and flexibility to shuttle their children to and from pre-kindergarten programs—especially if the programs are part day, the parents are working non-traditional shift hours, or the programs are not located in their neighborhood and public trans-

portation is scarce. States may address this issue by providing transportation for children or by developing innovative models to partner with home-based caregivers to promote school readiness for children. States should examine specific conditions in their communities and determine the most feasible solutions.

Most states allow programs to use pre-kindergarten funds for transportation, as well as for many other competing needs. State approaches include:

- *Providing funds for transportation above and beyond pre-kindergarten funds*

Pre-kindergarten programs in **Georgia** may apply for an additional \$165 per child per year to provide transportation to and from programs in targeted high-needs areas.

- *Requiring programs to make provisions for transporting children to and from the program*

Tennessee, Washington State, and Wisconsin explicitly require programs to ensure children have access to transportation. However, Wisconsin requires pre-kindergarten programs to provide transportation only for children who live more than two miles from the facility.

As of the 2006-2007 school year, **North Carolina** requires programs to develop a written plan showing how the transportation needs of potential children will be addressed. Transportation is an allowable expense; and the authorizing legislation allows for the transportation of any More at Four child to any pre-kindergarten site on public school buses, even when those sites are operated by community-based providers.⁵³

- *Including transportation as an allowable expense for pre-kindergarten funds*

Kentucky allows pre-kindergarten funds to be used for transportation not only to and from pre-kindergarten but also to and from a child care or Head Start facility, in order to extend the day.

6) Support working families' choice of family child care, while ensuring that children in these settings can participate in pre-kindergarten programs

According to Child Care Aware, “parents choose family child care because they want to keep their children in a home-like environment. They prefer to relate to a single caregiver and believe that children are

healthier, happier and more secure in smaller groups. Some parents like having all their children in the same group, or trust what they learned about the provider from friends. Sometimes they choose family child care because they find it closer to home, less expensive or more flexible.”⁵⁴ One in 10 low-income children ages three to four with an employed mother are cared for in a family child care home.⁵⁵ Twenty-eight percent of children receiving a child care subsidy are in family child care.⁵⁶

Despite the prevalence of family child care, only 13 states have implemented state pre-kindergarten programs that include family child care providers.⁵⁷ Even in these states, it may be rare for family child care providers to participate. In New York, less than 2 percent of the state pre-kindergarten program’s providers are family child care providers. This is due to teacher standards, a very short program day, traditional ideas that pre-kindergarten should be school- and classroom-based, and other factors. Yet, states and local communities that have worked to include community-based settings have found that a family child care model can work and can have benefits for children, families, and providers.

Just as pre-kindergarten varies from state to state, so too do models that include family child care. Often, local providers or groups have come together and created opportunities for family child care providers to participate as networked groups, rather than having to navigate the state application process alone. In others, the state has actively worked to include family child care providers in the state pre-kindergarten program. Examples of state approaches to including family child care in pre-kindergarten initiatives include:

- *Providing opportunities for children in family child care to participate in state pre-kindergarten programs*

In **Arkansas**, pre-kindergarten programs may participate on their own or as part of networks of family child care homes, which rotate a certified teacher to help with lesson plans and assessment. The state has encouraged these partnerships, and the number of participating children in family child care homes increased from zero in the 2003-2004 school year to 140 in 2005-2006. To participate, teachers in the family child care home must have a minimum of a CDA credential with a professional development plan to obtain a bachelor’s degree in early

childhood or child development. In addition, teachers must receive 30 hours of early childhood-related training per year. The state has a set budget for providers, on a per-child basis. The budget includes salary, benefits, and professional development funds for the family child care provider. It also includes a small transportation stipend for each child, along with financial supports for development and health screenings; meaningful parental engagement; and curriculum, materials, and work sampling assessments. There is a 40 percent match required of participating pre-kindergarten providers; for many providers, participation in a family child care network makes it possible to meet the match.

In **Illinois**, Illinois Action for Children, the resource and referral agency for Cook County (which includes Chicago), and other public and private partners came together in a pilot project connecting children in family child care with enhanced learning experiences, both in classrooms and in child care homes. Children in family child care homes attend a center-based state pre-kindergarten program for

four half days each week, and classroom staff visit family child care providers twice per month. Family child care providers continue to receive child care subsidies for a full day of care, in order to ensure that there is no financial disincentive for participation in pre-kindergarten.

7) Connect health and family support services to pre-kindergarten programs, in order to make it easier for busy working parents to access supports on behalf of their children

Many state-funded pre-kindergarten programs offer some child or family support services. States vary in what they require as part of their pre-kindergarten program. Three states (**Delaware, Oregon, and Washington**) address all eight of the major areas of comprehensive services required by federal Head Start Program Performance Standards, providing the most intensive and extensive array of child health and family strengthening supports. The majority of states do not require pre-kindergarten programs to provide the same level of comprehensive support services as the Head Start program does,⁵⁸ and they do not provide the funding to allow programs to do so. Of the 48

state-funded pre-kindergarten initiatives in 2005, just 27 require vision, hearing, and health screenings and at least one support service. Twenty-three require at least one meal per day.⁵⁹ State approaches to linking health and family support services to pre-kindergarten include:

- *Requiring pre-kindergarten programs to meet the federal Head Start Program Performance Standards*

In **Oregon**, pre-kindergarten provides the same comprehensive services as the federal Head Start program. This includes addressing children's nutritional, health, and mental needs; providing opportunities to include parents in the development of the program's curriculum and approach to child development and education; and providing medical, dental, nutrition, and mental health education programs for program staff, parents, and families. Pre-kindergarten program family services staff often provide families with referrals and information about available community resources.

In **Washington State**, family support is a main tenet of the pre-kindergarten program. The state requires programs to provide family

support services, using an approach that builds from parent or guardian strengths and involvement and supports parent empowerment and family advocacy. Staff and families must work together to develop reciprocal relationships. Children must be transported to and from program activities, and pre-kindergarten funds may be used for this. Staff must assist parents or guardians in planning for any necessary follow-up health treatment for children and in accessing health resources.

- *Requiring programs to have a social worker or family resource coordinator responsible for linking children and families to necessary community services*

New Jersey's Abbott program provides family support services, health and nutrition services, and referrals to additional services when necessary. Programs also must have a family worker or social worker to conduct outreach to families.

- *Providing grants to programs serving high numbers of children considered to be high risk, to be used to hire a social worker or family resource coordinator*

In Georgia, programs that serve a certain proportion of

at-risk children may apply for additional funding to hire a resource coordinator, who is available to support families through assistance in coordination of services and linkages to services available in the community, opportunities for parents to learn more about their child's development, and weekly meetings or regular contact with teachers to discuss issues related to children and families. Full-time resource coordinators work a minimum of 40 hours a week and have caseloads of 50 to 75 families.

8) Offer voluntary, high-quality pre-kindergarten as one key component of a comprehensive birth to five early care and education policy agenda

A voluntary, high-quality, comprehensive pre-kindergarten program is just one part of what states can do to promote child development and school readiness from birth. States should also consider initiatives to address the needs of low-income and vulnerable infants and toddlers. State early care and education policies that start at birth and address the full range of children's development have the potential to identify health and developmental

issues, link low-income and at-risk families to necessary supports, and ensure that those who care for infants and toddlers have the tools to stimulate early learning and development and ease transitions into the preschool and elementary years. Yet state pre-kindergarten programs focus mostly on children in the year just prior to entering kindergarten. Of the 38 states that funded at least one pre-kindergarten program in 2006, 26 served three-year-old children along with four-year-olds.⁶⁰ However, only six of these served more than 5 percent of the three-year-olds in the state.⁶¹ In some instances, states have reduced the number of three-year-olds served in order to expand enrollment for four-year-olds.⁶²

State leaders can implement policies that promote child development prior to the traditional age of entry into preschool in concert with efforts to expand access to high-quality programs for preschoolers. In doing so, states should focus on both the specific early care and education policies and the means of structuring governance and finance systems to ensure ongoing support for and attention to birth to three early care and education issues. It is critical to understand that early care and education policy initiatives that focus on infants and

toddlers will necessarily differ in the details from those created to support state pre-kindergarten initiatives. The basic categories, however, are fairly similar; both require high standards for programs and guidelines for early development; qualified and well-compensated teachers and supported family, friend, and neighbor caregivers; and linkages to health and family support services for families that need them. In the pre-kindergarten movement, states have made inroads in these areas for preschool-aged children. The same energy, creativity, and resources are needed for children birth to three.⁶³

In order to deliver quality, comprehensive early care and education services, states also need sound governance and system-building structures that ensure that all the parts of a system are working in a coordinated way. Governance must account for both *horizontal* connections across systems serving children of the same age—for example, child care, Head Start, state pre-kindergarten programs, and early intervention services—and *vertical* connections of services from birth to five, to provide continuity and coordination for children as they grow. Funding decisions drive policy, making it crucial that new and existing funding streams target and include serv-

ices for infants and toddlers along with those for preschool-aged children.

States with strong pre-kindergarten initiatives already in place can examine ways of linking pre-kindergarten funding and policy to efforts for younger children. **Illinois** has the most recognized example of linking funding strategies. The state pre-kindergarten funding stream (the Early Childhood Block Grant) includes an 11 percent set-aside, which generated about \$30 million in 2006. This ensures that as pre-kindergarten funds grow, so do funds for younger children. Since 2006, all programs funded through the Infant Toddler Set-Aside have been required to use research-based approaches.

In **Georgia**, the Standards of Care program, housed in the state agency that administers the pre-kindergarten program, provides voluntary services to improve the quality of infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms. Infant and toddler providers receive technical assistance and training opportunities based on the Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS). The Standards of Care program also provides grants for centers to improve quality by purchasing equipment. A high-quality program may be designated as a Center

of Distinction or Center of Recognition.

Conclusion

Our review of state policies suggests that there is a significant need to reexamine efforts to expand pre-kindergarten services to low-income children, in both the context of family work patterns and that of increased partnerships with community-based programs. No state or national leader would wish to create new opportunities for high-quality early care and education that are inaccessible to children in low-income working families. In order to better address working family needs, state leaders will need to devote time, attention, and resources to better designing pre-kindergarten programs that work for working families. Including community-based child care in state pre-kindergarten programs presents an important opportunity to bring together the dual goals of promoting early learning and supporting low-income working families. However, policies must also intentionally encourage and fund the creative approaches described in this paper; and they must explore additional solutions to this critical issue.

All states that seek to expand access to early care and educa-

tion services that meet low-income working families' needs face a singular challenge: the inadequacy of funding to maintain a supply of high-quality, community-based early care and education. Federal and state funding for child care subsidy programs should be greatly increased; at current levels, it is inadequate to meet the needs of low-income working families. Hundreds of thousands of chil-

dren are on waiting lists for help, and most states set child care subsidy payment rates well below what states pay pre-kindergarten programs for a similar number of hours of service.⁶⁴ Likewise, Head Start enrollment has not increased for the past three years.⁶⁵ Without an adequate foundation of federal and state funding for the early care and education programs on which poor and

low-income working families already rely, state pre-kindergarten initiatives will have difficulty fully expanding access to pre-kindergarten—because they will not be able to find high-quality community early care and education partners. Without increased investments, working lower-income families and their children will be left behind.

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Child Care and Early Education Series

June 2007
Paper No. 1

ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national nonprofit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal

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justice for all. CLASP's child care and early education work focuses on promoting policies that support both child development and the needs of low-income working parents and on expanding the availability of resources for child care and early education initiatives. CLASP examines the impact of welfare reform on

child care needs; studies the relationships between child care subsidy systems, the Head Start Program, pre-kindergarten efforts, and other early education initiatives; and explores how these systems can be responsive to the developmental needs of all children.

CLASP

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