



ARE PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO LIVE UP TO THEIR POTENTIAL?



State-funded preschool is finally moving to the top of state policy agendas. In fact, state preschool funding more than tripled between 2002 and 2017, to \$7.6 billion, according to the most recent installment of the [State Preschool Yearbook](#). (The Yearbook is co-authored by National Education Policy Center Fellow W. Steven Barnett and is published by the National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, which Barnett founded.)

Aaliyah Samuel of the National Governors Association noted in November 2018 that 18 governor-elects talked about aspects of early education on the campaign trail. In Colorado, Governor Jared Polis has [proposed](#) adding 8,000 new state preschool spots while also expanding free, full-day kindergarten. With strong support from Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, New Mexico [created](#) a new Department of Early Childhood Education and Care while adding \$35.6 million in funding for early childhood programs. Perhaps most ambitious is California Governor Gavin Newsom's [three-year plan](#) to implement full-day preschool in that state for four-year-olds from low-income families, with the eventual goal of universal access.

As a reform, state-funded preschool has great potential. In a [recent article](#) in the peer-refereed journal *AERA Open*, Barnett and his co-authors report that, on average, state-funded preschool programs in the eight states they studied had positive effects on language, math, and emergent literacy upon kindergarten entry. In an earlier NEPC [policy brief](#), Barnett outlined longer-term effects of preschool education programs, including higher rates of educational attainment, lower rates of retention in grade, reduced odds of special education identification, and less juvenile and adult crime. But he strongly cautions that only high-quality programs can be expected to deliver such results. "Policymakers should not depart from preschool education models that have proven highly effective," he recommends.

What does that mean?

National Institute for Early Education Research [yearbooks](#) use research-based guidelines to rate state programs. These standards are a good baseline indicator of the minimal standards states should consider as they turn their attention to preschool education:

- **Standards alignment, cultural sensitivity, state support, and broad approach.** Comprehensive early learning and development standards should be horizontally and vertically aligned with standards for older and younger children. They should also be culturally sensitive. States need to provide support (such as professional development) that helps schools implement the standards. The standards themselves should address physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, language development, cognition, and general knowledge.
- **Curricular assistance.** Schools also need assistance with curriculum implementation. Support may include professional development and guidance on program selection.
- **Professional preparation.** Lead teachers should have bachelor's degrees and specialized training in early childhood learning, pedagogy, and development. Assistant teachers should have a Child Development Associate or comparable degree.
- **Professional development.** Staff should receive at least 15 hours per year of professional development.
- **Manageable class size.** Class sizes should be limited to 20 or lower. Student-teacher ratios should be 1:10 or lower.
- **Health.** Students should receive vision, hearing and other health screenings and referrals.
- **Evaluative feedback loop.** Programs should engage in a continuous quality improvement system that includes collecting data and using it to improve policy or practice.

Just three states (Alabama, Michigan, and Rhode Island) met all these standards in 2017. Given that the guidelines represent minimum baselines, not ideal conditions, state programs are almost certainly missing opportunities to maximize the benefits that preschool has the potential to offer. As policymakers turn their attention to this important area of education in the months to come, quality should be a core focus of their efforts to improve early education.

NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education

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