

# The Imperative for High-Quality Pre-K

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## Overview

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, nearly every state in the country has made significant investments in public preschool, and preschool has become the norm in children's education experience.

The theory of change for this investment is that preschool can help children develop the skills they need to succeed in kindergarten and can thus set children on a trajectory for school success.

Access to high-quality preschool can give children from low-income families a fairer chance at succeeding in school, and the research on long-term impact suggests it can alter life trajectories. Of the many school improvement initiatives this series discusses, preschool is among the most studied, and it may have the most potential to move the needle on improving student achievement.

## Guidance for Policymakers

- Clearly articulated goals are important. They guide program development as well as the measures used to assess program quality, support program improvement, and track outcomes.
- Quality is the primary consideration in any preschool system. States have many levers to affect policy that will improve quality, including program licensing standards, educator credentialing standards, resources to support effective teaching, child learning standards and assessments, quality monitoring systems, and curriculum guidance.
- What happens after preschool affects the long-term benefits of preschool. Policies related to preschool should not be considered in isolation. If the later grades do not build on what children learned in preschool, its benefits will fade. States should encourage districts to review the organization of instruction through the early grades and ensure effective Preschool–Grade 3 alignment.
- The politics of pre-K can be complicated to navigate. Many constituencies are affected by decisions related to state-funded preschool, including the relevant state agencies, community-based programs that may be included in the pre-K system, institutions of higher education that train teachers, school districts, Head Start, and parents. All policy decisions should include their voices.

## What the Research Tells Us

- The number of children served by public preschool programs has grown dramatically in the years since the release of *A Nation at Risk*.
- Research suggests that high-quality preschool programs can have both short-term and long-term benefits, but the operative phrase is “high quality.” Only programs that meet high quality standards have shown long-term effects.
- Evidence shows that children who attend the diverse array of pre-K programs offered by states and school districts are more ready for school than children who do not attend pre-K.
- Many studies show an initial benefit of preschool but that the benefit fades over the first few years of elementary school. Preschool is more likely to yield long-term academic benefits if it is followed with instruction that builds on initial gains.

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