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## Promoting Effective Preschool Programs

As the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 falls further behind in meeting its ambitious goals, high-quality preschool education—with its potential to increase school readiness and narrow achievement gaps—is increasingly regarded as a key means of achieving NCLB goals and thus has become a more integral part of the K–12 education reform agenda. States have begun to invest heavily in preschool programs, most of which target children at risk. In three states, public preschool is available to all four-year-old children, and a handful of other states are moving in that direction, even for three-year-olds. The federal government has a long-standing commitment to early care and education through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program, Title I funding, Head Start, and other programs. Other initiatives at all levels of government focus on raising quality in existing or expanded programs.

Identifying the federal policies and investments that will best promote effective early learning programs is complicated because public support reaches programs through multiple funding streams at the federal, state, and local levels and because the delivery system includes a range of public and private providers. In this brief, we highlight what we know from existing research and the options that emerge for federal policy.

### Research Shows That Preschool Provides Important Benefits, but Access and Quality Vary

**Achievement gaps in K–12 are rooted in a readiness gap.** Much attention is paid to the magnitude of the academic achievement gaps between different groups of students—whites or Asians versus African Americans or Latinos; economically disadvantaged children versus those more advantaged; students with low versus high parental education; and so on. Recent studies find that those school-age achievement differences are present at the starting gate, when children first enter school.

### Abstract

This is one in a series of policy briefs on key education issues prepared by the RAND Corporation for the Obama administration. Preschool education plays an important role in increasing school readiness and closing achievement gaps for children at risk. However, access to high-quality preschool programs varies greatly. Therefore, policymakers could use federal funds to support state efforts to improve preschool quality and access for the most disadvantaged children.

### A rigorous body of research demonstrates that effective preschool programs can narrow readiness gaps and later achievement gaps.

Evaluations of smaller and larger high-quality preschool programs show that such programs can advance school readiness and lead to higher test scores through at least third grade. The benefits of preschool are more pronounced for disadvantaged children, but there are positive effects for children across the socioeconomic spectrum.

**Preschool programs produce other lasting benefits that help children become more productive individuals.** Several evaluations of preschool programs serving at-risk children that followed students for many years document a lifetime of individual and societal benefits, such as higher rates of high school graduation and employment, increased earnings, and reduced rates of crime and delinquency.

**Existing subsidized preschool programs do not reach many of the children who could benefit most.** While federal and state programs are designed to primarily serve disadvantaged children, most programs do not receive enough funds to serve all eligible children. As a result, disadvantaged children—those who could benefit the most—are less likely to attend preschool than their more advantaged peers.

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**Many preschool-age children whose families receive child-care subsidies are in unregulated settings of unknown, but probably mediocre, quality.** In the interests of ensuring parental choice and promoting parental responsibility, the CCDBG program allows parents to choose the care on which they spend the subsidies they receive. Depending on each state's licensing requirements and the availability of subsidized preschool programs, a substantial percentage of children benefiting from child-care subsidies may be found in unlicensed care.

**For many children in subsidized preschool programs, quality is below the level required to produce strong child outcomes.** Measuring the quality of preschool programs is challenging, but a growing body of research finds that many subsidized preschool programs fall short on the key quality indicators associated with promoting school readiness and later school success.

**Initiatives to raise quality are narrowly focused and have not always met with success.** States are increasingly investing in quality rating systems, which are assessments designed to make quality transparent and reward it through market forces. Quality rating and improvement systems provide technical assistance and financial incentives to motivate and support quality improvement. Limited evidence suggests that participation in these rating and improvement systems is associated with quality improvements, but the few studies to date have not found a link to improved child readiness—the ultimate goal of these systems.

### **These Findings Point to Several Policy Actions**

Existing research confirms gaps in both access and quality. While many states are actively pursuing initiatives to address these shortfalls, there is a potential role for federal policy to supplement and complement state efforts. However, the policy issues at the federal level often cut across different agencies of the federal government. Therefore, some initiatives will require cross-agency coordination and collaboration.

**Use federal dollars to fully fund Head Start, earmark additional Title I funds for state preschool programs, and/or directly supplement state preschool programs.** Because Head Start does not have the funding to serve all

eligible children, policymakers should explore options to facilitate combining federal Head Start funds with funds for high-quality state preschool programs and to support a more seamless early childhood education system. Title I funds are underutilized as a source of flexible funds for early education programs, so increased Title I funding could be earmarked for preschool programs. Federal matching funds could also support state efforts to serve more children in high-quality programs, starting with the most disadvantaged.

**Consider ways to leverage CCDBG funds to improve program quality.** States are required to set aside 4 percent of their CCDBG funds for quality improvement, but most CCDBG child-care funds go to help low-income working families become and remain independent, with only minimal, if any, requirements for quality. Quality might be improved by increasing the size of the set-aside—the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies suggests 10 percent—and requiring all paid providers who care for unrelated children on a regular basis to have a state license or permit and to meet rigorous pre-service and in-service training requirements.

**Support efforts to raise the quality of preschool programs, promote the alignment of preschool and K–12 education, and collect student-level longitudinal data from preschool onward.** States are experimenting with quality rating and improvement systems, early learning standards that align with standards for kindergarten and beyond, and systems that link data from preschool to postsecondary levels to support more-informed decisionmaking and quality improvement. The federal government can provide leadership in identifying best practices and promoting knowledge sharing across the states.

**Foster experimentation and associated evaluation to assess what works and what does not in developing a high-quality early education system.** The degree of variation across states in early care and education policy provides a laboratory that can inform decisionmakers about effective approaches to expanding access and raising quality. The federal government can promote rigorous evaluation of state initiatives and serve as a clearinghouse for the growing base of knowledge about what does and does not work. ■

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This policy brief describes work done for RAND Education and RAND Labor and Population. It is based on research by RAND and others. For further reading, see [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9427/index1.html#references](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9427/index1.html#references). This policy brief was written by Lynn Karoly, Gail Zellman, and Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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