

The Expansion of Voluntary Full-Day Pre-K in Nebraska

The science is clear that children with high-quality early childhood experiences from birth to age 8 tend to do better in school and life. They participate in the workforce at higher rates, earn more, and access public benefits at lower rates. Research has also found that high-quality early learning experiences improve children's academic performance, build strong social and cognitive skills, reduce the cost of K-12 special education, and lower health and criminal justice costs.

With regard to the various programs available to families, the level of quality within these programs, and the different ages of young children different programs serve, the early childhood landscape is complex. This is only further complicated from an administrative standpoint by the underlying and varying family income eligibility levels, data collection and reporting requirements, and multiple, siloed funding streams. **While we support a broader effort toward a comprehensive system of services for children birth to 8, this issue brief focuses specifically on the aspect of expanding voluntary full-day public school district prekindergarten (pre-K) programs for 3- and 4-year olds.**

The purpose of this issue brief is to focus on the expansion of voluntary full-day pre-K programs for 3- and 4-year olds with new funding supporting programs that meet the quality standards of Nebraska Department of Education Rule 11. By expanding and improving our current pre-K programming, we can build upon the evidence to create a foundation of success for children, families, and Nebraska's short and long-term economic stability. Children, particularly those in low-income working families, will miss out on opportunities for high quality pre-K education if only a part-day program is available.

Nebraska School District Pre-K

Program Overview

The Nebraska Early Childhood Education Grant Program began as a pilot in 1992 and expanded in 2001. Financial support is available for public schools and education service units that partner with child care centers, as well as Head Start and/or human services agencies. Grantees must provide a 100% funding match using local and/or federal sources.¹

The program serves children ages 3 years to kindergarten entrance age. Programs shall include to the extent possible children of diverse social and economic characteristics.²

One priority for funding of the program shall be for new grants and expansion grants for programs that will serve at-risk children who will be eligible to attend kindergarten the following school year.³ The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) defines an at risk child as one experiencing conditions or factors which could have a negative impact on his or her development or learning, including but not limited to such factors as:

- low birth weight,
- poverty,
- being a child of teen parents or parents who did not graduate from high school,
- or living in a home whose occupants have limited ability to speak and understand English⁴

1. Neb. Rev. Stat. §79-1103(5).

2. 92, NAC 11-004.08.

3. Neb. Rev. Stat. §79-1103(1)(c).

4. 92 NAC 11-002.01

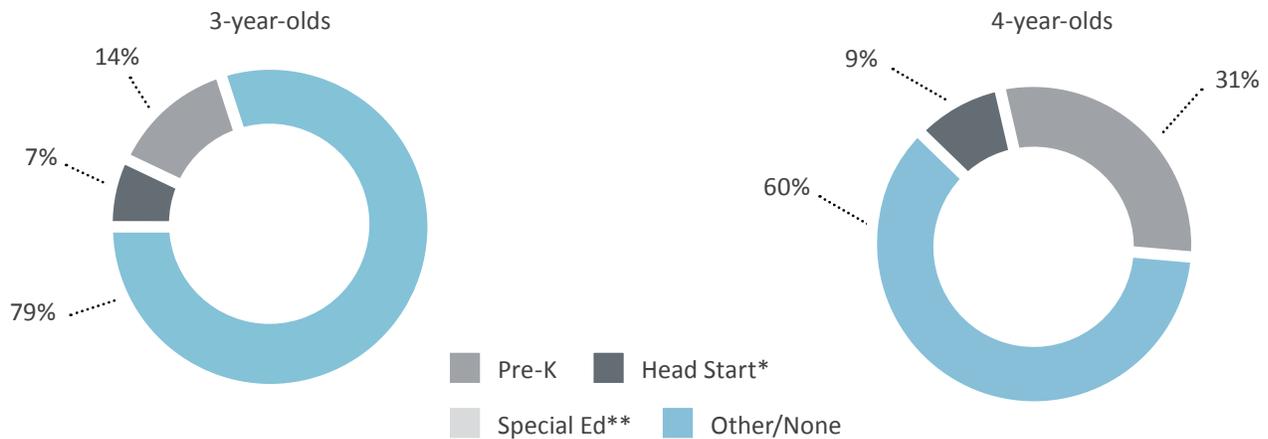
How many children are served and where?

In the 2014-15 school year, 84% of school districts offered a state early childhood education program, but only 28% of all school district preschool programs were operating as full-day programs.⁵ In total, Nebraska had 240 full day pre-K programs and 681 part day programs. Since 2012, Nebraska has seen a total enrollment increase of 4,253 students, an overall 42% increase in enrollment.

Numbers Served (in public school preschool classrooms by school districts/ESU and Head Start)	
FY 2012	10,204 Children
FY 2013	10,442 Children
FY 2014	11,852 Children
FY 2015	14,457 Children

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), as a percentage of total population in 2015, 14% of our 3-year-olds were served in state pre-K, and 31% of our 4-year-olds.⁶

State Pre-K and Head Start Enrollment as Percentage of Total Population (2015)

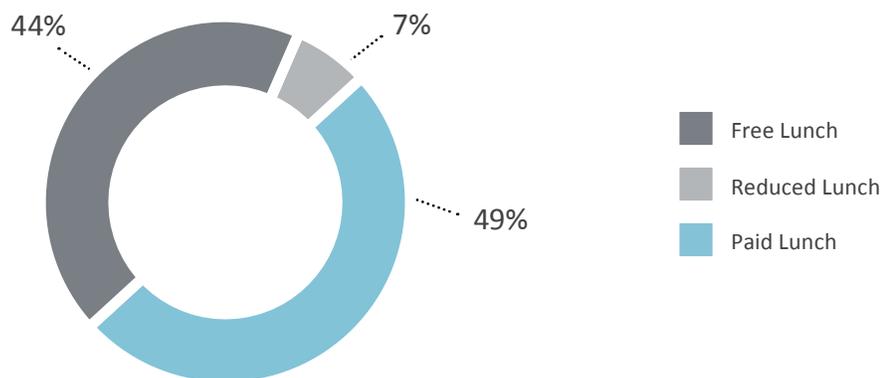


*Some Head Start children may also be counted in state pre-K.

** Estimates children in special education not also enrolled in state pre-K or Head Start.

According to even more recent data from NDE, in the 2016-17 school year, 51% of Nebraska's enrolled pre-K students received free and reduced lunch.⁷ This means that although the program is intended to prioritize funding for young children at risk, only half of the population is considered at risk based on economic barriers.

Free & Reduced Lunch Related to Pre-K Enrollment (FY 2016-17)

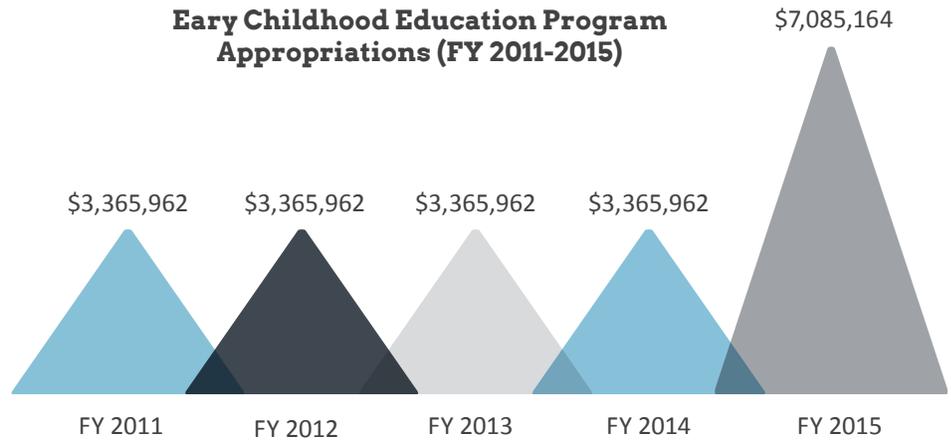


5. Nebraska Department of Education, 2014-15.

6. National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool 2015, State Preschool Yearbook*.

7. Nebraska Department of Education, 2016-17, This information represents the total of students from 1) NDE Grant Funded Early Childhood Education Program 2) Qualified NDE Grant Funded Early Childhood Education Program 3) NDE Approved Early Childhood Education Program and 4) Qualified NDE Approved Early Childhood Education Program.

Also according to NIEER, the total state pre-K investment was \$33,313,438.⁸ This amounts to \$2,759 per student. Of the total state pre-K investment, \$7,085,164 was appropriated to the Early Childhood Education Grant Program.



Early Childhood Education Program (FY 2011-2015)					
	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015
General Funds	\$3,365,962	\$0	\$0	\$1,820,164	\$5,235,164**
Cash*	\$0	\$3,365,962	\$3,365,962	\$1,750,000	\$1,850,000
Total State Funds	\$3,365,962	\$3,365,962	\$3,365,962	\$3,570,164	\$7,085,164

*Lottery funds

**One time General Funds appropriation

Evidence to Support Full-Day Pre-K Programs

Research shows the achievement gap is measurable and apparent as early as 18 months of age, long before kindergarten.⁹ A child who starts behind in kindergarten is likely to remain behind in third grade and less likely to graduate from high school. A child who is not reading at grade level by third grade is four times less likely to graduate high school than their peers who are reading at grade level by third grade.¹⁰

Is More Better? Yes, and Quality Matters.

To address the need for policy decisions about the relative benefits of prekindergarten programs with shorter and longer hours per days or days per year, NIEER conducted a randomized trial with 4-year-olds in a low-income urban district. Results indicated that students who were far behind at preschool entry can develop vocabulary, math, and literacy skills that approach national norms if provided with extended-duration preschool that maintains reasonable quality standards. The added hours of preschool education were substantially effective at closing the achievement gap between treatment group and their more advantaged peers.¹¹ The results clearly indicate that duration matters.

Just as the effects of increased duration can be greater with higher quality programs, the effect of increased duration could be reduced, eliminated, or even reversed if program quality is low. According to a 2010 literature review by Child Trends, “perhaps the most striking pattern of finding . . . is the increase in positive outcomes (and in some studies, decrease in negative outcomes) when children attend high quality early care and education programs for more time.”¹²

8. NIEER Yearbook

9. Fernald, Anne, Virginia A. Marchman, and Adriana Weisleder. “SES Differences in Language Processing Skill and Vocabulary Are Evident at 18 Months.” *Developmental science* 16.2 (2013): 234–248. PMC. Web. 17 Jan. 2017.

10. Hernandez, D.J. 2012. *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

11. NIEER, *Is More Better?*

12. Zaslow, M., Anderson, R., Redd, Z., Wessel, J., Tarullo, L. and Burchinal, M. (2010). *Quality Dosage, Thresholds, and Features in Early Childhood Settings: A Review of the Literature, OPRE 2011-5*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Researchers have found that the benefits of Tulsa’s Universal full-day, high-quality pre-K program outweigh the costs by about 2-to-1.¹³ Important quality indicators include the requirement that teachers have a bachelor’s degree and early childhood certification, they are paid on par with K-12 teachers, and they rate highly in terms of instructional quality on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The benefits were calculated from projected increases in pre-K participants’ future earnings and reductions in crime based on their lower rates of retention by 9th grade compared to students who did not participate.

The researchers also found:

- Pre-K participation reduced grade retention for all students, though effects were stronger among traditionally disadvantaged subgroups, such as those who qualify for free and reduced-priced meals.
- Large, long term benefits require full-day pre-K.
- The cost-saving benefits from earnings were much greater than benefits from crime reduction.

Conclusion

Investing in expanded high-quality opportunities for learning for our youngest students is smart education policy and smart economics. The expansion of Nebraska’s part-day programs to full-day programs also benefits children at-risk who the program is intended to target. Because hard working families need full-day programs to accommodate work schedules, the evidence that full-day pre-K can support working families and benefit children’s learning should be of high interest to parents and policymakers.

Nebraska boasts one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country at 3.4% in November 2016. This indicates the majority of parents are working. **In fact, in 2015, 71% of children under the age of 6 had all available parents in the workforce.**¹⁴ When working families cannot leave work to transport their child from a high quality school district pre-K program to child care, let alone find a part-time child option and one that may accept the child care subsidy, this leaves parents to choose the full-day child care program of low or unknown quality as compared to a high-quality program in their local school district. **The lack of access to full-day high quality prekindergarten in Nebraska leaves too many young children missing out on educational benefits that can close in on the academic achievement gap.** We can and must do more.

Policy Options

- Provide expanded opportunities for voluntary full-day pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds in public school district programs
- Increase the weight of an early childhood student in TEEOSA
- Allow schools to receive early childhood funding regardless of eligibility for equalization aid
- Increase Early Childhood Education Grant Program awards to incentivize full-day prekindergarten programs
- Expand opportunities for full-day pre-kindergarten programs through integrated programming across public and private sectors through school district and child care partnerships

13. Bartik, Timothy, ... *A Benefit-Cost Analysis of the Tulsa Universal Pre-K Program*

14. Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Nebraska 2015. <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force#detailed/2/2-52/false/573,869,36,868,867/any/11472,11473>

