

UNIVERSAL PRE-K

ISSUE

Access to high-quality, inclusive Early Childhood Education

SUMMARY

Pennsylvania has a critical opportunity and need to improve access to high-quality, inclusive Early Childhood Education for all children. The Arc of Pennsylvania supports implementing Universal Pre-K and building the infrastructure for inclusion in Pennsylvania as the best method to achieve this.

BACKGROUND

It is estimated that only 1 in 6 Pennsylvanian children have the opportunity to attend a high-quality Early Childhood Education program.¹ This prevents children in Pennsylvania from realizing their full potential, as research has proven that students who lack access to high quality Early Childhood Education (ECE), or preschool, are at a significant disadvantage when they begin school. This research demonstrates that a large achievement gap exists between children who have access to high-quality preschool programs and those who do not have access, especially in the attainment of literacy and language skills; for many children with disabilities, this gap is even wider than for children without disabilities.² While children with disabilities often have the greatest need for high-quality ECE, they face significant barriers in gaining access to high-quality, inclusive preschool settings. The two largest obstacles preventing children with disabilities from accessing high-quality, inclusive preschools in Pennsylvania are cost and availability.

Costs

Because ECE is not viewed as a universal right for all children in Pennsylvania, families must either meet the rigorous criteria for means-tested preschool programs (typically falling below an income threshold) or pay for preschool themselves. Many Pennsylvanian families fall into a middle ground of having too high of an income to have access to Head Start or other publicly-funded preschool opportunities and having too low of an income to pay privately for high-quality preschool.

Families of children with complex support needs often face additional financial hardships that are not faced by parents of typically developing children. Due to the care their child requires, families face increased financial obligations such as insurance co-payments for therapies, medication and medical equipment. In addition, many children with complex support needs come from homes with a single-income family because of the need for one parent or family

¹ Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, "School Readiness in Pennsylvania", <http://www.papartnerships.org/work/early-learning/early-learning-reports>, Accessed August 25, 2015.

² United States Department of Education, "A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America", <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/early-learning/matter-equity-preschool-america.pdf>, April 2015, Accessed August 31, 2015.

member to be available to care for the child's significant needs. Preschool, although proven to be beneficial for development,³ cannot be a priority due to these financial concerns.

Availability

Families of children with complex needs struggle to find inclusive preschools that have the ability or willingness to enroll their child. Even when families have the ability to pay for preschool, they face an access barrier to inclusive early childhood education.

The quality of preschool programs in Pennsylvania varies greatly, and many private preschools do not have the capacity to serve preschool students with complex support needs. Parents are often turned away from preschools, being given the reasoning that they are not able to support their child in an appropriate manner. There is a significant need for education of staff and administrators on inclusion, how to best support students with various special needs and how to fulfill their obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, there is a serious mismatch between the expectations we place on early childhood teachers and the quality and relevance of available preparation, supports for learning on the job, and compensation and benefits.⁴

Together, these obstacles create a system that pushes families towards free, albeit segregated, preschool settings. Many Preschool Early Intervention programs (mostly Intermediate Units) offer free classroom placements for students with disabilities as part of their programming. This makes it much more likely that students with disabilities will be placed in segregated special education environments because their families are faced with a difficult choice: special education classroom placement in an Intermediate Unit preschool or no preschool at all for their child who critically needs access to a preschool environment. Families in rural areas particularly encounter this dilemma.

Universal ECE, or Universal Pre-K, would address most of these obstacles by creating a policy and funding commitment that high-quality preschools be available to all children. "Universal pre-K programs are state-funded preschool programs that offer early childhood education to all qualified children during the year or years before kindergarten. Universal means that a program's only eligibility criteria are age and residence—no requirements based on income, disability, or other risk factors—and that, ideally, there should be enough seats for all interested families to enroll".⁵

It is also paramount that any policy shift to Universal Pre-K ensure children with and without disabilities have access to inclusive settings instead of segregated preschool settings and

³ Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, "Prioritizing Smart Investments", http://www.papartnerships.org/publication_files/federal-2015-early-learning-budget-fact-sheet.pdf, May 2014, Accessed August 31, 2015.

⁴ Marcy Whitebook and Sharon Ryan, "Policy Brief: Degrees in Context", <http://nieer.org/publications/policy-matters-policy-briefs/policy-brief-%E2%80%93degrees-context-asking-right-questions>, April 2011, Accessed September 13, 2015.

⁵ Halley Potter, "Lessons From New York City's Universal Pre-K Expansion", http://www.tcf.org/assets/downloads/TCF_LessonsFromNYCUniversalPreK.pdf, May 13, 2015, Accessed September 16, 2015, page 3.

empower parents to know their right to choose inclusive preschool settings. Apart from children having the right to inclusive education because of IDEA,⁶ research also shows improved outcomes in inclusive preschool settings. Research demonstrates that when children with disabilities attend inclusive preschools with appropriate supports, accommodations, and modifications, the result is improved outcomes for those children and typically-developing peers. Inclusive early childhood settings help all young children develop as a whole child—academically, socially, and emotionally.^{7,8}

POSITION

The Arc of Pennsylvania supports universal, high-quality early childhood education in Pennsylvania as the best way to address the obstacles children with and without disabilities face in accessing preschool. Governor Tom Wolf and Federal Senator Bob Casey have already expressed their intent and support for universal access to high-quality ECE settings for Pennsylvania’s children. State-funded programs that offer universal access to high quality pre-kindergarten programs have a higher participation rate and high levels of success in school readiness.⁹ For universal, high-quality ECE to be achieved in Pennsylvania, we recommend the following:

- Improve NAEYC and Keystone STARS evaluation criteria for ECE settings to include inclusion as an indicator of a high-quality setting.
- Provide vital training and technical assistance to ensure that the learning curriculum and inclusion are effectively implemented. Quality preschool programming and success of children in preschools is directly reliant upon having quality trained staff to implement and teach the curriculum.¹⁰
- Formalize best practices of inclusive early childhood education in community and publicly-funded early childhood education programs in Pennsylvania through rigorous data collection and analysis to drive policy development. Some promising practices are evident from the OCDEL/The Arc of PA partnership program Include Me Preschool. Training and technical assistance support must address site-specific needs and is including but not limited to environmental adaptations, curriculum adaptations and development, accessing resources, family engagement/support, building strong staff collaboration and collaboration with outside agencies.
- Appropriate necessary funding to guarantee access to ECE for all Pennsylvanian children; provide training and technical assistance on effective inclusion to ensure

⁶ Education Law Center, “Including Children with Disabilities in State Pre-K Programs”, http://www.edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/PreKPolicyBrief_InclusionChildrenWithDisabilities.pdf, February 2010, Accessed August 31, 2015.

⁷ Maryland State Department of Education, “Preschool Through Kindergarten NE/LRE Team Decision Making Module”, 2011.

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education, “Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs”, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/earlylearning/joint-statement-full-text.pdf> September 14, 2015, Accessed September 15, 2015.

⁹ “Policy Statement on Inclusion”.

¹⁰ Whitebook and Ryan, “Policy Brief: Degrees in Context”.

continuous quality and adherence to early childhood standards; and implement data collection and evaluation to determine best practices for inclusion.

- As Pennsylvania adopts Universal PreK, an infrastructure for inclusion (i.e., through implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention and Support systems) must be built to ensure access for students with disabilities.¹¹
- The Arc of Pennsylvania recognizes the important role of OCDEL in implementing Universal PreK and the significant improvements that continue to increase access to inclusive preschools. We urge OCDEL to leverage their authority in support of inclusive Universal Pre-K.

As an advocacy organization, The Arc of PA recognizes its role in working with our own chapters who provide ECE, families, policymakers, and other advocacy organizations to make universal, high-quality ECE a reality in Pennsylvania.

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¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education, "Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Programs", <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ecce-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>, Accessed September 18, 2015.

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