

Pre-kindergarten: Should state support be expanded?

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Texas lawmakers may revisit the merits of expanding eligibility and increasing funding for pre-kindergarten programs when they convene for the 82nd regular legislative session in 2011. A bill approved during the regular session in 2009, HB 130 by Patrick, would have funded certain full-day pre-kindergarten programs. Gov. Rick Perry vetoed that bill, saying the funds would be better spent on existing half-day programs.

Pre-kindergarten is an educational program for 3- or 4-year-old children to prepare them for kindergarten. It is intended to help them succeed in areas such as language, math, and social skills. Providers include public and private schools and faith-based and private child-care facilities. Supporters of expanding state support for pre-kindergarten say it allows all children to begin school similarly prepared, regardless of their socio-economic status. Opponents say any benefits of pre-kindergarten fade out by the third grade, so the programs do not merit expanded state funding.

This report provides an overview of pre-kindergarten in Texas, including state and federal funding streams and ongoing debate about whether the state should expand its support for these programs.

History and current law

Pre-kindergarten enrollment is not mandatory in Texas. However, according to a 2007 report from the Legislative Budget Board (LBB), 80 percent of the 1,033 school districts and 194 charter schools in Texas offered either half-day or full-day pre-kindergarten. In the 2008-2009 school year, Texas public schools served a total of 200,529 pre-kindergarten students through state and other funding sources, according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Of these students, about 85 percent were minorities and about 88 percent

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were classified as economically disadvantaged. In addition, 510 private child-care facilities accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children provide pre-kindergarten. An estimated 85 percent of the state's 4-year-olds attend public or private pre-school programs, according to the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Pre-kindergarten programs in Texas are funded through a combination of tuition and state and federal grants and appropriations.

History. Before 1985, local school boards had the option of offering pre-kindergarten classes. In 1983, the Joint Select Committee on Public Education recommended that school districts be required to provide voluntary, free pre-kindergarten for 4-year olds. The committee advised the Legislature to encourage efforts to improve and expand early childhood care and education, calling for special attention to the qualifications of early childhood teachers and caregivers. It also recommended developing minimum educational standards for child-care facilities so children could enter school as prepared as possible.

The enactment in 1984 of HB 72 by Haley marked the first time Texas required school districts to offer pre-kindergarten classes. The bill required districts to provide voluntary, half-day pre-kindergarten for educationally disadvantaged and limited-English-proficiency 4-year-olds if the district could identify at least 15 such students in their service area.

Current law. Under current law, a school district must offer voluntary, free, half-day pre-kindergarten for eligible children, ages 3 and 4, if at least 15 eligible 4-year-olds live within the district's boundaries. A district may be exempted if it would have to build classroom facilities to offer the class. A school district has the option of offering pre-kindergarten if at least 15 eligible 3-year-old children are identified. Before starting a program, a district must consider sharing an existing federal Head Start site or other program site.

A child is eligible for free, half-day pre-kindergarten if the child is 3 or 4 years old and:

- is unable to speak and comprehend the English language;
- is educationally disadvantaged;
- is a homeless child, as defined by 42 U.S.C. sec. 11434a;
- is the child of an active-duty member of the armed forces, including state military or the armed forces reserves, who is ordered to active duty;
- is the child of an active duty member of the armed forces, including state military or a reserve component of the armed forces, who was injured or killed during active duty; or
- is or has ever been in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services.

School districts are required to notify residents who have eligible children that free pre-kindergarten classes are available. The district may, but is not required to, provide transportation for pre-kindergarten students. Once a child is enrolled, attendance is mandatory, but parents may withdraw their children any time.

School districts may extend half-day pre-kindergarten to a full day or may open enrollment to any 3- or 4-year-old child in the district. Funding to do either must come from tuition or the district's budget. Tuition rates must be approved by the commissioner of education and may not exceed what is needed to cover the cost of the program.

State funding

State appropriations to school districts are distributed through the Foundation School Program to fund costs such as payroll, classroom education, and teacher training. The amount for each district is based on the district's property wealth, student demographics, and number of students in average daily attendance.

State funding for pre-kindergarten is determined by the number of pre-kindergarten students in average daily attendance in a district and distributed as a part of a monthly payment from the Foundation School Program. The state spent \$665 million from the Foundation School Program for pre-kindergarten programs in fiscal 2008-09, an average of \$7,300 per student, based on 91,092 pre-kindergarten students in average daily attendance.

The state provides several grants for which eligible pre-kindergarten providers may apply.

Early start grant program. The pre-kindergarten early start grant, formerly known as the pre-kindergarten expansion grant program, awards funds to school districts and open enrollment charter schools to expand existing half-day pre-kindergarten programs to a full day or to start new programs at campuses without them. To be eligible, a pre-kindergarten program must prepare students to enter kindergarten on or above grade level and demonstrate the ability to function after the grant lapses.

Grant recipients must develop an integrated “school readiness model” to coordinate school district programs, federal Head Start programs, and both nonprofit and for-profit child-care centers. Grant recipients assess the subjects in which students are behind developmentally, then coordinate programs to ensure each student is developmentally, academically, and emotionally prepared for kindergarten.

In SB 1, the state budget for fiscal 2010-11, TEA rider 45 appropriates \$208.6 million in general revenue funds to the pre-kindergarten early start grant, an increase of \$25 million from fiscal 2008-09. The \$25 million would have funded full-day pre-kindergarten classes if HB 130 by Patrick had not been vetoed. The increase is expected to serve an additional 17,100 children in half-day pre-kindergarten under the early start grant program, according to an estimate by the LBB.

The early start grant program has three tiers:

Tier one is competitive and has a five-year grant period. School districts that did not receive a grant from this program in the previous grant cycle and whose average third-grade Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) reading and math scores were below the state average for the previous three consecutive years are eligible. For 2009-10, 100 school districts received tier-one grants, totaling \$32 million.

Tier two is non-competitive and formula driven. Tier-two grants have a three-year grant period. School districts who received funding in the previous grant cycle and whose average third-grade TAKS reading and math scores were above the state average for the last three consecutive years are eligible. For 2009-10, 93 districts received tier-two grants, totaling \$21 million.

Tier three is competitive and has a two-year grant period. School districts who received funding in the previous grant cycle and whose average third-grade TAKS reading and math scores were below the state average for the last three consecutive years are eligible. For 2009-10, 70 districts received tier-three grants, totaling \$46 million.

For 2009-10, 263 school districts received grants totaling \$99 million under the early start grant program. Grant funds may be used to hire personnel, acquire curriculum materials or equipment, or contract with another entity.

Early childhood school readiness program. The early childhood school readiness program operates a competitive grant to fund the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM). The program encourages sharing of resources among Head Start, university early childhood

Definitions

Early childhood education — any program that serves children from infancy up to age 3.

Pre-kindergarten — a class, in public or private school, that serves 3- and 4-year-old children to prepare them for kindergarten.

Pre-school — all educational programs for children under age 6. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with pre-kindergarten to refer to classes and schools that serve 3- and 4-year-olds both inside and outside of the public education system, including programs within child-care facilities.

Half-day pre-kindergarten — kindergarten with an instructional period of at least 3 hours.

Full-day pre-kindergarten — kindergarten with an instructional period of at least 7 hours, including recess and breaks.

Universal pre-kindergarten — in general, free, voluntary, half-day or full-day pre-kindergarten for every 4-year-old (sometimes includes 3-year olds).

programs, private non-profit early childhood care programs, and public schools. TEEM streamlines funding, registration, and enrollment for these programs. In the 2008-2009 school year, 61,109 students in 1,285 schools or centers (about 3,000 classrooms) in 38 communities participated in TEEM. For fiscal 2010-11, the Legislature appropriated \$15 million in general revenue funds to the early childhood school readiness program.

To be eligible to apply for a grant, a program’s student population must have at least 75 percent low-income children. Funds may be used for professional development, to pay instructors, and for curriculum and skills assessment materials.

Educational programs must include scientific, research-based pre-reading instruction to prepare children to enter school. School readiness includes phonemic, print, and numeracy awareness; understanding and using language to communicate for various purposes; understanding and using an increasingly complex and varied vocabulary; developing and demonstrating an appreciation of books; and progress toward mastery of the English language, if the child’s primary language is not English.

TEEM teachers and caregivers provide a learning environment often referred to as a “circle classroom.” Lesson plans are detailed and specific and allow children to spend time at learning centers, where they are exposed to letters, math, science, and other activities in a playful environment.

Guidelines and accountability

Texas does not mandate adherence to curriculum standards for pre-kindergarten programs, unlike those that govern kindergarten through 12th grade. Likewise, Texas does not scrutinize pre-kindergarten programs under the accreditation or accountability systems. Texas does provide pre-kindergarten guidelines and encourages participation in the voluntary school readiness certification system.

Texas pre-kindergarten guidelines. The Texas Education Agency has developed pre-kindergarten guidelines with input from experts. The guidelines are intended to align pre-kindergarten curricula with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), but adherence to them is optional. The guidelines provide descriptions of children’s behavior and development at the beginning of the year and detailed descriptions of expected behaviors for skills that should be observed by the end of pre-kindergarten. The guidelines suggest lessons and address instructional strategies, physical arrangement of the classroom, professional development, family involvement, and ways to monitor student progress.

Texas school readiness certification system. The State Center for Early Childhood Development, in conjunction with the P-16 Council — which seeks to provide curriculum continuity from pre-kindergarten through college graduation — has developed *Texas School Ready!*, a voluntary certification system that assesses the effectiveness of government-subsidized pre-school programs in preparing children for kindergarten. *Texas School Ready!* is based on the link between quality instructional practices and a child’s standardized assessment that indicates preparation for kindergarten. In 2008, 63 percent of participating Head Start programs, 65 percent of child care classrooms, and 85 percent of public school classrooms were certified *Texas School Ready!*.

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2009 Texas legislative session

HB 130 by Patrick, as approved in 2009 by both houses of the Texas Legislature but vetoed by the governor, would have established direct state funding for full-day pre-kindergarten for currently eligible 3- and 4-year-olds for districts choosing to provide full-day programs. The state currently funds half-day pre-kindergarten only for certain students and does not directly fund any full-day pre-kindergarten. A school district may budget for or charge tuition to provide full-day pre-kindergarten.

A grant program established by HB 130 would have given first priority to districts that received less grant funding for early childhood education than in the 2008-2009 school year and whose students performed above average on the 3rd-grade state assessments for the preceding three years. Next in priority would have been districts with established programs whose students performed above average on the 3rd-grade state assessments for the preceding three school years.

The bill's grant program would have limited pre-kindergarten classes to 22 students and would have required an average ratio of at least one certified teacher or teacher's aide for every 11 students. Current law does not limit class size or require specific student-to-teacher ratios, but it does recommend that classes be limited to 22 students for each teacher.

HB 130 would have required each program class to have at least one certified teacher with at least nine credit hours of college courses emphasizing early childhood education. The state currently does not require specialized training for pre-kindergarten teachers. Like

all public school teachers, pre-kindergarten teachers must hold a bachelor's degree. They also must hold a teacher certificate qualifying them to teach children from early childhood to 4th grade or 6th grade. Public and private child-care programs offering pre-kindergarten under a contract with a public school district are required only to meet state child-care licensing standards, which do not require certified teachers or early childhood endorsement.

The bill would have required school districts to implement a curriculum using the pre-kindergarten guidelines developed by TEA. Under the program, at least 20 percent of grant funds would have been used to contract with and reimburse community providers for school facilities, certified teachers, personnel, and supplies.

The LBB estimated in 2009 that 89,300 currently eligible students were enrolled in state-funded, half-day pre-kindergarten programs, of which about 40 percent would participate in full-day programs if such programs were available. This would suggest a grant program cost

Examples of instructional models for pre-kindergarten

Many instructional models and methods are available to teach pre-kindergarten. A few examples of these approaches are described below.

The Reggio Emilia approach, named for the Italian city in which it originated, involves parents, teachers, and children in developing curriculum, is centered on art and creativity, and relies heavily on the environment to spur curiosity. The High/Scope approach emphasizes hands-on learning and seeks to encourage children to be active, engaged learners. Direct Instruction is a teacher-driven reading instruction approach known for scripted lessons. In these classrooms, children learn from "repeat after me" type experiences.

The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) is a national network of 82 open-enrollment charter schools in 19 states. KIPP's pre-kindergarten instructional philosophy attempts to instill in children the aspiration for higher education. KIPP involves parents through home visits made by teachers and relies on activities such as self-directed math problems. Children who are 4 years old attend from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., while 3-year-olds attend in the morning or the afternoon. KIPP schools do not have specific requirements for what must be taught or how. Pre-kindergarten teachers may adjust lessons for restless children who want to play or may provide nap time.

The Montessori method operates under the basic premise that each child has an inner drive toward natural learning and growth. Montessori provides a self-directed learning environment. The teacher acts as a guide as the child explores various materials and concepts. The environment provides learning materials based in five categories — practical life, sensorial, math, language, and culture.

of about \$172 million in fiscal 2010 and \$218 million in fiscal 2011. The LBB estimated that the cost could be higher if eligible children not now enrolled in state-funded pre-kindergarten began participating. Program costs would have been limited by appropriation and awarded according to the priorities outlined in the bill.

When Gov. Perry vetoed HB 130, he said the \$25 million set aside in SB 1, the general appropriations act for fiscal 2010-11, to implement the bill should instead be used to expand the number of students served in existing half-day programs, rather than for full-day programs. He said state resources should be directed to districts with the greatest academic need and programs demonstrating the most efficiency. He said that under the existing grant program, the \$25 million would serve more students than it would under HB 130. (For the complete text of the governor's veto message and a response by Rep. Diane Patrick, the House author, and Sen. Judith Zaffirini, the Senate sponsor, see HRO Focus Report, [Vetoed of Legislation, 81st Legislature](#), July 22, 2009).

In Art. 3 of SB 1, TEA rider 45 earmarked \$25 million for the new full-day pre-kindergarten grant program contingent upon the enactment of HB 130. Because HB 130 was vetoed, the \$25 million instead went to the existing pre-kindergarten early start grant.

Supporters of state-funded, full-day pre-kindergarten say that implementing full-day pre-kindergarten programs would make it possible for more students to participate, increasing the benefits of pre-kindergarten for Texas. Full-day pre-kindergarten would alleviate the need for midday transportation for working families. Many families do not participate in half-day programs because they cannot work out the logistics of picking up the child in the middle of the day and transporting the child to daycare. A shift from half-day to full-day programs would draw in a larger number of eligible students.

State-supported, full-day pre-kindergarten programs would allow Texas to continue reaching at-risk students as early as possible for the greatest effect. Full-day programs are a significant factor in closing the achievement gap between students.

By supporting full-day programs, the state would ensure a steady and reliable source of funding for school

districts. Texas funds half-day programs for school districts, but districts with full-day programs must rely on tuition, grants, or local funding to pay for the remainder of the day.

Hidalgo Independent School District's population is 98 percent economically disadvantaged, and half of the students begin school with limited English proficiency. Almost 20 years ago, wanting to avoid high crime and dropout rates, the district implemented free, full-day pre-kindergarten. It was expensive, but the investment paid off. Hidalgo students are bilingual and reading in English by kindergarten, and the district boasts a graduation rate of 88.7 percent — 10 points higher than the Texas average.

Opponents of state-funded full-day pre-kindergarten say the limited state resources available for pre-kindergarten should be used to serve a greater number of students through existing half-day programs, rather than to fund full-day programs. Funding the existing grant program for half-day pre-kindergarten would allow the state to serve both a larger number of students and those students with the most academic need.

State-supported, full-day pre-kindergarten could be a step down the road to state-supported universal pre-kindergarten, which would cost the state too much money and unnecessarily increase the role of the state in these programs, opponents say.

State-funded, full-day pre-kindergarten could harm private child-care providers. Private providers say they are able to eliminate the stress on parents from having to arrange for transportation from half-day pre-kindergarten to daycare because they are able to deliver both all-day care and pre-kindergarten at one location.

Head Start

The federal government funds pre-school programs, including pre-kindergarten, for certain students in Texas through the federal Head Start program and through several grant programs, including those established by the No Child Left Behind Act. These funds serve low-income and at-risk students as well as those with physical and mental disabilities.

The oldest means by which the federal government has financed early childhood education, including pre-kindergarten, is Head Start, first established in 1965. The federal Head Start program promotes school readiness by trying to enhance the social and cognitive development of economically disadvantaged children between the ages of 3 and 5 with educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services. The program focuses on early reading and math skills. Grants are awarded directly to local public agencies, private non-profit and for-profit organizations, Indian tribes, and school systems.

At least 90 percent of the students participating in a local Head Start program must belong to families with incomes at or below the poverty line — \$22,050 for a family of four. At least 10 percent of the program’s enrollment must be made up of children with disabilities.

In fiscal 2007, Texas received \$481 million in federal Head Start grants, which served 67,630 3- and 4-year-olds. The federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided an additional \$60 million for Head Start. A recipient of a grant funded by the Recovery Act is required to match the federal funding at no more than 20 percent of the total costs of the program. Texas received another \$354 million through the Recovery Act for staff compensation and training, upgrading Head Start centers and classrooms, increasing hours of operation, and enhancing transportation services.

Other federal funding sources

In addition to receiving federal money for pre-school programs through Head Start grants, Texas receives federal funds through the No Child Left Behind Act and other federal grant programs.

No Child Left Behind (Title I, Part A). Texas received \$1.3 billion in fiscal 2008 through the No Child Left Behind Act. Money was distributed to school districts through TEA. The funds are to be used for public education in general, but school districts may use them for pre-kindergarten. The federal government

limits the students who may be served by a pre-kindergarten program funded by Title I, Part A to those between the ages of 3 and 5 who previously participated in Head Start or in Early Head Start, which is for infants and toddlers, and who are at risk of not meeting state standards. The proposed reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act would include new funding streams for pre-kindergarten. A new grant program, Striving Readers, would replace previous programs.

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Early Reading First. Early Reading First is a competitive grant program established by the No Child Left Behind Act through which Texas received \$40.2 million in fiscal 2008. The program

supports the development of pre-school programs that primarily serve children from low-income families and that address all areas of development, especially the early language, cognitive, and pre-reading skills that prepare children to succeed in school.

Even Start Family Literacy Grant. The Even Start Family Literacy Grant is a competitive grant program authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act under Title I, part B. Grants are awarded to partnerships between a school district or open-enrollment charter school and a public agency, institution of higher education, or nonprofit organization. The program seeks to help low-income families with children between infancy and age 7 to become full partners in their children’s education, ensure the children reach their full potential as learners, provide literacy training for parents, and provide information about successful parenting.

Recipients must provide funds equal to 10 percent of their total grant. For 2009-10, Texas received about \$5 million to award new grants and continue funding existing grants. Texas will receive an estimated \$5.5 million for fiscal 2010-11 to continue funding 31 existing grants.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Funding through the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is appropriated to TEA, which then distributes it to school districts and open-enrollment charter schools for the extra cost of providing special education and services to children

with disabilities. School districts may use the funding for special instruction, development and implementation of individual education plans, assistive technology, audiology, counseling, and therapies. This helps schools abide by the federal law that requires children with disabilities to be placed in mainstream classrooms whenever possible.

Pre-school grants for special education. In fiscal 2008, the state received \$22 million in special education pre-school grants. These funds may be used exclusively for pre-school, including pre-kindergarten. In fiscal 2008, Texas received \$916 million in special education basic state grants, which may be used for any grade level, including pre-kindergarten.

Debate about expanding state-funded pre-K

Supporters of expanding state support for pre-kindergarten say it would allow more children to participate and would help improve the quality of pre-kindergarten in Texas.

Texas has the highest overall pre-kindergarten enrollment rate in the nation, but the quality of its programs is rated one of the lowest by the National Institute for Early Education Research. According to a 2008 evaluation, Texas met only four of 10 criteria the institute uses in evaluations — curriculum standards, teachers' degree requirements, teachers' specialization requirements, and hours of professional development. The state failed to meet criteria for requiring assistant teachers to hold an associate degree; having a class size of 20 or fewer; having a student-to-teacher ratio of at least one teacher per 10 children; vision, hearing, and health screening; and site visits carried out by the state.

Children who attend pre-kindergarten are better prepared to begin learning when they reach kindergarten and less likely to drop out of school, supporters say. For example, a long-term study by the High/Scope Education Foundation on the impact of pre-kindergarten over a student's lifetime showed that disadvantaged children enrolled in the Perry pre-school were 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school. Pre-kindergarten benefits children academically and socially, improving self-confidence and the ability to interact with others in a classroom environment.

Claims of a "fade out" of the positive benefits of pre-kindergarten programs are unfounded. Such results are from weak research designs or weak programs. Weak programs have large classes, teachers without child development training, and parents who are discouraged from getting involved.

A 2006 Texas A&M study demonstrated that for every dollar Texas spends on pre-kindergarten, the state earns a return on investment of \$3.50. Students need less remediation and are less likely to enter the criminal justice system, more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to go to college, and more likely to obtain higher-paying jobs. The higher the quality of the program, the higher the return. Other states find they get back as much as \$8 or more per dollar spent on pre-kindergarten programs.

Supporters of expanding state support for pre-kindergarten say opponents' claims that formal early education can harm behavioral development are unfounded. It is unlikely that harmful behavior development results from formal education and more likely that it is the result of other environmental factors. A study in North Carolina discovered that poverty can have a negative effect on a child's brain development due to toxic levels of stress in families living in poverty. It is likely that potential behavioral issues can be tempered by the experience pre-kindergarten provides.

Opponents of expanding state support for pre-kindergarten question whether so much responsibility for providing early learning experience should be granted to the state. They say government-funded academic programs for the youngest children are an inefficient use of the state's resources and may usurp parental responsibility.

Long-term academic gains from pre-kindergarten are realized only for the most disadvantaged children, who already are eligible for public school pre-kindergarten, Head Start, or subsidized child care, opponents say. National enrollment has increased from roughly 16 percent in 1965 to 69 percent today, and yet student achievement has stagnated, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the International Evaluation of Education Achievement. Positive effects of pre-kindergarten fade by middle school, as evidenced by declining average test scores

since 1992 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Georgia and Oklahoma, two states with universal pre-kindergarten programs.

Although advocates for expanding state-funded pre-kindergarten cite a Texas A&M study that claims that every dollar invested in universal pre-kindergarten in Texas will return \$3.50 to Texas communities from increased future wages and lower welfare and prison costs, this study overestimates benefits and underestimates costs. It is based on a Chicago program that incorporated parent training and involvement, which are not a part of pre-kindergarten in Texas, but which many experts believe contributed substantially to the benefits realized in Chicago.

Opponents of expanding state support for pre-kindergarten say it could lead Texas further down the road to universal, full-day pre-kindergarten. Universal full-day pre-kindergarten would cost Texas taxpayers an additional \$1.8 billion each year, according to a 2007 report from the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

In addition, opponents say, formal early education can actually be detrimental to the behavioral development of children who are not involved in special education. A 2006 study by Stanford and the University of California found that children who had attended pre-school were more likely to exhibit aggression and bullying behaviors and to show a lack of cooperation and self-control.

— *by Catherine Dilger*

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