



## **Executive Summary**

# Education for Four-Year-Olds State Initiatives

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# Executive Summary

**O**NE OF THE MAJOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY SHIFTS in recent years has been the establishment of state-funded prekindergarten programs in a number of states. Such a move seems to be driven, in part, by:

- evidence that many students are failing in the early grades, particularly children considered “at risk,”
- an increasing number of mothers in the workforce,
- welfare reform policies that require mothers to work and, therefore, find child care, and
- evidence of the importance of early childhood to later development.

The research questions posed in the present study were: How did the states manage this distinctive shift in educational policy to prekindergarten? What were the major facilitators and major barriers to be overcome, and the particular strategies that appeared to be useful in achieving this result? It was noted that such a policy change was being accomplished despite the known difficulty of instituting change in bureaucratic systems and the hidden power of the status quo in resisting change.

Five states were chosen (Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina, and Texas) on the basis of previous surveys that determined that these states were making substantial progress in establishing a prekindergarten program in their state. The objective of this study was to discover the forces at work in each state by conducting structured interviews of knowledgeable people in each of the five states and by examining documents provided by them. The people interviewed represented early childhood, Head Start, child care, the political scene, and others who were seen as relevant to the educational policy in that particular state.

The interviewees were provided the questions they would be asked that essentially inquired into their views and experiences related to facilitators and barriers to the state-funded program for prekindergarten. They were asked to describe how the policy had been established and how it was being implemented.

A category system was designed, based on previous work on policy barriers, which allowed for the coding of the interviews into nine separate categories (Institutional, Individual, Groups, Economic, Political, Geographic, Academic, Media, and Resources). Each category was capable of being either a facilitator or a barrier (see p. 13–14). Each passage, identified as a facilitator or a barrier, was coded by three judges. Two of the three judges had to agree for the coding to be accepted. The individual case studies and analyses yielded the following results for each of the states.

## GEORGIA

In 1992, then Governor Zell Miller decided that prekindergarten was something that Georgia needed and he provided the political leadership to make a program possible. The program began as a pilot and served 750 ‘at-risk’ students. In school year 1995–1996 with the growing income from the newly passed lottery,

a full-day universal program for all four-year-olds (all four-year-olds that wished to participate were entitled to the program) was begun. In 1996 Miller moved the program from the Department of Education into a separate unit, the Office of School Readiness, which reported directly to him.

During the school year 1999–2000, this voluntary state prekindergarten program spent over \$220 million and served about 62,500 (63%) students while Head Start served another 10,000 children. Using either program, a total of about 73% of all four-year-old children in Georgia were served. The Georgia program required a teacher-child ratio of 1:10 and a maximum class size of 20 children. The program must operate at least 6 hours per day. The Office of School Readiness contracts with public schools, Head Starts, and private providers to deliver the services.

The prekindergarten program was facilitated because of the commitment of former Governor Zell Miller and the availability of a designated funding source (the lottery) which did not dilute existing funds from other state programs. The establishment of Coordinating Councils, which required the commitment of many agencies, also promoted a smooth start.

A major barrier appeared to be that the program was started so fast that the necessary collaboration and initial concerns of child care and Head Start were overlooked. These concerns now have to be accommodated in the implementation phase.

## ILLINOIS

This program began fifteen years ago through the strong initiation of a program of educational reform by the State Board of Education, a variety of influential advocacy groups and by friends in the state legislature. The target population was and remains children identified as “at risk” for academic failure through a screening process, or

children for whom English is a second language.

The prekindergarten program has grown from \$3 million to \$200 million dollars and has units in every county in the state. The state funds full-day and half-day programs; most are half-day programs. The staff-child ratio may not exceed 1:10 with a maximum of 20 children in each classroom. During school year 1999–2000, it served almost 55,000 children (15% of the statewide population of three- and four-year-olds although there are more four-year olds served in the program). Statewide about 22% of four-year-olds are served, with Head Start serving another 40,000 children. Although still not part of the regular school budget (it operated as a grant program) it seemed to be well established. Localities must receive funds through the public schools, but they may subcontract with Head Start and child care centers to provide the services.

The prekindergarten programs appeared to be facilitated by gradual implementation and strong public support. There were many advocacy voices for this program from a variety of groups in the private and professional sectors of Illinois. From the very beginning of the program, there was an emphasis on program quality that reassured the public that their money was being well spent.

Major barriers appeared to be a limited amount of collaboration between the schools and other agencies in many districts. Lack of space, transportation, and qualified teachers remained a problem although, ironically, such deficits encouraged collaboration.

## NEW YORK

New York has had an Experimental prekindergarten program in place for 35 years and this program laid the groundwork for the Universal Prekindergarten program (UPK). UPK started in 1997 with a year of planning. The first year of implementation, 1998–1999, the program served 68 low-income

districts with all children within these districts being eligible to attend this half-day program.

Universal Prekindergarten had a budget of \$100 million for school year 1999–2000 and served 99 districts including the five largest districts in the state. Almost 35,000 (13% of the four-year-olds in the state) children were served in 1999–2000 with priority given to economically disadvantaged children within these districts. A budget of \$225 million was approved for this half-day program in 2000–2001.

The money is awarded to the public schools, which must then subcontract at least 10% of their funds to outside agencies. Public schools, Head Start and private providers may offer programs. There has been a strong emphasis on quality with the requirement that all lead teachers be certified by school year 2001–2002. There is no minimum class size, but the maximum is 20.

A major facilitator for the Universal Prekindergarten program was the legislation that **mandated** at least 10% of prekindergarten funds be set aside for other agencies to participate. A driving force for the new program (buried in a large education reform package—the LADDER proposal) was Speaker of the Assembly, Sheldon Silver, with the support of many advocacy and professional groups. A strong curriculum was made available to local districts as well as quality controls that were designed to enhance child development.

Although promoted as a universal program, open to all, it has a five-year phase-in and there remain concerns about whether there will be enough money appropriated for total implementation. Some schools remain doubtful of the state's intent and their concerns have been magnified by the legislature's penchant for late budgets, often not passed until the summer. Lack of trained personnel, transportation and half-day programs are problems that require other support funds.

## SOUTH CAROLINA

The strong leadership of former Governor Richard Riley facilitated the prekindergarten program in South Carolina. He began the program as part of a package of education reform. The fact that many students in South Carolina were performing poorly on standardized tests and that prekindergarten received strong support from minority groups were seen as strong catalysts for the program.

The prekindergarten program began as part of the Education Improvement Act in 1984 with the passage of an additional one-cent sales tax. The program served 'at-risk' four-year-olds who are defined as "children with potential academic deficiencies or children for whom English is a second language." A school district may subcontract with outside agencies to provide prekindergarten services. Only certified teachers may teach in the program regardless of what setting is being used. The program requires two and a half hours per day—five days per week. Half-day programs are not practical in some localities so they often use an assortment of funding sources and collaboration to provide full-day programs.

Every school district was required to have at least one program, and about 15,400 children were served in the 1999–2000 school year. This was about 30% of the four-year-olds in the state. At the same time the state appropriated \$23.6 million for this program with the participating localities spending additional amounts.

The program has faced political problems, depending upon which party was in power, in addition to financial costs and lack of resources, such as trained personnel. There were also moral issues raised by conservative voices, who carry considerable weight in South Carolina. They often questioned whether such early childhood programs were undermining the family by encouraging women to work outside the home.

## TEXAS

The prekindergarten program in Texas began in the fall of 1985. It served ‘at-risk’ (children unable to speak or understand English, educationally disadvantaged, or homeless) children in almost every locality of Texas. If a school district identified at least 15 eligible four-year-olds, it must offer a prekindergarten program. The program had gradually grown over the years to a \$171.9 million program, serving 142,000 children or about 22% of the four-year-olds in the state.

Currently the state funds half-day programs, but an additional \$200 million was provided by the state legislature in 1999 to transform these programs into full-day programs. This money is to be used during the 1999–2001 school years. The Texas Education Agency administers the prekindergarten program and local school districts receive the funds. They may subcontract with community agencies for prekindergarten services. There are voluntary curriculum standards but a certified teacher must be in each classroom. Because prekindergarten was removed from the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (a means used by the Texas Education Agency for determining accountability/ requirement) there is neither a state-approved teacher child ratio nor a maximum class size.

The prekindergarten program was facilitated because the program was a part of a larger educational reform movement inspired by a citizen’s commission headed by Ross Perot. The impetus for the program was the large number of children failing in the early grades. A new initiative pushed by Governor Bush, ‘every child reading on grade level by the third grade,’ has increased interest and support for the prekindergarten program.

The major barriers are lack of facilities and personnel and also a lack of administrative support as evidenced by a one-person Department of Early

Childhood Education and a lack of regular early childhood education staff in the important Regional Resources Centers. There is also a question about how extensive the collaboration is between community agencies and the education programs.

## FACILITATORS & BARRIERS

Using the category system employed in this study, all of the states seemed to have high percentages of facilitators in the **institutional**, **individual**, and **political** areas. The wide variety of changes in the systems of education and child care resulted in a high percentage of responses in the **institutional** category. Organizational shifts for administrative purposes, establishing local coordinating councils, creating new personnel preparation programs, and so on, all fell in this category. The **individual** category was also high in most states, which reflected the powerful influence of key persons in the state, both political and professional leaders, necessary to move the program along. **Political** responses reflected the important role played by the political process in bringing about these policy changes.

The barriers that were mentioned most frequently by most states fell into the **institutional**, **resources**, and **economic** categories. The many responses in the **institutional** category reflected the continued need to establish collaboration between agencies and the lack of data systems, communication networks, and other support system features that were needed for a complete prekindergarten program.

The lack of **resources** to properly run a prekindergarten program was felt by all of the states and focused on space, transportation, and personnel needs. Even when the program was limited to ‘at-risk’ students there were major shortages to meet all of these needs. As states move to a universal

program such needs will multiply, again requiring a consistent strategy as to how to meet these needs on a continuing basis.

**Economics** was the third category that received many comments. The major concern was how to pay for this program. At the universal level it is the equivalent of adding another year to the budget of the public schools, which is no small matter. Aside from Georgia's use of the lottery, there were few insights as to how the program was going to be financed aside from gradually increasing this budget year-by-year. A phase-in strategy is almost sure to be used by most states to allow for gradual increases in the budget to pay the bill for this new prekindergarten program.

## COMMON THEMES

The investigators found several common elements across all five states. These included, (1) the importance of political leadership, (2) the goal of trying to reduce school failure in the early grades, (3) the importance of making this program a piece of a larger educational reform package, (4) the cooperation between professional and political leaders, and (5) the increase of mothers in the workforce putting pressure on decision makers for some type of action.

Major differences between the states were found in: (1) the manner of financing the program, (2) gradual versus sudden implementation, (3) how the program was administered and the degree of support services provided to back-up the program.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Among the suggestions provided by the investigators to other states that might be thinking about state action for prekindergartens or expanding existing programs, the five most important were:

- link the program with other educational reform packages,
- target children who are not developing in ways that could make likely their successful entry to school ('at-risk' children),
- seek political leadership and support,
- establish a funding source, if possible, one that does not take away from other state services, and
- encourage collaboration among the many early childhood stakeholders within the state.

Other suggestions were: develop strategies for transportation, build a data system to collect needed information, and stress program quality such as using certified personnel and well developed curriculum. ■

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