A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America

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"I believe that every single child deserves the opportunity for a strong start in life through high-quality preschool, and expanding those opportunities must be part of ESEA [the Elementary and Secondary Education Act]."

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan
January 12, 2015

The Challenge

Each year, about 4 million children enter kindergarten in the United States. All parents hope their child will start school ready for success. And many parents turn that hope into action, seeking out supportive and high-quality early learning opportunities. Unfortunately, not every parent finds those opportunities, and access differs based on geography, race and income.

As a result, too many children enter kindergarten a year or more behind their classmates in academic and social-emotional skills. For some children, starting out school from behind can trap them in a cycle of continuous catch-up in their learning. As a nation, we must ensure that all children, regardless of income or race have access to high-quality preschool opportunities.

This year, as Congress seeks to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), our nation is at a critical moment. Congress can honor this important legacy and moral imperative – as our nation observes ESEA's 50th anniversary – by reauthorizing a strong education law. This new law must reflect real equity of opportunity, starting with our youngest children.

Significant new investments in high-quality early education are necessary to help states, local communities, and parents close the school readiness gaps between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers. Across the country, we must expand access to high-quality early learning to ensure that all children graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college, careers, and life.

New Evidence

Advances in neuroscience and research have helped to demonstrate the benefits of quality early education for young children[1] and that the early years are a critical period in children's learning and development, providing the necessary foundation for more advanced skills.

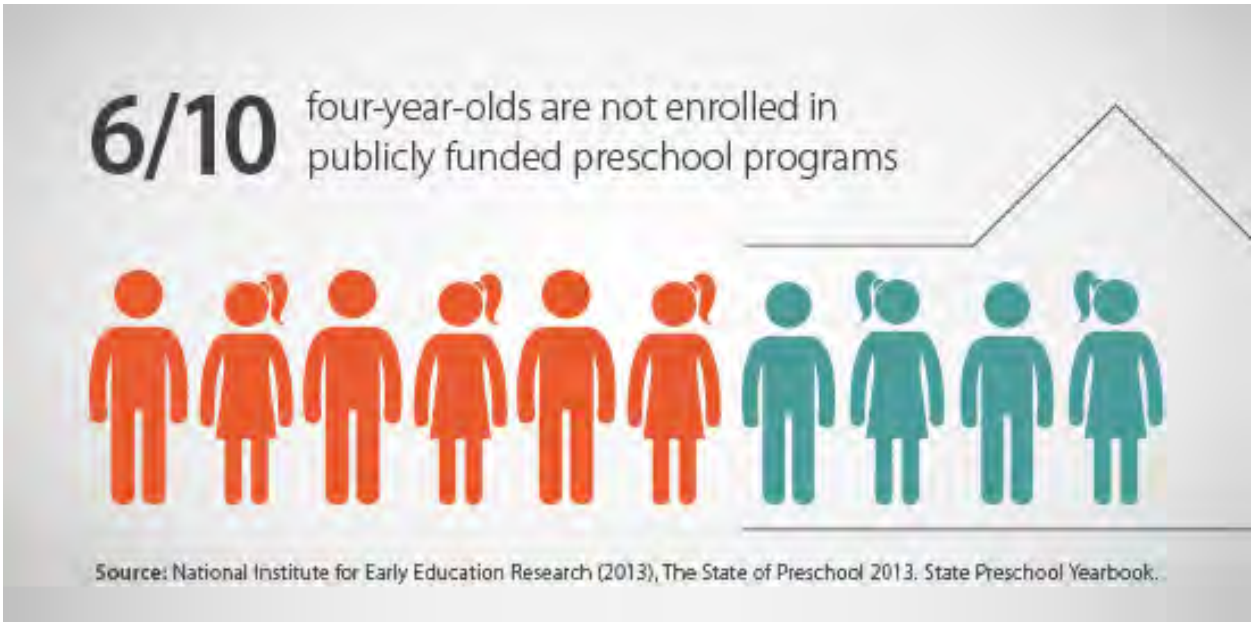
For example, children's language skills from age 1 to 2 are predictive of their pre-literacy skills at age five.[2] A robust body of research shows that children who participate in high-quality preschool programs have better health, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes than those who do not participate. The gains are particularly powerful for children from low-income families and those at risk for academic failure who, on average, start kindergarten 12 to 14 months behind their peers in pre-literacy and language skills.[3]

Studies also reveal that participating in quality early learning can boost children's educational attainment and earnings later in life.[4] Children who attend high-quality preschool programs are less likely to utilize special education services or be retained in their grade, and are more likely to graduate from high school, go on to college, and succeed in their careers than those who have not attended high-quality preschool programs.[5] Research also suggests that expanding early learning – including high-quality preschool – provides society with a return on investment of $8.60 for every $1 spent. About half of the return on investment originates from increased earnings for children when they grow up.[6]

Providing children with quality early education experiences is not only the right thing to do for America's youngest learners, it's an imperative for strengthening our nation's economy.

Unmet Need

While both states and the federal government invest in early learning, these efforts have fallen short of what is needed to ensure that all children can access a high-quality early education that will prepare them for success.



Across the nation, 59 percent of 4-year olds – or six out of every 10 children – are not enrolled in publicly funded preschool programs through state preschool, Head Start, and special education preschool services (Table 1).[7] Even fewer are enrolled in the highest-quality programs.[8]

Access to Preschool Uneven Across States

Table 1. Enrollment in Publicly Funded Preschool* by State (4-year-olds) 2012–2013

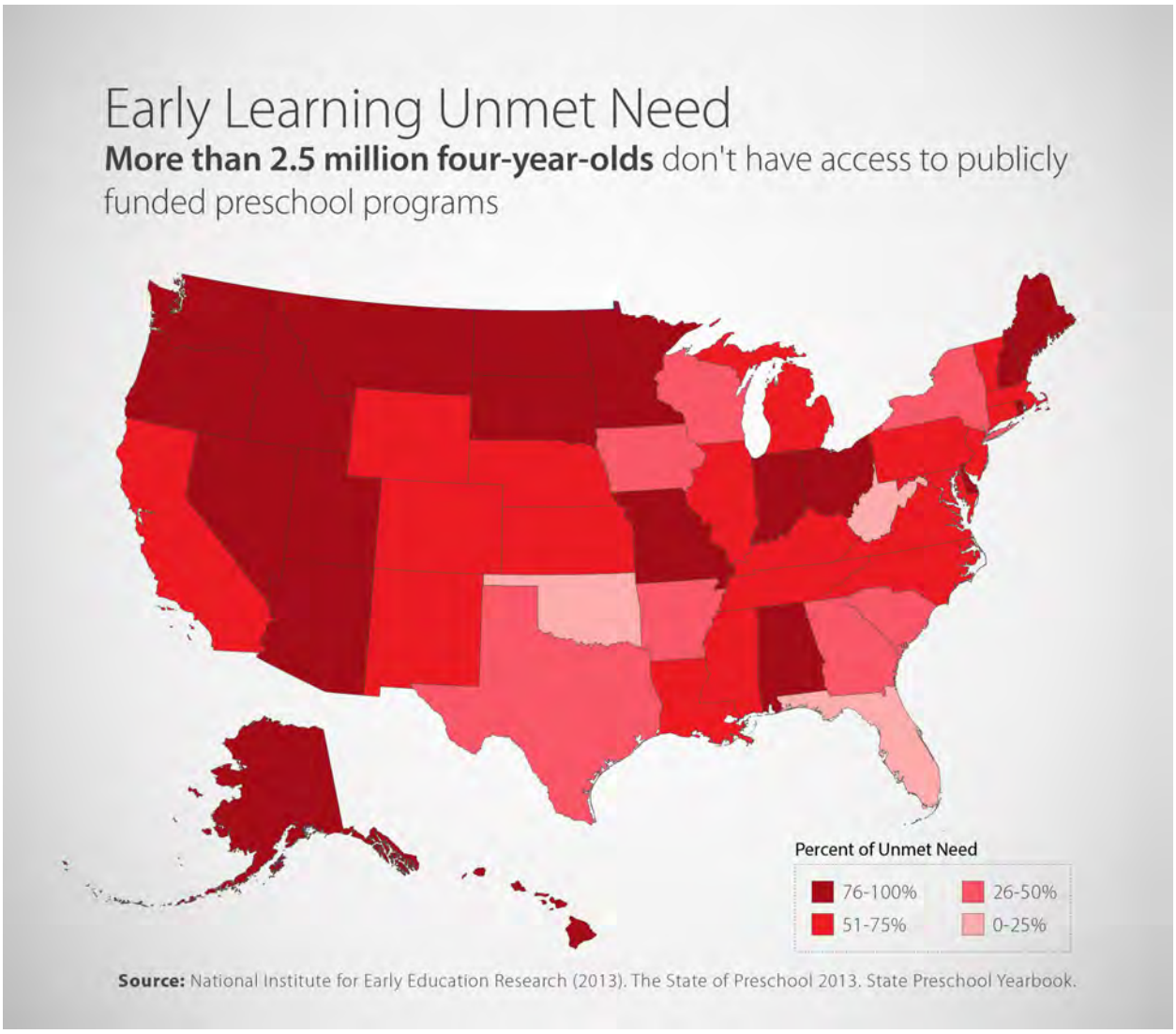
State	Total number of 4-year-olds in the state	Percentage of 4-year olds enrolled in state preschool	Percentage of 4-year olds enrolled in federal Head Start programs	Percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in special education preschool	Total 4-year-olds *not enrolled* in a publicly funded program	Total percentage of 4-year-olds *not enrolled* in a publicly funded program
50 states plus D.C.	**4,112,347**	**28%**	**10%**	**3%**	**2,462,740**	**59%**
Alabama	62,483	6%	15%	2%	48,145	77%
Alaska	10,760	3%	13%	6%	8,420	78%
Arizona	92,778	3%	11%	5%	75,118	81%
Arkansas	40,173	33%	13%	5%	19,862	49%
California	516,595	15%	11%	3%	368,341	71%
Colorado	69,956	21%	7%	6%	46,103	66%
Connecticut	40,958	13%	7%	5%	30,343	74%
Delaware	11,372	7%	6%	6%	9,223	81%
District of Columbia	6,945	94%	6%	0%	0	0%
Florida	221,842	78%	9%	1%	25,266	11%
Georgia	140,894	58%	7%	1%	47,981	34%
Hawaii	17,536	0%	9%	4%	15,176	87%
Idaho	24,427	0%	8%	4%	21,298	87%
Illinois	167,665	27%	11%	3%	98,124	59%
Indiana	87,734	0%	9%	6%	75,006	85%
Iowa	41,034	60%	8%	2%	12,159	30%
Kansas	41,428	21%	8%	8%	26,440	64%
Kentucky	57,379	29%	15%	0%	31,945	56%
Louisiana	64,356	31%	12%	2%	35,050	54%
Maine	14,059	34%	10%	7%	6,775	48%
Maryland	74,758	35%	6%	5%	38,679	52%
Massachusetts	74,901	14%	7%	4%	55,932	75%
Michigan	119,525	21%	15%	0%	77,066	64%
Minnesota	72,464	1%	8%	6%	61,430	85%
Mississippi	43,363	0%	33%	4%	27,339	63%
Missouri	78,544	3%	10%	6%	63,586	81%
Montana	12,568	0%	19%	3%	9,833	78%
Nebraska	26,783	26%	9%	0%	17,527	65%
Nevada	38,407	3%	4%	7%	33,065	86%
New Hampshire	13,853	0%	5%	7%	12,144	88%
New Jersey	109,605	28%	6%	5%	65,952	60%
New Mexico	29,614	18%	14%	7%	18,036	61%
New York	231,040	45%	10%	6%	91,147	39%
North Carolina	128,958	23%	9%	3%	84,809	66%
North Dakota	9,256	0%	17%	5%	7,183	78%
Ohio	144,309	2%	12%	5%	116,712	81%
Oklahoma	54,100	74%	13%	0%	6,955	13%
Oregon	48,463	10%	8%	5%	37,307	77%
Pennsylvania	147,710	12%	10%	6%	105,705	72%
Rhode Island	11,607	1%	10%	7%	9,455	81%
South Carolina	61,682	40%	9%	2%	30,261	49%
South Dakota	12,237	0%	18%	6%	9,295	76%
Tennessee	84,178	21%	11%	2%	55,086	65%
Texas	397,272	52%	9%	1%	152,559	38%
Utah	53,014	0%	7%	6%	46,130	87%
Vermont	6,462	71%	8%	0%	1,320	20%
Virginia	104,722	17%	7%	3%	76,900	73%
Washington	90,419	8%	8%	4%	72,255	80%
West Virginia	21,469	62%	23%	0%	3,165	15%
Wisconsin	72,488	64%	7%	1%	19,968	28%
Wyoming	8,202	0%	11%	13%	6,216	76%

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). (2013). 2013 State Preschool Yearbook http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2013.pdf
*Publicly-funded preschool includes state preschool, Head Start, and special education preschool services and does not include privately funded or locally funded preschool programs.

Children's access to preschool also varies significantly by family income level and the region where children live.[9] As of the 2012–13 school year, 40 states and the District of Columbia offer voluntary, state preschool programs for some children. While these states enroll a total of 1.1 million 4-year-olds in state preschool, enrollment in individual state programs significantly varies.[10]

For example, Florida, Oklahoma, Vermont, and the District of Columbia served more than 70 percent of their 4-year-olds in state-funded preschool, whereas 11 states with programs served fewer than 10 percent of 4-year-olds. These states are: Alabama; Alaska; Arizona; Delaware; Minnesota; Missouri; Nevada; Ohio; Oregon; Rhode Island; and Washington. Local Head Start programs serve another approximately half million 4-year-olds from the lowest-income families (Figure 1).[11]

Figure 1. Unmet Need



For Latino children, the unmet need is especially great. While Latinos are the fastest growing and largest minority group in the United States, making up a quarter of 3- and 4-year-olds, Latinos demonstrate the lowest preschool participation rates of any major ethnicity or race. The participation rate for Latinos is 40 percent, compared to 50 percent for African-American children, and 53 percent for white children.[12] In addition, children from low-income families are less likely to be enrolled in preschool than their more affluent peers – 41 percent compared to 61 percent.[13]

While most children who have access to preschool attend moderate-quality programs, African-American children and children from low-income families are the most likely to attend low-quality preschool programs and the least likely to attend high-quality preschool programs.[14]

Racial and socioeconomic disparities in access to high-quality early education contribute to achievement gaps that are noticeable by the time children enter kindergarten. A longitudinal study of children in kindergarten in 2010-11, found that, upon children's first entry into kindergarten, Asian students had higher reading and math scores than children of other races/ethnicities. White students had higher reading and math scores than black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. Scores in reading and math were lowest for kindergartners in households with incomes below the federal poverty level and highest for those in households with incomes at or above 200 percent of the federal poverty level.*

Without access to quality preschool, African-American and Latino children, and children from low-income families, are far less likely to be prepared to start kindergarten than their peers.

Building on Progress

To address the unmet need for high-quality preschool, states and the federal government have invested in initiatives to expand access. These investments provide a solid base upon which we can build voluntary, universal access to high-quality early education that will prepare our nation's students for success in kindergarten and beyond.

State Action

Over the past decade, governors from both political parties have pushed for the creation and expansion of publicly funded preschool programs. Since 2003, states have increased their investment in preschool by more than 200 percent.[15] In 2014, 28 states increased their investments, amounting to more than $1 billion in new state resources dedicated to early education. Seventeen of these states were led by Republican governors and 11 were led by Democratic governors. Ten states – California, South Carolina, Michigan, Rhode Island, Ohio, Alabama, New Mexico, Washington, Missouri, and Nebraska – increased funding by more than 20 percent.[16]

* **Source:** Mulligan, G.M., Hastedt, S., and McCarroll, J.C. (2012). First-Time Kindergartners in 2010-11: First Findings From the Kindergarten Rounds of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-11 (ECLS-K:2011) (NCES 2012-049). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch. Retrieved March 29, 2015

Notable State Actions

California significantly expanded its preschool program by adding 11,500 new, full-day and full-year preschool seats for 4-year-olds from low-income families, with the goal of reaching 31,500 additional children in future years. Michigan and Texas provided $65 million and $58 million in new investments, respectively, for early education. Both Hawaii and Utah made investments in preschool for the first time, and Indiana increased its previously modest investment of $1.5 million in 2013–14 by 700 percent to 10.5 million in 2014–15.[17]

Head Start

The federal government has undertaken important efforts through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Head Start program, both to improve the quality of early learning programs and to expand the number of children served.[18] For example, in 2011, the Obama administration adopted new rules based on bipartisan Head Start legislation. For the first time, these new rules required Head Start programs that did not meet specific quality benchmarks to re-compete for their grants. These rules, called the Designation Renewal System, brought new providers into some communities and incentivized all providers to reexamine the quality of their programs and make improvements. In December 2014, HHS notified 86 Head Start grantees that they had been designated to compete for continued Head Start funding.

Since 2008, Congress also has increased funding for the Head Start program by about 12 percent. These funds have been used to expand Head Start as well as Early Head Start. Additionally, funds have helped to create new Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships that bring high-quality early learning opportunities to more children by linking child care and Early Head Start programs. Funds also have provided start-up resources for new grantees so programs can be more fully prepared to provide high-quality, comprehensive services.

President Obama's fiscal year 2016 budget request would build on these efforts to improve the quality of Head Start through funds that would ensure all Head Start children are served in full-day, full-year programs, which, research shows, have larger impacts on learning.[19] The budget also would restore Head Start enrollment to the fiscal year 2014 level and further expand the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships.

Early Learning Challenge

Twenty states received support through the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services' jointly administered Early Learning Challenge program.[20] These grants were designed by Congress to provide funding for state-designed efforts to implement an integrated system of high-quality early learning programs and services. States have used funds to improve early childhood workforce preparation and training; strengthen health services and family engagement; link early childhood and K-12 data systems to learn more about how children's early learning experiences impact school success; and ensure that parents have information about high-quality early learning programs in their communities. While a total of 40 states applied to participate in the Early Learning Challenge program, only half of those states received grants, due to the amount of available funding and other factors.

Data reported by the first two cohorts of 14 states demonstrate significant progress toward meeting the goals of the program as well as improvements in program quality, examples of which are below.

- The number of early learning programs participating in their state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) has increased by 73 percent. These systems provide information to parents about the quality of their child's early learning program. These systems also support program efforts to improve quality.
- More at-risk children are gaining access to high-quality early learning experiences across child care programs, state preschool programs, and Head Start.
- States are designing and implementing a framework of workforce competencies to guide early childhood educators in preparing children for success.

States that applied, but did not receive funds from the Early Learning Challenge also benefited from the momentum created by the program. In applying for the grant, many states brought together public and private partnerships, and some states continue to pursue the reforms outlined in their plans.

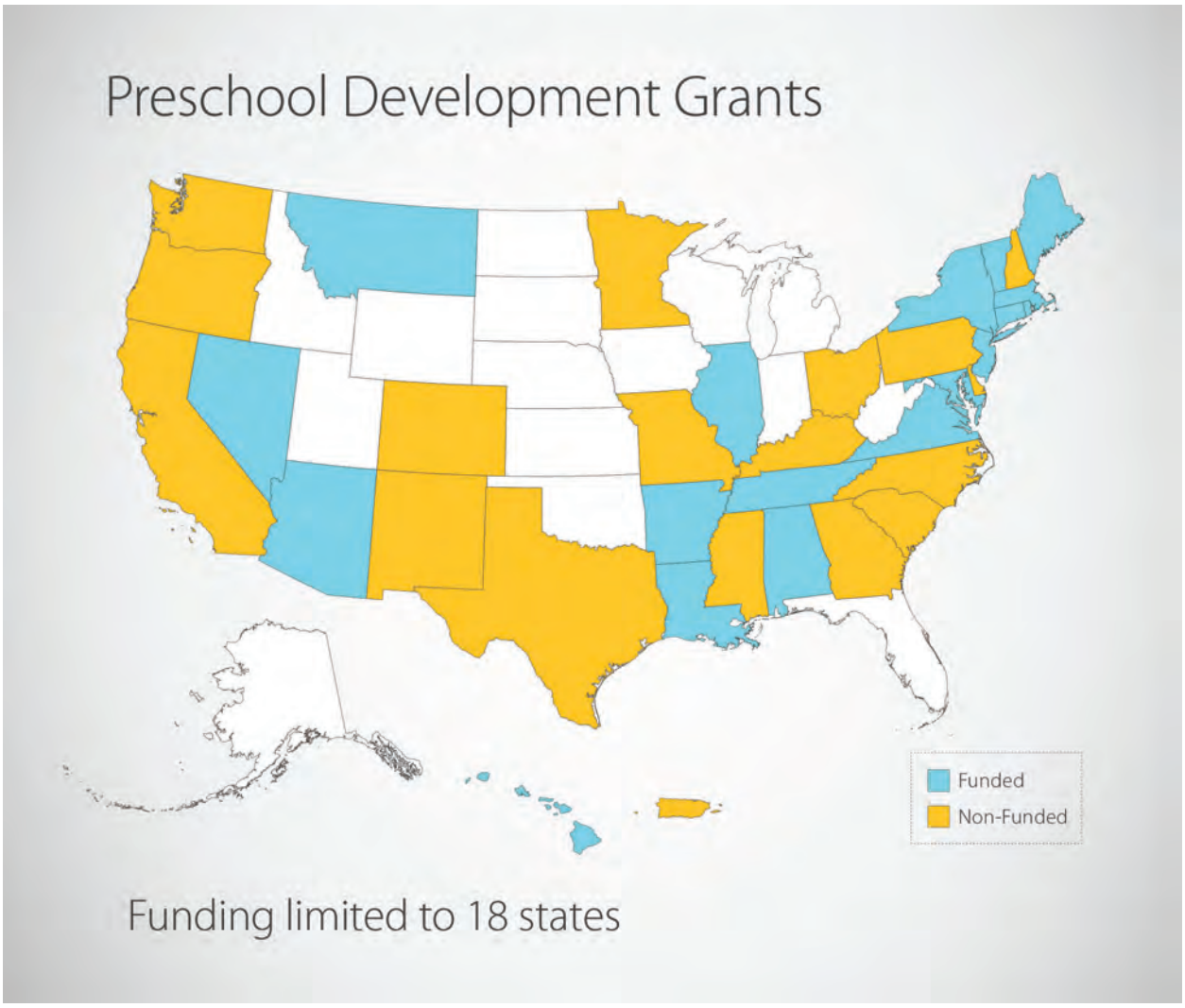
- Arkansas, with support from the Kellogg Foundation, is redesigning the state's early learning standards for children from birth to age 5 and identifying a new, developmentally appropriate kindergarten-entry assessment tool that can help teachers tailor learning to each student's needs. The state also is creating a framework to support family engagement.
- Hawaii developed and released Taking Action for Hawaii's Children, outlining six main goals to achieve overarching outcomes for children.
- Missouri, partnering with the University of Missouri, created early learning standards for children from birth to age five.

Preschool Development Grants

Congress took an important step in 2014 to address inequities in access to high-quality preschool by supporting the Preschool Development Grants program, a 4-year, federal-state partnership to expand the number of children enrolled in high-quality preschool programs in high-need communities.[21] There was significant bipartisan interest from state governors in this program. Thirty-five states and Puerto Rico applied. Due – in part – to funding limitations, 18 grants were awarded (Figure 2). During the 2015–2016 school year, these states will use grant funds to serve 33,000 additional 4-year-olds from low- and moderate-income families in more than 200 communities in high-quality preschool programs.

Unfortunately, Preschool Development Grants will not cover every child in the funded states; however, these states will be another step closer to the goal of expanding access to high-quality early learning across the country. Over the 4-year grant period, and with continued funding from Congress, these states are expecting to enroll an additional 177,000 children in high-quality preschool programs, which will help put children on a path to success in school and in life.

Figure 2. Preschool Development Grants



States have a strong interest in partnering with the federal government to expand high-quality preschool for the children who need it most. About 285,000 preschoolers could have been served in the 18 states that did not receive a Preschool Development Grant, which reflects a tremendous, ongoing unmet need.

For three years, the Obama administration has requested formula funding to address the enormous unmet need for high-quality preschool.[22] In addition, the administration's fiscal year 2016 budget request includes funding for continuation grants to support current states, as well as additional dollars to expand Preschool Development Grants to more states, the Bureau of Indian Education, tribal educational agencies, territories, and the Outlying Areas.[23]

Table 2. States that applied for Preschool Development Grants, but were not funded

State	4-year-olds not enrolled in public preschool programs[1]	Additional 4-year-old children served in the first year	Additional 4-year-old children served over four years
18 non-funded states	**1,331,278**	**59,796**	**284,631**
California	368,341	3,757	15,028
Colorado	46,103	1,301	6,554
Delaware	9,223	824	3,296
Georgia	47,981	2,458	12,586
Kentucky	31,945	3,289	14,008
Minnesota	61,430	1,143	5,634
Mississippi	27,339	2,425	15,298
Missouri	63,586	1,976	7,904
New Hampshire	12,144	582	5,282
New Mexico	18,036	1,773	7,092
North Carolina	84,809	19,969	79,876
Ohio	116,712	3,409	13,636
Oregon	37,307	865	4,525
Pennsylvania	105,705	8,725	34,900
Puerto Rico	45,542[2]	496	2,000
South Carolina	30,261	621	2,848
Texas	152,559	2,683	11,914
Washington	72,255	3,500	42,250

* **Source:** Preschool Development Grants Web site http:www2.ed.gov/programs/preschooldevelopmentgrants/awards.html

Preschool Development Grants and Early Learning Challenge Grants: Expanding Opportunities for Children

While states are in the early stages of implementing Preschool Development Grants, and the quality initiatives funded by the Early Learning Challenge grants are just starting to mature, we already are seeing what our investments in expanded access to high-quality early education can achieve. Below are a few examples of what these partnerships between the federal government and states are accomplishing and what more could have been done by states that did not receive a grant.

Illinois

Preschool Development Grants and Early Learning Challenge Recipient

Illinois has received strong support for its early learning initiative from Governor Bruce Rauner. Through its Early Learning Challenge grant, Illinois dramatically increased the number of teachers graduating from credentialed programs. The state also is working to develop an integrated early childhood data system across all programs that is linked with the state's K-12 Longitudinal Data System to better support student success. Through its Preschool Development Grant, Illinois plans to expand high-quality preschool in 19 communities, where approximately 45 percent of children from low-income families live. Illinois will contribute $128 million in state funds over four years, matching its grant by 150 percent, and serving more than 30,000 additional children in high-quality settings by 2018. Even with this robust investment, the state will still reach less than 50 percent of its 4-year-olds.

Maine

Preschool Development Grants Recipient

Over the next four years, Maine's Preschool Development Grant, supported by Governor Paul LePage, will support the development or expansion of 55 classrooms in 13 school districts with the highest numbers of children from low-income families. These districts previously did not have any public preschool and were unable to meet the needs of their communities. Partnerships with regional Head Start grantees and other providers will ensure full-day, full-week programming to all preschool-age children in the target communities. Maine also will require all public preschool programs to meet Maine's Public Preschool Program Standards and ensure compliance through a statewide system of monitoring and support. Still, the state only will be able to serve about 50 percent of its 4-year-olds by 2018.

Montana

Preschool Development Grants Recipient

With strong support from Governor Steve Bullock, Montana's Preschool Development Grant will help the state improve access to high-quality preschool education in 16 communities, eight of which are on Indian lands. By 2018, the state plans to serve an additional 5,000 children from low-income families. The state intends to phase in the program through three cohorts by building on the Montana Striving Readers Project and having the first cohort mentor and coach the second and third cohorts through ongoing collaboration and site visits. The program will be evaluated externally by Education Northwest and all activities in the state ultimately will lead to assuring that Montana builds a sustainable program. Even with the additional support of the grant, the state only will be able to serve about a third of its 4-year-olds.

Mississippi

Applicant for Preschool Development Grants

In its application for funds from the Preschool Development Grants program, Mississippi proposed to triple the number of children in the state's new preschool program, thereby serving 4,291 additional children in high-quality preschool by 2018 and reaching almost half of the unmet need for 4-year-olds. Currently, only 37 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in public preschool in Mississippi. The state had planned to improve the quality of preschool educators by investing in training and professional development and ensuring comparable pay for preschool teachers in funded-programs.

Ohio

Early Learning Challenge Recipient and Applicant for Preschool Development Grants

If Ohio had received a Preschool Development Grant, the state could have used the grant funds to prepare 3,400 additional children in both urban communities and rural Appalachia for success in kindergarten through public preschool programs. Ohio has worked to improve the quality of its state program through the $70 million Early Learning Challenge grant it received in 2012. In the second year of its grant, the state continued to increase access to highly-rated early learning programs. Participation in Step Up To Quality, Ohio's quality rating system, increased overall by 19 percent, and programs rated in the top tiers increased by 15 percent. All early learning programs in Ohio have completed or are in the process of fully integrating the new state-developed early learning and development standards – which were supported through the grant – into their curricula and classroom practices.

California

Early Learning Challenge Recipient and Applicant for Preschool Development Grants

Approximately 77 percent of California's $75 million 2012 Early Learning Challenge grant is being spent at the local level to support a voluntary network of 16 counties. Nearly 1.9 million (70 percent) of children under age 5 in California are represented by these 16 counties. Through its grant, the state has aligned coursework for early childhood educators across 105 community colleges and universities. California proposed to use its Preschool Development Grant to support more than 3,700 additional children in high-quality preschool programs. The state planned to focus its efforts on supporting the full inclusion of children with disabilities, English learners, and migrant populations.

Georgia

Early Learning Challenge Recipient and Applicant for Preschool Development Grants

Though only in its second year of the $51 million Early Learning Challenge grant, Georgia has made excellent progress toward its goal of including all licensed, registered, and publicly funded early learning programs in the state's program quality rating system. This system both supports program efforts to improve quality and progress and provides parents with valuable information about the quality of various providers. Georgia's preschool program is a mixed-delivery model that promotes socio-economic diversity in each classroom. The new seats that would have been created through Preschool Development Grants funding would have increased access and quality in 10 high-need communities, ensuring strong alignment and coordination with the K-12 system and increasing the reach of public preschool to 68 percent of 4-year-olds. Receiving Preschool Development Grants funding would have complemented the state's work to improve quality through its Early Learning Challenge grant.

Support for Early Learning

Over the last several years, an impressive coalition of education, business, law enforcement, military, child advocacy groups, and faith-based leaders have joined together to support the expansion of high-quality preschool programs. These groups recognize that investing in high-quality preschool means that more students will graduate from high school, go to college or join the armed or public services, and become contributing, productive members of our society with fewer youth and adults entering the justice system.

At the White House Early Education Summit in December 2014, corporate and philanthropic leaders pledged more than $330 million in new actions to expand the reach and enhance the quality of early education for thousands of additional children.[24]

"Early childhood development is the compelling economic, social, and moral issue of our time," former Procter & Gamble CEO John Pepper explains. "It helps provide all children with the opportunities they deserve to develop their natural abilities. It is also the most effective way to build the workforce … we need. Investing in young children's healthy development is a financial and social imperative for any country."

The public also recognizes these benefits and broadly supports greater federal investment in early education. According to a recent Gallup poll, 70 percent of voters said they would support increasing federal funding to make sure high-quality preschool programs are available for every child in America.[25]

During the last Congress, members supported bipartisan legislation, the Strong Start for America's Children Act. This legislation would complement other federal investments by significantly expanding access to high-quality preschool so that every child from low- and moderate-income families could enter kindergarten ready to learn. That bill, cosponsored by 177 members of Congress, also received broad support from a diverse group of stakeholders including parents, educators, researchers, business leaders, law enforcement, and local and state lawmakers. The proposal, if passed, would support meaningful implementation of high-quality preschool programs aligned with our nation's elementary and secondary school systems.

Taking the Next Step

Fifty years ago, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act into law. President Johnson believed that "full educational opportunity" should be "our first national goal." With the pending reauthorization of ESEA, Congress has an opportunity to take the next step in supporting greater investment in high-quality preschool for generations to come.

Without a deliberate focus on children's preschool experiences in our nation's education law, we run the risk of limiting opportunity for a generation of children by allowing educational gaps to take root before kindergarten. As a nation, we must commit to ensuring that all young people – particularly our most vulnerable – are prepared for a future where they can fulfill their greatest potential through a strong education.

By making a significant investment in preschool a key component of ESEA, we can help America live up to its highest ideals, as a place with real equity of opportunity. Congress has a chance to honor and extend the civil rights legacy of our education law by providing all children – no matter where they live or how much money their parents earn – an equal opportunity to begin school ready to succeed.

Endnotes

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[12] Bureau of the Census, "Current Population Survey" (2012) , Table 3, available at https://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/2012/tables.html

[13] Ibid.

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