Knowledge Bank

The Building Blocks of Success

Clearing up common misconceptions about state pre-K programs can lead to better outcomes for our kids.

Give them a good foundation.

By Sara Mead | June 26, 2015 | 11:45 a.m. EDT + More

Over the past 20 years, states have significantly increased investments in state-funded pre-K. Although state spending on pre-K faltered during the Great Recession, states have begun spending again on pre-K. And the Obama administration has supported programs to supplement and encourage state pre-K investments. The resumed expansion of state pre-K funding has the potential to improve school readiness for thousands of youngsters. But debate over these policies is often marred by common misconceptions about state pre-K programs. Here are a few:

State pre-K is universal pre-K. The terms "state pre-K" and "universal pre-K" are often used interchangeably in public debates. The perception that state pre-K means universal pre-K sometimes leads to opposition from critics who believe pre-K funds should be targeted to the lowest-income children. But in fact, most state pre-K programs are far from universal. Nearly half of states with state pre-K programs limit enrollment to low-income children. Furthermore, many state pre-K programs do not serve all eligible children. In 2014, of the 41 states with state-funded pre-K programs (a figure which included the District of Columbia), only nine served more than half of all 4-year-olds in the state, and 11 served less than 10 percent. Only three states – Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma – truly have universal pre-K programs.

[**READ:** Too Little, Too Late]

State pre-K means putting 4-year-olds in public schools. Another common misconception is that state pre-K programs serve children primarily or exclusively in public schools. This can lead to opposition from critics concerned that state pre-K programs will harm community-based childcare and private preschool programs, or that public schools are ill-equipped to serve preschoolers well. In fact, however, the vast majority of state pre-K programs utilize a diverse delivery model, designed to serve pre-K students in a mix of public schools and non-school settings, including community-based childcare centers, private nursery schools and Head Start programs. While some states, such as New York and Colorado, flow funding for pre-K through public school districts, many of these states have established policies that require districts to incorporate community-based preschools, as well as public schools, into their approach to delivering pre-K.

State pre-K funds cover the full cost of pre-K. Public debate and coverage of pre-K often suggests that state funds cover the entire costs of pre-K. The National Institute for Early Education Research, for example, publishes an annual analysis showing the extent to which average state per-pupil spending on pre-K falls short of the costs to deliver quality pre-K. The institute is certainly correct that many states spend far less on pre-K than is necessary to ensure quality learning opportunities for preschoolers – even after other funding sources, such as local and matching funds, are taken into account. But some state pre-K programs were never intended to cover the full cost of pre-K. Some, such as Maine's Public Preschool Program, provide additional funding to incentivize districts to use their own funds for pre-K. In Arkansas, the Arkansas Better Chance for School Success program requires a 40 percent funding match from other sources. In Connecticut, the state requires a parent copay for pre-K that varies based on family income. And in Maryland, the state doesn't provide districts any per-pupil funding for pre-K at all, but mandates that districts serve low-income 4-year-olds using a combination of general state aid and local funds. Not all of these arrangements are optimal for supporting quality pre-K, but state policymakers need to realize that there are a variety of policy options for splitting the costs of pre-K between the state and other funding sources, and consider how to use state funds to leverage local or federal funding for pre-K. In other areas of K-12 education, state funds typically combine with locally generated funds to cover the costs of schooling. Similar arrangements may be necessary to expand pre-K sustainably.

[**READ:** Pre-K for All]

State pre-K is the only way children are receiving public pre-K services. State pre-K programs get a lot of public attention, in part because they are sometimes the subject of gubernatorial campaign proposals and high-profile legislative battles. But they're not the only game in town when it comes to pre-K. The federal Head Start program funds preschool services for nearly three-quarters of a million 3- and 4-year-olds. Special education preschool programs – which are distinct from state-funded pre-K in most states – serve more than 400,000 children nationally, and in some states serve more children than the state-funded pre-K program. Further, communities and school districts are increasingly taking matters into their own hands when it comes to pre-K. Cities such as San Antonio, Denver and Seattle have passed ballot initiatives raising local taxes to fund pre-K. And districts, such as Boston, are choosing to use their own general and federal funds to serve preschoolers. Unfortunately, many states do not systematically track the number of children served through locally funded preschool initiatives, and there's no systematic national effort to track children served through these programs either. But as more cities and districts undertake such efforts, they could become a growing force in expanding preschool access, particularly if state and federal funds don't keep pace.

A growing number of kids are being served in state and locally funded pre-K programs. That's a good thing. But ensuring that all children enter school ready to succeed will require both expanded access in many communities and improvements in pre-K quality in most. Clearing up common misconceptions about state pre-K can help policymakers better address these challenges.

TAGS: education policy, early childhood education, public schools, K-12 education

Sara Mead is a principal with Bellwether Education Partners, a national nonprofit dedicated to helping education organizations become more effective in their work and achieve dramatic results for students. In this role, she writes and conducts policy analysis on issues related to early childhood education and K-12 education reform and provides strategic advising support to clients serving high-need students. Follow her on Twitter at @saramead.

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