

Universal Pre-K in Seattle

Early learning and universal pre-K

Despite our city's best efforts, too many of Seattle's children are not prepared for school. Nearly a quarter of students in Seattle Public Schools cannot read at grade level by third grade, a warning that they might not graduate from high school. The story is worse for students with greater educational needs, including students of color and immigrant students. High-quality early learning, including universal pre-K (UPK), is one of the best ways to increase children's achievement and close the opportunity and achievement gaps, which are already present by the beginning of kindergarten.

While there are some publicly-funded preschool programs in Seattle that serve low-income or developmentally delayed children, they do not serve many. In Seattle, there are approximately 2,000 government-subsidized slots, including programs such as the federal Head Start program, the state's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), and the city's Step Ahead program. However, only 54 percent of low-income children in Seattle are enrolled in an early learning program.

All children need high-quality UPK

Only 3 out of 10 three- and four-year-olds in Washington were enrolled in preschool programs that met minimum state standards last year—one of the widest early education gaps in the nation, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Nationally, about one in three children from middle-income families do not know the alphabet when they enter kindergarten, as compared with only one in six children from upper-income families. Middle-income children also face many of the same educational challenges as low-income children, including increased rates of grade repetition, dropout, and placement into special education, which are many of the challenges high-quality pre-K has proven effective in addressing. One of the main reasons more children are not in pre-K is because their families cannot afford it. In Seattle, pre-K costs more than in-state college tuition.

Early learning, including UPK, is one of the best economic investments we can make. For every dollar invested, there is a return of seven dollars or more. This return comes from a variety of savings, including decreased costs for special education, grade repetition, and criminal justice. Research found that Tulsa, Oklahoma's voluntary

UPK program resulted in three to five dollars for every dollar invested. In addition, those enrolled in the program have better reading, math, and writing skills than children not enrolled in the program. Tulsa and Boston's UPK programs have been found to produce between a half- and full year of additional learning compared to children not enrolled in the program.

One of the reasons early learning is such a powerful investment is because the majority of brain development happens before age five. It is critical to provide children with the supports and education they need during their first five years.

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Updated March 2014

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Seattle and UPK

The Seattle City Council passed a resolution in September 2013 that begins the process of designing a voluntary UPK program, *Preschool for All*, which would serve all three- and four-year-olds in Seattle whose families choose to enroll in the program. The goal of the program is to increase the number of children prepared for kindergarten.

From the resolution will come a gap analysis study, survey of parents and guardians, proposed *Preschool for All* program, cost model for the program, and program implementation timeline.

The proposed UPK program is being designed by city staff and consultants and must consider teacher qualifications, classroom hours, student-teacher ratio, and evaluation of the program. Similar to federal Head Start and the state's ECEAP program, *Preschool for All* will include family engagement, health screenings, culturally appropriate language support, and connection to kindergarten readiness.

The program will likely have a sliding fee scale and be free for families at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$47,100 for a family of four). The proposed program must include an implementation phase-in plan and cost estimates for the program. In addition, the proposal must include a recommendation on how to integrate and align *Preschool for All* with current publicly-funded programs. The proposal will also include recommendations for evaluating the effectiveness of the program including rigorous, ongoing, longitudinal evaluations.

What's next

In early 2014, city staff and consultants are creating the proposed program. The city council could approve the program as early as the spring of 2014. If approved, *Preschool for All* will likely need a new source of funding, which means an initiative to fund the program could be on the Seattle ballot as early as November 2014. Public support for UPK in Seattle is extremely high—a recent poll found that 79 percent of people surveyed support creating a publicly funded, voluntary pre-K program.

Having a UPK program will help Seattle's children, families, the school district, and the state. Preparing all of Seattle's children for school will result in savings to the school district and state and increased earnings and tax revenue once these children are adults.

The South Shore effect

South Shore School is a public pre-K to 8th grade school in southeast Seattle that is the result of an innovative partnership between Seattle Public Schools and the League of Education Voters Foundation.

The student population is 50 percent black, 29 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 13 percent white, and 8 percent Hispanic. More than half of all students receive free or reduced-price lunches.

According to a 2013 ECONorthwest study, students who enroll at South Shore in pre-K significantly outperformed demographically similar students attending other Seattle Public Schools in math and moderately outperform them in reading.

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