



## RSAI 2024 Legislative Priority Position Paper: Preschool

**Background:** Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP), first implemented in 2007-08, has grown to serve over 33,000 four-year-olds in 2023-24. PK enrollment was lower than kindergarten by about 8,000 students, meaning nearly a quarter of kindergarteners may not have been served in SVPP. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is critical. Quality preschool helps students reach this important benchmark. Preschool enrollment swings experienced during the pandemic had significant budget impacts for school districts. Hold harmless budget provisions and programs to support early literacy are more important than ever in supporting Iowa's youngest students to academic success.

**Why does preschool matter?** The Perry Preschool Project, 40 years later, documents \$17 savings for every dollar invested (earlier findings of \$8 saved for every dollar invested are also often cited). Once considered a strategy just to support working parents with childcare needs, the majority of states now view access to high-quality PK programs as a critical long-term economic investment in the future workforce. Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf> Oct. 2014: *Six rigorous, long-term evaluation studies have found that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs were:*

- 25% less likely to drop out of school.
- 40% less likely to become a teen parent.
- 50% less likely to be placed in special education.
- 60% less likely to never attend college.
- 70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

Sarah Daily, *Initiatives from Preschool to Third Grade: A Policymaker's Guide*, shows reductions in costly outcomes that quality preschool prevents. (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, October 2014, <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf>). The National Conference of State Legislatures quotes studies on long-term return on investment: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/new-research-early-education-as-economic-investme.aspx>

Another study shows improved behavior and social skills: the Journal of Research in Childhood Education, *The Long Term Benefits*, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285> demonstrates for low-income students in quality preschool compared to low-income students without the PK experience, the PK group had fewer behavior issues, referrals, better attendance, initially more special education in kindergarten (identified earlier) but less special education services by fourth grade than the control group.

**Barriers to Expansion.** Preschool funding in the formula is paid entirely with state funds, based on the prior year's enrollment of 4-year-olds in the program on October 1. Although 3-year-olds and 5-year-olds may be served, they are not counted for weighting/funding purposes. Unlike the regular program enrollment for K-12 budget purposes, there is no adjustment for enrollment growth known as on-time

funding modified supplemental amount if more PK students are served than in the prior year. Districts are also prohibited from using general fund dollars to pay for PK expenses, leaving parent pay or grant funding as the only remaining options. Additionally, 4-year-olds from low-income families may need other supports, such as full-day programs or wrap-around care to allow families full employment. For non-English-speaking families, preschool is critical. Yet, the 0.5 weighting is not enough to cover the costs of translators, staff and additional materials to support immigrant families to fully engage with their students, let alone the full-day programming that would jump-start their language development. Lastly, in particular for rural schools, transportation costs are most efficient when students can be transported together. The half-day PK option requires additional routes, very costly to rural school districts, or no transportation at all, which is burdensome to parents and a barrier to full-time employment.

**Workforce and Childcare:** Full-day preschool with a 1.0 weighting for lower-income and non-English-speaking 4-year-olds is a win-win-win: 1) a win for students with improved academic success down the road, 2) a win for the business community when parents can fully engage in employment and freed up childcare slots can serve waiting lists enabling other parents to work, and 3) a win for taxpayers as students with quality preschool are 50% less likely to experience the costs of long-term special education typically borne by property taxpayers. Quality preschool is an excellent example of the maxim that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

**Quality Preschool:** funding of quality statewide voluntary preschool for three and four-year-olds should be set at the 1.0 per pupil cost for full-time or prorated proportionally. The formula should include PK protections against budget and program impacts of preschool enrollment swings like they do for K-12 (budget guarantee/on-time spending authority). Full-day programming increases the opportunity for parent workforce participation, allows Iowa's limited childcare workforce capacity to focus on younger children, prevents later special education consequences, improves literacy and prepares students for learning. Although all students benefit from quality preschool, Iowa's low-income and non-English speaking students face barriers to half-day programs, making them even more at risk of lower long-term achievement.