



## RSAI 2025 Legislative Priority: Preschool

**Background:** Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP), first implemented in 2007-08, grew to serve 25,330 four-year-olds by the 2019-20 school year, then dropped by almost 2,500 students during COVID. Participation in the SVPP has rebounded some, funding seats for 23,360 students in the Fall of 2024, based on the enrollment count of students in SVPP in October 2023. SVPP enrollment was lower than the count of first graders in the same school year by about over 11,300 students, meaning nearly a third of students may not have been served in a quality preschool. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is critical. Quality preschool helps students reach this important benchmark.

**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 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). In the Learning Policy Institute's research, [Untangling the Evidence on Preschool Effectiveness: Insights for Policymakers](#), 2019, with a rigorous evaluation of 21 public PK programs, "finds that students who attend high-quality preschool programs reap benefits that can last throughout their lives, and are more prepared for school and experience substantial learning gains in comparison to children who do not attend preschool. Another study shows improved behavior and social skills: the Journal of Research in Childhood Education, [The Long Term Benefits](#), 2017, demonstrates for low-income students in quality preschool compared to low-income students without it, the PK group had fewer behavior issues, referrals, better attendance, initially more special education in kindergarten (identified earlier) but less special education services by 4th grade than the control group.

**Labor Market Benefit:** in addition to fostering student success, full-day preschool programs significantly contribute to increasing labor market participation. It's important to clearly state that preschool, with certified teachers and a rigorous curriculum, is not synonymous with child care. However, providing child care and preschool improves labor participation of young parents in the same way. When children have a safe place to be, parents often opt into more employment, miss less work and increase productivity. Iowa has a childcare shortage. Any four-year-olds in childcare who could

experience full-day PK would free up a childcare slot for another child. In “Child care and parent labor force participation: a review of the research literature,” [the study](#) shares empirical evidence from a free universal PK program implemented in Washington, D.C., which states “the percentage of mothers with young children participating in the labor force increased by 12 percentage points—10 of which were attributable to universal preschool.” [Another study of the D.C. program](#) concludes: “Using both a synthetic control method and a difference-in-differences analysis, this study finds that these increases in maternal labor force participation are strongly linked to the district’s implementation of universal preschool.”

**Barriers to Expansion.** SVPP funding is paid entirely with state funds, based on the prior year’s enrollment count. 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. Hold harmless budget provisions and programs to support early literacy are more important than ever in supporting Iowa’s youngest students to academic success. Short of transferring a few unexpended categorical funds into the flexibility account, districts are prohibited from using general fund dollars to pay for PK expenses, leaving parent pay or grant funding as the only remaining options. For non-English-speaking families, preschool is critical, but, the 0.5 weighting is not enough to cover the costs of translators, staff and additional materials, let alone the full-day programming that would jump-start early language development. Transportation is also a barrier; half-day PK requires additional routes, very costly to school districts who might otherwise provide transportation.

**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 similar to K-12. Districts need access to resources for start-up costs to expand enrollment or increase the number of sections.

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.

Additionally, if parents of a 5-year-old who did not attend PK would prefer their student delay kindergarten, and there is no transitional kindergarten option in their district, they should be allowed to enroll their student in PK and that student should be counted for funding purposes.