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- Increase teacher education requirements, skills and compensation
- Develop meaningful family engagement strategies
- Align care and education in the years before and after pre-K
- Layer funding sources to provide high-quality, full-day services for children and maximize cost-effectiveness of state-funded pre-K

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This issue brief takes a deeper look into the Roadmap’s first recommendation: Broaden family eligibility criteria and consider risk factors. In the following pages, we examine the importance of access to high-quality state-funded pre-K, how research defines and supports expanded access, what states are doing in this area and steps Indiana must take to increase access to high-quality programs.

**MILE MARKERS:** Access to High-Quality Pre-K

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**SUMMARY**

While high-quality pre-K is expanding in Indiana, access is not uniform across the state.

In terms of access, Indiana ranks 43rd out of 44 states that offer state-funded pre-K.

Sixty-five percent of Hoosiers support expanding state-funded pre-K for all children.

To improve access, policymakers should remove existing programmatic and geographic restraints.

by:
Karen Ruprecht, Ph. D.
Director of Research & Practice

**EARLY LEARNING INDIANA**
Why is access to high-quality state-funded pre-K important?

To demonstrate the importance of access to high-quality state-funded pre-K, imagine two 4-year-old children. One child, Jaden, is fortunate enough to live in one of Indiana’s five pilot counties with state-funded pre-K. For the first time, Jaden was in a structured learning environment outside of his home. Through his pre-K year, he learned how to work with other children, to take turns and to use words to express his emotions. He learned how to hold a pencil so he could write his name, and match and categorize items of similar properties. He also discovered how much he enjoyed painting and making letters and numbers from play dough. At the same time, because of the program, Jaden’s mother picked up extra hours at her job.

On the other hand, Maria, Jaden’s cousin, lives in a neighboring county that is not included in the state pre-K program. Both of Maria’s parents work, but they struggle to make ends meet and to keep her enrolled in a pre-K program. Although her family receives a voucher to help pay for her child care, their options are limited. Her program is not rated as a high-quality pre-K program on the state’s Paths to QUALITY™ rating system, just like most of the programs in her community. While Maria’s parents feel she is safe at her child care provider, they know she is not receiving the same type of learning opportunities as her cousin. They worry she is falling behind, even before entering kindergarten.

Although these stories are purely for illustrative purposes, the truth is that scenes like this play out in Indiana counties and with Hoosier families each day. These stories are rooted in what the research on Indiana’s On My Way Pre-K program has told us so far:

- When parents had the opportunity to enroll their child in the On My Way Pre-K program, 51 percent reported they increased work or school hours, 35 percent were able to get a new job, and 33 percent were able to start a job-training program.

- Children who participated in the On My Way Pre-K program showed greater gains in language, literacy, executive function and social skills compared to children who were not enrolled in the program (Family and Social Services Administration, n.d.).

Indiana’s pre-K access is limited.

Nine Indiana counties - Starke, Jasper, Newton, Wells, Warren, Putnam, Rush, Sullivan and Crawford - have no high-quality pre-K programs. These nine counties have close to 10,000 children under the age of 5 (ELAC, 2017; Kids Count Data Center, 2017).

1.9% of eligible Indiana 4-year-olds are covered by state-funded pre-K.

27k low-income 4-year-olds are not in a high-quality state-funded program.

(Barnett et al., 2017, ELAC, 2017)
Access to high-quality state-funded pre-K should not be treated as a luxury. In fact, we know that children who are most at risk benefit the most from attending effective pre-K programs (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Increasing access to early educational opportunities can help thousands of Hoosier children begin their education on the right path.

Access to high-quality state-funded pre-K can also create an equitable playing field. Right now, only some children and families have access to high-quality state-funded pre-K, purely determined by county lines. If Hoosiers are serious about building Indiana’s human infrastructure for the long term, then access to pre-K should not be restricted by lines on a map.

Pre-K access is also vitally important to our state’s future health. Indiana is unfortunately ranked 4th in the nation in the percentage of children under the age of 5 living in households with adverse family experiences (National Survey of Children’s Health, 2011/2012). Nearly 20 percent of Hoosier children under the age of 5 live in households with two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). While most adults have experienced at least one ACE in their childhood, the more ACEs a child has experienced, the greater the likelihood of developmental delays and negative long-term health outcomes in adults such as cancer and heart disease (Center on the Developing Child, 2009). However, early intervention – such as a high-quality pre-K program – can help mitigate the effects of these experiences. Thus, increasing access to high-quality state-funded pre-K is as much a health care issue as it is an educational issue.

What are adverse childhood experiences?

The 2011/2012 National Survey of Children’s Health, funded by the federal government, randomly surveyed residents in each state and asked a series of questions regarding children’s health. Several of the questions were taken directly from the Adverse Childhood Experience survey from 1998 that showed significant relationships between abuse or neglect and exposure to violence with adult health problems (Feletti et al., 1998). The ACE’s responses for Indiana’s children under the age of 5 are as follows:

Since the child was born, did the following experiences occur for your family or child?

- **33.6%** Financial hardship (difficulty covering basics like food and housing)
- **9.3%** Parent served time in jail
- **14.6%** Lived with parent divorced or separated
- **1%** Lived with parent who died
- **8.4%** Lived in home with domestic violence
- **4.4%** Victim or a witness of neighborhood violence
- **7.2%** Lived with someone with mental illness
- **9.3%** Drug or alcohol problem
- **1.4%** Treated unfairly due to race or ethnicity
What does the research say about access issues?

The construct of access to high-quality early care and education programs is surprisingly complicated. There is no single, agreed-upon definition of access in the research (Friese, Lin, Forry, & Tout, 2017). Discussion about access to high-quality early care and education is often focused on certain settings (state funded pre-K or Head Start) or among high-priority populations (low-income, children with identified disabilities, homeless families, etc.).

Despite a common definition, the research generally defines and measures access in the following ways:

- Availability and utilization of early care and education programs – measured by the number of children enrolled and the number of available slots
- Quality of early care and education programs – measured by the number of children enrolled in high-quality early care and education programs, number of programs rated at the highest level and the number of high-quality open slots
- Cost of early care and education programs – measured by the number of programs that accept child care vouchers and the number of children receiving vouchers

Addressing access issues is a twofold process. Barriers exist within communities (lack of providers, lack of providers rated at the highest quality levels) and within families (transportation barriers, location of the programs to family’s work and/or home, and alignment of parent work hours to provider hours) (Sandstrom, Giesen, & Chaudry, 2012). Other factors, such as families with children with disabilities, homeless families, immigrant families, or families that speak another language also pose obstacles to accessing high-quality pre-K in their communities (Forry, Tout, Rothenberg, Sandstrom, & Vesely, 2013; Friese et al., 2017).

The research provides clear examples on why increasing access to high-quality pre-K programs and expanding family access is the right path to take in pre-K expansion. States that have fewer restrictions on access – i.e., those states that have universal access or use a wider definition of access instead of poverty status alone – not only have higher participation rates, but children in these programs who are at most risk for academic and social-emotional challenges gain skills that are important for future success (Barnett et al., 2017).

In Indiana, 90 percent of children attend kindergarten, even though it is not mandatory (ELAC, 2017). Kindergarten enjoys widespread access and availability to any child who meets the age requirements. Families do not have to show a need to participate – there are no work and training requirements for participation. Research shows high-quality pre-K programs can help set the stage for future academic success. Why not provide the same level of access and availability for pre-K that we offer parents for kindergarten?
How is access to pre-K currently addressed in Indiana?

Indiana has taken steps forward in increasing state funding for high-quality pre-K. In 2017, the General Assembly invested $22 million to expand state-funded pre-K from five to 20 counties and to expand family eligibility in the original five pilot counties to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, instead of the previous 127 percent poverty threshold.

However, in the 15 new counties slated for expansion, family eligibility is determined with the 127 percent poverty threshold. Thus, family access in the 20 counties that now have state funded pre-K is not uniform, leaving some families behind in a system where access is already limited.

In addition to the income requirements, families that receive state-funded pre-K scholarships must be working and/or attending a certified or accredited training or education program (Family and Social Services Administration, n.d.). While these new requirements align On My Way Pre-K with the child care voucher system, it could also potentially limit participation for children who may be most in need of a high-quality pre-K learning experience. We know from previous studies of other pre-K programs that children whose families were not working or attending school benefited from the pre-K programs (Conn-Powers, 2016).

- Approximately 50 percent of families who participated in the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 Early Education Matching Grant (EEMG) program were unemployed.

- Children in the EEMG program gained language and school readiness skills and the percentage of children showing signs of developmental delays decreased dramatically throughout the year.

The new legislation also sets aside up to 20 percent of funding to help expand high-quality pre-K programs throughout the state, not just in the designated counties. Communities have been successful at increasing the supply of high-quality providers available for families.

- In the past six years, communities have doubled the number of high-quality early care and education programs from about 500 to more than 1,000 programs.

- The number of children enrolled in high-quality programs has also nearly doubled in this same timeframe, from about 25,000 children in 2012 to nearly 45,000 children in 2016 (ELAC, 2017).

**Family access varies by county.**

Access and eligibility for On My Way Pre-K depends on where families live and what they earn.

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\begin{align*}
127\% & = \$37,861 \\
185\% & = \$45,510
\end{align*}
\]

127% = $37,861

In the 15 new On My Way Pre-K counties, families must be at 127 percent of federal poverty level or lower, which translates to $30,861 per year for a family of four.

185% = $45,510

In the original five pilot counties (Lake, Allen, Marion, Jackson, Vanderburgh) families can earn up to 185 percent of federal poverty level, or $45,510 per year for a family of four.
While access to high-quality programs is increasing, it is not increasing uniformly across the state. Not surprisingly, a majority of the growth in high-quality programs in 2016 was centered in the communities where state-funded pre-K exists. In 2016, 130 high-quality programs were added, serving 2,200 children (ELAC, 2017).

There is uneven and inequitable access to state funded pre-K in Indiana, leaving some children behind while others – based solely on where they live, their families’ income level and whether their family is able to work or attend school – are able to participate in a high-quality pre-K experience.

This policy sets up two pathways for children in low-income families. On one path, children have an opportunity to start their education earlier and learn important skills in a structured learning environment, leading to success in kindergarten. On the other path, families are left to figure out on their own how best to support their children’s educational experience. This second path represents families who are probably the least resourced in our state. This disparate access cements the notion that inequality in education starts early and becomes even more difficult to overcome when policies limit access to families who need it most.

Ultimately, all Hoosier children should have access to high-quality state-funded pre-K programs, regardless of their families’ economic status or their county of residence. Thankfully, most Hoosiers agree. Recent polling found that 65 percent of Hoosiers support universal access to pre-K, even if it comes at a higher cost to taxpayers. This support will only continue to grow, as evidence continues to verify its benefits.

Although family eligibility has grown with the recent pre-K expansion effort, Indiana has more work to do. Policymakers must recognize that all children, regardless of their families’ income levels or work statuses, should have access to early education. Furthermore, they should recognize that if children do have that access, it will strengthen local communities and families, as well as help children start their educational journey on a more solid footing.
How are other states and programs addressing access to state-funded pre-K?

Currently, 44 of the 50 states offer some type of state-funded pre-K system, with some states (e.g., Iowa, Connecticut, Kansas and New Jersey) offering multiple programs. State-funded access to high-quality pre-K is a relatively new approach in Indiana. In fact, we rank 43rd out of 44 states that offer state-funded pre-K programs. In 2016, Indiana’s program served just 1.9 percent of all eligible 4-year-olds, or 1,585 children (Barnett et al., 2017).

Thus, Indiana can learn from other states how to increase state-funded pre-K access for families. One obvious place to start is to examine how other states have defined access. A review of the research finds many states have a broader definition of access and family eligibility than Indiana (Barnett et al., 2017).

- 11 of the 44 states that offer state-funded pre-K programs have universal access, meaning the only requirement for participation is having an age-eligible child.
- 22 of the 44 states with state-funded pre-K have no income eligibility standards for participation. Of the remaining 22 states that do have income eligibility standards, at least 16 have income eligibility standards set at 185 percent of federal poverty level or higher. Five states, including Indiana, have income eligibility standards at 127 percent or lower.
- Eligibility for state-funded pre-K includes additional family factors in at least nine states, not including the 11 states and the District of Columbia that already have universal access to pre-K. For children, these factors include developmental delays, a history of abuse or neglect, or migrant status. For families, they include homelessness, teen parents, deployed parents, non-English-speaking family members, and unstable housing. In addition to this list, several states allow local communities to set aside a proportion of state-funded pre-K slots based on locally determined risk factors.
- Eight states, including Indiana, require some type of local match for state-funded pre-K.
- Indiana is the only state with eligibility standards tied to work and education requirements. To be eligible, a parent needs to be working or attending school either before the child begins pre-K or 30 days after the program begins.

Other federally funded programs, such as Head Start, require programs to consider families with certain risk factors as priority in determining eligibility for their program in addition to income requirements. Those factors are whether the child has an identified disability, is in foster care, or if the family is homeless. Starting with the 2017-18 pre-K year, Indiana foster care families are eligible for state-funded pre-K scholarships, regardless of family income level.

It is important policymakers continue to examine how to expand access to state funded pre-K in Indiana. Because of the broad adoption of state-funded pre-K systems, Indiana stands to benefit from a wealth of knowledge from similar states. Most states recognize that basing access to pre-K on income eligibility alone does not go far enough in serving those in most need. Considering Indiana’s ranking in national surveys that examine risk factors, policymakers would be well-advised to examine these data and broaden access not just on income or geographical location, but on solid data that show what the impact of a lack of quality pre-K education can do to the long-term health of our state.
Increasing access to high-quality programs is a complex issue, involving local communities, state resources and families. We know increasing access to high-quality pre-K programs will require a multi-step approach. We can use the research to guide our practices in Indiana by thinking about how to broaden access to high-quality pre-K programs by considering the following recommendations.

**Policymakers can:**

- **Recognize that low-income families are not a homogeneous population, and there is variability within this population in regard to access issues.** For example, low-income families differ in their composition whether they are single parents, married couples, grandparents raising grandchildren, or teen parents. Each family type may present its own unique risks and challenges. Some may face additional obstacles because of low educational attainment, language barriers, parental incarceration or non-standard work schedules. Working with community leaders to identify the needs of families can help open access to populations who need it the most.

- **Work with local communities to help determine what risk factors – beyond income level – are most salient to them.** For example, many communities are facing an unprecedented crisis due to the increasing opioid epidemic that has left communities and families fractured. The rise in the number of children in foster care – due largely to this crisis – is at an all-time high. Several states (e.g., Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois) recognize parental substance abuse puts children at risk for academic and social emotional delays (Barnett et al., 2017). Providing a high-quality pre-K education can help alleviate the stressors related to living with a parent with a substance abuse problem. Although the current legislation does not specifically address this population, the Indiana Department of Child Services and the Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School Learning have partnered to reach out to foster care families to offer pre-K scholarships.

- **Align eligibility for state-funded pre-K in a similar way to other federal programs.** Both Head Start and the child care subsidy program recognize special populations of children and families that need access to child care above and beyond income eligibility. Both federal programs provide priority status to children with disabilities, homeless families, and children in foster care. Indiana already considers children in foster care eligible for state-funded pre-K scholarships, starting with the 2017-18 funding year.

- **Reconsider the new work and education eligibility requirements.** There are many reasons why parents may not work or be enrolled in an education or job training program. Parents in Indiana – like parents all over the country – struggle with addiction, mental health issues, housing instability, domestic violence and chronic illness, each of which may prohibit them from working or going to school. Further penalizing their children and denying them access to a chance for a better opportunity in their young lives goes against common sense and Hoosier family values. A family-centered approach would consider pre-K enrollment as the entry point into helping the family to connect to job, training opportunities or other support services, rather than making it a requirement.
In addition, access to high-quality state-funded pre-K can only happen if these providers exist within local communities. Hoosier legislative, business and philanthropic leaders should consider the following recommendations along with examining family factors.

**Community leaders can:**

- **Invest in increasing the number of high-quality providers statewide.** Currently there are nine counties that have no high-quality early care and education programs available to them. Increasing family access in these counties will not matter if high-quality providers do not exist in the community.

- **Build coalitions to identify the greatest needs in their area.** Local leaders are the experts in their communities. Their needs and ideas about how to expand high-quality pre-K in their communities should be the most important voices that policy makers listen to for guidance.

- **Strive toward an ample supply of high-quality providers to meet families’ unique needs.** The long-term goal for state-funded pre-K should be articulated so communities can ready themselves to serve pre-K families. Our goal for state-funded pre-K should be universal pre-K for all children. The best way to determine how we arrive at that goal begins with clarity about our timeline and intended outcomes.

Access to high-quality, state-funded pre-K should not stop at a county line. Much like roads, pre-K should be treated as a critical piece of our state’s infrastructure and economy, a piece that helps ensure our future success. High-quality pre-K helps children gain the important and necessary skills to be successful in kindergarten and beyond, an essential part of Indiana’s vitality. We do not stop building roads at county lines to limit access to motorists, so why would we stop access to pre-K in this manner?
References


