



NORTH DAKOTA HEAD START ASSOCIATION

Beginning the Conversation: Answers to Five Key Questions on Providing High-Quality Early Education in North Dakota

Introduction

Since FY05, states' investments in high-quality, voluntary preschool programs have increased by nearly \$2 billion, nationwide.¹ Seven states already provide or are phasing in preschool programs for all children.² What is driving this remarkable growth? Policymakers have been moved by the wealth of research demonstrating the critical role children's first five years play in brain development, the superior returns on preschool investments, and the impressive short- and long-term benefits of high-quality preschool for children, families, and communities.³

Preschool programs support working families and complement good parenting. They supplement the essential early learning that takes place in the home by providing unique opportunities for social, emotional, and cognitive development. Sadly, North Dakota is one of only eight states that make no state investments in preschool or Head Start. The time has come to give young children in this state the opportunities they need to succeed in school, in life, and in the global marketplace.

Implementing a high-quality pilot preschool program is one highly effective strategy states have employed to join this vital national education effort. A voluntary, high-quality pilot program would allow North Dakota to effectively tap the resources and expertise of Head Start and other high-quality preschool programs, generate essential data on the program's efficacy, and provide accountability to children, families, and taxpayers. With smart policy and strong policymakers behind it, a high-quality preschool program will pay dividends to North Dakota and its children now and into the future.

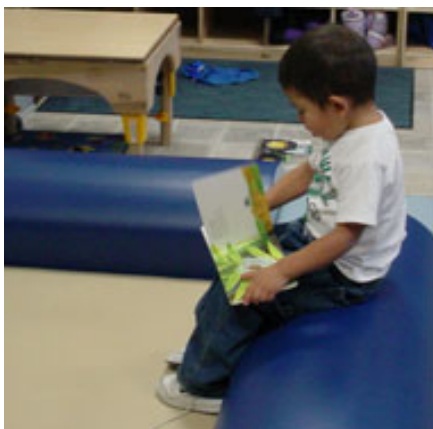
1. Why Support Preschool in North Dakota?

High-quality preschool has both significant educational benefits and lifelong positive impacts for children. Research has found reduced special education placements, improved test scores, and increased rates of high school graduation during the K-12 years as well as higher lifetime earnings, decreased criminal activities, and reduced dependence on welfare services in adulthood.⁴

According to estimates from one well-respected economic study, because of these benefits, a high-quality preschool program available to all three- and four-year-old children in North Dakota could return up to \$10.1 for every \$1 invested.⁵

Head Start programs operate throughout North Dakota serving federally designated at-risk populations. Yet, despite the presence of federal early education, waiting lists are a reality statewide. The facts about early education in North Dakota are:

- The state is home to nearly 39,000 children under the age of five.⁶
- Head Start serves nearly 2000 North Dakota three and four year olds.⁷
- Another 574 income-eligible three and four year olds are on Head Start wait lists.⁸
- North Dakota ranks 49th in the nation in terms of preschool access with only 27 percent of three and four year olds enrolled.⁹



2. What Is High-Quality Preschool?

The impressive benefits of preschool depend upon programs being of high quality.¹⁰ The four most critical elements of quality are:

1. Teacher qualifications — Research shows that programs employing teachers with bachelor's degrees are more likely to achieve substantial gains for children.¹¹ Preschool teachers should have the following:

- A four-year degree in an early childhood-relevant field,
- Certification in early education, and
- Access to continuing education to ensure they stay abreast of the latest research and practice.

2. Research-based curricula — Developmental research indicates that three- and four-year-old children learn best in carefully designed environments that tap their natural curiosity and support learning through play and active exploration of their surroundings. Strong standards outline the skills, knowledge, and dispositions children need to ensure a successful transition into kindergarten. High-quality settings and research-based curricula — i.e. those that utilize proven methods for early learning — provide daily opportunities for children to build a variety skills, including:

- Physical, social and emotional development,
- Approaches to and enthusiasm for learning,
- Early literacy, mathematics, and problem solving, and
- Basic knowledge of families, communities, and the world.

3. Small class sizes — no more than 20 children per class, and

4. Low teacher-child ratios — one adult for every 10 or fewer children.¹²

To ensure that all these quality elements work effectively with the state's existing early childhood and education systems, state preschool quality standards should align with:

- The state's existing K-12 standards,
- North Dakota Early Learning Guidelines Ages Three through Five
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), and
- Head Start Child Outcomes and Performance Standards.

High-quality programs must also accommodate children with special needs and be linguistically and culturally appropriate for the children they serve. Teachers should be trained and supported to work with the diverse needs and backgrounds of the children in their classrooms. They must also be trained to recognize learning challenges and have access to the proper professionals for screenings and assessments. Keeping classes small and ratios low helps teachers provide individualized attention, evaluate learning and behavior, and access interventions as needed.

Without high quality, preschool programs cannot produce the returns documented in the research. By insisting on research-based best practices and well-qualified teachers, policymakers can ensure that public dollars are put to their best use.

3. How Can a High-Quality Preschool Program Best Meet the Needs of North Dakota's Families?

While the characteristics of high-quality preschool are consistent nationally, each state must build a program that meets the needs and reflects the values of the population it will serve. No single solution will work for every child, every family, every town, or every state.

Research indicates that high-quality preschool benefits all children, regardless of socio-economic, ethnic, or cultural background.¹³ Programs must, however, be culturally and linguistically appropriate, respect the challenges faced by today's families, and be sensitive to parents' concerns. In North Dakota, programs must address the needs of rural communities, working families, the faith community, and American Indian and other minority populations as well as those of existing community providers.

Diverse Delivery

One effective strategy is the use of a diverse delivery system. Diverse delivery allows state-funded preschool to be offered in Head Start and other community-based settings that meet state quality standards. A diverse delivery system maximizes parent choice by providing options, including:

- Public schools,
- Head Start programs,
- Child care centers,
- Home-based providers, and
- Faith-based centers (where state funding does not support religious education), as well as
- The option not to enroll their child in any program.

This system utilizes existing local infrastructure, resources, and expertise and engages the early childhood community, such as North Dakota's nationally recognized Head Start system, which has been providing high-quality preschool services for over 40 years. Diverse delivery systems also require private providers to meet state standards and have been found in some states to raise the quality of services across settings.¹⁴ Of course, respecting families' values and needs means North Dakota preschool should be entirely voluntary.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement initiatives are another way state preschool can ensure programs reflect the populations they serve. Nationwide, Head Start promotes parental participation as a cornerstone of its service delivery model because when parents become involved early in their children's education, it supports learning and development and can translate into greater engagement throughout the K-12 years.

Key parent involvement initiatives include:

- Open-classroom policies that invite parents to stop by anytime,
- Regular parent-teacher conferences,
- Home visiting, and
- Literacy, self-sufficiency, and parenting classes for adults.

Bringing families into the preschool setting creates instant accountability, fosters communication between families and teachers, supports learning both in preschool and at home, and has been shown to improve outcomes for children through K-12.¹⁵

Comprehensive Services

Some families need more than just preschool. Providing comprehensive support services through a preschool program means both parents and children are more likely to be aware of those services and to get the help they need. Comprehensive services, when offered in a familiar, trusted environment like a preschool setting can be the difference between success and failure for North Dakota's young families.

Through collaborative relationships with local Head Start programs already in place in communities statewide, preschool programs can gain access to these essential support services. Head Start understands the needs of local populations and has developed effective strategies for addressing them. Head Start programs in North Dakota already provide a comprehensive array of services, including:

- Child development,
- Health, mental health, and nutrition,
- Safety,
- Family and community partnerships, and
- Support for children with disabilities.

4. How Can We Ensure the Program Works?

Substantial investment of public dollars should not be undertaken without mechanisms to evaluate program effectiveness. North Dakota's preschool pilot should include assessments of child outcomes using approved, research-based, developmentally appropriate assessment tools. Short-term efficacy can be evaluated by a review of test scores and other data from kindergarten through third grade and via anecdotal information from K-12 teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Additionally, the pilot should be evaluated for effective use of funds, implementation of quality standards, and application of research-based best practices.

Program evaluations should be mandated and conducted by experts from the state university system or other outside institutions and should align with learning standards and curricula. School districts, in collaboration with Head Start and other community providers, should be required to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of administrative and evaluation systems and to report annually on efforts to improve resource deployment and service delivery.



5. What Are the Next Steps in Providing High-Quality Preschool in North Dakota?

Providing high-quality preschool in North Dakota will require significant state funding. Resources will be needed to support delivery of programs, but the state also must invest in developing capacity, infrastructure, facilities, and a qualified teacher corps. Starting with a high-quality pilot that works collaboratively with Head Start and other existing early childhood programs will build a strong foundation for high-quality preschool in North Dakota.

Program Design

To more-effectively address a broad range of program-design issues — from development of teacher-education programs at state universities to transportation in rural jurisdictions to length of program day — a variety of stakeholders should be engaged early in the process, including:

- Head Start,
- Parents,
- Private early childhood providers,
- School district administrators, and
- K-12 and higher education.

Through collaboration with the Head Start – State Collaboration Office and local Head Start programs, and other experienced, established high-quality, community-based providers, North Dakota can gain access to expertise in early childhood development and education; knowledge and experience in program design; and superior comprehensive family support services.

Funding

North Dakota should allocate funds to local communities and should require development of clearly articulated collaborative agreements with Head Start and other community-based providers to offer high-quality preschool and comprehensive services in diverse settings. North Dakota preschool programs should prioritize access for low-income, special needs, and educationally at-risk children with availability for other children phasing in as more funding becomes available.

To support this system, however, state funding must supplement but not supplant the various federal resources already available to early childhood providers. The state should permit school districts and providers to braid state preschool dollars with federal funding streams, such as:

- Head Start,
- Title I,
- Child care,

- Early Childhood Special Education, and
- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

The ability to braid multiple funding streams is critical to financing needed quality improvements, providing adequate facilities, transportation, and materials, and supporting increased enrollment.

Quality and Standards

To guarantee high quality, the program should follow the DAP guidelines and align with the state early childhood and K-12 standards and Head Start standards listed on page two. Designating a selection of approved, research-based curricula allows provider flexibility while ensuring all programs use research-based best practices.

To ensure that quality is consistent across settings, local programs can employ a diverse delivery system that requires and supports community providers' adherence to state standards. These systems must include clearly articulated terms for collaboration with local Head Start agencies. Additional collaborations with health and family service providers should be required to ensure the availability of comprehensive services to children and families.

Conclusion

North Dakota can no longer afford to lag behind the nation on high-quality, voluntary preschool. To preserve our state's economic competitiveness and protect the future of our youngest citizens, we must take decisive action. Establishing a high-quality preschool pilot is the wise first step in that effort and will build a strong foundation for early education in the state. The time for excuses has passed. Our children deserve the same opportunities as their peers elsewhere in the nation to succeed in school and in life.

Endnotes

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7. "North Dakota Head Start Program Information Briefs." (North Dakota Head Start Association, 2008).
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10. See: L.N. Masse and W. Steven Barnett, "A Benefit-Cost Analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention," in *Cost-Effectiveness and Educational Policy*, ed. H.M. Levin and P.J. McEwan (Larchmont, NJ: Eye on Education, 2002).
11. See: W. Steven Barnett, "Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications," in *Preschool Policy Matters* (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2004).
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14. See: Ellen Frede et al., "The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (Apples) Interim Report," (New Brunswick: National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2007).
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Acknowledgements

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