

The Pew Charitable Trusts Advancing Quality Pre-K for All; Five Years Later

By Susan K. Urahn and Sara Watson

In September 2001, after looking carefully at the research base and the prospects for positive change, The Pew Charitable Trusts (hereinafter the Trusts) launched a national initiative with the ambitious goal of ensuring that every three- and four-year-old has access to a quality pre-k education, called Advancing Quality Pre-K For All.

Now, five years later, we want to take stock of where we've been, how our strategy has evolved, and what the future might hold. Many people have worked long and hard to create the pre-K movement in this country, a movement built on a long history of commitment to the issue. We have been privileged to work with many of these dedicated individuals and look forward to continued collaboration that will achieve more victories for children.

Why did The Pew Charitable Trusts focus on pre-kindergarten?

The Trusts believes that one effective way to invest its resources is by informing and advancing state and federal policies that benefit the public. There are many policy issues deserving of attention, but philanthropic dollars are limited, and deciding where to focus is a challenge. We begin to narrow the field by identifying important issues that also meet the following criteria:

- There is a clear goal toward which to work,
- That goal is supported by objective, high-quality research,
- The issue can generate broad support from the public, policymakers and a range of influential constituencies, and
- Measurable progress can be made toward the long-term goal in three to five years.

After many years of experience in the environment, education, health and human services arenas, we have learned that advancing policy goals takes time; significant resources; rigorous, nonpartisan research; and sophisticated, focused public education campaigns. In 2001, the Trusts' board determined that a multi-year initiative with the goal of advancing voluntary, high-quality pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds fit these criteria.

How is the Trusts' initiative designed?

We framed the issue of preschool as an integral part of children's educational experience, with the power to help reduce the achievement gap and enable more children to reach critical early learning goals and meet their potential. This framing fit into the emerging national concern over children's educational achievement and made it possible for us to bring in an array of diverse constituencies who had not previously been part of the policy debate on early education. With new research, funded by the Trusts and others, we are now reaching beyond education to frame pre-K as an economic strategy, capable of contributing to the nation's fiscal health. This increases the interest in pre-K and further diversifies the chorus of voices emphasizing its value to the nation.

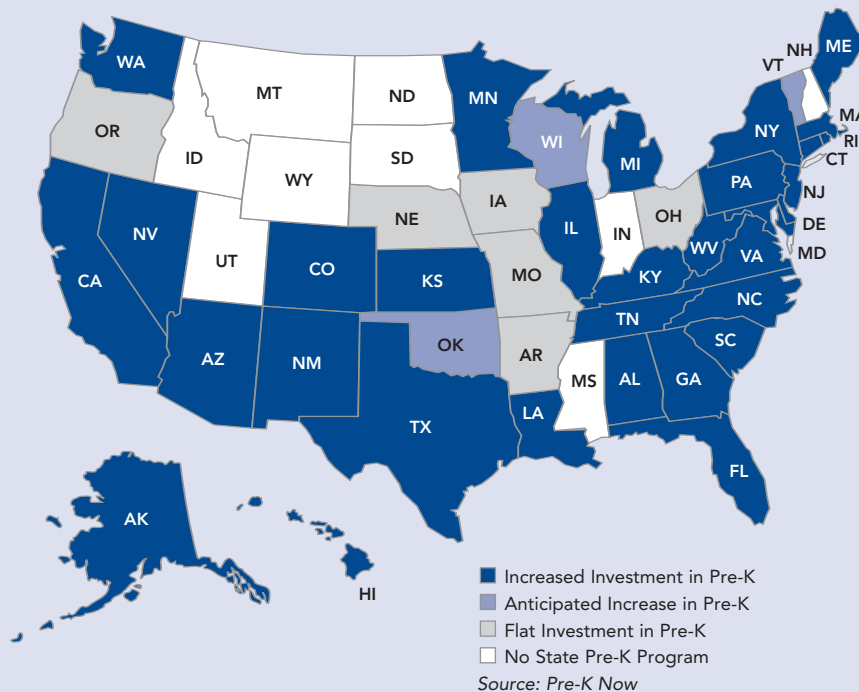
Based on this framing, our strategy has been to develop objective, rigorous information on the costs, benefits and characteristics of high-quality pre-kindergarten and to build the networks needed to ensure that unbiased research informs public policy debates nationally and in the states. Our primary focus is on identifying states that have the opportunity to advance this issue, strengthening the capacity of advocates to disseminate non-partisan research and analysis about

pre-K, and engaging a wide range of organizations and individuals, including those from law enforcement, business, education, early childhood, and physicians and seniors, to inform these debates with good data. Our principal partners are Pre-K Now of the Institute for Educational Leadership (www.preknow.org) and the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University (www.nieer.org), which have provided key research, strategic support and leadership. Other major grantees have included Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National School Boards Association, the Committee for Economic Development, Education Law Center, Every Child Matters, Voices for America's Children, the Hechinger Institute On Education and The Media and the Education Writers Association—all of which have put their reputations, skill and experience behind this issue.

National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force

High-quality preschool is a large investment for states to make. To ensure that children reap the benefits of these programs, state leaders must know that they are effective. To help them, the Foundation for Child Development, the Joyce Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts launched the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, which is based at the Trusts as part of its overall pre-K initiative. The Task Force, led by Profs. Sharon Lynn Kagan and Eugene Garcia and staffed by Thomas Schultz, expects to release its final report in the spring of 2007. www.earlyedaccountability.org

Legislative Action on Pre-K Budgets FY 2006-2007



Is pre-K making progress?

Thanks to decades of work by many dedicated individuals and organizations, the movement for quality pre-K is taking root. It is instructive to take a look back. In 2002 and 2003, state revenues plummeted and virtually every state in the country had to cut spending significantly to balance their budgets. As the National Conference of State Legislatures noted, it was the most challenging budget situation states had faced since World War II. It was not the best of times for expanded investments in pre-kindergarten, but researchers and advocates used this time to build their case and educate the public and policymakers. As state revenues began to improve, states moved to support pre-kindergarten, as shown in the map.

Several success stories stand out. This year, Illinois became the first state in the nation to pass legislation providing quality pre-kindergarten to all its 3- and 4-year-olds. This victory is the result of a four year effort that began with local activists educating all gubernatorial candidates

in 2002 and then working with the new governor to fulfill his promise. The state provided \$90 million in new money over the next three years and then in 2006 set the program on a trajectory to serve all children by 2011. In signing the bill, Governor Rod Blagojevich said, “Study after study and basic common sense tell us that giving kids the chance to start reading early and learning early is the single most important step we can take towards helping them become successful students. That’s why it’s so critical that every child in Illinois have the opportunity to attend pre-kindergarten and it’s why we’re making Illinois the first state in the nation to make pre-kindergarten available for every 3-year-old and every 4-year-old.” Renowned pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton praised the governor, saying “I’m going to be talking about it all over the country...I’m going to be using Illinois as the example of what needs to be done.”

Other states have also taken up the pre-kindergarten banner.

- Tennessee’s governor has stated his commitment to cover all 4-year-olds. The state expanded its top-quality program by 57 percent this year and will consider additional funds next year.
- Arkansas—a poor state, with a family income that is 49th in the nation—nonetheless has continued to expand its new program that is on track to cover 60 percent of the state’s children.
- In 2006, Texas broke a long-standing logjam over expanding its program when it expanded eligibility to include children of military families.
- Even Louisiana, despite overwhelming demands on its resources, decided to make children a priority by increasing funding by \$1.5 million.
- Massachusetts has enacted a high-quality pilot program, and in 2006 both houses of the state legislature unanimously passed a bill establishing pre-kindergarten for all. Advocates hope for full approval in the next session.
- In 2002, Florida voters changed the state constitution to require a quality education for every 4-year-old. While the program’s quality standards are not yet at the level that children need, advocates continue to press for these improvements.

“Until all Illinois children have access to pre-K, we’re not going to stop beating the drum... pre-K is an investment, not an expense, and one that makes our other educational achievements more effective.”

State Representative Roger Eddy (R-IL)

There have also been setbacks—but in each case, advocates and policymakers continue to press forward. In 2006, California voters turned down a ballot initiative that would have covered all 4-year-olds in the state, citing concerns about the funding mechanism and governance structure. However, exit polls showed 62 percent of voters still supported pre-K for all children. Based on this support, the state invested \$100 million in early education shortly after the referendum was defeated.

In 2004, 14 states increased funding for pre-kindergarten by \$204 million over the previous year. In 2005, 26 states added another \$600 million, giving 120,000 more children the opportunity for a good early start. And in 2006, 31 states increased pre-kindergarten by over \$450 million—growth supported by policymakers spanning the political spectrum. **In sum, over the past 3 years, states have increased funding for pre-kindergarten by over \$1.2 billion.**

Individual leaders are also raising the visibility of this topic as never before, including governors such as Jodi Rell (R-CT) and Phil Bredesen (D-TN); and business executives such as Jim Rohr, CEO of PNC and Rusty Hammer, former CEO of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce. Governor Tim Kaine (D-VA) made pre-K the centerpiece of the education platform in his 2005 campaign and included it in the Democratic response to the 2006 State of the Union address. Yet another marker of how this issue has grown in prominence is media coverage—last year there were over 5,000 major stories on this topic, with the nature of the coverage changing over the past few years from “human interest” stories to ones addressing core issues of quality education, financing and access.

This progress is the result of continued perseverance by a wide range of individuals and organizations. State and local advocates such as Arkansas Advocates for Children and Youth, Strategies for Children in Massachusetts, Preschool California, United Ways of Texas, Florida Children’s Campaign and the Winning Beginning and the PreK Coalition in New York have planned smart campaigns, forged coalitions with many colleagues and built a reputation for working with diverse policymakers and the public to win these victories. In Illinois there was tremendous leadership—and unprecedented collaboration—among three early childhood groups, who jointly decided to lead with pre-K while there was opportunity to make progress, with the expectation of continuing that partnership on other issues. In California, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation has been another philanthropic champion for pre-K, and they have helped develop national strategy. Other key foundations include the Foundation for Child Development, Schumann Fund for New Jersey, George Gund Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation. Head Start leaders have long made the case for the importance of pre-K for poor children. And many early childhood groups, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, have pushed for more and better pre-K.

How long will the Trusts’ pre-K initiative last?

Since 2001, the Trusts has invested over \$50 million in more than 20 organiza-

tions, with grantees supporting rigorous nonpartisan research and analysis, as well as public education campaigns to inform policy debates in over half the states. Our grantees have had great success to date, but as is true with all our work, future investments will depend on the opportunity for continued progress—which for pre-K looks very promising over the next few years. However, at some point, states will move from pre-K to a new challenge. That’s the natural cycle of policy change. Our philosophy is to target issues where there is a unique window of opportunity to advance change, and when that window begins to close, move to the next issue.

Our philosophy is to target issues where there is a unique window of opportunity to advance change, and when that window begins to close, move to the next issue. (In the future) the structure of our pre-K initiative... may well lend itself to other issues.

In fact state advocates have told us that, the structure of our pre-K initiative—a tight focus, support for research and public education efforts, and engagement of diverse messengers—may well lend itself to other issues. So we would hope to use the lessons learned from this experience to develop an effective campaign in another area of vital interest to children, such as some aspect of health care or supports for infants and toddlers—as long as it meets our criteria.

We also hope that the long-term research commissioned under this initiative, as well as the advocacy training and capacity-building supported by the Trusts’ funds, will leave a lasting benefit to the field.

What do you mean by “quality pre-kindergarten for all”?

Every state has its own definition of pre-K and will implement that vision somewhat differently. But here’s what we look for (figure 1):

Figure 1

Pre-K programs should:

- Meet **quality** benchmarks associated with improving children’s outcomes, such as highly-trained teachers
- Have a **fun and engaging** atmosphere that children look forward to and enjoy
- Encompass **all aspects** of children’s development—cognitive, social, emotional, physical
- Include referrals to **health and other services**
- Help **parents** educate their children and encourage parents to be involved in the pre-K program

State pre-K policies should:

- Improve both the **quality** of pre-K programs as well as children’s **access** to them
- Provide **voluntary** access to a core program for all families who want pre-K for their 3- and 4-year-olds
- Establish an ultimate goal that **pre-K will be available to all** children, but they may reach that target through a **phased-in enrollment that serves disadvantaged children first**
- Offer a core pre-K program for all children and **additional services for at-risk** children
- Include diverse settings—schools, community-based, and faith-based settings—to **give parents good choices**, as long as quality standards are met
- Collaborate with **child care** to provide the coverage that working parents need
- Support pre-K not as a stand-alone policy but as part of a **system of services** (including Head Start) that are needed for young children’s future success
- Use improvements in pre-K to **strengthen the rest of the early childhood system**
- **Not take funding** from one children’s program to pay for another

Would the Trusts' pre-K initiative support a broader agenda?

Children need far more than pre-K to thrive, and states are tackling a variety of those issues. As has always been the case, advocates in each state will determine which of the very important supports that children need are most likely to move in their state's policy climate. And because states face different challenges and have different needs, they will have different priorities—some will focus on health care, some on child care and others on pre-K. Many advocates have a broad vision for children—and they should because children need a wide range of supports. But as policy experts repeatedly advise, what is most important is that advocates choose some focus within that vision to win real victories for children—one step at a time.

In some states, such as Texas, advocates focused on pre-K because they were convinced that it was the only child-focused topic that would move in their state at that time. Other states are packaging pre-K with selected other services in skillful ways—with the Trusts' support. Illinois is a powerful example of using pre-K's lead message and strong data to strengthen the entire early childhood system, since the new commitments support an early childhood fund that devotes 11 cents of each dollar for infant/toddler programs. In Massachusetts, advocates look just beyond pre-K and are working toward a combined package of pre-K and full-day kindergarten. Other states and school districts are concentrating on pre-K to third grade given the critical window of opportunity to solidify early learning in those years.

We are also pleased to participate in a new collaboration—joining the Packard Foundation, Gates Foundation and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund in support of a joint effort by Zero to Three and Pre-K Now to develop a vision for a coordinated and comprehensive system of early care and education services for children prenatal to age 5 that foster their success in school and life. The paper will document best practices from select

states in their journey to build bridges between pre-K, child care, infant/toddler programs and other family support services and offer policy recommendations for those who are striving toward this vision.

Two other points are important here. First, no matter which issue advocates choose to focus on, it is critical that states not rob Peter to pay Paul—taking funds from one effective children's program to pay for another. And second, while the Trusts' pre-K initiative has a specific goal, we are moving towards that target in ways that we hope ultimately will strengthen the whole network of early childhood



While the Trusts' pre-K initiative has a specific goal, we are moving towards that target in ways that we hope ultimately will strengthen the whole network of early childhood services.

services. For example, improvements in pre-K, such as better teacher training opportunities, can be structured so they also apply to those who teach programs for younger children. And after states win victories in pre-K, advocates are well-positioned, with deeper skills and experiences, to build on that success to advance other policies needed to create a nurturing environment for children.

The Trusts has now helped organize a new project addressing children prenatal to age 5 called the Partnership for America's Economic Success—does that mean the Trusts has changed its focus?

Not at all. As mentioned earlier, the Trusts' pre-K initiative is moving full steam ahead. But we're excited about pursuing a separate but related project to help children. While the research is clear that pre-K makes a tremendous difference, it's not the only support children need to thrive. With 11 other funders, we helped start (and now administer) the Partnership for America's Economic Success (www.partnershipforsuccess.org). Robert Dugger, a managing director of Tudor Investment Corporation, is our lead partner and chair of the advisory board. Sara Watson is the project director. Its purpose is to assess the contribution that different supports for young children make to the nation's economy. That project is in the early stages, while the pre-K initiative is a full-fledged campaign.

If the evidence compiled by the Partnership is compelling—and we hope that it is—we will seek to work with our partners to expand the Partnership into a major campaign designed to advance the most effective investments in children. Just as the Trusts supports projects to protect the world's oceans as well as the world's old growth forests, so too can we advance a variety of effective, targeted initiatives that help children grow into healthy, productive adults.

This is an exciting time for early childhood advocates. Our nation has the opportunity to fundamentally change what it means to provide a quality education for all children. Success to date shows that a focused agenda, backed by good research and fueled by smart strategies to get that information into policy debates, can win substantial victories for children.

Susan Urahn is the Managing Director, State Policy Initiatives and Sara Watson is Senior Officer, State Policy Initiatives at The Pew Charitable Trusts

For more information on the Trusts' strategy, visit www.pewtrusts.org.

The Pew Charitable Trusts serves the public interest in three major areas of work: informing the public on key issues and trends as a highly credible source of independent, nonpartisan research and polling information; advancing policy solutions on important issues facing the American people; and supporting the arts, heritage, health and well-being of our diverse citizenry and civic life, with particular emphasis on Philadelphia.