

Defining High-Quality: The Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program

As the Commonwealth begins to implement the Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten pilot program (UPK) through a mix of public and private providers, the Early Education for All (EEA) Campaign urges the state to pursue and reward delivery of high-quality early educational opportunities for young children. High-quality pre-kindergarten education has a myriad of benefits including that participants are:

- Better prepared for kindergarten, especially in the areas of pre-reading, pre-math, and social skills;
- 40% less likely to need special education services or be held back a grade;
- 30% more likely to graduate from high school; and
- Twice as likely to go to college.

Massachusetts is committed to provide universal access to high-quality early education for children ages three to five. In 2005, the first-in-the-nation consolidated Department of Early Education and Care became operational and was statutorily mandated to oversee, among other responsibilities, the development of universally accessible high quality early education for all preschool-aged children in the Commonwealth. The state furthered its commitment by creating the UPK program and funding a pilot initiative in its FY07 budget. The state increased funding for UPK by \$2.5 million in its FY08 budget and an additional \$3.75 million in its FY09 budget, bringing the current funding level to \$10.89 million. Governor Deval Patrick has thus established universal pre-kindergarten a key element of his education policy for Massachusetts.

EEA is a coalition of leaders from business, early childhood, labor, religion, health care, education and philanthropy working in partnership with families, grassroots leaders, and state policymakers to achieve universal access to high-quality early education for the preschool-aged children of the Commonwealth through UPK.

The EEA coalition recommends that the Commonwealth ensure that its investment in UPK deliver high-quality pre-kindergarten education with the capacity to positively impact children's growth, development, and life chances. To this end, EEA recommends that the Commonwealth set a clear, uniform, and verifiable standard that all early education programs or classrooms designated UPK must meet along with resources to support programs in achieving and maintain the standard. A uniform, high-quality standard across participating public and private pre-kindergarten education providers must reflect the research-based elements that in combination result in positive outcomes for children. The elements of this high-quality standard should be:

At least one teacher per classroom or family child care home with a Bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood education.

Research draws a direct connection between high-quality early education and the formal education level of the teacher providing it. The most effective preschool teachers have a bachelor's degree with specialized training in early childhood education and child development.¹ Teacher quality is key to providing every child enrolled in pre-kindergarten with the early learning opportunities that set the stage for success in school and in life.

At least one leader per program or family child care setting with a Bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood education.

Whether managed by a program director, school principal, or early childhood coordinator, classrooms in a high-quality pre-kindergarten program and family child care homes demand informed leadership to support effective teaching and learning.

¹ Kelley, P., Camilli, G. (2007). The impact of teacher education on outcomes in center-based early childhood education programs: a meta-analysis. NIEER Working Paper.; Whitebook, M. (2003). Bachelor's degrees are best: higher qualifications for pre-kindergarten teachers lead to better learning environments for children. Trust for Early Education.

Education consistent with the *Early Childhood Program Standards for Three and Four Year Olds and Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences* approved by the Department of Education.

A diverse group of stakeholders from across the early education and care sector met for ten years to develop a set of standards and guidelines for pre-kindergarten education that were aligned with Massachusetts' child care licensing requirements and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation standards, and based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks which guide education in the K-12 public education system. These *Standards* and *Guidelines* also recognize the importance of engaging families as the primary teachers of their children, and connecting children to health, dental, and mental health resources as needed. When pre-kindergarten education programs use *Standards* and *Guidelines* to inform a curriculum of their choosing and to leverage comprehensive resources, they help to ensure that children are ready to succeed in Massachusetts' schools and its economy.

Accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children or its equivalent.

Accreditation by NAEYC is widely accepted as the gold standard for the certification of pre-kindergarten programs as quality early learning environments.² NAEYC accreditation has been incorporated into the *Standards*. A voluntary accreditation process, NAEYC evaluates programs' curricula, teacher quality, class size and health and safety standards compliance. Other accreditation systems that are similarly rigorous and should be recognized under the UPK program include the National Association of Family Child Care, Head Start's Program Review Instrument for Systems Monitoring (PRISM), and the New England Association of Schools and College's anticipated incorporation of Massachusetts' UPK program standards. Although accreditation can be a time consuming and costly process for programs to undergo, it is a vital third-party assessment of pre-kindergarten education quality.

Assessments of participating children's progress over time.

Appropriate assessments of children's progress contribute to high-quality pre-kindergarten education in three important ways: First, they are used by educators to individualize a plan for each child to gain the knowledge, skills, and behaviors s/he will need to succeed in school; second, they are used to help communicate to parents how well a child is progressing; and third, the information they generate about the progress of children participating in UPK classrooms or programs is a key way to ensure accountability for delivery of high-quality pre-kindergarten education under UPK that benefits our children and our Commonwealth.

² Shellenbarger, S. (2006, March 23). Finding five-star child care: states rate facilities in effort to boost quality. *The Wall Street Journal*
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