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Student achievement begins with school readiness

High quality preschool education can offer lifelong benefits

Kentucky's state-sponsored preschool targets at-risk children

Kentucky could potentially improve the quality of its preschool program by raising its standards

Preschool in Kentucky: Current Status and Future Trends

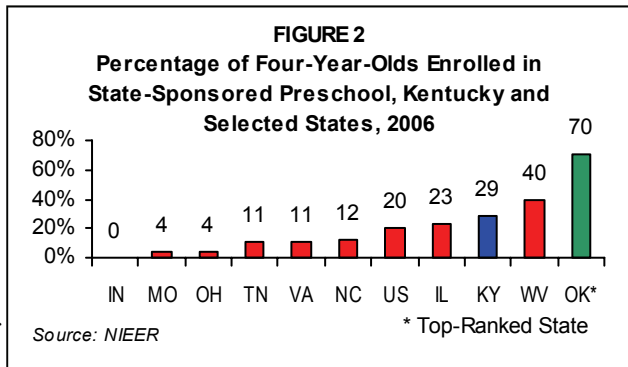
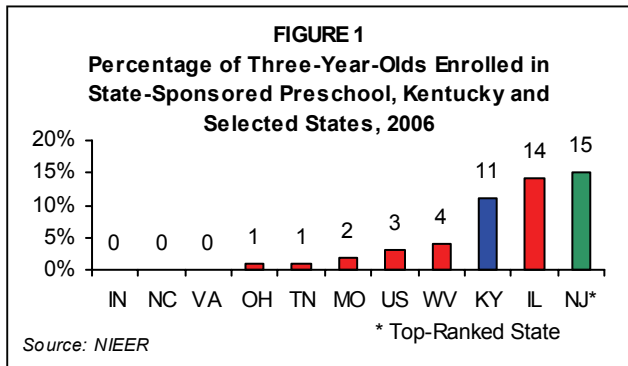
Contact Mark Schirmer at mark.schirmer@lrc.ky.gov

Any discussion of how to improve student achievement must include—if not begin with—the question of whether children are socially and intellectually ready for school. The phrase “school readiness” embodies a number of factors that impact how children will perform when they begin kindergarten: physical well-being, motor development, social and emotional development, language development, cognition and knowledge, and how they approach learning.¹ Consequently, preschool education plays a pivotal role in determining a child’s school readiness. But past research has found that Kentucky’s at-risk children are often not ready for preschool.

Numerous studies have focused on model preschool programs, tracking children’s performance as they advance through their school years, some even following them into adulthood. From this research, a number of general conclusions have emerged that underscore the importance of quality preschool education. Though results vary from program to program, children who receive an excellent preschool education perform better academically in subsequent years, though some of these gains might fade over time. Besides being better prepared for school, upon reaching adulthood, individuals who participated in high-quality pre-kindergarten programs tend to be healthier, more economically self-sufficient, and less likely to engage in criminal activity than their cohorts.² Moreover, such gains prove even greater among children deemed by some criterion to be “at risk.”³

Though Kentucky does not offer state-sponsored preschool to all three- and four-year-olds, it does provide free preschool to children considered to be at risk: all three-year-olds with a physical disability and all four-year-olds who either have a disability or are from low-income families. Kentucky compares favorably to its competitor states in terms of access, having the third- and eleventh-highest enrollment rates respectively for three- and four-year-olds (see Figures 1 and 2). However, the state ranks 31st in per pupil spending, which has dropped in recent years due to increased enrollment coupled with stagnant funding (see Figures 3 and 4).⁴

Spending and enrollment, however, speak nothing of actual quality. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) established a set of ten benchmarks to assess quality standards for state-run preschool programs. Kentucky meets eight of these standards, which include recommended class sizes and student support services, but fails to require a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential of assistant preschool teachers, and does not monitor facilities with site visits.⁵



The first three years of development are crucial but fragile

At-risk children face a gap in development that quality preschool can help remedy

Kentucky has egregiously low standards for its workers in the field of child care

STARS for KIDS NOW helps child care centers improve, but a minority of centers participate

Though Kentucky's state-sponsored preschool program has room for improvement, it still has the potential to greatly benefit at-risk three- and four-year-olds, helping to prepare them for kindergarten. However, significant numbers of the state's at-risk children are showing up unprepared for preschool.

From birth through age three, 90 percent of physical brain development occurs. During this time, development can flourish or falter depending on external factors, resulting in children facing problems before they even reach preschool.⁶

In 1991, the University of Kentucky began a six-year series of annual evaluations of the Kentucky Preschool Program (KPP). Screenings of incoming preschoolers found a consistent, significant gap between the chronological age and developmental age of children eligible for the program due to disability or low family income.⁷ A gap also existed between eligible children and ineligible students, but follow-up testing indicated that eligible children who participated in KPP performed about as well in school as their ineligible cohorts and outperformed KPP-eligible children who did not participate in the program.⁸ Unfortunately, there have been no such evaluations since 1997, in spite of the growing focus on early childhood education.

Given the lifelong impact of early development and the need for nurturing, intellectually rich environments during this stage of development, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education recommends programs for infants and toddlers be led by teachers with BAs.⁹ Kentucky falls egregiously short of this standard, not even requiring a high school diploma, but requiring only that child care workers be 18 or older, have no criminal record, and be free of tuberculosis.

Moreover, in a comparison of state child care standards that also included the District of Columbia and Department of Defense, Kentucky ranked 50th out of 52 (see Table 1).¹⁰ Were the hallmark of quality child care merely the protection of children's physical safety, Kentucky's standards might prove sufficient. However, early childhood experts call for moving beyond this "babysitter" model, emphasizing the necessity for child-focused educational activities.¹¹

The state has, in fact, been working to improve child care through the STARS for KIDS NOW program, which offers incentives and rewards for child care centers that meet certain benchmarks of quality, while also assisting centers in meeting those benchmarks. Currently, over 600 licensed facilities and over 150 family child care homes participate in the program, serving over 40,000 children.¹² However, in light of the fact that 2,256 licensed child care facilities and nearly 1,029 family child care homes operate in Kentucky, child care centers in the STARS for KIDS NOW program comprise a small minority of all such providers within the state.¹³ Kentucky clearly faces numerous challenges and difficult choices to ensure its children show up for preschool and kindergarten ready to learn, laying the foundation for future achievement both in and out of the classroom.

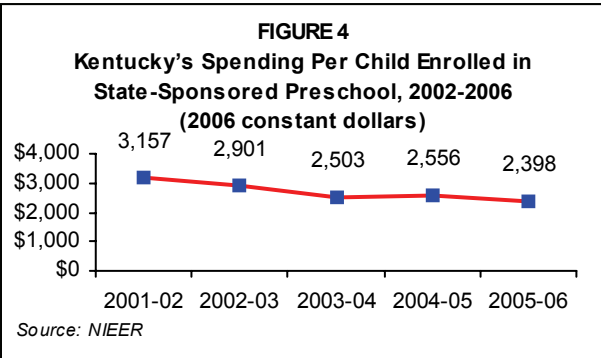
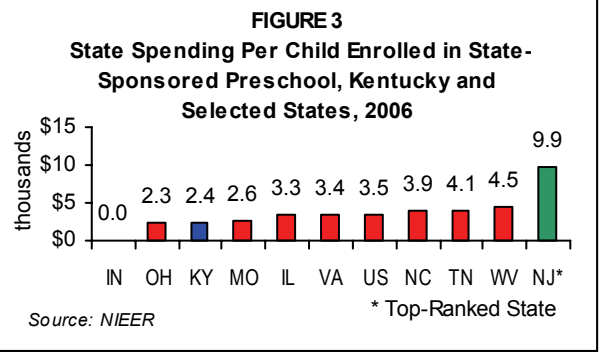


Table 1
Where Kentucky's Child Care Standards Fell Short

1. Staff:child ratios and group size requirements do not meet recommendations for any age groups
2. Center directors not required to have an Associate's degree or CDA
3. Center teachers not required to have a high school diploma or GED
4. Centers not required to allow parental access at all times

Source: National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

¹ National Governors Association, *Building the Foundation for Bright Futures*, 2005 <<http://www.nga.org>>. ² Lynn A. Karoly, Peter W. Greenwood, Susan S. Everingham, Jill Hoube, M. Rebecca Kilburn, C. Peter Rydell, Matthew Sanders, James Chiesa, *Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1998) 65-68. ³ Ibid 110-111. ⁴ National Institute for Early Educational Research, *The State of Preschool 2006* (Edison, NJ: Rutgers, 2006) 72-73. ⁵ NIEER. ⁶ Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington: National Academy Press, 2000) <<http://www.nap.edu>>. ⁷ College of Education and College of Human Environmental Sciences, "Third Party Evaluation of the Kentucky Education Reform Act Preschool Programs," University of Kentucky, 1997, 10-12. ⁸ University of Kentucky 18-24. ⁹ Linda Jacobson, "Scholars Split on Pre-K Teachers With B.A.s," *Education Week* 27 March 2007 <<http://www.edweek.org>>. ¹⁰ National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, *We Can Do Better: NACCRRA's Ranking of State Child Care Center Standards and Oversight*, eds. Linda Smith, Grace Reef, Susan Perry-Manning, Mousumi Sarkar, Caitlin McLaughlin, Mary Beth Salomone, and Kelsey Kurth, 1 March 2007 <<http://www.naccrra.org>>. ¹¹ "The Future of Infant-Toddler Child Care," 2003, Zero to Three <<http://www.zerotothree.org>>. ¹² Kentucky Department of Education, *Kentucky's Early Childhood Initiative Summary*, 11 September 2006 <<http://education.ky.gov>>. ¹³ *The 2005 National Child Care Licensing Study: Final Report*, December 2006, National Association for Regulatory Administration and the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center <<http://www.nara.affiniscape.com/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenb=104>>.