Every year, over 600,000 children are born in the six Great Lakes states. These children play a key role in the region’s future growth and prosperity, and early education is crucial to their success. Financing and expanding access to quality early education programs will pay dividends, as it can increase educational attainment, improve the sustainable workforce for the region, and boost local economies.

State policies and programs should focus on expectant mothers and babies because the most crucial cognitive and physical development phase for children starts before birth (USAID 2017). Experiences from pregnancy through a child’s second birthday can influence a child’s ability to learn, develop social skills, self-regulate, and respond to stress with resilience (Center on the Developing Child 2015). Ensuring early brain development is particularly essential for children from low-income families, as inequities develop quickly. Vocabulary disparities between wealthy and low-income children appear as early as 18 months (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.). Crucial brain development continues from ages 3 to 5, when children learn essential cognitive, physical, behavioral, social, and emotional skills that prepare them to succeed in their formative years. Investing in children from birth through age 5 affects the long-term health and productivity of children and their communities.

In this brief, we explore the benefits for children, families, and communities of two early education and care programs: home visiting and preschool. For both program areas, we identify how the Great Lakes states vary in their approaches and results. Finally, we offer recommendations for state leaders and local stakeholders looking to improve their programs through increased funding and realize the benefits of quality early childhood education.
About This Policy Brief Series

This brief is part of a series recommending policies that will build ladders of opportunity and economic mobility for young people in the six state Great Lakes region—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

The series of policy briefs follows a framing paper that detailed the challenges and opportunities facing the Great Lakes region (Pendall et al. 2017). During the first decade of the 2000s, manufacturing employment and incomes fell substantially, government revenues declined, and young people moved away from the region. Manufacturing has begun to rebound, but communities throughout the region are still dealing with the direct and ripple effects of this unprecedented blow to their economic base. Despite these severe challenges, ample evidence suggests the Great Lakes region has significant assets and a strong foundation that can sustain future economic and population growth and higher levels of prosperity. Ensuring the future productivity, stability, and prosperity of the region, though, requires policies and investments that bolster the people currently living in the Great Lakes states, especially young people.

The series includes five policy briefs with strategies for the following:

- supporting access to high-quality child development and preschool programs (this brief)
- eliminating gaps in K–12 education so all can read by third grade and graduate from high school ready for college or career (Gallagher and Chingos 2017)
- promoting successful transitions to adulthood, higher education, and the workforce (Spaulding 2017)
- reducing criminal and juvenile justice involvement for young people (Jannetta and Okeke 2017)
- supporting basic needs to promote opportunity and economic mobility for young people (Hahn 2017)

The in-depth policy analyses and recommendations in these briefs shed light on what needs to be done and what decisionmakers can do to invest in young people and ensure broad-based prosperity and a high quality of life in the Great Lakes region for coming generations.

Home Visiting Programs: What Are They and Whom Do They Benefit?

Home visiting programs provide parent and child services focused on child health and well-being, child development and school readiness, positive parent-child relationships, parental health and well-being, family economic self-sufficiency, and family functioning. Typically, a trained nurse, social worker, or early childhood specialist provides these services at a family’s home (National Home Visiting Resource Center 2017). The quality of home visiting programs can vary greatly. The US Department of Health and Human Services has so far approved 20 evidence-based programs. In 2015, evidence-based home visiting programs served 311,976 children nationwide. The majority of those children came from low-
income families, and more than two-thirds were younger than 3 years old (National Home Visiting Resource Center 2017).¹

**Evidence of Impact**

Home visiting programs positively affect children, families, and their communities. This is especially true for low-income families. Research demonstrates the need for quality evidenced-based programs to yield positive outcomes. Research proves that high-quality home visiting programs can have positive short- and long-term outcomes for children and families, as well as cost savings for the community.

- Low-income children who participated in one home visiting program in two large cities demonstrated significantly better language development, impulse control, and academic achievement than their peers in preschool and early grades (Kitzman et al. 2010; Olds et al. 2004).

- Seventy-nine percent of home visiting programs approved by the Department of Health and Human Services show significant positive effects on child health (Sama-Miller et al. 2017).

- Eighty-eight percent of home visiting programs approved by the Department of Health and Human Services show significant effects on positive parenting practices (Sama-Miller et al. 2017).

- A home visiting program in Durham, North Carolina, recouped initial costs by the time children were 3 months old by reducing government medical assistance (Dodge and Goodman 2012).

- The Nurse-Family Partnership, active in all six Great Lakes states, yields an estimated $5.70 for every dollar spent for high-risk children (Karoly, Kilburn, and Cannon 2005).

- The Parents as Teachers home visiting program had an estimated cost-benefit ratio of $3.39 per dollar invested (Kay and Pennucci 2014).

- Durham Connects has a community benefit of $3.01 per dollar invested by the time participating children are 6 months old (Dodge et al. 2013).

**Federal Mandates, Grants, and Encouragement**

Before 2010, home visiting was a more fragmented system. States often did not target the highest-need populations, fund the highest-quality programs, or carefully monitor spending or programs (Schmit et al. 2015). In 2010, the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program changed the home visiting landscape. The program provides funding to states to support evidence-based home visiting programs for at-risk families and children. The program has awarded over $1.8 billion to states since 2010, and the number of families served has increased five-fold over the past five years. Each state has been awarded grant funds, with the requirement that 75 percent of the grant go toward evidence-based programs and 25 percent go toward new promising programs that are being evaluated.
States now use a mix of Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program and categorical and broad-based funding for their home visiting programs (Pew Center on the States 2011).

Home Visiting in the Great Lakes States

The home visiting landscape in each of the Great Lakes states varies based on the types of program, target population, staff competencies, service providers, and funding. The 2017 Home Visiting Yearbook provides important information regarding how the six states match up on home visiting efforts (National Home Visiting Resource Center 2017). A relatively small share of children younger than 6 in each state is served based on need and the availability of other care (e.g., family or relative care, subsidized child care, private child care, public preschool). Figure 1 shows the ratio of eligible families to families served in each state.

**FIGURE 1**

Ratio of Eligible Families to Families Served in Home Visiting Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Ratio in number of families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Ohio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Indiana and Ohio stand out as serving a higher share of eligible families than the other states, while Minnesota serves less than 1 out of 120 eligible families. Though ratios are helpful in visualizing the state landscape, they do not account for states’ targeted efforts. Each of the six states focuses on the youngest and highest-risk children, a strategy supported by research. In each state, over 75 percent of children served in home visiting programs are newborn to age 2. States also target resources to low-income and working-class families. Figure 2 shows the insurance status of children served.
States also differ on the average number of home visits per family served. This variation is likely because of multiple factors, including the intensity and requirements of each program and the location of programs in the state (figure 3).

For local and state governments, financing home visiting programs has proven to be a wise that can pay dividends in the short and long term. Recent changes to federal spending approaches have also provided a platform for states to expand their evidence-based home visiting programs.

Preschool: What Is It and Who Benefits?

Preschool programs provide early education and care for 3- to 5-year-olds before the start of kindergarten. Programs focus on child development through teaching cognitive, language, social and emotional, and physical skills. Preschool programs vary based on type of target population, curriculum, service provider, quality, and funding. Though the federal government offers some funding for early education (mainly through nonentitlement programs, Head Start, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Preschool Development Grants), most of the money comes from state and local governments. That provides an important opportunity for state governors and legislators. Many programs target low-income children to reduce inequities and close the achievement gap. Great Lakes states are primed to make policy changes that can bolster a well-educated and well-trained workforce and spark economic prosperity.

Evidence of Impact

Preschool programs have a rich evidence base that documents the value of preschool. But this value depends on the program’s quality. Research shows that poor and low-performing prekindergarten can have an adverse effect on children’s kindergarten readiness. Only high-quality prekindergarten has demonstrated significant effects on children’s short- and long-term outcomes (Minervino 2014). Research has explored many types of preschool programs that vary in size, funding source, quality, and other key factors. The level of evidence differs on long-term key outcomes based on the type of program, but ample support remains for the academic, societal, and economic effects of high-quality preschool.

Academic Effect

Preschool can be an important building block for children’s development and academic success. These academic effects are realized in the short and long term.

- High-quality preschool programs have a positive effect on cognitive development and school readiness for all children, but they have a relatively larger effect for black and Hispanic children and for children from low-income families (Ahmad and Hamm 2013; Phillips et al. 2017; Yoshikawa et al. 2013).
- High-quality preschool has been linked to higher assessment scores, lower special education placement, and lower grade retention through all grades (O’Brien and Dervarics 2007).
- Students enrolled in preschool have higher rates of high school graduation (Reynolds et al. 2002).
Societal and Economic Effects

Investment in preschool has also shown long-term effects that are relevant to public spending and local economies. Three of the most prominent longitudinal studies—Perry Preschool Study, Abecedarian Project, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers—demonstrate the potential long-term effects of preschool. The three studies found that participants in high-quality prekindergarten were less likely to be arrested in adulthood and more likely to attend college, be employed, and earn higher wages (García et al. 2016; Heckman et al. 2009; Reynolds et al. 2011). Though these three studies offer important lessons, critics have pointed out that those programs differ greatly from today’s prekindergarten programs.²

Nonetheless, more recent studies have reaffirmed some of the findings on long-term outcomes (e.g., criminal activity, higher education) for programs that resemble today’s models.

- The Oklahoma universal prekindergarten program reduced the likelihood that black 18- and 19-year-olds would commit misdemeanor (7 percent reduction) and felony (5 percent reduction) crimes (Smith 2015).
- Adults who attended Head Start were more likely to graduate high school and attend college compared with their peers (Garces, Thomas, and Currie 2002).

Economic gain is not limited to participants. Studies use a variety of measures to calculate the financial benefits of early education. Some of the common components of such analyses are tied to increases in higher education and income of participants, as well as reductions in criminal activity, health care costs, and safety net participation. Many cost-benefit analyses have determined that each dollar invested in early education yields large long-term savings.

- Researchers estimated that current state and district prekindergarten programs for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds have a benefit-to-cost ratio of $4.20 (Kay and Pennucci 2014).
- Researchers estimated that universal preschool in California would have 2.6:1 benefit-to-cost ratio for the state and society (Karoly and Bigelow 2005).
- A cost-benefit analysis of providing universal preschool to all children in the US yielded an estimate of $8.90 for every dollar spent, or $304.7 billion in total benefit by 2050 (Lynch and Vaghul 2015).

Others have highlighted how expanded access can create a more educated and qualified workforce and ultimately boost local economies (Bartik 2012). Expanded early education can particularly benefit low-income and working families, as they have the greatest need for free or even subsidized care to maintain financial stability and employment (Aspen Institute 2013).

The evidence on preschool demonstrates the positive spillover effect of programs into many different sectors. This makes preschool expansion a worthy goal to spark growth in the Great Lakes region. But states must consider how to fund and balance competing needs of quality and access.
Federal Involvement in Preschool

Financing preschool expansion and improving its quality involves many funding streams and strategies. Funding for preschool programs is difficult to secure for a few reasons: preschool programs are discretionary, and funding is vulnerable and inconsistent; preschool is typically voluntary, unlike compulsory 1st through 12th grade nationwide; and the benefits of preschool accrue over time and often occur in other sectors (e.g., crime reductions) (Kreeger and Massey 2016).

Traditional federal funding for preschool includes money for Head Start and Early Head Start, early intervention and special education through Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (also known as IDEA), and Title 1 of the No Child Left Behind Act. Federal grants including the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) program broken into three categories (development, expansion, and pay for success grants) also offer some funds. Illinois has a preschool expansion grant, which offers financial support and a corresponding evaluation focused on providing and expanding high-quality, full-day prekindergarten programs in 18 communities. The Minnesota Department of Education and Cuyahoga County, Ohio, receive pay-for-success feasibility grants that ultimately aim to leverage public and private funds. This approach involves investors funding the expansion and improvement of programs to meet specific outcomes (e.g., kindergarten readiness, third grade reading). Investors are repaid if participants achieve those outcomes.

Federal programs target children with special needs and children from low-income families. Programs funded through federal dollars are held to high standards in terms of quality, safety, inclusion of students with special needs, and continuous quality improvement.

Preschool in the Great Lakes States

Where do the Great Lakes states stand in terms of preschool access, funding, and quality? We look at available data from the National Institute Early Education Research’s State of Preschool 2016 yearbook to answer that question (Barnett et al. 2017).

Access

Wisconsin’s high level of enrollment stands out, as it has a long-standing state-funded prekindergarten program (figure 4). In contrast, Indiana and Minnesota are in earlier stages of growing their state prekindergarten programs. Both have piloted prekindergarten programs in 2014 and 2016, respectively, but they still serve just over 1 percent of 4-year-olds in state prekindergarten programs. Two of the Great Lakes states have no state programs for 3-year-olds, and two others have programs for 3-year-olds that serve well below the US average.
FIGURE 4
Share of 3- and 4-Year-Olds Enrolled in State Prekindergarten
2015–16 school year


Figure 5 shows the combination of slots provided by state-funded preschool, the Head Start program, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for students with special needs. In this figure, all states, with the exception of Wisconsin, serve less than the national average of 4-year-olds through these programs, and only Illinois serves more than the national average of 3-year-olds.
FIGURE 5
Share of 3- and 4-Year-Olds Enrolled in State Preschool, Preschool Special Education, and Federal and State Head Start
2015–16 school year


Notes: Indiana serve special education children in their state pre-K programs but were not able to provide the number of children for at least one of their programs. Estimates were used based on the average percent of special education students in state pre-K across all programs and enrollment numbers for each program. At least one program in Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota were able to report the number of children enrolled in state pre-K and Head Start. This information was used to estimate an unduplicated count of Head Start enrollment. Wisconsin serves special education children in their state-funded Head Start pre-K programs but were not able to provide the number of children. Estimates were used based on the percent of children with IEPs in Head Start in the state as reported by the PIR.

Spending

Some Great Lakes states have launched promising early childhood education (ECE) funding strategies. In Wisconsin, preschool funding is built, in part, into the state’s education funding formula, making it less vulnerable to state cuts. Research about Michigan’s preschool program has contributed to a spike in funding, as Michigan invested an additional $130 million in preschool from 2013–15. Local communities have also established successful financing structures. In November 2016, Cincinnati voters passed issue 44, a property tax levy to raise $15 million to fund the expansion of quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-
olds. The Rockford Public School District in Illinois coordinated a $13.8 million budget for preschool that combines funding from state prekindergarten, federal PDG program local funds, and Head Start.

Despite these promising strategies, preschool is still underfunded in most of the Great Lakes states. Minnesota is the only Great Lakes state in the top third of spending per student among all states, and three of the states fall below the US average. Additionally, state spending decreased in three of the six Great Lakes states between the 2014–15 and 2015–16 school years (figure 6).

**FIGURE 6**
State Funding per 4-Year-Old Child Enrolled in State Prekindergarten

Though many policymakers agree that preschool is an essential building block for student achievement and success and that education should be considered in a prekindergarten-through-12th-grade spectrum, preschool funding pales in comparison with K–12 (figure 7). K–12 spending is sometimes triple (i.e., Illinois and Ohio) the amount spent for preschool.

**FIGURE 7**

State Funding Per 4-Year-Old Child Enrolled in State Prekindergarten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>K–12 Pupil Spending</th>
<th>Preschool Pupil Spending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>$14,000</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>$12,000</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
<td>$7,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Quality**

Based on the new quality standard rating in the Barnett and colleagues report (2017), three of the state programs rank below average in terms of the program quality as defined by a variety of criteria (e.g., teacher qualifications, teacher-to-child ratio, curriculum), and all show room for improvement, especially in staff professional development (table 1). The framework for analyzing high-quality early education programs, developed by Jim Minervino (2014), also highlights where the Great Lakes states can improve. This framework considers enabling environment, rigorous policies, and strong practices. An assessment of this framework shows that the early education programs in the six Great Lakes states have strengths but still need substantial improvement, especially in political will (e.g., political
leadership, ballot initiatives, court orders) and integrated systems (i.e., state’s activities to align standards, curricula, professional development, and assessment) (Barnett et al. 2016).

**TABLE 1**

State Performance on Quality Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IL</th>
<th>IN</th>
<th>MI</th>
<th>MN</th>
<th>OH</th>
<th>WI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early learning and development standards</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum supports</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher has bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized training in pre-K</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant teacher has CDA or equivalent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff professional development</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class size 20 or fewer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-child ratio 1:10 or better</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision, hearing, and health screening and referral</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous quality improvement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New quality standards checklist sum</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CDA = Child Development Associate.

Michigan has showcased a long-standing commitment to quality standards since the inception of its preschool program in the 1980s. Michigan has updated these standards to match research and evidence in the field and, since 2011, has worked to bring all ECE programs under one umbrella to improve administration, measurement, and continual quality improvement (Wechsler et al. 2016).

**Recommendations**

The Great Lakes states have made strides in developing home visiting and preschool programs, but they still fall short. Home visiting programs are fragmented and financed primarily by federal funds, and they are only one of many services (e.g., infant and toddler child care, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) that support child development and health. States should assess how to leverage evidence of impact, partners, and increased federal funding on home visiting to expand these initiatives and cultivate new evidence-based programs that meet their needs. States can also look for areas to integrate services or systems for newborns to 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds.

Preschool offers even more opportunity for concrete policy change. Particularly, the Great Lakes states must focus on building political and legislative support to improve preschool access, quality, and funding streams.
Garner Bipartisan Political and Legislative Support

State and local legislators play a key role in determining the use of tax funds and in passing legislation with important budget implications. Therefore, the value of preschool must be framed correctly to garner necessary support among countless other priorities:

- **Refine strategic plans for garnering bipartisan political and legislative support around the sustainable expansion of preschool using evidence, effective framing and messaging of the topic, and collaboration with key stakeholders.** States must be opportunistic about when and how to introduce legislation or ballot initiatives focused on expanding high-quality preschool. States should use the relevant evidence base on short- and long-term benefits for participants and communities to strengthen their case and garner bipartisan support. For example, Michigan used positive evaluation results demonstrating the impact of its Great Start Readiness Program to catalyze a $130 million increase in funding over two years. This push for new funding was championed by Republican governor Rick Snyder and garnered bipartisan support in the legislature. Despite a difficult negotiation and sometimes contentious debate, Minnesota also struck a bipartisan deal for $25 million to launch a free preschool program in public and charter schools in 2016. In Cincinnati, a strong broad-based coalition of local stakeholders, organizations, and legislators from both parties led the Preschool Promise campaign. They championed the expansion of high-quality preschool and helped win by a resounding 44-vote margin.

- **Support and disseminate research and evaluation of preschool expansion efforts to enhance campaigns for increased funding.** Preschool expansion evaluations can demonstrate the program’s value and be a crucial fundraising tool, as seen in the Michigan example above. Evaluations that focus on short- and long-term outcomes across sectors as well as financial costs and benefits resonate most with policy experts and voters.

Finance Expanded Access to High-Quality Preschool

Financing preschool expansion and improving quality is not a one-size-fits-all solution and requires foresight about state and local context and short- and long-term trade-offs. Blended funding streams are a key aspect of preschool finance. Evidence from current programs and strategies from many states and localities nationwide can provide important ideas for shaping financing tactics. The following are ways states can improve upon funding strategies:

- **Build preschool funding into the state’s education formula.** In Wisconsin; Washington, DC; and states with high access rates, preschool funding is partially built in to the state’s education funding formula. This funding structure is less vulnerable and can be expanded or enhanced with improvements to the K–12 formula. It also strengthens the opportunity to create a more integrated prekindergarten–12 system in terms of funding, data, and rules and regulations.
- **Identify local and state tax and revenue sources that can be earmarked for preschool expansion.** In Georgia, where about 60 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled in state prekindergarten, the program is funded by state lottery revenues. Five other states have prekindergarten budgets that are funded in part or entirely through lottery revenue, while multiple states use tobacco settlement funds to cover the cost of prekindergarten (Stone 2008). These funding streams are relatively consistent and are a strong starting point for financing programs.

- **Develop policies to support and encourage local funding strategies and the goal of expanded or universal high-quality preschool in cities.** Many large cities across the country have moved toward expanding preschool in their districts through local or blended funding streams. A study of 10 large districts with expanded or universal prekindergarten showed diverse funding strategies, including increased sales taxes and property taxes (Muenchow and Weinberg 2016). Cincinnati provides a strong example of this strategy as it passed a property tax levy for $15 million to fund the expansion of quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in the district.

- **Explore creative funding possibilities to support the expansion of high-quality preschool and infrastructure, including blended funding streams, private-public partnerships, and new local tax sources.** State leaders and legislators must think outside the box about how to leverage new and existing funds to build a high-quality early education system. Funding strategies for prekindergarten, including pay for success, as well as blending different funding sources provide promising solutions to enhance programs’ sustainability. In Washington, DC, officials developed a blended funding model using Head Start and local funding from the state education formula. This financing structure supports their unique Head Start schoolwide model, which serves 81 percent of 4-year-olds and 70 percent of 3-year-olds in the district (Barnett et al. 2017). In Illinois, the Rockford Public School District coordinates a $13.8 million budget for preschool that combines funding from the state prekindergarten, federal PDG program, local funds, and Head Start. The full-day program is operated through the child care center and a Head Start program (Fonseca 2015).

**Improve Quality**

Program quality is essential in realizing the positive effects of ECE on children, families, and the community and is intertwined with financing. Quality is a shared goal across the field, but there is a lack of consensus regarding which aspects of quality (e.g., teacher training, professional development, class size, staff-child ratios) are most important and what are the best trade-offs given limited resources. Measuring some of these quality components can also present a challenge. For this reason, much of the discussion on quality often focuses on measurable regulation components, including well-defined standards and the successful delivery and monitoring of strong evidence-based curricula. Standards for program quality focus on classroom environment, instruction, and teacher preparation and training. The following are recommendations for states to improve program quality:
- **Focus on clear-cut quality standards and goals that match federal guidance and high-performing states, and use them to encourage ECE staff training and maintenance of high-quality programs.** States should look to adopt and adapt high standards developed for federal grants, such as the PDG program or those used in high-performing states (e.g., Michigan). They should use these examples to refine quality rating systems to meet unique state needs and contextual factors. In drawing from strong program examples, states should emphasize developing and supporting the early childhood workforce. This can be accomplished through tailored and multifaceted approaches involving standardized and competitive rates, opportunities for career growth, effective coaching and training, continuing education, and other professional development opportunities (Ullrich, Hamm, and Schochet 2017). Competitive grants, awards, and similar mechanisms can support the push for quality. For example, Illinois is using the Race to the Top funding to help improve and enhance early learning standards, align vision and goals, and push districts to adopt high-quality approaches.

- **Invest in the growth of promising programs that meet state standards and allow local communities to innovate to match their specific needs.** Some districts, such as Boston, have found value in developing integrated curricula that combine different evidence-based curricula to meet multiple objectives along with focusing on coaching and professional development (Weiland and Yoshikawa 2013). States should encourage innovation at the local level.

**Conclusions**

Expanding preschool requires a sizeable investment, but evidence has shown this investment can pay dividends in terms of improving children’s academic success, reducing the achievement gap, and saving money in the long run. States and localities must assess how their goals for preschool match up with their goals and efforts for academic improvement, workforce development, and economic growth. The Great Lakes states are at different phases of their preschool initiatives, but they all can take concrete steps to enhance policy and expand high-quality preschool programs.

**Notes**

1. More than three-quarters of households served through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program reported annual family incomes below the federal poverty guidelines (approximately $20,000 for a family of three in 2015).


6. See note 5 above.


8. See note 4 above.

References


About the Author

Michael Katz is a research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute, where he helps lead and manage projects evaluating alternatives to school discipline, school choice for low-income families, and prekindergarten access and expansion.

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