

MAKING UNIVERSAL PRE-K ACTUALLY UNIVERSAL

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THE PROBLEM

1. The U.S is one of the few developed nations in the world without a **public** child care system. Instead, Americans mostly rely on private options for early childhood education, which provides very few affordable and high-quality options.⁸

2. Low-income households spend

30%

of their incomes on child care, despite affordable child care being defined as **10%** of income.⁸

3. Only

40%

of 4-year-olds are enrolled in a state or federal pre-K program.³

4. Young children from higher-income households are more likely to be enrolled in child care programs. This difference in enrollment between income levels perpetuates the **wealth-based achievement gap** in schools.⁶

5. Only about

36%

of fourth-graders can read proficiently, with **black and Hispanic** children scoring the lowest on reading assessments.¹⁰

WHAT IS UNIVERSAL PRE-K?

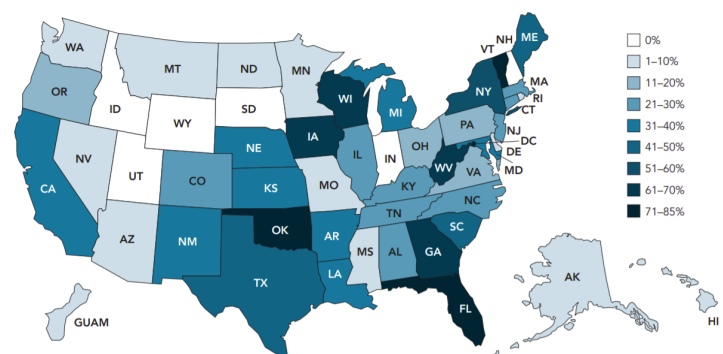
Broadly, **universal pre-K** is defined as being a public option that is available to all families who would like to enroll their three- and four-year-olds. In the United States, current universal pre-K programs vary at both the **state** and **federal** levels.

Current state programs

Most states currently offer some form of pre-K for young children, but these programs vary in both **access** and **quality**. Many states' programs are "targeted," which generally means they are only available to children from families up to a certain income level. Moreover, many programs are lacking in quality, with some having no learning standards or teacher qualifications.²

Only Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma offer pre-K programs that are considered to be universal. Florida's program has been rated as being low in quality, while Georgia and Oklahoma are rated highly in both access and quality.²

Figure 1: Percent of 4-Year-Olds Served in State Preschools³



Current federal programs

Current federal early childhood programs such as the **Head Start Program** serve only 11% of 4-year-olds due to limited funding. Additionally, they are only targeted towards children from low-income families. This limited accessibility greatly impacts children from families whose income level does not qualify for the program, yet are still in the lower half of the income distribution. This results in preschool enrollment rates being the lowest for this group.⁴



WHY UNIVERSAL PRE-K?

Offering high quality universal pre-K for three- and four-year-olds has the potential to significantly alleviate families' financial burden and better prepare children for kindergarten and beyond.

Children who enroll in pre-K programs see significant long-term benefits in areas such as adult well-being and educational attainment.

Adults in their 20s who participated in a pre-K program as a child are less likely to commit crimes and have lower rates of symptoms of depression. Additionally, they are more likely to have attended a 4-year college, have a full-time job, and have health insurance. ⁹

Universal pre-K programs in Oklahoma and Georgia have successfully increased preschool enrollment rates among various groups.

Children of mothers who only have a high school degree are less likely to be enrolled in pre-K if there is not a public option. When Oklahoma and Georgia implemented their universal programs, the likelihood of 4-year-olds being enrolled in pre-K increased dramatically. ²

Oklahoma and Georgia's universal pre-K programs have proven to be very successful, especially for disadvantaged children.

Hispanic and black children who were enrolled in preschool programs in large metropolitan areas in Oklahoma showed the most gains in their cognitive and language skills, which are strong predictors of kindergarten achievement. ^{1,5} Additionally, low-income children in Oklahoma and Georgia who were enrolled in the program had higher scores in 8th grade reading and math than children in other parts of the U.S. ²

What are the costs?

Though a national universal pre-K program would initially be costly, implementing it would have significant long-term monetary benefits for the United States. It is estimated that it would only take 9 years for a universal pre-K program to begin to pay for itself. When examining the costs and benefits of this program in 2050, the predicted long-term monetary benefits largely outnumber the costs. Examples of outcomes include savings from crime reduction (\$156 billion), increased wages and benefits (\$432 billion), and budget benefits for federal and state governments (\$191 billion). ⁷

Why not just offer parental leave?

Despite, personal preferences for early child care, we cannot ignore the growing tendency towards pre-K. Children from higher-income families are more likely to be enrolled in pre-K programs. Considering the academic and developmental benefits of these early childhood education programs, this exacerbates the wealth-based achievement gap. Additionally, although mothers may spend less time with their children, preschool enrollment has the potential to increase the quality of the time spent with their children, which can include educational activities, playing, and art projects. ²

WHAT SHOULD A FEDERAL UNIVERSAL PRE-K PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

1. Universal access for all three- and four-year-olds (regardless of income, special needs, etc.).
2. Full-day programs to give children enough time to learn and play, and to affect parents' work schedules as little as possible.
3. Sufficient and stable funding for high-quality facilities and resources.
4. Pre-K teachers must have the same compensation and benefits as public elementary school teachers.
5. Teachers must have strong qualifications; all pre-K teachers should have a college degree⁴



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