



# NCPIEUpdate

*A Publication of the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education*

*May-June 2006*

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## **Increased High Quality Pre-K Programs in America**

Quality pre-k programs for young children across the country was the focus of the May NCPIE meeting, as Matt Mulkey, Internet Communications Manager for the Washington DC advocacy group Pre-K Now, gave a summary of the national pre-k movement and what the organization is doing to engage families.

pre[k]now

### **Mission and History of Pre-K Now**

Pre-K Now, a project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, assists national and state leaders and the public to design and implement sound, research-based policies that support voluntary access to high-quality pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-old children in the United States. Since 2002 more than \$5.5 million has been provided to a small set of carefully selected states that are advancing the pre-kindergarten movement. The organization's goal is to advance high-quality pre-kindergarten programs for all children by:

- providing financial and technical assistance to advocates and other leaders in targeted states to create and fund new public pre-kindergarten programs or to improve the quality of and access to existing programs;
- strengthening the capacity and skills of early childhood advocates and state leaders to secure policy changes and funding; and
- waging a targeted campaign to educate and mobilize key sectors of the public and policymakers at the state and national level about the severity of the American school readiness problem and the potential that high-quality pre-kindergarten for all has for addressing the problem and boosting K-12 student achievement for all children.

### **The Basic Components of High Quality Pre-K Programs**

Pre-K Now advocates for the advancement of state supported programs that are high-quality in nature. That means that when you walk into a high-quality pre-kindergarten program, you immediately see that learning is taking place. Children are engaged in small groups reading books, building interesting structures with blocks, and determining what sinks and what floats at the water table. Teachers are asking questions, rewarding successes and guiding learning. The room has a sense of purpose, organization, and excitement. The key components of a high-quality program as defined by Pre-K Now and its foundational partners the National Institute for Early Educational Research ([nieer.org](http://nieer.org)) include:

#### **❖ Well-Educated Teachers:**

The most effective pre-k teachers have earned bachelor's degrees and have additional, specialized training in early-childhood education. Highly educated and fairly compensated pre-k teachers are more likely to develop strong, responsive, interpersonal relationships with their students, which affects each child's motivation to learn, social competence, and school achievement. Pre-k classroom aides should, at a minimum, have a child development associate credential, and both the teacher and aide should devote at least 15 hours per year to improving their skills through comprehensive, well-designed professional development opportunities.

❖ Low Teacher-Child Ratios and Small Class Sizes

Young children learn best in small groups of no more than 20 children in which they can ask and answer questions and receive individualized attention from the teacher. Teachers with fewer children to manage are less restrictive and controlling, are more supportive of each child's learning style, and have time to develop students' language skills, guide their social interactions, and encourage exploration and problem solving. A ratio of one teacher for every ten or fewer children is crucial to the success of everyone in the classroom.

❖ Research-Based Curriculum Aligned to K-12 Standards

A thorough but flexible curriculum helps teachers organize daily learning activities. While no one curriculum has been identified as best, high-quality pre-k programs are consistently built around curricula with specific goals that integrate learning across all aspects of a child's development: cognitive, physical, social, and emotional.

❖ Engaged Families

Parents and extended family members are an integral part of any high-quality pre-k program. The most common component of family engagement is direct communication with classroom teachers. Through parent conferences, home visits, and regular reports, families and teachers can exchange information about a child's strengths and successes, favorite activities, and learning progress. In addition, high-quality programs encourage even more family involvement, and a variety of avenues for that participation are typically available. These might include opportunities to: serve on a governing board or committee, assist in the classroom, help with field trips, or share expertise. Most importantly, high-quality pre-k programs respect the role of families as a child's first and most important teachers and support efforts toward greater learning at home.

❖ Focus on the Whole Child and Family

Children cannot learn when their basic needs are unmet or when special needs go undiagnosed. If a child is undernourished, cannot see the pictures in a book, or hear what is said to them, learning cannot take place. High-quality pre-k programs should screen children's vision, hearing, and general health in order to identify problems and make appropriate referrals early. Pre-k programs should offer children breakfast and/or lunch in order to ensure proper nutrition. When needed, families should be given access to social services or to information about nutrition, parenting, and family support. For such support services to be effective, it is crucial that they be administered by trained professionals and not be solely the responsibility of teachers who may lack the necessary expertise, extra time, and specialized resources.

***Pre-K vs. Pre-School***

*Preschool and pre-k do not, in fact, denote the same type of program. Pre-k is more readily associated with the K-12 system and is clearly defined as a significant year or two of learning that provides three- and four-year-old children with the skills necessary to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.*

*Preschool is a more general term used to refer to a variety of early care and education programs including pre-k, childcare, nursery school, and even "mothers-day-out" programs which serve children of various ages on numerous possible schedules.*

**The Benefits of High-Quality Pre-K Programs**

Pre-k program benefit children, their families, and communities by providing youth with a foundation for improved academic outcomes. Research from the Yale University Child Study Center and the Chicago Longitudinal Study has shown that quality pre-k programs:

- Increase high school graduation rates
- Help children do better on standardized tests
- Reduce grade repetition
- Reduce the number of children placed in special education

There are also benefits to the participants in these programs themselves. The research cited above has also found that many participants in high-quality pre-k programs have lower teenage pregnancy rates, less involvement in crime, and higher employment and earnings. Additionally, society benefits from high-quality pre-k programs in the forms of:

A more productive workforce	Increased competitiveness
Reduced crime	Increased school achievement
Significant return on investment	Savings in K-12 costs
Savings in social services costs	Savings in crime costs
Increased tax revenue	

### **Efforts to Engage Families**

Pre-K Now is working to engage families by providing information and resources to parents in a variety of ways including providing families with information about what constitutes a high quality program through a Virtual Classroom tour that helps users to see and better understand what to look for when investigating their pre-k options. Pre-K Now also is committed to providing information to America's Spanish speaking community and has an extensive Spanish Language Outreach component for all of its written materials. The organization also provides parents and the public with a handy easy to read and decipher checklist—*Finding High-Quality Pre-K* that can be used by families to help them find the right program for their child and family. The checklist includes information on the program qualities and components that research says are most important for a child's growth and development: <http://preknow.org/families/findprek/find.cfm>.

Pre-K Now's report, *Leadership Matters: Governors' Pre-K Proposals for Fiscal Year 2007*, reviews each state's proposed budgets and commitments to high quality pre-k for all. To view the report go to: <http://preknow.org/resource/leadershipmatters/index.cfm>.

For more information about Pre-K Now and the status of state funded pre-k programs in the country, visit [www.preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org).

(Source: [www.preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org); [www.NEEIR.org](http://www.NEEIR.org))

*Matt Mulkey, NCPIE Presentation Slides:*

[http://www.preknow.org/documents/presentations/20060531\\_NCPIE\\_pres.ppt](http://www.preknow.org/documents/presentations/20060531_NCPIE_pres.ppt)

Virtual Classroom Tour

<http://www.preknow.org/resource/classroomtour.cfm>

Finding High-Quality Pre-K checklist

<http://www.preknow.org/families/findprek/find.cfm>

An interim version of the checklist in Spanish is available at this link

[http://www.preknow.org/families/findpreksp/find\\_sp.cfm](http://www.preknow.org/families/findpreksp/find_sp.cfm)