



VITAL QUESTIONS ABOUT UNIVERSAL PRE-K

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INTRODUCTION

Research consistently shows that children who begin school ready to learn are far more likely to succeed academically and socially. Conversely, when children start behind, the challenges multiply—not only for the students themselves but also for their teachers, families, and the education system. While this may seem like an abstract policy issue, the reality is simple: Investing in early childhood education is one of the most effective ways to ensure long-term success.

Decades of research demonstrate that children who thrive in their K-12 education are more likely to become successful adults, contributing positively to society and requiring fewer social interventions later in life. One of the most powerful predictors of future success is kindergarten readiness.

With that in mind, what policy options are available to improve the chances of success for Nevada’s children? Where does the state currently stand in expanding access to high-quality preschool programs?

STATUS OF STATE-FUNDED PRE-K PROGRAMS IN NEVADA

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Nevada’s state-funded pre-K programs meet 7 out of 10 national quality benchmarks and rank ninth nationally in state spending. However, because the state only serves about 7 percent of its 4-year-old population, Nevada ranks 40th in preschool access.¹

During the 2019 Legislative Session, [Senate Bill 84](#) established standards for state-funded pre-K programs. The 2021 Legislature adjusted funding for the Nevada Ready! State Pre-K program to stabilize the per-pupil cost across programs and provide adequate resources for high-quality programming. State funding for pre-K education in Nevada grew from approximately \$6 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 to \$20 million in 2021. The governor’s 2026-2027 Executive Budget recommended \$25 million in continued funding for FY 2026, along with an annual budget enhancement of \$70 million to sustain pre-K and early literacy programming, as funded through [Assembly Bill 400](#) in 2023.

¹ “State of Preschool, 2023 Yearbook, Nevada.” <https://nieer.org>, National Institute for Early Education Research, 2023. <https://nieer.org/yearbook/2023/state-profiles/nevada>.

Using a rough estimate of 40,000 Nevada 4-year-olds and a per-student cost of \$9,000 annually, Universal Pre-K (UPK) in Nevada might cost approximately \$360 million annually if every child participated, although expected participation would be materially lower.²

VITAL QUESTIONS REGARDING UNIVERSAL PRE-K

How much can Universal Pre-K reduce achievement gaps?

A report from the NIEER titled “How Much Can High-Quality Universal Pre-K Reduce Achievement Gaps?” suggests that nationalized UPK could make significant inroads in closing developmental gaps at kindergarten entry. Drawing from studies of high-quality UPK models in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Boston, Massachusetts, researchers estimated a national effort could reduce the kindergarten entry gap for math by 45 percent for African American children and 78 percent for Hispanic children. It would effectively eliminate the reading gap for both groups. For low-income children of any race, UPK could reduce gaps in math and reading by 27 percent and 41 percent, respectively. **The report argues that targeting high-risk children alone is insufficient. Universal access ensures greater equity by encouraging diverse classrooms that benefit all students.**³

Is Universal Pre-K necessary, or is targeted Pre-K sufficient?

The NIEER also examined whether public preschool should be universal for all children or target those at the greatest risk of struggling in school. Targeted programs are less expensive because they serve fewer children, but they can present administrative challenges, stigmatize participating kids, and potentially miss children who would benefit from the programming. The research indicates UPK yields better results because it is more likely to reach all children in need, which is especially beneficial for children from lower-income families who often lack access to quality developmental supports before kindergarten. Because the public broadly supports UPK, it is typically well-resourced, which translates to better teachers, curriculum, and auxiliary services. A 2024 survey by the University of Maryland found that a majority of Republicans and Democrats in swing states, including Nevada, favor free universal preschool.⁴

² As of 2023, Nevada's population of children under 19 was 755,449. Assuming an even distribution across all ages, we estimate Nevada had approximately 39,760 four-year-olds. Assuming some population growth over the past two years, we rounded this number to 40,000. <https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/data?obj=9®=32&slev=4&sreg=32&stop=178&top=14>. A June 2023 cost study conducted by WestEd found the average per-pupil cost for pre-K in Nevada was \$8,882. Assuming some inflation over the past two years, we rounded this number to \$9,000.

https://webapp-strap-paas-prod-nde-001.azurewebsites.net/uploads/nrpk_cost_and_equity_study_final_report_3eac8ea5e8.pdf

³ Friedman-Krauss, Allison, et al. “How Much Can High-Quality Universal Pre-K Reduce Achievement Gaps?” www.americanprogress.org, Center for American Progress and National Institute for Early Education Research, Apr. 2016. www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/04/NIEER-AchievementGaps-report.pdf.

⁴ “In Swing States Majorities of Democrats and Republicans Favor Major Federal Actions to Help Families.” Publicconsultation.org, 2024, publicconsultation.org/family-medical-leave/in-swing-states-majorities-of-democrats-and-republicans-favor-major-federal-actions-to-help-families/.

A tangential benefit of UPK is that it eases the cost of childcare, which is especially helpful to lower-income working families.

In its study, NIEER suggests that states shift toward UPK, with the caveat that the program must have strong standards and provide additional support to children with greater needs. If a state cannot immediately afford UPK, it can transition over time by ramping up income eligibility or initially targeting communities with higher needs.⁵

How do states fund Pre-K?

States have used various funding mechanisms for pre-K education, though most rely on general fund appropriations. Nine states have integrated pre-K into their K-12 funding formulas, providing a more stable source of revenue than a general appropriation. Other states have created dedicated funding streams like lottery revenue or “sin taxes” on products like alcohol or tobacco. Research shows that states without UPK tend to struggle with access and quality issues due to inconsistent funding and the need to use eligibility criteria and enrollment limits to compensate for any funding shortfall. This can make pre-K especially challenging in rural and low-income communities. Based on experiences in other states, the key elements for ensuring a successful pre-K effort appear to be identifying reliable or dedicated revenue and integrating pre-K financing into the state’s K-12 formula.⁶

What options are available for setting Pre-K eligibility if Universal Pre-K is not possible?

A decade ago, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes looked at how states structure pre-K eligibility to better target children with the most pressing developmental needs. While many states aspire to offer UPK, funding realities may necessitate gradually pursuing that goal over time. In the meantime, states have used income-based eligibility criteria to target children with higher needs. The most common income threshold is 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Some states recognize that income criteria alone may be insufficient, so they also use other risk factors like housing instability, lower parental education, child disability, or non-English-speaking households to further identify the highest-need children. Some states also use simple geography to prioritize pre-K funding in areas with higher poverty or other risk factors.

The Center’s research further suggests that children with multiple risk factors gain more from early education. However, targeting pre-K funding can be an administrative challenge and may unintentionally miss children who would benefit. Thus, the report recommends that states that are unable to offer universal access be thoughtful in their targeting strategies and enrollment processes. It also suggests states consider research showing the benefits of mixed-income classrooms on developmental outcomes when formulating an overall strategy.⁷

⁵ Barnett, W. Steven, et al. “The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool for All?” www.nieer.org, National Institute for Early Education Research, Apr. 2004, www.nieer.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/6.pdf.

⁶ Parker, Emily, et al. “How States Fund Pre-K: A Primer for Policymakers.” www.ECS.org, Education Commission of the States, Feb. 2018. www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/How-States-Fund-Pre-K-A-Primer-for-Policymakers.pdf.

⁷ Carolan, M. & Connors-Tadros, L. “Approaches to State Pre-K Eligibility Policy: Considerations for Policy Makers in Revising Policy to Increase Access for High Needs Children (CEELO Policy Report).” www.CEELO.org, Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, 2015. http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ceelo_policy_report_prek_eligibility_approaches.pdf.

Are there other considerations?

Conversations about early childhood services often focus on care and education, as these are typically the most significant considerations. However, there are supports and services that, depending on the child, might be as critical or even more important. As detailed in the Guinn Center's [comprehensive report](#) on early childhood systems, these services can include physical and mental health care, child welfare, nutrition, early intervention for children with developmental delays, and economic and other supports for struggling families with young children.⁸ Thus, in the context of pre-K education, it is vital to consider all of a child's needs to ensure they are completely ready to begin kindergarten.

Additionally, when thinking about the need for holistic coordination of a child's needs, it is also essential to consider their transition between the pre-K and school systems. A poorly managed transition can cause significant stress for children at kindergarten entry, affecting their academic performance. However, a well-coordinated transition between aligned systems can engage families early in their child's development and prepare young students to enjoy school and immediately experience academic and social growth. Research shows that the kindergarten entry transition is more likely to be effective with specific key components in place, including:

- Careful and intentional alignment of standards and practices;
- Collaboration and coordination at the systems, school, and child levels;
- A formal process for transition planning—more generally and for individual children; and
- Technical assistance, particularly for those beginning the process.⁹

CONCLUSION

Nevada can learn from the experiences of nations with high-performing education systems. Almost universally, these countries ensure their K-12 systems receive young children who are well-prepared for the long process of primary and secondary education.¹⁰ Universal Pre-K has proven effective in achieving this goal. Still, short of universal access, research shows that expanding access to high-quality pre-K is an effective way to prepare targeted children for long-term success and close the developmental gaps between demographic groups. Whether a state funds UPK or uses a targeted approach, research shows that better preparing young learners to thrive in kindergarten benefits individual students, the education system, and society.

⁸ Colquitt, Anna, et al. "From Crowded to Coordinated: Examining the Governance of Nevada's Early Childhood System." www.GuinnCenter.org, Guinn Center for Policy Priorities, Oct. 2024, www.guinncenter.org/research/from-crowded-to-coordinated-examining-the-governance-of-nevadas-early-childhood-system.

⁹ Bornfreund, Laura, et al. "State Policies to Enhance Transitions into Kindergarten: A Systems Lens for Transitions into Kindergarten." www.ECS.org, Education Commission of the States, October 2020. <https://www.ecs.org/statepolicies-to-enhance-transitions-into-kindergarten/>.

¹⁰ "No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State." www.ncsl.org, www.ncsl.org/education/no-time-to-lose-how-to-build-a-world-class-education-system-state-by-state.

Nevada has made meaningful progress in expanding its early childhood education programs, but access remains a challenge for many children who would benefit. As Nevada's policymakers consider their next steps, it will be helpful to focus on ensuring a sustainable funding source, instituting enrollment strategies that most effectively reach children with the greatest risk of developmental deficits, comprehensively considering children's developmental needs, and planning for seamless transitions into the K-12 system.

Years of early childhood research show that investing in early learning is not just about preparing children for school—it is about preparing them for life.



ABOUT THE GUINN CENTER

The Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy center addressing key challenges faced by policymakers in Nevada. We are affiliated with the University of Nevada, Reno, with researchers and collaborative partnerships at NSHE institutions across the state.

Founded in 2014 by a group of Nevadans who sought to advance new policy choices based on sound research, sensible and pragmatic thinking, and bold ideas, the Center is named for the late-Governor Kenny Guinn.

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