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University of Pennsylvania

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Programs for Young Children: State Policy Options

Abstract
Young Children Face the States: Issues and Options for Early Childhood Programs by W. Norton Grubb is summarized in this policy brief. The report discusses the many decisions state policymakers must make as they seek to respond to needs of today’s parents and children. It also describes the historical conflicts that persist within the early childhood movement and the status of early childhood education policy across the country.

Disciplines
Curriculum and Instruction | Education Policy | Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration

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Programs For Young Children: State Policy Options

The Issue of Providing Programs For Very Young Children Is Fast Gaining High Political Visibility.

While federal support for such programs has declined over the last few years, current initiatives are coming from the states (see Table 1). Yet, state policymaking in the field of early childhood education is still in its infancy. State policymakers now have a rare opportunity to develop, almost from the start, an effective and coherent approach to early childhood education, according to a research report published by the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE).

Much confusion surrounds early childhood programs— their operational nature, their costs, their effects, their quality and even their basic objectives—especially since most states have provided little of their own funding for early childhood programs and thus have little knowledge of this area.

Turf battles persist and the major professional communities with an interest in young children often confront each other over basic philosophical objectives and methodologies, as well as over economic issues associated with jobs and administrative control. Unless policymakers develop a coherent approach to these problems, the current interest in young children could easily fade without effective programs to show for all the effort. Or states could legislate programs that are at best, ineffective or at worst, harmful to children.

Young Children Face the States: Issues and Options for Early Childhood Programs by W. Norton Grubb is summarized in this policy brief. The report discusses the many decisions state policymakers must make as they seek to respond to the needs of today's parents and children. It also describes the historical conflicts that persist within the early childhood movement and the current status of early childhood education policy across the country.

The report does not attempt to prescribe a single "best" method of dealing with this issue. Rather, it provides a framework for setting goals. Once policymakers decide on the goals of early childhood programs in their own states, various elements—such as funding mechanisms, administrative structures and program requirements—can be tailored to reach those goals.

Which Children Should Be Served... and In What Types of Programs?

The goals of any early childhood policy are inextricably tied to the question of what populations should be served. Should programs be provided for 4-year-olds, 3-to-4-year-olds or even for infants? Should all children in a specified age group be eligible to attend programs or should enrollment be limited to children who speak little English or to those who are considered "at-risk"?

The importance of this question cannot be overstated. Most states have targeted at-risk children for their programs (see Table 1). But the best programs provide an integrated setting with children of various racial and socio-economic backgrounds, rather than segregating at-risk children from others. Moreover, while child care for low-income children has been a special concern, the amount and quality of child care available to children whose parents can afford to pay for it is also inadequate.
And then there is the question of hours of operation. Most of the programs recently enacted by states are half-day preschool programs, administered by state departments of education and run by local school districts (see again, Table 1). But since two-thirds of women with children under age 6 work full time, part-time programs are insufficient.

Program content and structure are also important considerations for policymakers. Should programs be organized like most elementary classrooms where the emphasis is on cognitive development in a structured, teacher-directed atmosphere? Or should they follow the model used by many independent child-care centers, one that is less structured and focuses more on the child’s emotional and social development?

The conflict over structure and focus reflects basic differences in conceptions of learning, the role of parents and teachers, teacher preparation and educational objectives. The problem for policymakers is to contain and narrow these differences with programs that permit flexibility and variety without allowing quality to vary intolerably. Although regulating content and quality is difficult, some direction is absolutely critical as a way to realize the benefits of exemplary programs.

**What Levels of Funding Will the Programs Receive... and In What Forms?**

Much of a state’s early childhood policy will be shaped by decisions about funding. Given the wide variation in what teachers are paid, in adult-child ratios, in access to free or reduced-cost facilities, in volunteer resources, in the costs of living and in the extra services provided by programs, it is nearly impossible to say what a “typical” early childhood program might cost.

However, available figures can provide some guidance about general magnitudes. Even though data on costs are poor, it is still possible to build representative budgets to consider the trade-offs among components of early childhood programs. There are several methods of determining annual per-child costs based on different combinations of adult-child ratios, salaries, and ancillary services (see Table 2). For example, a preschool program which pays teachers minimum wage, which has a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:10, and which has moderate costs for space, materials, etc., could cost $1,533 per year. Assuming more reasonable teacher salaries of $18,600 with the same teacher-pupil ratio, and the same fixed costs, the cost-per-child increases to $2,663. While teacher salaries and teacher-pupil ratios are the major options affecting annual costs-per-child, other program components also must be considered when calculating costs.

The issue of appropriate costs can never be fully resolved and analyzing costs cannot eliminate political battles or make difficult trade-offs any easier. But it can clarify the available choices and the likely consequences of legislative decisions.

**Another fiscal decision involves funding sources and mechanisms.**

One way to stretch state funds is to require local revenues to support some fraction of the total costs; but if this fraction is too high, few cities and school districts would want to participate. Another option would be to require parents to contribute to programs; especially on a sliding-fee basis. In this case, the design of the fee schedule may be crucial to the participation of families with different incomes.

States could fund early childhood programs in a number of ways. The simplest option would be to expand existing programs—either child-care programs funded through Title XX/SSBG funds or Head Start programs. This would add state revenues to existing federal funds, thereby allowing more low-income children to be served. State funds could also support services for more moderate-income children, allowing them to join existing programs by using a sliding-fee schedule. The simplicity of this alternative is obviously an advantage, since it would not be
## TABLE 1

### State Initiatives in Early Childhood Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POPULATION SERVED</th>
<th>HOURS OF OPERATION</th>
<th>NUMBERS SERVED/RESOURCES</th>
<th>RATIOS</th>
<th>ECE TRAINING</th>
<th>METHOD OF FUNDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District of Columbia</strong> (enacted 1968)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds</td>
<td>51 full-day 69 half-day</td>
<td>3,300 children $2.9 million</td>
<td>1:15 (full-day) 1:10 (half-day)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Local district funding since 1982; previously Chapter 1 funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Florida</strong> (begun 1986)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant children 3-4</td>
<td>full-day</td>
<td>1,528 children in 100 programs</td>
<td>1:10</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Some Ch. I funds. Districts may subcontract to private non-profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Florida</strong> (enacted 1986; begun 1986-87)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children 3-4; 50% must be disadvantaged</td>
<td>local option</td>
<td>8 pilot projects 650 children; $750,000 (1986-87)</td>
<td>local option</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Project grants to school districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Illinois</strong> (enacted 1985; begun Jan. 1986)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children 3-5 <em>at risk</em></td>
<td>half or full-day</td>
<td>7,400 children in 234 districts 12.1 million</td>
<td>none; 1:8 preferred</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Project grants, up to one per district; no local match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Louisiana</strong> (enacted 1985; begun fall 1985)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4-year-olds <em>at risk</em></td>
<td>mostly full-day</td>
<td>1,000 children in 37 of 66 districts $2.1 million</td>
<td>1:10 with aide; 1:5 without</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Project grants, 1-4 grants per district; no local match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maine</strong> (enacted 1979)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds</td>
<td>most half-day; some 2 days/week</td>
<td>656 children $1.6 million</td>
<td>no limit</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Funded through the regular school aid program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maryland</strong> (enacted 1979)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year olds</td>
<td>half-day</td>
<td>2,225 children in 55 schools $2.25 million</td>
<td>1:10</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Project funding; schools selected based on low test scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Massachusetts</strong> (enacted 1985); begun fall 1986</td>
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<tr>
<td>Varied—program discretion</td>
<td>half-day or full-day</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>being developed (probably 1:10)</td>
<td>yes*</td>
<td>Competitive grants to districts, mostly low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Michigan</strong> (pilot projects Jan.-Sept. 1986)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year olds <em>at risk</em></td>
<td>mostly full-day</td>
<td>400-500 children in 23 projects</td>
<td>1:10</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Project grants to school at districts, providing 30% of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Jersey</strong> (since 1903)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds</td>
<td>half-day</td>
<td>6,029 children in 93 districts</td>
<td>1:25</td>
<td>no**</td>
<td>Funding through the regular school aid program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(TABLE 1 CONTINUED)

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<table>
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<tr>
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<th>NUMBERS SERVED/RESOURCES</th>
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<th>METHOD OF FUNDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York State (enacted 1967)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year olds, 90% disadvantaged</td>
<td>mostly half-day</td>
<td>9,300 children in 75 districts $20 million, $2,600/child</td>
<td>1:7.5</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Project grants with 11% local funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City (enacted 1986; implemented 1986-87)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-income 4-year olds</td>
<td>half-day</td>
<td>2,600 children $6.7 million</td>
<td>1:10</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Project grants, with high-need areas targeted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio (1985-86)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3-5 year-olds</td>
<td>2 with 2 half-days/week; 1 full-day</td>
<td>120 children in 3 pilot projects</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>no*</td>
<td>Project grants to districts; personnel costs paid locally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma (enacted 1980)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds</td>
<td>half-day or full-day</td>
<td>1,400 children in 34 programs $1 million</td>
<td>1:10</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Project grants to school districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania (since 1965)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds</td>
<td>half-day or full-day</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>no regs</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Regular state aid formula for kindergartens used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina (enacted 1984)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds with deficient &quot;readiness&quot;</td>
<td>half-day</td>
<td>6,500 children $8.7 million, $1,053/child</td>
<td>1:10</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Allocation to each district based on students &quot;not ready&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas (enacted 1984; begun fall 1985)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds, low income or limited English</td>
<td>half-day</td>
<td>35,000 children in 495 districts, $29.5 million</td>
<td>1:22 (with exemptions)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Matching grant with state match based on local property value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington (enacted 1985)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year-olds, Head Start eligibility</td>
<td>mostly half-day</td>
<td>1,000 children $2.9 million, $2,700/child</td>
<td>1:6</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Funds to Head Start agencies or schools; priority to districts with most at-risk children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*New early childhood credentials are being developed in Massachusetts and Ohio.
**In Louisiana a nursery or kindergarten certificate is preferred; in New Jersey most teachers have a nursery endorsement.

necessary to develop new administrative structures or program models.

### Additional Options For Funding Mechanisms Include:

- **Expanding state tax credits**: increasing the credit (or deduction) to individuals or to corporations.
- **Project grants**: eligibility can include school districts only, school districts with subcontracts allowed, or both school districts and community organizations.
- **Formula funding**: using existing formulas which fund only school districts, or creating new ones which allow schools, community organizations, cities, towns and counties to receive funds.
- **Vouchers**: to parents with unrestricted use, or to parents to be used for programs of specified quality.
- **Multiprogram funding**: such as the system used by California. This complex system allows eligible parents with different needs to choose among a range of programs.

Coordinating these programs is difficult and costs are relatively high, but the California model provides a vision of early childhood programs where flexibility and variety are enhanced.

### How Can High Quality in the Programs be Ensured?

Once content, structure and funding choices are made, states must still make sure the programs are of good quality. Obviously, many of the choices about quality are made in legislative prescriptions about operating hours, adult-child ratios, teacher salaries, costs-per-child and other program components. For example, the decision to fund a half-day preschool, as many states have done, is also a decision not to expand day care that best meets the needs of working parents; a very low spending per child is implicitly a decision not to require programs of high quality.

Still another means of guiding the quality of early childhood programs is teacher certification. In this area, researchers and practitioners have reached one unanimous conclusion: teachers of young children must have specific training in early childhood development. According to this reasoning, a teacher with a community college certificate in early childhood education with a Child Development Associate credential would be preferable to someone with a B.A.-level elementary teaching certificate but without training in early childhood education.

Programs can also be enhanced by the actions of the state administering agency, through licensing requirements and technical assistance. All states license child-care facilities, although licensing is usually interpreted as ensuring that minimum health and safety standards are met, rather than enhancing the quality of the programs. Technical assist-
ance—providing consultation, workshops, information and access to experts in the field—is a better way to encourage development of good programs.

Hopes For Children

As an area of governmental concern, early childhood policy is still in its infancy. Most programs enacted thus far have been small and some of them seem to have been legislative accidents without much public support. Some of them have realized the worst fears of early childhood advocates while some of them are excellent models upon which to build. There is no dearth of options available to state policymakers. Rather, the problem is to decide on a state’s goals and then devise the mechanisms to best accomplish them.

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CPRE unites the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, the RAND Corporation and the University of Wisconsin-Madison in a unique venture to improve the quality of schooling. Sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education, CPRE conducts research on the implementation and effects of state and local education policies. By communicating its findings to policymakers, the Center attempts to contribute to the framing of education policies that will have a positive impact on children in classrooms.

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- Teacher Policies
- Educational Indicators and Monitoring
- New Roles and Responsibilities
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For further information on CPRE, contact: Lynn McFarlane, Assistant Director for Communications, Center for Policy Research in Education, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901; phone (201) 828-3872.

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