

A push to educate children in their earliest years attracts attention, money (video)

By Hannah
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The youngsters are told to stand still in line, but they are mostly a jumble of wiggling arms and legs, chattering and squirming as they wait for their teacher's instructions. It's snack time on a Monday, and the 4-year-old students at **Norseman Elementary** in Fresno are finally given the green light to snag a plastic pocket full of apple slices.

Joram Rocha is a playful boy who quickly finishes his snack, but hasn't quite caught on to his teacher Roberta Nazaroff's expectations.

"When you're finished, what should you do with your wrapper?" Nazaroff politely asks her class. "Throw it away," come the tiny voices of the transitional kindergartners, who stretch out the "away" sound as they respond in unison. Joram gets the hint, and drops his trash in the wastebasket.

It's the type of scene that's being played out in hundreds of new transitional kindergarten classes across the central San Joaquin Valley, where students are beginning to learn about numbers, the alphabet and social skills. "TK," as it's called, is a relatively new concept in California, established by lawmakers in 2010 as part of the **Kindergarten Readiness Act**. The students are at that in-between age, too old for preschool yet too young to enter kindergarten.

The state's move to add a new grade level for some of its youngest learners comes amid a slew of other changes to early education, an infusion of more money for preschool after years of recession-era cuts, and a renewed focus among state and federal politicians on educating children in their earliest years.

All this recent attention hasn't slipped by naysayers -- research that's long shown benefits of early education is now being challenged by critics who point to recent studies showing major programs such as **Head Start** have limited long-term effects on student success.

California's early education system is complex, and some contend major changes are needed to improve quality and streamline ineffective rules. Local advocates say getting more children in the door can be a positive first step.

Yet major challenges remain. Rural programs that are hurting because of the drought face new budget headaches as families leave town and enrollment drops. The opposite problem plagues other communities, where demand is quickly outpacing space at many schools.

A new focus

Government and education officials at all levels are bringing new focus -- and money -- to education programs for young kids.

The push starts at the top. President Barack Obama gave a ringing endorsement for universal preschool for all 4-year-olds during his State of the Union address less than two years ago. New state initiatives aimed at expanding early education have since emerged.

In California, lawmakers signed off this summer on an early learning budget that includes \$273 million more than last year, which will help fund about 11,500 new preschool seats. Child care providers for low-income children will see more money after years of rates being frozen, and parent fees for certain preschools have been eliminated. Although preschools and day care centers can offer similar programs, preschools have traditionally offered more academic-oriented lessons.

The money comes at a good time. Since the state's economy plunged in 2008, lawmakers carved nearly \$1 billion out of California's early learning budget.

"It has been difficult for (preschools and child care providers) to be able to be sufficient," said Guadalupe Romo-Zendejas, interim policy administrator for early education with the [California Department of Education](#). "A lot of agencies are looking at other funding sources, some of them have private pay to help, some are going out of business."

Extra state backing comes as public opinion polls show more Californians support wider access to early education. [In a March survey](#) of 1,000 registered voters conducted by EdSource, an education research nonprofit, about 55% said it's "very important" that all 4-year-olds have access to preschool.

The support can be explained in part by a shift in how the public and education professionals view preschool, said Debra McMannis, director of early education and support division for CDE.

"We have come to a point in California where we are recognizing the importance of children's early development," she said. "We are no longer having the discussion, 'Is it child care or is it education?'"

Local school officials are taking note, too. In Fresno, education administrators have pushed for expanded preschool for the past several years.

[Fresno Unified](#) recently invested \$7.4 million in early learning, money that's helped fund 53 new preschool classrooms since 2011, including 18 the past school year. The district also has expanded its transitional kindergarten program -- a new class for 4-year-olds who turn 5 after the Sept. 1 kindergarten enrollment cutoff -- from two classes in 2011 to nearly 80 this year.

"We have additional children, they need to be served, what can we do?" said Wilma Hashimoto, Fresno Unified's newly hired assistant superintendent for early learning. "Early learning needs to be made a priority. What that means is funding to programs."

Research shows mixed results

Syncere Sampson, 3, dipped her brush into a cup of pink watercolor paint, then methodically swirled the wet stuff around on paper until it turned a dark rose, perfectly matching the plastic clips in the shape of bows and butterflies that held tight her long hair, twisted like ropes.

Syncere and her preschool classmates at Ivy Community Center's Head Start are learning about colors. One of her teachers, Patricia Ybarra, said the school plays a "very important part" in the southwest Fresno community, especially among the black, Hispanic and Hmong families who send their children there.

"We have parents coming here every day wanting to sign children up," Ybarra said. "We go into the elementary schools and the teachers there tell me they can see a big difference with children who attend Head Start and children who come just from home to kindergarten."

But what's going on in Head Start classrooms like this one has come into the cross-hairs of some preschool cynics. At the same time early education is gaining more positive attention, a groundswell of criticism has fallen on public programs, with the federally funded Head Start initiative taking most of the heat.

Some call public preschool a boondoggle, a labyrinth of early childhood programs that are costly, too large to manage effectively, and lacking real proof that children benefit long-term.

An oft-cited national review of Head Start shows that although children benefit while enrolled, any academic improvement fades by the time they're in third grade.

"There was little evidence of systematic differences" between the thousands of youngsters who went to Head Start and those who didn't, [a 2012 report](#) on the program found.

That's damning evidence against public preschool, said Lindsey Burke, an education policy fellow at the conservative [Heritage Foundation](#) think tank.

"We're spending a lot of money for questionable outcomes and to a questionable end," Burke said. "The federal government has a terrible track record with its preschool. That's the absolute last place we would want to turn."

The Head Start findings contrast with years of research that says just the opposite.

One of the most well-known and long-range preschool studies, the [High Scope Perry Preschool Project](#), shows lifelong benefits such as a greater chance of graduating high school and a reduced risk of run-ins with the law. It's critiqued by some for its small sample size and decades-old data, but still is regarded by many as proof that preschool works.

The project, which started in the 1960s, looked at how a group of 123 black preschoolers who grew up in Michigan fared through childhood, their teen years and into adulthood.

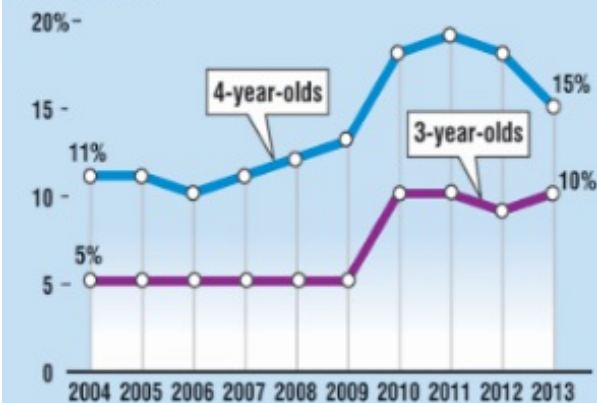
Access to preschool in California

How some states rank based on access to state preschool programs for 4-year-olds.



Rank	State	4-year-olds enrolled in state preschool	Enrollment change 2001-02 to 2012-13	4-year-olds enrolled in state preschool or Head Start
1.	Washington, D.C.	94%	+3,507	50%
2.	Florida	78%	+174,145	78%
3.	Oklahoma	74%	+14,235	19%
4.	Vermont	71%	+3,981	63%
5.	Wisconsin	64%	+32,817	45%
27.	California	15%	+34,940	7%

Percent of California 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in state preschool



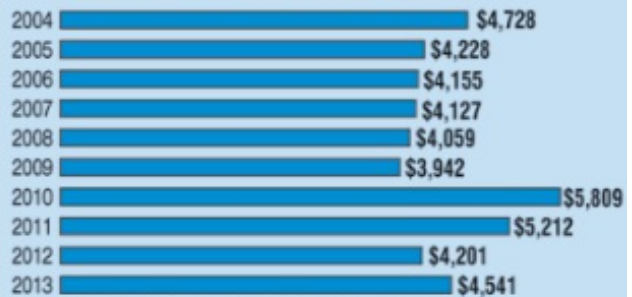
Source: "The State of Preschool 2013," The National Institute for Early Education Research

Cost of preschool

State spending on preschool programs in 2013.

	Dollars per child enrolled in preschool	Change in spending from 2011-12 to 2012-13	Total state preschool spending in 2012-2013
California	\$4,541	\$340	\$588 mil.
National average	\$4,026	\$36	\$5.3 bil.

California spending per child enrolled in preschool

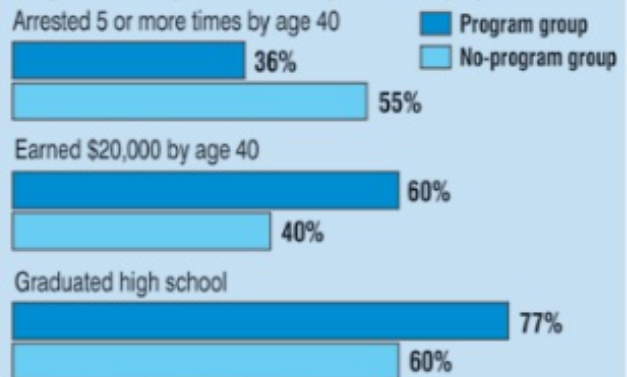


Source: "The State of Preschool 2013," The National Institute for Early Education Research

Long-term effects of preschool

The High/Scope Perry Preschool project, one of the longest-running trials on the effectiveness of early childhood education, has shown high quality programs are positively related to high school graduation rates, career earnings and crime prevention.

Long-term findings from the Perry Preschool project



Source: High/Scope Perry Preschool study

THE FRESNO BEE

Overwhelmingly, the set of 58 students picked to attend preschool were living more positive lives by age 40: They made more money, had better relationships with their families, and were arrested less often than the 65 students who didn't attend the program.

Head Start's Ybarra said early education is especially important for at-risk kids -- like the Perry preschoolers -- and the ones she serves. All her youngsters come from low-income homes, and many are just beginning to learn English.

Some show up speaking no more than a few words outside their native language.

Said Ybarra, "Before you know it, all of a sudden they're speaking English. They're like sponges, they pick up everything."

Heather Holley-Sharp, a Clovis Unified special education preschool teacher, said she often hears criticism that early

education is little more than playtime.

For years, she said, parents and administrators would grumble at her for using interactive projects (like using play dough and cookie cutters to learn about shapes) rather than work sheets or more traditional methods.

"We hear, 'But they're just playing,' but what (people) don't realize is, it's on purpose, it's play with purpose."

A complicated system

Navigating California's early childhood system can be complex. According to [a recent Legislative Analyst's Office report](#), it's in need of an overhaul to expand access and quality.

In some ways, preschool and other early childhood programs parallel their K-12 counterparts: parents can choose from public, private and other options.

Choice has long been a pillar of early childhood education, officials say. Parents have flexibility to send their children to a school close to home or work, and often more importantly, to a place they're confident is best for their child. Depending on their income, parents can pick from a variety of state-funded schools, federally funded Head Start, nonprofit or private centers, or home-based day care.

But with that freedom to choose comes some sense of risk. No statewide database or rating of programs exists, which can make the research process laborious for parents seeking the best program for their child.

"Unfortunately, we are behind the curve on this," CDE's McMannis said. "There are many states that have a state-implemented (rating) system. ... This is an area in California that we just started getting into in the past few years."

Some tools are available, such as the [Central Valley Children's Services Network](#), which runs a hotline for parents who need referrals. Fresno County also has developed a local rating system, which ranks preschools based on their quality.

Even so, some low-income families likely will face challenges, especially those that aren't enrolled in the state's CalWORKS public assistance program.

While children of enrolled families are eligible for a variety of early education options, those who aren't can only pick from a handful of programs run by the state.

The Legislative Analyst's Office has taken notice and [delivered a critical report](#) on the topic in April.

"It is really complex and confusing and you have a system where similar types of families have different rules applied to them," said Carolyn Chu, the report's author and senior fiscal and policy analyst for the LAO.

Switching general child care and most state-funded preschool seats to a voucher system would make more sense, she said. Chu said she's pleased lawmakers chipped in more funding for children's programs this year, but said "the structural issues, in terms of the diverse numbers of programs and the different rules, are still there."

State-funded preschools get money from a mosaic of funding sources, which can create heartburn for schools as they plan programs and hire teachers.

In Clovis Unified, for example, where a preschooler can enroll is dependent on parents' income. Those who qualify for state-based preschool are enrolled in half-day classes. Those who don't qualify pay \$22 daily and are placed in a separate program.

No state laws require districts to maintain that divide, but district officials say it's the best way to enroll as many low-income students as it can accommodate, while keeping some seats open for more affluent families.

"When the state gives you money and says you are authorized to run a state program of some sort, the dollars come with lots of strings attached," district spokeswoman Kelly Avants said. "The state funding apparatus makes it very difficult to serve both of those groups."

It wasn't always this way. Fresno Unified's Hashimoto was an administrator in Clovis when students -- no matter their family's income -- sat side-by-side in Clovis preschool classrooms.

"It was initially a blended program," she said, noting parents who could afford it still paid a fee. "That was the whole intention, you don't want to have those who could pay versus those who couldn't."

That changed when the number of enrolled middle- and upper-income children ended up squeezing out some kids from low-income families. Parents who could afford preschool ended up footing the bill for the state dollars that the district lost when low-income children were no longer enrolled. Fees rose and many families left district programs, Hashimoto said.

Jackie Burgan, Clovis Unified's director for child development, said the new system allows the district to serve more families of all income levels. All students get the same curriculum and may even take classes on the same campus.

"They can be using the same facilities, but they might be with a different set of kids," she said.

Challenges remain

Many preschools across the central San Joaquin Valley continue to struggle, with some scrambling to fill seats and others turning families away because of limited space.

In the small agricultural town of San Joaquin, many families are fleeing because of the drought, emptying local schools and preschools in the process.

On a hot summer day, dozens of men in broad-brimmed hats and women with young children look for shade outside a food distribution site in town. Like many in San Joaquin, Maria, a single mother who declined to give her last name, is out of work and waiting for provisions.

Her daughter Laura, 4, is just around the corner at West Hills College's preschool. It's a small school next to the town's community center, a plain building but for a colorful outdoor mural that displays a farmer holding a basketful of vegetables and fruit.

The painted scene is more fitting of summers past. Like town residents, the preschool has been hard hit by the drought.

"Because there's no water, there's no work. And because there's no work, there's no need for child care," said site supervisor Virginia Cruz.

Enrollment is "very low" this year, she said, with just 37 of the school's 48 slots filled. Most years, there's a waiting list.

Over the past decade, the center has cut its staff from 25 to just 13. Almost all work part time, and there's no longer enough money to fund a teacher for the infant room, which was the only one in town but was forced to close a few years ago. The center, which is free for low-income families, relies on full enrollment for enough state reimbursement to cover operating costs.

"I don't know" what's going to happen, Cruz said. "When we've been down before, we've had to let go of staff, close down rooms."

Since 2010, 36 -- or about 10% -- of Fresno County's licensed preschool centers have shut their doors, said Lupe Jaime, deputy director for [Central Valley Children's Services Network](#).

Even though new state money could benefit spots such as the center in San Joaquin, Jaime said it's costly to restart a business, so it's unlikely those that closed will pop up again.

The recession, and now the drought, have taken their toll on many community preschools. In places such as Kerman, Kingsburg and Mendota, there aren't enough seats for 80% of children eligible for the state's low-income preschools.

Across Fresno, thousands of children in the southwest, central, and eastern neighborhoods don't have seats, Fresno County Office of Education data shows.

Head Start's Ybarra said the southwest center serves about 80 children but has a long waiting list that often includes families that can't afford to send their children elsewhere.

"It's probably about 20 to 25 children on our waiting list right now," she said. "I wish we could serve more. It's hard to tell them no."

It's the same story across much of the state. Nearly 15,000 preschool seats were slashed between the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years, [a 2013 report from the National Institute for Early Education Research](#) shows. And in 2013, only 28% of the state's 4-year-olds had access to either state preschool or Head Start.

"We hit bottom last year and so now we're starting to come out of this downturn," said McMannis of the state Education Department. "But we certainly are nowhere near where we once were. We're getting there. It's the beginning of a renaissance, we hope."

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