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The State of Kindergarten

By Emily Workman

March 2013

It is throughout the earliest years of a child's education that he/she gains the foundation upon which subsequent learning is built. A high-quality, full-day kindergarten program is a critical period in the education continuum.

P-3 is a Continuum!

President Obama recently made one of the boldest federal education proposals for early childhood education in U.S. history with a plan to significantly expand access to pre-K for low- and middle-income families across the nation. While the emphasis on pre-K is a big win for children, pre-K represents only a single point on the P-3 continuum. Equal emphasis must be placed on ensuring that students have access to high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs in order for this early investment to produce long-term positive results.

There is significant diversity in state policies that influence access to high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs.

Higher Expectation in the Early Grades

A strong P-3 system requires that students transitioning from high-quality pre-K programs do not land in kindergarten programs that fail to build on this strong beginning. This has never been truer than now, as the rigorous Common Core State Standards, being implemented in 46 states plus the District of Columbia, were constructed to build on a foundation of early knowledge beginning with kindergarten.

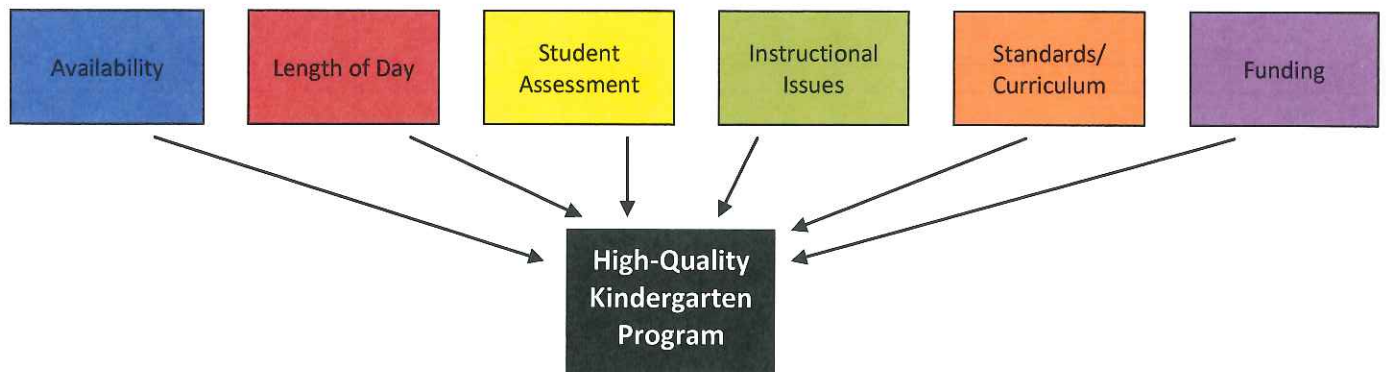
Current Trends in Kindergarten State Policy

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) reviewed policies across all 50 states—policies that we believe are significant markers in the quality of a state's kindergarten program. For other critical elements where policies were NOT reviewed, research is presented to support our position. It is important to note that this is entirely a policy review and ECS acknowledges that practice is way ahead of policy in many states.

There is SIGNIFICANT Diversity in State Kindergarten Policies

Findings indicate that the goal of this report is to begin a discussion that will lead to the simultaneous strengthening of pre-K through state actions and the president's proposal, and consistent quality kindergarten through strong state leadership.

Components of a Model Kindergarten Program



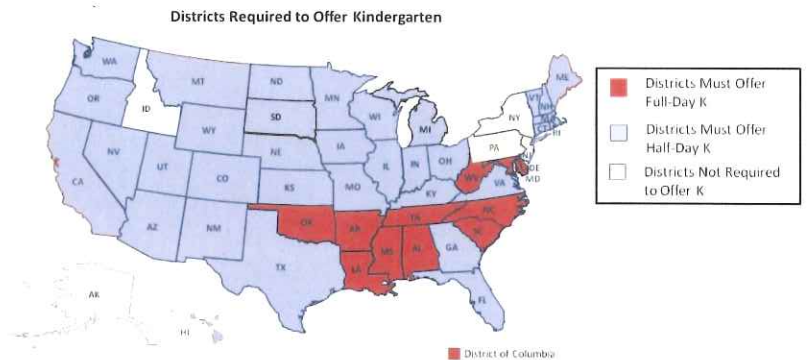
The Importance of Availability



What We Found

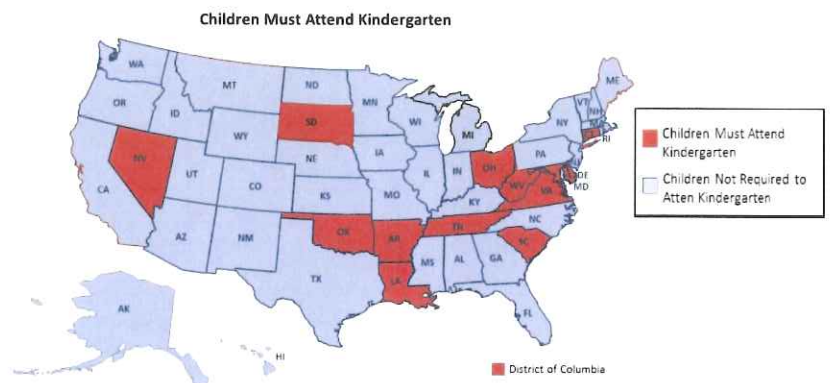
Districts must offer kindergarten

- 11 states plus D.C. require districts to offer to offer full-day kindergarten.
- 34 states require districts to offer half-day kindergarten.
- Five states do not require districts to offer kindergarten, leaving the decision to school districts.



Children must attend kindergarten

- 14 states plus D.C. mandate kindergarten attendance.
- 36 states do not require that children attend kindergarten.



Why it Matters

- Benefits of kindergarten attendance are clearly supported by research.
- The Common Core State Standards are predicated on a strong foundation that begins in kindergarten.
- Early literacy and mathematic skill building is critical for later proficiency.

Critical Decision Points

- Are sufficient high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs available for students?
- Will parents have the option to enroll their child in a full-day program?
- Are students required to attend kindergarten?
- Do districts receive state funding for half-day only or full-day? Does the funding formula need to be revisited?
- Is access to kindergarten programs free of charge?
- Are districts authorized to contract with another district or outside provider for kindergarten programs?

Length of Day: What Constitutes a Kindergarten Program?

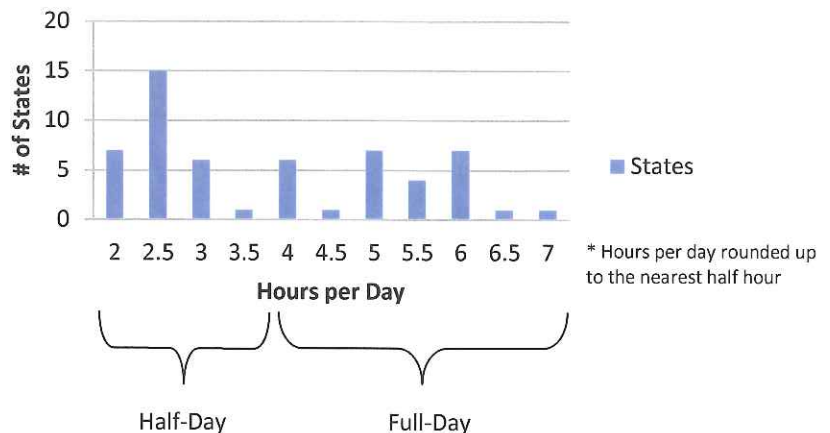


What We Found

Most discussion of kindergarten policy centers on whether programs are half-day or full-day—and most policymakers are probably unaware of the significant discrepancies in instructional time across states, whether half-day or full-day programs.

- State requirements for half-day programs range from a minimum of two hours to three-and-a-quarter hours per day.
- Requirements for full-day programs range from a minimum of four hours to seven hours per day.

Minimum Hours States Must Offer Kindergarten*



Why it Matters

- Kindergarten is the foundation upon which future learning is built.
- Students in one school district might receive more than three times the learning opportunities than those in a neighboring district. This is an equity and effectiveness issue.
- With the introduction of the Common Core, all kindergarten students will be expected to meet the same rigorous standards whether they spend two hours or six hours per day in the classroom.
- For students who attend high-quality preschool programs, offering continuity in the number of hours they spend in a classroom each year thereafter will avoid disrupting normal schedules and support working families so that they do not need to continually adjust childcare schedules.

Critical Decision Points

- What length of kindergarten day provides sufficient opportunity?
- Should public/private partnerships be developed for cost-saving purposes?
- How can the school funding formula provide districts with incentives to increase enrollment and expand full-day kindergarten programs?
- Are minimum hours well-aligned to the hours required in pre-K and 1st-grade classrooms?

Kindergarten Entry Assessments



An increasing number of states require the administration of kindergarten entry assessments. The impression among researchers is that this is the result of an increasingly high-stakes educational climate. This emphasis on early testing is often confused with or compounded by other efforts aimed at evaluating the early childhood programs that are receiving significant public investment. However, while the purposes cited for assessing kindergarten students seem sensible, such as informing teachers and identifying students who require additional supports, further evidence on the effect of kindergarten entry assessments on student achievement is needed.

What We Found

- 25 states plus D.C. currently require the administration of a kindergarten entry assessment.
 - 14 states plus D.C. use a state-developed kindergarten entry assessment.
 - 11 states require districts to develop and administer local kindergarten entry assessments.
- Four states are in the process of developing a kindergarten entry assessment, expected in 2014.

Why it Matters

Kindergarten entry assessments can be used to:

- Identify strengths and needs of young children
- Predict the need for additional supports for children
- Inform teachers, improve classroom instruction, and ensure services are made available to students
- Indicate whether pre-K programs are aligned with school expectations (K-3).

Key Decision Points

- How is readiness for kindergarten defined?
- Are the assessments developmentally appropriate and do they capture social, emotional, and behavioral development of students?
- Is a particular assessment tool required? How does state policy influence selection of assessments? How is validity and reliability determined? Are assessment choices nationally normed?
- At what time or intervals throughout the year are the assessments administered, and who administers them?
- For what purpose is the assessment used?
- Is the assessment aligned to standards and curriculum?
- What are the costs in time and dollars?

Instructional Issues: The Classroom – Class Size



What We Found

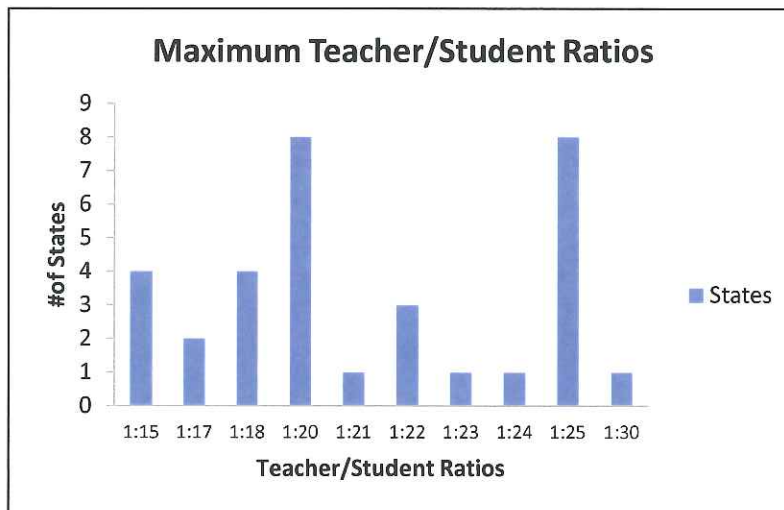
- Lowest maximum teacher/student ratio specified in law is 1:15.
- Highest maximum ratio is 1:30.
- Some states specify ratios if an aide or teaching assistant is in the classroom, ranging from 2:20 to 2:30.

Why it Matters

- Although research is mixed in its support for smaller class sizes across the entire spectrum, for early grades and students from low-income families, evidence supports the premise that smaller class size contributes to student achievement.

Key Decision Points

- What evidence is being used to determine the optimal class size for kindergarten or P-3 classrooms?
- Are there enough qualified teachers available to meet the needs of smaller class size and therefore more kindergarten classrooms?
- What is the evidence for using aides as a less-costly support for teachers assigned to larger classes so that teachers are freed up to focus solely on instruction?



Instructional Issues: Teacher Preparation, Licensure, and Professional Development



Effective teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development are critical components of a P-3 system. Research shows that the developmental needs of students in early childhood education are unique to that age group, and specialized training is required for teachers to gain the skills needed to teach in ways that are developmentally appropriate.¹ Teacher preparation programs should offer separate tracks for teachers planning to work in the early grades, and the use of P-3 licensing that documents skills in teaching early literacy and mathematics can help ensure that early grade teachers are well-prepared to meet the needs of that age group. Although some states offer a P-3 license, many school leaders prefer that their staff hold a K-6 or K-8 license because it provides them with maximum flexibility in teacher placement. This is an area ripe for deeper discussion and research.

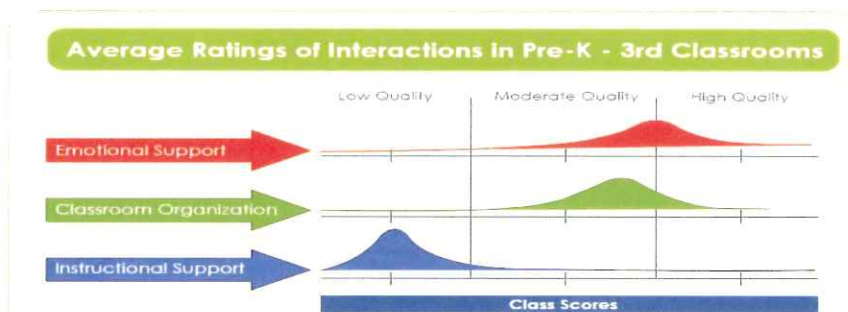
Coupled with teacher preparation and certification, an essential element to ensuring high instructional quality is the availability of ongoing, effective professional development. High-quality teacher training and education should not end when a teacher enters the classroom.

Why it Matters

- The academic, social, and behavioral needs of kindergarten students are unique, and teachers working with that age group need to be prepared and well-trained to meet their needs.
- Teachers who lack the critical knowledge or skills for teaching young children too often find themselves assigned to kindergarten classrooms, resulting in instruction that may be developmentally inappropriate.

Critical Decision Points

- Are teacher preparation programs effectively preparing teachers who will work in a P-3 environment?
- Does the current license reflect a strong preparation base for teaching young children?
- Is a P-3 license available, and is it a requirement for teaching in a P-3 setting?
- Is professional development tailored to the needs of P-3 teachers and students? Is it provided?
- Are there resources available for effective professional development?



Source: Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, *Measuring and Improving Teacher-Student Interactions in PK-12 Settings to Enhance Students' Learning* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, 2011)

State Standards and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum



Making full-day kindergarten accessible to all is the first step, but not a sufficient step. The quality of a kindergarten experience is fundamental to the ultimate impact on children and their success in school and in life. To ensure quality, state standards need to be aligned across the P-3 continuum, curricula that support the standards need to be of high-quality and developmentally appropriate, and quality of individual programs needs to be evaluated.² *Developmentally appropriate* means that kindergarten programs should not simply emphasize basic skills, but help children build their physical, social/emotional, and intellectual capabilities through exploration and play.³

Most states have early learning standards, but the degree to which they have been integrated with the Common Core or high-quality curricula is far less clear. In order to be successful in kindergarten, students must be given the opportunity to master the expectations set forth for them in the standards. High-quality curricula are essential in achieving this goal.

Why it Matters

- Expectations of deeper learning by the end of kindergarten have greatly increased with the introduction of the Common Core.
- Deeper learning does not equate to “less play” or playful learning activity. Attention needs to be paid to developmentally appropriate instructional practice.
- Student capacity for growth and learning is significant in the early years.
- Documented, common expectations will provide teachers with roadmaps and benchmarks to tailor to developmentally appropriate lessons.

Critical Decision Points

- Has the state developed standards for early learning, and are they aligned to K-12 standards?
- Are curricula selected based on independently gathered evidence, and is curriculum aligned to the kindergarten standards?
- How does state policy support ensuring that the curricula available are developmentally appropriate? Are schools offered a menu of nationally normed curricula, state-developed curricula, or curricula that is locally developed but approved by the states?

State Kindergarten Funding:



The way a state chooses to fund its kindergarten programs can provide districts with strong incentives or disincentives to offer high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs. A state can fund a full-day kindergarten program in one of three ways:

- a) At a higher level than its half-day program
- b) At the same level as the half-day program but equal to or greater than what is provided for 1st grade
- c) At the same level as the half-day program but less than what is provided for 1st grade⁴.

In many states, parents who choose to send their child to a full-day program are held responsible for paying tuition to cover the second half. In order for students to meet the rigorous demands of kindergarten, it is wise for policymakers to provide incentives to districts to offer high-quality, full-day programs. The most powerful incentive is funding.

Why it Matters

- Disparities in funding both within and across states can significantly affect access, equity, and effectiveness
- The way a state chooses to fund kindergarten can provide incentives or disincentives to districts to offer full-day kindergarten
- Funding full-day kindergarten outside the funding formula makes it less predictable
- Without adequate funding, parents will be required to cover the costs of kindergarten.

Critical Decision Points

- How is kindergarten funded?
- Does the current funding formula provide incentives/disincentives to districts to offer full-day kindergarten?
- Is the funding provided sufficient to fund a high-quality, full-day kindergarten program?
- Is state funding support restricted to operating costs, or does it also allow districts to use it for additional classroom space that might be necessary? What provisions does the state make for those districts that do not have adequate space?

Conclusion

The greatest take-away from this report is that access to high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs is incredibly diverse across states and that this diversity will most likely contribute to very different outcomes for children. While two hours of kindergarten might have sufficed in the 1960s, the range in instructional time alone should raise significant questions about effectiveness and equity.

Offering kindergarten to young children so that they can begin building a foundation on which future learning can be built is not a new idea. Children have been attending kindergarten in large numbers for more than 100 years. A rich body of research asserts that through high-quality early learning opportunities, children boast stronger academic performance throughout their educational careers, making the return on investment for states well worth the costs of ensuring these programs are universal, full-day, and of high-quality. To do so, policymakers would be well served by taking a hard look at the details of their kindergarten policies and programs, with special attention paid to availability, length of day, how assessment is used, how quality of instructional programs and staff are ensured, how developmentally appropriate standards and curriculum are implemented, and how funding works to support these essential programs. State policy and decision-making would be further enhanced if states renewed a commitment to collecting, analyzing, and reporting data on this most important foundational year—kindergarten.

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Equipping Education Leaders, Advancing Ideas

¹ Margaret Hardy Snider and Victoria R. Fu, "The effects of specialized education and job experience on early childhood teachers' knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Volume 5, Issue 1, March 1990, 69–78; Steven Barnett, "Better Teachers, Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications," *Preschool Policy Matters*, Issue 2, Revised December 2004; Marisa Bueno, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Danielle Gonzales, *A Matter of Degrees: Preparing Teachers for the Pre-K Classroom*, (Washington D.C.: The PEW Center of the States, Education Reform Series, March 2010).

² NAEYC, *Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation: Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8*, (Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009); *Preschool Curriculum: What in it For Children and Teachers?* (Washington, D.C.: The Albert Shanker Institute, 2009).

³ Bredekamp, S, *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age eight: Expanded Edition*, (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987); Bredekamp, S. & Rosegrant, T., *Reaching potentials: Appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children (Vol 1)*, (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1992); Frost, J., Wortham, S., & Reifel, S, *Play and Child Development (2nd ed.)*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hallm, 2007)

⁴ ECS, *Full-Day Kindergarten: A Study of State Policies in the United States*, (Education Commission of the States, June 2005).