

Early Learning

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key Policy Points	36
Early Learning in Georgia	36
I. Overview	36
II. Research on Early Learning	37
III. Childcare	39
IV. Head Start	40
V. Prekindergarten	42
VI. Other Early Learning Initiatives in Georgia	47
Emerging Policy Concerns for Early Learning	48

QUICK DEFINITION

Educators and policymakers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the first five years of life in building the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical foundations of later success. Research has demonstrated that quality early learning programs can have significant and lasting benefits throughout childhood and into early adulthood.¹

As a policy issue, early learning encompasses the variety of early childhood care and education settings that children encounter prior to school entry, including childcare, family childcare, preschool, prekindergarten, and Head Start. These programs may be offered in private or public settings. Additionally, in recent years researchers and policymakers have expanded the notion of early learning to encompass policies and programs that impact child health and well-being for children aged zero to five.

¹ Education Commission of the States, “Early Learning,” www.ecs.org.

KEY POLICY POINTS

- Children who start school academically behind their peers are not likely to catch up. Early learning is a proven means of reducing gaps in student learning, as studies have shown that quality early learning experiences can positively impact children's development, overall school readiness, and long-term academic outcomes.²
- Investments in early learning yield substantial benefits not only for individuals but for society as a whole. Long term studies measuring the impact of quality programs show a benefit-cost ratio as high as 17:1. Research indicates that early intervention programs have more favorable outcomes and cost less than remediation programs.³
- Leading economists conclude that investments in young children may be the best way to stimulate economic growth. Programs that have had the greatest impact are those that include high-quality care for children and provide economic and social supports for families.⁴
- A striking disconnect exists between the system of early care and learning and the more formal K-12 education system. This disconnect results in a lack of alignment of learning expectations for children, little collaboration on professional development, discontinuities in curriculum and the classroom environment, and scant attention to helping children and parents make smooth transitions.⁵
- Despite significant increases in federal funding, the aggregate capacity of Head Start, child care subsidies, and related programs still falls far short of serving all those eligible.⁶ Furthermore, part-day, part-year programs such as the traditional Head Start model and pre-K program hours no longer meet the needs of parents working full-time.⁷

➤ While many employers are involved in early care and learning in some fashion, they typically view it as a family issue, in contrast to the way they view K-12 education reform – as an investment in the quality of their future workforce.⁸

EARLY LEARNING IN GEORGIA

I. OVERVIEW

Georgia's youngest children deserve an auspicious start in life. Yet the promises that should come with being born in one of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced nations in the world remain unfulfilled or broken for many of our state's most vulnerable citizens. Despite the proliferation of irrefutable evidence that the first few years of a child's life lay the groundwork for his or her future growth and success, there is a stark disconnect between the demand for quality health, childcare, and educational programs and our government's commitment to ensuring affordable access to such programs.⁹ In 2007, the United States ranked second-to-last among 21 industrialized nations in an assessment of overall child well-being. In the same year, Georgia ranked 41st in the nation for child health and well-being. If one true measure of a nation or state is how well it attends to the fundamental needs of its children, where does Georgia stand, and what can we expect for our future?

Policies that target early childhood health, learning, and well-being are critical to helping improve the academic achievement and social outcomes of all youth. Ensuring children aged zero to five have access to enriching early life experiences increases their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical foundations for later success. Moreover, providing quality health and educational programs for our youngest citizens not only affords them a brighter, healthier start in life, but also pays long-term benefits for communities and society at large.¹⁰ Georgia has long been recognized for its groundbreaking commitment to early learning: the 1995 implementation of state-funded universal prekindergarten for four-year-olds. But now, 13 years later, research and

² Ibid.

³ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007).

⁴ Louve, Robert, "Perspectives: The Cradle of Prosperity," National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2006).

⁵ Education Commission of the States, "Early Learning Overview," www.ecs.org.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Children's Defense Fund, *State of America's Children 2005* (Washington, D.C., 2005).

¹⁰ National Center for Children in Poverty, *Georgia Early Childhood Profile* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2007).

statistics make clear the urgent need to improve our state’s policies and programs for children’s health and education.

II. RESEARCH ON EARLY LEARNING

Research on early learning holds several implications for parents, educators, and policymakers. Profiled here are three major areas of research that pertain to early child care and education: brain development and child health; the school preparation gap; and the economic benefits of early learning.

Brain Development and Child Health

Scientists have repeatedly demonstrated that during the critical time between birth and age five, when the brain undergoes its most rapid development, children learn more than during any other five-year period of life. During these early years, young children learn to walk and talk and build the foundations for future development.¹¹ Children whose early years are spent in an environment that meets their basic physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs are better prepared for the school experience. Providing safe and healthy home environments for children is, therefore, critical to their cognitive development. However, many of our nation’s policies, such as parental leave, child care, welfare work requirements, and child protection services fail to take into account the crucial importance of early life experiences and their impact on child well-being.¹²

Healthy children become healthy students. The availability, quality, and cost of health care influence child development and school readiness. Poor health can lead to academic challenges throughout the K-12 school years including the need for special education services, retention in a grade, or the non-completion of high school.

Georgia is known as a national leader in early health screenings and immunizations and is one of only a few states with a dedicated agency, Bright from the Start: Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), that oversees the health and educational needs of young children.¹³ However, a comparison of Georgia’s children to those in other states reveals a dismal and challenging environment for our youngest citizens. According to the national 2007 *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, Georgia falls below the national average on nine out of ten key indicators of child health and well-being; for overall child well-being, Georgia ranks 41 out of 50 states.¹⁴ Statistics in Table 3.1 on the status of Georgia’s children aged zero to five are no more encouraging.

The School Preparation Gap

Not all students begin school with the same preparation and knowledge-base. Children of higher income and Caucasian families are more likely to be enrolled in a quality prekindergarten program and be exposed to enriching environments that foster development. There is a significant preparation gap between these children and those of lower-income, African-American, and Hispanic

Table 3.1 - Snapshot of Georgia’s Children Aged Zero to Five

NUMBER OF CHILDREN AGED ZERO TO FIVE	816,000
Percentage not receiving medical and dental preventive-care visits	46%
Percentage enrolled in nutritional programs due to low-income status	31%
Percentage born to mothers with less than 12 years of education	24%
Percentage living in households below the poverty level	23%
Percentage who lack health insurance	11%

Source: Family Connection Partnership, “Snapshot of Georgia’s Young Children: ages 0-5.”

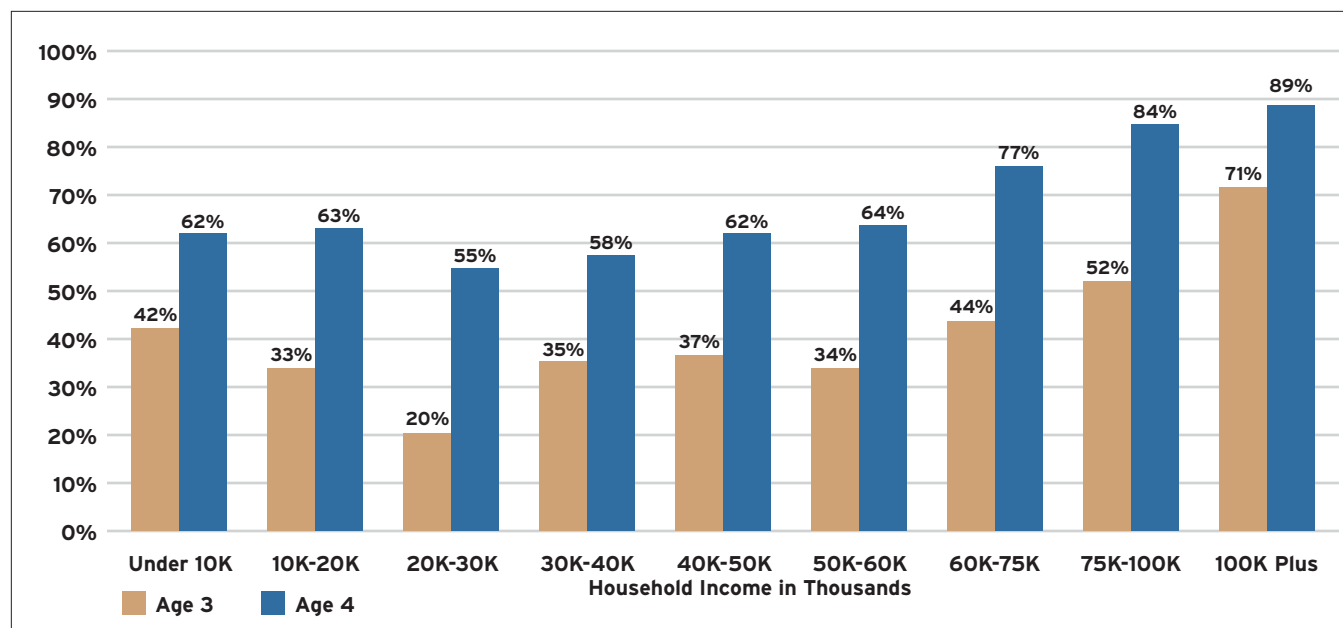
¹¹ Zero to Three Policy Center, *State Policies to Improve the Odds for the Healthy Development and School Readiness of Infants and Toddlers* (Washington, D.C., 2007); Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, *The Economics of Education: Second Edition* (Atlanta, GA, 2007).

¹² National Council on the Developing Child, “Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships” (2006).

¹³ Voices for Georgia’s Children, personal communication. For more information about the role of Bright From the Start, refer to the Governance and Policymaking chapter of this publication.

¹⁴ Annie E. Casey Foundation, *2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book* (Baltimore, MD, 2007).

Figure 3.1. National Preschool Participation by Income: 2005



Source: W. Steven Barnett and Donald J. Yarosz, *Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does it Matter?* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2008)

families. While more than 65 percent of all entering kindergarteners can recognize letters, less than 40 percent of traditionally underserved children can. Children in the highest socioeconomic quintile score 61 percent higher than those in the lowest quintile on cognitive tests. Researchers estimate that these preparation gaps account for one-half of the achievement differences among racial and socioeconomic student subgroups. On average, this gap equates to four grade levels by the time children reach high school graduation.¹⁵

The preparation gap is illustrated in Figure 3.1 which shows three and four-year-old preschool enrollment by household income level. Wealthier children are much more likely to be in preschool; however, very low-income children are slightly more likely than middle class children to participate in preschool programs. This trend may be due to the options available to families below a certain income level including the federal Head Start program, many state prekindergarten programs,

and government child care subsidies. Families with modest incomes may face the greatest difficulties in obtaining high-quality preschool education for their children.¹⁶

Economic Benefits of Early Learning

The long-term economic and educational benefits of high-quality early learning programs are well documented in research. Children who attend prekindergarten not only enter school prepared for success, but also are less likely to repeat grades, drop out of school, or need special education throughout their school years compared with similar children who did not have such exposure.¹⁷ The Perry Preschool Project – perhaps the most well known longitudinal study of a prekindergarten program – found that the benefits of quality preschool experiences for three- and four-year-olds extended through age 40. Students who participated in the Perry Preschool Project experienced higher lifetime earnings, greater rates of homeownership, and less dependence on social services.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sara Mead, *Open the Door, Close the Preparation Gap* (Progressive Policy Institute, 2004); Rimm-Kaufman, S.E., R.C. Pianta, and M.J. Cox. *Teachers' Judgements of Problem in Transition to Kindergarten*, (Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 12(2) 2000).

¹⁶ W. Steven Barnett and Donald J. Yarosz, *Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does it Matter?* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2008).

¹⁷ W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2006* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2006); Gary T. Henry, et al., *Report of the Findings from the Early Childhood Study: 2001-02* (Atlanta, GA: Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, 2003).

While the primary goal of quality early care and education is affording our youngest citizens a brighter start in life, the long-term benefits of an investment in early childhood extend to local communities and society at large. Table 3.2 provides an overview of these benefits.

Leading economists, including the Nobel-prize winning James Heckman, are concluding that investments in young children may be the best way to stimulate economic growth. Programs found to have the greatest impact are those of high-quality that establish a solid foundation for children’s social and emotional skills while also providing economic and social supports for their families. As seen in Figure 3.2, research has concluded that the largest economic return comes from interventions that begin early in a child’s life. Additionally, economic simulation models have predicted that national implementation of high-quality early childhood development programs will produce substantial gains in gross domestic product (GDP) and in the nation’s stocks of physical and human capital. In the long term, full-scale implementation of such programs would also produce much stronger economic development impacts than would business subsidies.¹⁹

III. CHILDCARE

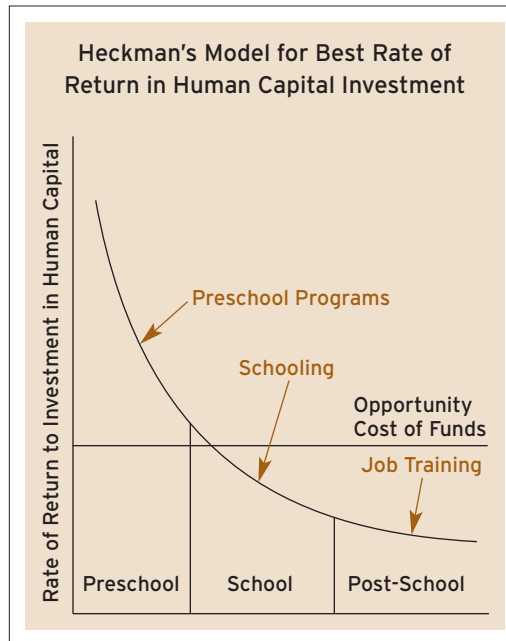
As a result of women’s growing participation in the workforce, approximately two-thirds of children under age 6 spend at least part of their day in the care of adults other than their parents. Nationally, 63 percent of mothers with children ages 3-6 and 59 percent of mothers whose children are 3 years or younger work at least part time outside the home.²⁰ These statistics underscore the critical need for quality childcare programs. While there is considerable research on the factors that constitute high-quality childcare, most studies estimate that only about 15-20 percent of programs have these characteristics, and an appalling 40 percent of infant and toddler care programs are considered of such poor quality as to be potentially harmful to children’s development.²¹

Table 3.2. Positive Effects of Early Learning

Student Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Higher language and math skills ➤ Better relationships with classmates ➤ Decreased likelihood of dropping out of school ➤ Decreased likelihood of repeating grades ➤ Increased educational opportunities ➤ Increased annual earnings
Societal Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Lower crime rates ➤ Reduced poverty and welfare rates ➤ Lower teen pregnancy rates ➤ Higher tax revenues ➤ Increased homeownership ➤ Increased civic participation ➤ Higher rates of employment

Source: Robert G. Lynch, *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High-Quality Prekindergarten* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2007).

Figure 3.2. Economic Returns From Preschool Programs



Source: Southern Education Foundation, *Pre-Kindergarten in the South: The Region's Comparative Advantage in Education*, (Atlanta, GA, 2007).

¹⁸ Lawrence J. Schweinhart et al., *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40* (High/Scope Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Partnership for America’s Economic Success, “Long-Term Economic Benefits of Investing in Early Childhood Programs: Proven Programs Boost Economic Development and Benefit the Nation’s Fiscal Health,” Issue Brief #5,

²⁰ Voices for Georgia’s Children, *Compounding Interest: Why Zero to Five is an Investment Worth Making* (Atlanta, GA, 2008).

²¹ Education Commission of the States Website. Early Learning: Ensuring Quality, 2008. <http://www.ecs.org/>

Among experts, there is a general consensus – and considerable research support – for the following standards of childcare program quality:

- Low child/staff ratios;
- Staff educated or trained in early childhood development;
- Continuing professional development for staff;
- Developmentally appropriate learning practices;
- Continuity in caregivers;
- A safe and caring environment; and
- Strong parental involvement.

The principal barrier to improving these elements of quality in early care programs is adequate funding - the money needed to hire more staff to reduce child/staff ratios, raise providers' pay and benefits to attract and retain qualified people, and invest in continuing professional development.

In Georgia, the Child Care Services division of Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) is responsible for licensing or registering approximately 3,000 childcare learning centers, more than 6,500 family child

care homes, 2,000 informal care providers, and 234 group day care homes. Licensing consultants conduct annual licensing inspections for childcare learning centers and make periodic visits to all childcare programs to evaluate compliance with state requirements and to provide consultation, training, and technical assistance to childcare providers.

Additionally, DECAL's Child Care Services provides regular customer-focused licensing orientation sessions for prospective centers and group day care homes. The agency also responds to inquiries from parents, concerned citizens, and others regarding child care programs, and processes criminal records checks on all directors and family day care home providers.

IV. HEAD START

Head Start is the primary federal early care and learning program. Created in 1964 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's anti-poverty agenda, Head Start provides low-income children with education, nutrition, health, and social services at special centers based in schools and community settings throughout the country. The Head Start program provides grants to local public and private non-profit and for-profit agencies to provide comprehensive child development services to economically disadvantaged children and families, with a special focus on helping preschoolers develop the early reading and math skills they need to be successful in school. Significant emphasis is placed on the involvement of parents in local Head Start programs. Parents are engaged in their children's learning and also provided services to make progress toward their own educational, literacy, and employment goals.

In 1995, the Early Head Start program was established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to serve children from birth to three years of age in recognition of the mounting evidence that the earliest years matter a great deal to children's growth and development. The mission of Early Head Start is to promote healthy prenatal outcomes for pregnant women, enhance the development of very young children, and promote healthy family functioning.

Table 3.3. Head Start Funding and Enrollment in the Southern States, FY2006

STATE	FEDERAL FUNDING ALLOCATION	HEAD START ENROLLMENT
Texas	\$473,492,116	67,875
Florida	\$260,267,233	35,514
Georgia	\$166,671,579	23,508
Mississippi	\$159,927,300	26,657
Louisiana	\$144,311,959	21,910
North Carolina	\$139,734,909	18,963
Tennessee	\$118,039,184	16,397
Kentucky	\$106,670,143	16,071
Alabama	\$105,467,527	16,374
Virginia	\$98,071,628	13,679
South Carolina	\$81,602,767	12,248
Oklahoma	\$80,166,186	13,474
Maryland	\$77,183,646	10,347
Arkansas	\$63,823,662	10,778
West Virginia	\$50,091,048	7,610
Delaware	\$13,091,612	2,071

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Head Start Program Fact Sheet," www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb.

Eligibility Criteria

Each state’s Head Start program is responsible for determining its own eligibility criteria. Family income is one key factor in determining eligibility. The federal poverty guidelines are used to evaluate

family income. Head Start programs may elect to target their services to a particular population to best meet the unique needs of families and children in their community.

Table 3.4. Head Start Initiatives in Georgia

PROGRAM	PARTNERS	FUNCTION	SIGNIFICANCE
The Georgia Head Start Quality Initiative	Georgia Head Start Association; Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; United States Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start	Provides training and technical assistance to Head Start grantees that are striving for NAEYC accreditation	To date, 123 Head Start centers have received NAEYC accreditation, which represents 40 percent of the total number of Georgia accredited centers
The Georgia Head Start Extended Services Initiative	Georgia Head Start Association; Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; Georgia Department of Human Resources	Provides funding to Head Start grantees to assist them in providing full-day, full-year services to Head Start children and families	During the 2006-07 program year, this initiative provided funding for full-day, full-year extended services to more than 3,000 additional Head Start children and their families
The Georgia Head Start Licensing Initiative	Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; Georgia Department of Human Resources; Georgia Fire Marshall’s Office; and United States Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start	Provides training, technical assistance, and financial resources to Head Start grantees that want to voluntarily apply for state childcare licensure	To date, 192 Head Start centers have been licensed through the Georgia Head Start Licensing Initiative.
The Georgia Head Start/Child Care Partnership Initiative	Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; the Georgia Head Start Association; United States Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start; Smart Start Georgia	Provides Head Start grantees and selected child care programs the opportunity to build working relationships through a series of training activities	Creates a climate of collaboration among childcare administrators trained in Head Start Performance Standards
The Georgia Professional Development Initiative	Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; Technical College System of Georgia; Georgia Department of Human Resources; Smart Start Georgia; and United States Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start	Coordinates the professional development activities of Georgia Head Start, Pre-K, and other early care and education programs	This model has trained more than 4,000 staff in programs that work with families of children enrolled in Georgia Pre-K and Head Start programs

Source: Bright From the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, “Georgia Head Start Special Initiatives,” www.decal.state.ga.us.

Table 3.5. Georgia Head Start Total Enrollment, 2006-07 Program Year

	NUMBER ENROLLED	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT
Children	26,661	99.3%
Pregnant Women	188	0.7%
TOTAL	26,849	100%

Source: Georgia Head Start Association, Head Start Program Information Report for the 2006-2007 Program Year

Table 3.6. Georgia Head Start Enrollment of Children by Age, 2006-07 Program Year

AGE	NUMBER ENROLLED	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT
Less than 1 year old	403	1.5
1 year old	482	1.8%
2 years old	625	2.3%
3 years old	13,712	51.4%
4 years old	10,984	41.2%
5 years and older	455	1.7%

Source: Georgia Head Start Association, Head Start Program Information Report for the 2006-2007 Program Year

Table 3.7. Georgia Head Start Total Enrollment by Race, 2006-07 Program Year

RACE	NUMBER ENROLLED	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT
African American	18,767	69.9%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	24	0.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	131	0.5%
Multi-racial	777	2.9%
Other/Unspecified	1,464	5.5%
White	5,686	21.2%

Source: Georgia Head Start Association, Head Start Program Information Report for the 2006-2007 Program Year

Head Start Funding

Nationally, more than six billion dollars was spent on Head Start in 2006. This federal funding represents a significant investment for low income children. Table 3.3 shows the federal Head Start allocations and enrollments for the 16 states that comprise the Southern Regional Education Board. Among these states, Georgia had the third highest Head Start funding and enrollment.

The Georgia Head Start State Collaboration Office

In Georgia, Head Start is coordinated by the Head Start State Collaboration Office which is housed in Bright From the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. The Collaboration office works to build partnerships between federally-funded Head Start programs and state-funded early childhood programs and to align all early education and care programs in Georgia with the state's K-12 education standards. Additional support for Head Start programs comes from the Georgia Head Start Association, a statewide, non-profit advocacy organization committed to strengthening the state's commitment to quality early childhood programs. Table 3.4 provides an overview of several Georgia Head Start Initiatives.

Georgia's Head Start program serves primarily three and four-year-olds. During the 2006-07 program year, 39 organizations including school systems, community action agencies, and universities operated Head Start and Early Head Start programs in Georgia. Services were provided to children and families in 157 of 159 counties in the state.²² Tables 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7 provide additional enrollment figures for Georgia's Head Start program.

V. PREKINDERGARTEN (PRE-K)

Prekindergarten programs are perhaps the most visible of states' commitments to early learning. Across the country, more states are realizing the benefits of making investments in prekindergarten and the attention to this policy issue is growing. This section addresses three important policy components of prekindergarten programs: access, quality, and funding.

²² Head Start Program Information Report for the 2006-2007 Program Year State Level Summary Report, 2007.

Access

There is a debate in many states as to whether prekindergarten (pre-K) programs should be universal and open to all children or targeted to certain populations such as low-income level children. Universal programs are often more accepted politically; however, some experts argue that pre-K should only be offered to those children and families who most need the service.

Nationally, state-funded prekindergarten reached more children during the 2006-07 school year than ever before with total enrollments exceeding one million for the first time. State pre-K programs served 1,026,037 children in 38 states across the country. Overall, 22 percent of 4-year-olds and 3 percent of 3-year-olds were served in state-funded pre-K programs across the country during the 2006-07 school year. This represented an enrollment increase of more than 80,000 children from the previous year.²³ Table 3.8 provides selected facts regarding the national context of prekindergarten.

All but one of the 16 states that comprise the Southern Regional Education Board currently operate state-funded prekindergarten programs. Yet, as revealed in Figure 3.3, there is great varia-

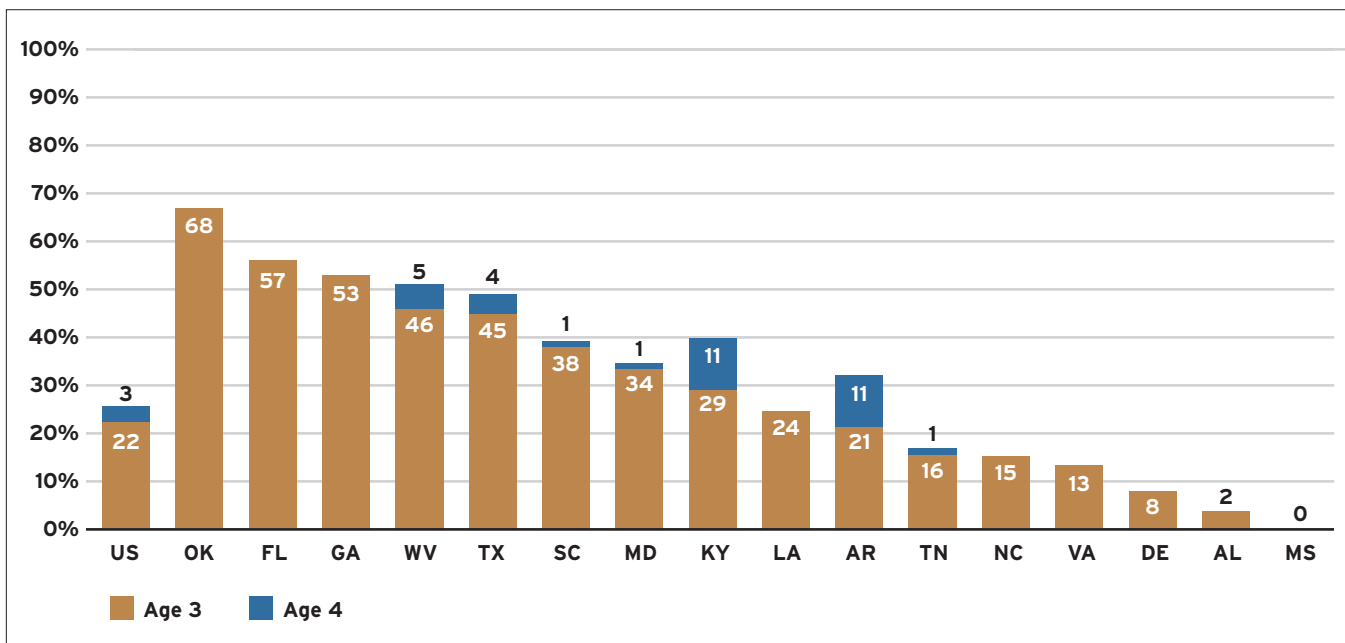
tion among the enrollment of children in pre-K programs throughout the South.

Table 3.8. National Facts on Prekindergarten Programs

- Nationally, about 70 percent of children in state-funded pre-K are served in a school setting. For- and non-profit childcare centers, Head Start centers, and faith-based providers serve the other 30 percent.
- Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma are the only states that currently make pre-K available to all four year olds.
- Twelve states with state-funded pre-K do not offer their programs to three year olds, including Georgia.
- Twelve states have no state-funded pre-K program at all.

Source: W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2007* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

Figure 3.3. Percentage of Children Enrolled in State Prekindergarten in SREB States, 2006-07



Source: W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2007* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

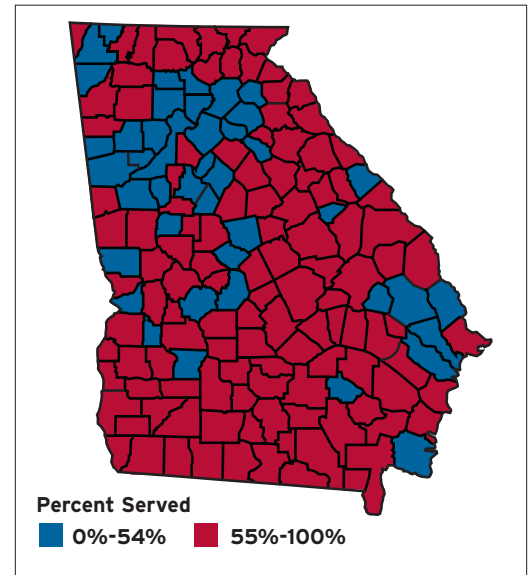
²³ W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2007* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

In 1993, Georgia piloted a targeted prekindergarten program for 750 at-risk 4-year-olds with funds from the state education budget. In 1995, the program was opened to all children whose parents wanted them to participate, and Georgia became the first state in the country to offer universal prekindergarten. The program is currently funded through the Georgia state lottery funds.

Georgia's pre-K Program operates as a public-private partnership with program providers from public school systems, private schools, Head Start agencies, postsecondary vocational technical institutes, private and state colleges, private non-profit and for-profit child care learning centers, military bases, faith based institutions, state colleges, and universities. Participating private programs must meet state childcare licensing requirements and public school systems must meet public school accreditation standards.²⁴ Georgia pre-K serves children considered at-risk as well as their more socio-economically advantaged counterparts while also serving children from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Though Georgia's program is designed to be universal, it has consistently served just over half of the total four-year-old population. During the 2006-07 school year, Georgia state prekindergarten served approximately 74,000 four-year-olds which was 53 percent of the total four-year-old popula-

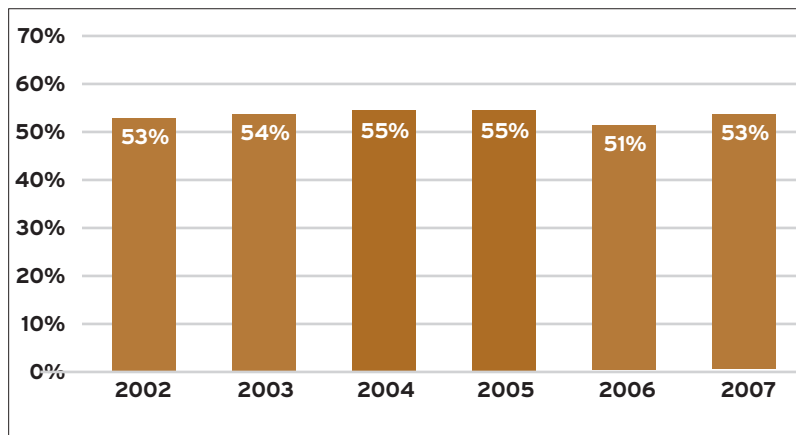
Figure 3.4. Georgia Public Prekindergarten Enrollment by County, 2006 Percentage of Four-Year-Olds Served



Source: Southern Education Foundation, Miles to Go: Georgia Prekindergarten, (Atlanta, GA 2007).

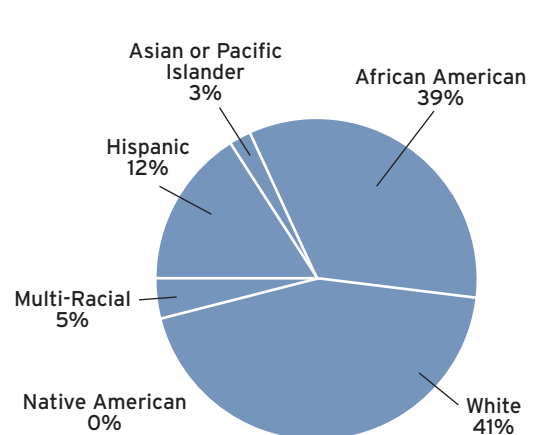
tion. Annual increases in the number of pre-K slots available have not kept pace with the growth of Georgia's four-year-old population and the demand for program services. Thus, access to the state-funded program continues to be problematic for large urban and metropolitan areas as illustrated in Figure 3.4. Additional enrollment data for Georgia's prekindergarten is shown in Figures 3.5 and 3.6.

Figure 3.5. Percent of Four-Year-Olds Enrolled in Georgia Public Prekindergarten



Source: W. Steven Barnett et al., The State of Preschool 2007 (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

Figure 3.6. Georgia's Public Prekindergarten Enrollment by Ethnicity, 2006-07



Source: Bright From the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

²⁴ Bright from the Start, 2008; National Institute for Early Education Research, 2008

Quality

The quality of a prekindergarten program plays a critical role in determining its value to the children who attend it and the taxpayers who support it. All states require classrooms to meet some specific quality standards to receive state prekindergarten funds.²⁵ The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) developed ten research-based quality standards for prekindergarten programs, which are used to compare quality standards across the states. These standards are presented in Table 3.9.²⁶

Currently, two states – North Carolina and Alabama – meet all 10 of the NIEER quality benchmarks. Eight additional states have pre-K initiatives that met nine of the 10 benchmarks – Arkansas, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington. Georgia meets all but two of the quality standards, as detailed in Table 3.10. In Georgia, pre-K classroom teachers are not required to have a bachelor’s degree, nor are assistant teachers required to have a Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent degree. Georgia only requires an Associates Degree or Montessori diploma for lead Pre-K classroom teachers and a High School Diploma (HSD) for assistant teachers.

Georgia’s Pre-K Program classrooms must have a lead teacher and an assistant teacher. Teachers must be certified in early childhood/elementary education, have a four-year degree in elementary education or a related field, or have an associate’s/technical school degree in early childcare and education. For the 2006-07 school year, 59 percent of Georgia pre-K teachers were certified in early childhood/elementary education; 20 percent had a four year degree in elementary education or a related field; and 21 percent had an associate’s or technical school degree in early childcare and education.

In Georgia, local prekindergarten program quality is evaluated using the Georgia Pre-K Quality Assessment (PQA). Pre-K consultants, who provide technical assistance and complete the PQA, visit each pre-K site a minimum of two times during the

Table 3.9. National Institute for Early Education Research Quality Standards for Prekindergarten

Standards to impact program rigor and maximize learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instructional and comprehensive curriculum 2. Maximum class size of 20 3. Child-to-staff ratio of 10-1
Standards that stress the importance of well-qualified teachers and classroom aides	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Bachelor's degrees for lead teachers 5. Special training beyond a bachelor's degree for lead teachers 6. Child Development Associate (CDA) certificates for assistant teachers 7. Staff members complete at least 15 hours of professional development annually
Standards that encompass the health and well being of the whole child	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Health and safety services, and vision, hearing and health screenings 9. Minimum of one meal per day
Standard that addresses accountability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Routine site visits by state agencies

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research, www.nieer.org.

school year. The PQA assesses quality in program administration, learning environment, instruction and curriculum, and kindergarten readiness. The scores are also used in planning needs-based training for instructional staff.

Funding

During the 2006-07 school year, states continued to increase funding for state prekindergarten due to both increased enrollments and a focus on improving program quality. Some states provide funding for their pre-K programs entirely through the use of state dollars while others employ additional local and/or federal dollars to reach adequate funding levels.²⁷

In 2007, Georgia ranked 15th among the 50 states in the level of state resources devoted to prekindergarten programs. Georgia’s per-pupil pre-K expenditure for 2007 was \$4,111 which is approximately half of what the state invests in each K-12

²⁵ W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2007* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2007* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

Table 3.10. Georgia's Prekindergarten Program Quality, as Measured by NIEER Standards, 2007

POLICY	GEORGIA'S STATE REQUIREMENT	NIEER QUALITY BENCHMARK	DOES GA MEET BENCHMARK?
Early learning standards	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	✓
Teacher degree	Associate's Degree (AA) or Montessori diploma	Bachelor's Degree (BA)	
Teacher specialized training	Degree in Early Childhood Education or meet Montessori requirements	Specializing in pre-K	✓
Assistant teacher degree	High School Diploma*	Child Development Associate (CDA) or Equivalent	
Teacher in-service	15 clock hours	At least 15 hours/year	✓
Maximum class size	20	20 or lower	✓
Staff-child ratio	1:10	1:10 or better	✓
Screening/referral and support services	Vision, hearing, health, developmental, dental, immunizations, and support services	Vision, hearing, health; and at least 1 support service	✓
Meals	Lunch	At least 1/day	✓
Monitoring	Site visits and other monitoring	Site visits	

Source: W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2007* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

* Beginning in the 2008-09 school year, teacher assistants will be required to hold at least a Child Development Associate (CDA).

pupil. Table 3.11 presents the rankings and state pre-K resources of the 16 states that comprise the Southern Regional Education Board.²⁸ Also shown in the table are states' per pupil expenditures for public elementary and secondary (K-12) education. In almost all states, investments in state prekindergarten students are a mere fraction of those for K-12 students.

Unlike Georgia's K-12 education system, the state's public prekindergarten program is not funded through general state revenues. Instead, Georgia funds its prekindergarten program through

state lottery funds. These lottery funds are also used for HOPE higher education scholarships which could lead to competition in the future between these two programs. There are advantages to the use of lottery funds which can produce significant levels of revenue and do not require annual legislative approval. Yet some critics of the lottery funding mechanism have voiced concerns that lotteries are a regressive tax (i.e., low-income individuals typically play the lottery more than those of higher-incomes). Additionally, there is no guaranteed level of funding as lottery revenue fluctuates with the market.²⁹

²⁸ Steve Suitts, "Pre-Kindergarten in the South," (Southern Education Foundation, 2007).

²⁹ Diane Stone, "Funding the Future: States' Approaches to Pre-K Finance," (Pre-K Now, 2008).

Table 3.11. State Prekindergarten and K-12 Per-Pupil Expenditures, 2006 and 2007

RANK AMONG ALL 50 STATES FOR PRE-K RESOURCES	STATE	STATE FUNDING PER CHILD ENROLLED IN PRE-K, 2007	STATE PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURE FOR K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION, FY 2006
–	United States	\$3,642	\$9,154
5	Delaware	\$6,745	\$11,621
8	Louisiana	\$5,138	\$8,486
9	Alabama	\$5,056	\$7,683
10	North Carolina	\$4,712	\$7,396
11	West Virginia	\$4,441	\$9,440
12	Arkansas	\$4,316	\$8,030
13	Tennessee	\$4,168	\$7,004
15	Georgia	\$4,111	\$8,595
17	Virginia	\$3,577	\$9,445
19	Kentucky	\$3,474	\$7,668
21	Oklahoma	\$3,433	\$6,941
27	Maryland	\$2,918	\$10,909
28	Texas	\$2,836	\$7,480
34	Florida	\$2,335	\$7,812
38	South Carolina	\$1,600	\$8,120
N/A	Mississippi	N/A	\$7,173

Source: W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2007* (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007); National Center for Education Statistics, *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2005-06 (Fiscal Year 2006)*, April 2008.

Note: For each category, data given represents the most current figures available. Pre-K resources and K-12 resources are given for different years and are meant for general comparison only.

VI. OTHER EARLY LEARNING INITIATIVES IN GEORGIA

Though Georgia's state-funded universal prekindergarten program has garnered the most attention from the public and from state and national policymakers, Georgia has other initiatives that focus on improving the early life experiences of our children. Two of these initiatives are Smart Start Georgia and Better Brains for Babies.

Smart Start Georgia

Smart Start Georgia (SSG) was established in 1999 as the Georgia Early Learning Initiative (GELI) to develop and implement a long-term plan to increase school readiness in Georgia with the aim of having all children in Georgia ready to succeed in school by the time they enter kindergarten.³⁰ SSG is a public/private partnership made up of the state of Georgia, the Joseph B. Whitehead Foundation,

³⁰ Smart Start Georgia, <http://www.smartstartga.org/home.php>, 2008.

United Ways of Georgia, the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, and more than 40 additional supporting organizations.

Smart Start fosters quality early learning experiences for Georgia's pre-school generation and promotes lifetime learning to ensure greater achievement throughout the child's education and life. With innovative state and local programs and outreach initiatives, Smart Start has developed and maintains strong commitments and partnerships with Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, childcare providers, parents, training and technical assistance organizations, and government and business leaders. Smart Start Georgia implements a number of programs statewide, including:

- A salary incentive program designed to encourage early care professionals to increase their level of education;
- A statewide scholarship program that provides financial support for early care and education professionals as they continue their education;
- Training and technical assistance for early care professionals;
- A substitute teacher program for early care and education centers; and
- Early literacy programs.

Better Brains for Babies

Better Brains for Babies (BBB) is a collaboration of state and local, public and private organizations dedicated to promoting awareness and education about the importance of early brain development in the healthy growth and development of infants and young children in Georgia. The organization strives to disseminate research-based information about the importance of early brain development in infants and young children in order to educate parents, practitioners, policy makers, and the general public about practices and policies that can maximize the potential of Georgia's children.³¹

The work of Better Brains for Babies focuses on four key areas:

- **Education:** to develop and deliver a clear and consistent science-based message about the impact of early brain development on children's overall growth and development.
- **Training:** to educate and support volunteer Better Brains for Babies trainers who will actively disseminate information on early brain development throughout the state.
- **Advocacy:** to influence early childhood practices, policies, and funding decisions in Georgia through the use of early brain development research findings.
- **Evaluation:** to evaluate the impact of Better Brains for Babies' education, training, and advocacy efforts throughout the state.

EMERGING POLICY CONCERNS FOR EARLY LEARNING

Given our research-based understanding of the conditions that influence whether children get off to a promising or an ominous start in life, state policymakers have the capability to craft legislation that can improve the societal conditions and family supports of our youngest citizens. Policy decisions made at the state and federal levels can ensure that mothers and children receive adequate prenatal services and healthcare, provide family access to child development information and services, and guide significant investments to public health insurance and child care subsidies.

Across the country, the majority of state-level early learning policies focus on prekindergarten initiatives for four-year-olds. Research underscores the benefits of additional programs and larger-scale efforts for the population of children aged zero to three. In order for families and states to reap the most benefit from any early learning program, policymakers must carefully consider the access and funding of state initiatives. All families need access to affordable, quality options for early learning.

It is clear that the quality of early learning matters. In order to earn the dividend from early childhood initiatives, states must make an intentional investment in quality early learning opportunities.

³¹ Better Brains for Babies www.bbbgeorgia.org, 2008.