

## UEN 2024 Issue Brief Preschool

**Background:** Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program (SVPP), first implemented in 2007-08, has grown to serve over 33,000 four-year-olds in 2023-24. PK enrollment was lower than kindergarten by about 8,000 students, meaning nearly a quarter of kindergarteners may not have been served in SVPP. Reading proficiently by the end of third grade is critical. Quality preschool helps students reach this important benchmark. Preschool enrollment swings experienced during the pandemic had significant budget impacts for school districts. Hold harmless budget provisions and programs to support early literacy are more important than ever in supporting Iowa's youngest students to academic success.

**Why does preschool matter?** The Perry Preschool Project, 40 years later, documents \$17 savings for every dollar invested (earlier findings of \$8 saved for every dollar invested are also often cited). Once considered a strategy just to support working parents with childcare needs, the majority of states now view access to high-quality PK programs as a critical long-term economic investment in the future workforce. Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf> Oct. 2014: *Six rigorous, long-term evaluation studies have found that children who participated in high-quality preschool programs were:*

- 25% less likely to drop out of school.
- 40% less likely to become a teen parent.
- 50% less likely to be placed in special education.
- 60% less likely to never attend college.
- 70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime.

Sarah Daily, *Initiatives from Preschool to Third Grade: A Policymaker's Guide*, shows reductions in costly outcomes that quality preschool prevents. (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, October 2014) <http://www.ecs.org/docs/early-learning-primer.pdf>. The National Conference of State Legislatures quotes studies on long-term return on investment. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/new-research-early-education-as-economic-investme.aspx>

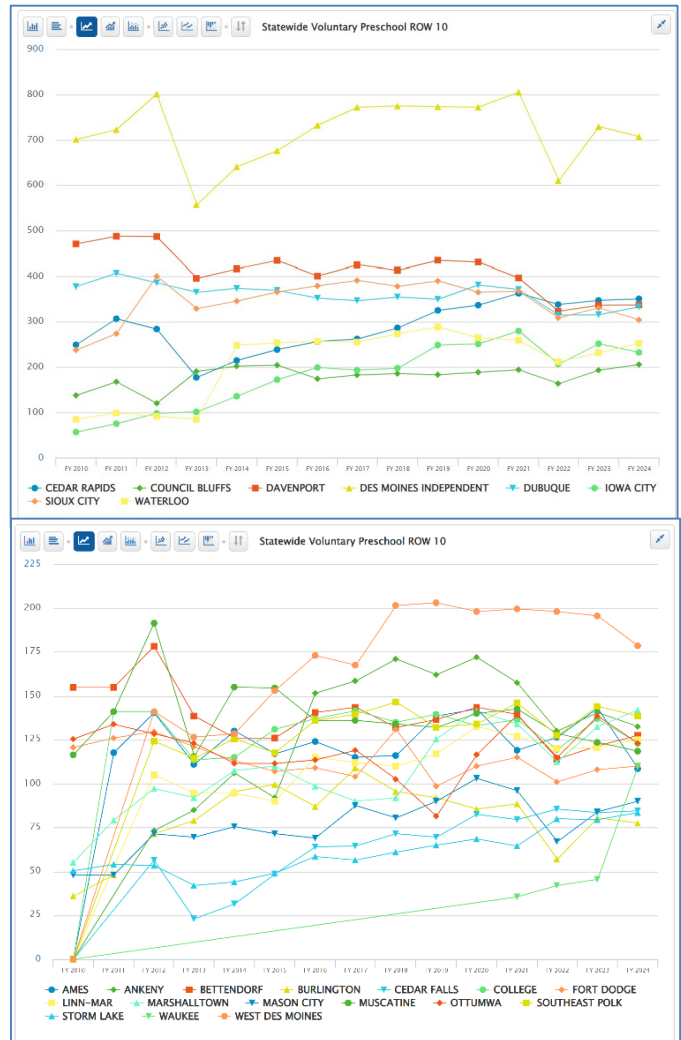
Another study shows improved behavior and social skills: the Journal of Research in Childhood Education, *The Long Term Benefits*, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285> demonstrates for low-income students in quality preschool compared to low-income students without the PK experience, the PK group had fewer behavior issues, referrals, better attendance, initially more special education in kindergarten (identified earlier) but less special education services by fourth grade than the control group.

**Barriers to Expansion.** Preschool funding in the formula is paid entirely with state funds, based on the prior year's enrollment of 4-year-olds in the program on October 1. Although 3-year-olds and 5-year-olds may be served, they are not counted for weighting/funding purposes. Unlike the regular program enrollment for K-12 budget purposes, there is no adjustment for enrollment growth known as on-time funding modified supplemental amount if more PK students are served than in the prior year.

Districts are also prohibited from using general fund dollars to pay for PK expenses, leaving parent pay or grant funding as the only remaining options. Studies estimate that young children from low-income families may hear between 4 and 30 million fewer words than children from professional families, creating a vocabulary gap that can impact later literacy development (Gilkerson/Lena Research Foundation 2017 and Hart and Risley 1995 respectively). Additionally, 4-year-olds from low-income families may need other supports, such as full-day programs or wrap-around care to allow families full employment. For non-English-speaking families, preschool is critical, yet the 0.5 weighting is not enough to cover the costs of translators, staff and additional materials to support immigrant families to fully engage with their students, let alone the full-day programming that would jump-start their language development.

PK enrollment rebounded beginning in the 2021-22 school year following the pandemic, yet many districts still remain under pre-pandemic PK totals; the founding eight UEN districts combined are still 9% below FY 2020 PK enrollment. Other UEN districts are still collectively 2% below, but without Waukee’s recently expanded program, 7% below).

**Workforce and Childcare:** Full-day preschool with a 1.0 weighting for lower-income and non-English-speaking 4-year-olds is a win-win-win: 1) a win for students with improved academic success down the road, 2) a win for the business community when parents can fully engage in employment and freed up childcare slots can serve waiting lists enabling other parents to work, and 3) a win for taxpayers as students with quality preschool are 50% less likely to experience the costs of long-term special education typically borne by property taxpayers. Quality preschool is an excellent example of the maxim that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.



**Quality Preschool:** Iowa’s preschool program, initiated with strong support from the business community nearly a decade ago, should generate 1.0 weighting for full-day programming, including wrap-around services and childcare for low-income and non-English speaking students. Such funding delivers a proven return on investment for both student achievement and taxpayers, while also freeing up childcare slots for younger children and allowing parents to fully participate in full-time employment. Additionally, schools should be allowed to use General Fund dollars or generate spending authority to pay for preschool expansion.