



## PRE-K FOR EVERY CHILD: A MATTER OF FAIRNESS

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**FIRST FOCUS**

*MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY*



Every child in America should have the opportunity to attend high-quality pre-kindergarten (pre-K). As a nation, we can no longer afford to ignore the evidence that some of the most important learning takes place in the years before kindergarten. Children who attend high-quality pre-K are more successful in elementary school and beyond. Too much time and too many limited school resources are spent helping kids who are behind at the start of their academic careers catch up, rather than challenging all students to meet their full potential. In fact, every dollar spent on pre-K returns, on average, \$7 in later cost-savings and benefits.<sup>1</sup> The reason is simple: what we don't spend early in a child's school career costs us later in grade repetition, special education, low productivity, and higher crime rates. It's time we put limited education dollars to better use and invest early in every child's education.

Earlier this year, the President put a national spotlight on pre-K in his State of the Union address. Subsequently, his budget request called for a new federal and state partnership to make quality pre-K available to every low-income and moderate-income child in America. His proposal would invest \$75 billion over ten years to help state governments expand access and improve the quality of pre-K. And momentum on pre-K is not only growing at the federal level; this year 27 governors mentioned early childhood education as a priority in their state of the state addresses. Making universally accessible high-quality pre-K a reality is a national priority. Policymakers and the nation cannot afford to wait to expand access to high quality pre-K for every child.

## PRE-K IN THE UNITED STATES

After nearly a decade of steady funding increases to expand pre-K, momentum has stalled in many states, in large part because of the economic downturn. Before the recession, states were on track to continue investing in the expansion of public pre-K to serve more children in high-quality programs. However, state funding has significantly decreased for the past three years, with the biggest drop coming in the 2011-2012 school year.<sup>2</sup> As a result, expansion has come to a halt and enrollment has stalled; between the 2010-2012 school years there was no enrollment increase in public pre-K.

Cuts to funding also negatively impact quality. Presently, 42 percent of children are enrolled in state pre-K programs that meet fewer than half of the benchmarks assessed by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for program quality standards<sup>3</sup> (see text box to the right).<sup>4</sup> Only five states (Alabama,

### NIEER Quality Standards

The ten quality standards benchmarks NIEER uses are meant as a minimum set of criteria drawn up from programs proven effective, not an exhaustive list of all the features of high quality pre-K. NIEER evaluates states based on whether these are required by state law, and some individual centers or programs may consistently exceed their state's standards. The ten benchmarks are:

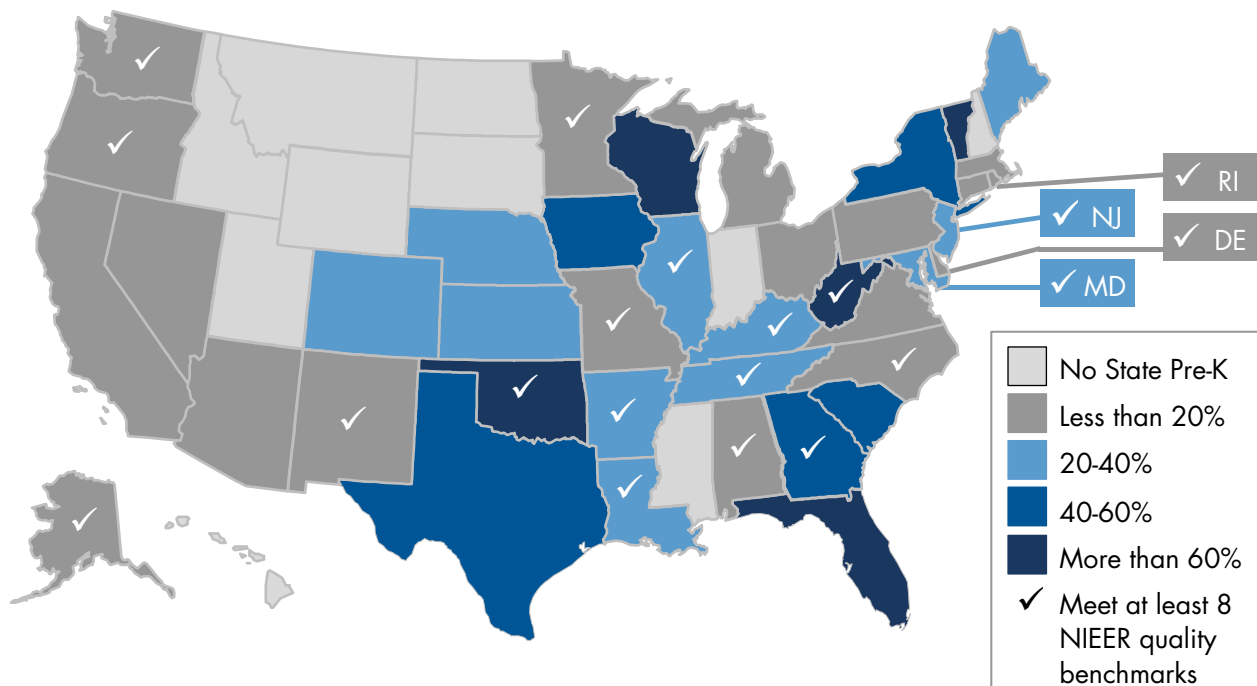
1. State early learning standards must be comprehensive and cover all fundamental areas of the National Education Goals Panel.
2. Lead teacher must have a Bachelor's Degree, at minimum.
3. Lead teacher must have specialized training in a pre-K area.
4. Assistant teacher must have a Child Development Associate's (CDA) degree or equivalent, at minimum.
5. Teacher must receive at least 15 hours/year of in-service professional development and training.
6. Maximum number of children per classroom must be 20 or fewer.
7. Lowest acceptable staff to children in classroom ratio is 1:10.
8. Screenings and referrals for vision, hearing, and health must be required, and at least one additional support service must be provided to families.
9. At least one meal must be provided daily.
10. Site visits must be used to demonstrate ongoing adherence to state program standards.



Alaska, Louisiana, North Carolina and Rhode Island) have pre-K programs that meet all ten of the NIEER quality standards, while ten states met five or fewer of these standards.

Evidence suggests the rate of quality improvement is slowing or even reversing. State funding cuts to pre-K initiatives force choices between reducing the number of children served or undermining program quality, such as by cutting the number of teachers and professional development time.<sup>5</sup> As the map below shows, many states with higher quality programs often have a lower percentage of children enrolled, while states with more children enrolled tend to have lower quality programs. For example, Florida enrolls 79.4 percent of four-year-olds in the state, but only meets three of the ten NIEER quality benchmarks. Only two states that meet eight or more quality benchmarks enroll at least 60 percent of 4-year-olds: Oklahoma (74 percent and 9 benchmarks) and West Virginia (60 percent and 8 benchmarks).<sup>6</sup>

### Map 1: Percent of Four Year Olds Served in State Pre-K



**Source:** National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool 2012*, National Quality Standards Checklist.

This tradeoff between quality and access is unnecessary; all children should have access to high quality early childhood education. States invested in providing broad access to high-quality pre-K see major gains in school readiness and achievement. In New Jersey, for example, the state's Abbott Preschool Program has offered high quality pre-K to all children in the communities with the highest levels of poverty, about 25 percent of the state's children, since 1999. Evaluations show that children who attended Abbott pre-K had decreased grade retention and special education referrals, boosts in vocabulary and math skills in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and improved scores on state-administered achievement tests in later grades compared to children that did not attend.<sup>7</sup> Oklahoma has also implemented voluntary pre-K for all 4-year-olds. Studies of the Oklahoma initiative conducted by researchers at Georgetown University compared children participating in Tulsa, the state's largest school district, to a control group of those who did not participate. They found, relative to the control group, students participating in universal pre-K experienced a 52 percent gain on assessments measuring children's early literacy skills, and a 21 percent increase in scores on assessments of children's pre-math skills, with the most dramatic gains for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and



Hispanic children.<sup>8</sup> More recently, a study of a cohort of children enrolled in Oklahoma's pre-K initiative in 2006 demonstrated, of children who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, those who participated in Oklahoma state pre-K performed better on state math tests in third grade than children who did not participate.<sup>9</sup> These examples demonstrate significant gains in children's achievement can be realized from state run programs offered at scale.

The federal government's largest investment in pre-K is Head Start for children ages 3-5 who are living below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), or an income of \$23,550 for a family of four.<sup>10</sup> Other children, such as those in foster care or children with disabilities, can also qualify, and children living up to 130 percent of poverty may qualify based on local programs. The federal government requires Head Start providers to meet high quality standards. But Head Start, like most state-funded pre-K, falls short of serving all the children who need it. Though investment for Head Start has been growing in recent years, particularly with an additional \$1 billion from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, it has not kept up with demand. It is estimated only 50 percent of eligible children are enrolled in Head Start.<sup>11</sup> With child poverty at near record highs and the economic recovery slow to come to low-income and middle class families, demand for Head Start is still growing.

## PRE-K IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Families facing a limited supply of publicly supported pre-K have the option to send their children to private pre-K programs. But high-quality private pre-K is expensive with an average annual cost of \$8,800,<sup>12</sup> which rivals the cost of tuition at a public university.<sup>13</sup> For a family of three living at FPL in 2013 (household income of \$19,530 per year),<sup>14</sup> the average cost of private pre-K for one child is nearly half of total income. Sending both children to private pre-K would leave the family with less than \$2,000. As a result, higher income families who can afford to send their children to private pre-K often do, while children in lower income and middle class families often cannot attend private pre-K.

Putting the average cost of private pre-K in the context of annual household spending makes it clear why many families can't afford these programs. Using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics average annual expenditure tables from the 2011 Consumer Expenditure Survey<sup>15</sup> and the average annual cost of high quality pre-K above, we can compare what households in each income quintile spend on typical expenses, such as housing, food, and healthcare, with the average cost of private pre-K. Households with income in the lowest 20 percent spend the largest share of their income on housing (\$8,771, or roughly 38 percent of current average expenditures). If a family in this quintile sent one child to private pre-K, it would be the family's largest expense. Figure 1 shows the average annual expenditures for households in the lowest income quintile and total spending for each category. It is no surprise, given these fiscal constraints, only 7 percent of 4-year-olds in this income quintile are enrolled in private pre-K.<sup>16</sup>

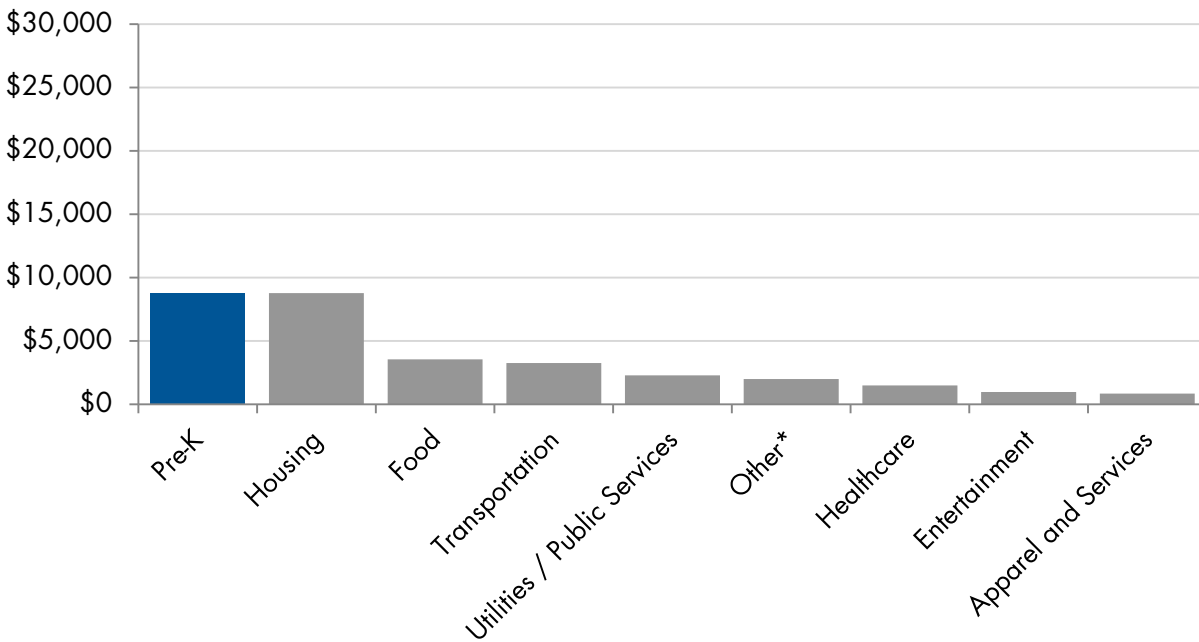
Families living in, or near, poverty are not the only families with difficulty affording private pre-K; it is also challenging for middle class families. As Figure 2 shows, the average cost of high-quality private pre-K would be the second largest expense for a family in the middle quintile. Only 21 percent of 4-year-olds in this quintile are enrolled in a private pre-K program.

Families in the higher income quintiles are more likely to be able to afford high quality private pre-K. As Figure 3 shows, the average cost of sending one child to private high quality pre-K would be the fourth largest expenditure, making up only about 12 percent of all current expenditures. Private pre-K costs are much more manageable for higher income families, so it's no surprise 60 percent of 4-year-olds in this quintile are enrolled in private pre-K.<sup>17</sup>



The cost of high quality private pre-K is prohibitive for many working and middle class families. With family budgets already strained and important expenditures like housing, transportation, and food taking a large share of family income, many families simply cannot afford to send their children to private pre-K.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 1: Lowest Income Quintile (income of \$20,262 or less) Average Annual Expenditures<sup>19</sup>**



\*Other includes reading, education, alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and personal care products.

## PRE-K PARTICIPATION: WHO PARTICIPATES AND WHO DOESN'T?

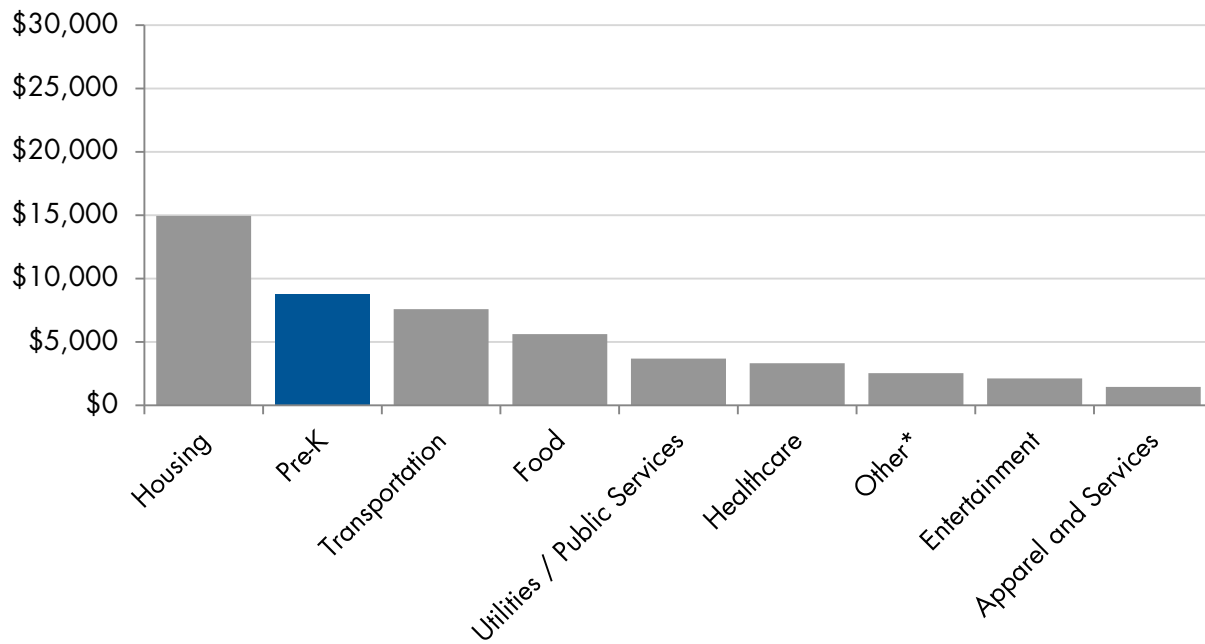
While many children in lower income families are enrolled in Head Start and public pre-K, these programs are not available widely enough for all children to attend. With low rates of private pre-K participation and the high cost of public pre-K, only 64 percent of 4-year-olds in the bottom two income quintiles attend any pre-K program, including lower-quality programs unlikely to produce gains in children’s development and learning.

As Figure 4 shows, 4-year-olds in working poor and middle class families (the bottom three income quintiles) enroll in pre-K at much lower rates than 4-year-olds in the top two income quintiles. Moreover, this data represents an optimistic estimate of pre-K participation for all income quintiles. Other data has estimated participation in center-based child care for 4-year-olds to be much lower.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly for 4-year-olds in the middle quintile, though state-funded pre-K and Head Start serve nearly half of all 4-year-olds, these programs are not available widely enough to serve all children. Even with a higher participation rate in private pre-K than for lower income quintiles, only 69 percent of 4-year-olds in the middle-class attend any pre-K.

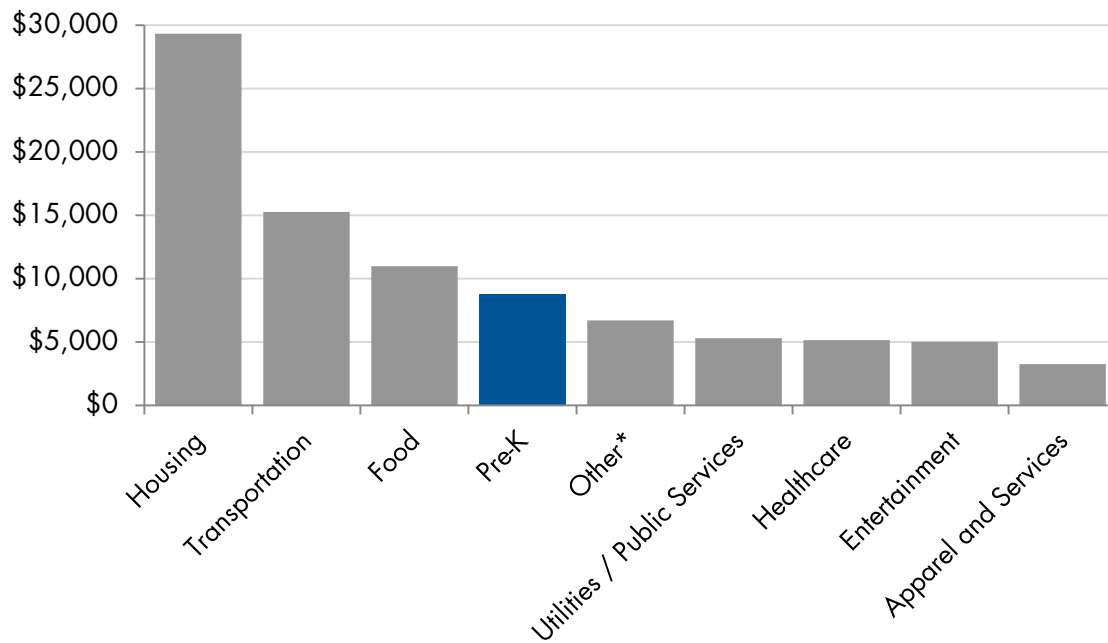


**Figure 2: Middle Income Quintile (income between \$38,521 and \$62,434) Average Annual Expenditures<sup>21</sup>**



\*Other includes reading, education, alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and personal care products.

**Figure 3: Highest Income Quintile (income of \$101,583 or more) Average Annual Expenditures<sup>22</sup>**

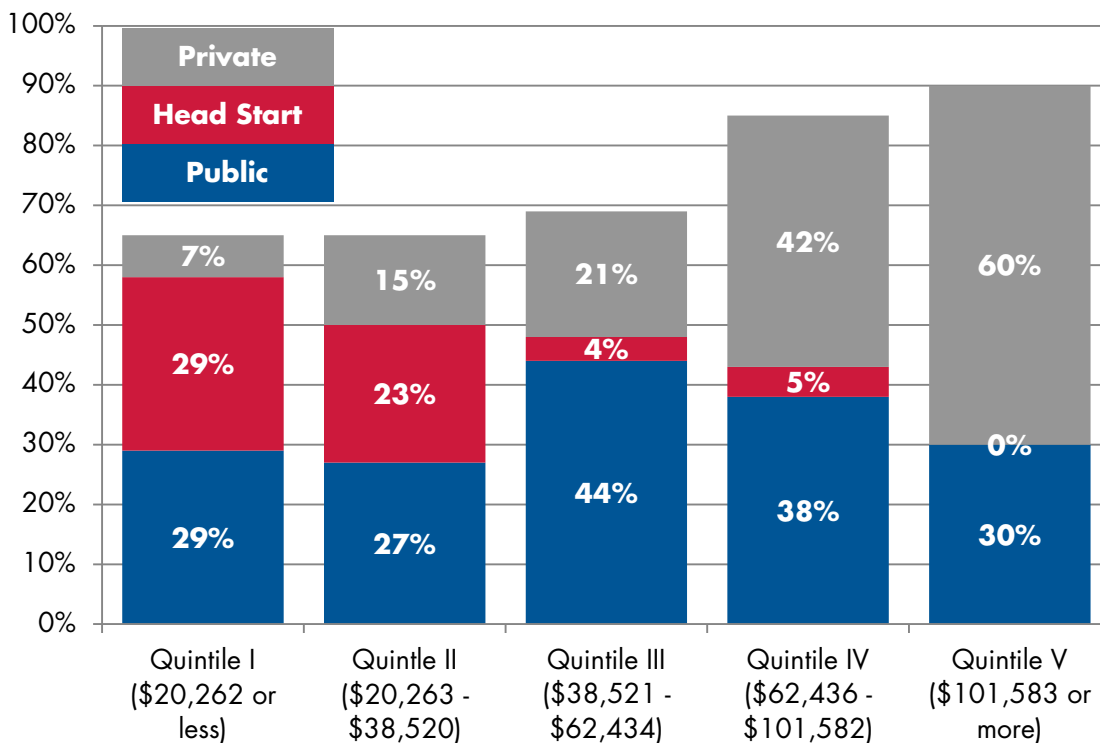


\*Other includes reading, education, alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and personal care products.



On the other hand, 85 percent of 4-year-olds in the second highest quintile and 90 percent in the highest quintile are enrolled in pre-K. While a percentage of 4-year-olds in these quintiles are enrolled in public pre-K, the significantly higher participation rate is largely the result of higher enrollment rates in private pre-K. Families in these quintiles can afford private pre-K, so the families who can't access public pre-K send their children to private programs, and overall participation is very high.

**Figure 4: Pre-K Participation and Type of Program for 4-year-olds by Income Quintile<sup>23</sup>**



With children in families from the lower and middle income quintiles participating in pre-K at lower rates than children in the higher quintiles, the groups of children most often left out are the ones who would benefit most from high quality pre-K.<sup>24</sup> For example, a significantly smaller proportion of Hispanic children are enrolled in any type of early childhood program before they enter kindergarten than any other race.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, while children of immigrants make up nearly a quarter of all children in the United States,<sup>26</sup> they are enrolled in early childhood programs at lower rates than their peers.<sup>27</sup> Children in rural communities also have lower pre-K participation rates compared to children in urban and suburban areas.<sup>28</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Families who cannot afford private sector pre-K and cannot access public pre-K are essentially shut out of the system. Many families can't afford the cost of private pre-K and we lack sufficient investments in public pre-K to ensure access for all families who can't afford high quality private pre-K. This fundamentally unequal access to pre-K places children on dramatically different starting points on their academic and social-emotional development trajectory.<sup>29</sup> Currently, high income families who can send their children to pre-K



often do, while lower income and middle class families are left with overburdened and underfunded public pre-K.

Our nation's children deserve a more equitable and just system that increases access to high-quality pre-K for every child. The status quo, which leaves this opportunity to chance, is unfair and inconsistent with American values. A new federal-state partnership would make high quality publicly funded pre-K more available to low-income and middle-class families. State-federal partnerships help states defray costs, similar to the highly successful Children's Health Insurance Program. It is unfair and unwise to have large numbers of children unable to attend high quality pre-K. This high-quality public pre-K will ensure a child's position at birth does not dictate her ability to attend high quality pre-K, start kindergarten ready to learn on day one, and succeed academically and throughout life with positive outcomes for the entire nation as a result.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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