

The State of Pre-K

2014-2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Pre-K in Mississippi (2014-2015) is the second report in Mississippi First's ground-breaking series by the same name focusing on pre-K access and quality in Mississippi. This report updates our 2011-2012 report on public pre-K and expands it to include information about licensed childcare centers serving four-year-old children. **This report is the first in Mississippi attempting to quantify pre-K access—whether public or private—in every Mississippi community. Additionally, this report is the first to present information about the quality of each school district program according to national benchmarks and to include programmatic information about all licensed childcare centers serving four-year-old children.**

Mississippi First believes that a high-quality pre-K education can be transformational for any student in Mississippi. Our goal is to ensure every child in Mississippi has access to high-quality pre-K. We believe that the data we present in *The State of Pre-K* series makes a compelling case for state investment in early childhood education in Mississippi. Our 2014-2015 report:

- 1) presents a clear picture of the number, types, and characteristics of pre-K providers in each Mississippi community,
- 2) identifies where the need is greatest for access to pre-K,
- 3) identifies where the need is greatest for *high-quality* pre-K, and
- 4) monitors the state's early education progress.

Details on providers, access, quality, and spending for every community are in the full report. Highlights are as follows:

MISSISSIPPI PRE-K PROVIDERS IN 2014-2015

27%

Head Start had the capacity to serve approximately 27% of four-year-olds in the state.

14%

School district programs, including blended Head Start programs, had the capacity to serve 14% of four-year-olds.

37%

The licensed childcare sector reported having the capacity to serve 37% of four-year-olds.

22%

An estimated 22% of four-year-olds in Mississippi lacked access to any licensed pre-K program.

In total, public pre-K programs (school district, Head Start, and state-funded programs) had the capacity to serve an estimated 41% of all four-year-olds in Mississippi in 2014-2015. 4.3% of these children were served in the state-funded collaboratives, comprised of Head Start centers, school districts, licensed childcare, and one parochial school. While public pre-K served more four-year-olds in total, the licensed childcare sector enrolled 28% of Mississippi four-year-olds, more than any other pre-K provider type.

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CHANGES IN THE LANDSCAPE

For four-year-olds who entered public school Kindergarten, overall access to public pre-K statewide was unchanged from a rate of 44% since 2011-2012. However, from 2011-2012 to 2014-2015, access to state-funded and school district pre-K increased offsetting substantial declines in Head Start enrollment. The number of children entering public Kindergarten also declined statewide.

On the community level, public pre-K access increased from 49% to 53.6%, on average. This means that, even though the number of pre-K programs in school districts decreased from 77 to 75 (counting all school district programs including those that charge tuition), those that kept their programs served a higher percentage future public school children. Also, the number of school districts offering full-year, classroom-based pre-K programs free-of-charge for all students increased by 2, from 70 school districts in 2011-2012 to 72 in 2014-2015.

Since our first report, the greatest change in Mississippi's early education landscape has been the advent of state-funded pre-K. In 2013, Mississippi passed the *Early Learning Collaborative Act*, **which funded high-quality pre-K for approximately 1,750 four-year-old children in eleven communities in 2014-2015. On average, the state-funded pre-K program increased access to pre-K in funded communities by 37%.** The program expanded in 2016 to include four new communities.

ACCESS TO NO- OR LOW-COST PRE-K

In our sample, we find that access to publicly funded pre-K is positively associated with high-poverty school districts: the higher the poverty in a district, the higher the access to publicly funded pre-K, on average. Nonetheless, we identified nine communities that have above-average poverty levels but below-average pre-K access. These "focus communities" ranked in order first by access from lowest to highest and then by poverty from largest to smallest are as follows:

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|----|--------------------------------|----|--------------------------------|
| 1) | Nettleton School District | 6) | Forrest County School District |
| 2) | Brookhaven School District | 7) | Pontotoc City School District |
| 3) | North Tippah School District | 8) | Stone County School District |
| 4) | Hancock County School District | 9) | George County School District |
| 5) | Jones County School District | | |

ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-K

Together, licensed childcare and public pre-K programs can provide pre-K access to an estimated 78% of all four-year-old children. Access, however, is only half the battle; children must have access to high-quality programs to reap the benefits of pre-K. Because different provider types do not have a common child outcome measure, Mississippi First could not use child outcome data to compare the quality of all pre-K programs in Mississippi. Instead, this report uses a program standards quality measure—the National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER) 10 benchmarks for a quality state pre-K program—to assess how closely different pre-K programs come to meeting minimum quality standards.

- To gain more information about the quality of school district programs, Mississippi First surveyed 72 of 75 school districts with classroom-based, full-year pre-K accessible to all students (as opposed to programs exclusively for students with special needs). **Of the 18 school district programs meeting 100% of benchmarks for a high-quality pre-K program, 17 were state funded, which includes all of the school districts that received state pre-K dollars.** Most school districts met between 6 and 8 benchmarks and typically lacked such components as requiring teacher assistants to have a Child Development Associate's degree (CDA), requiring pre-K teachers to specialize in early childhood education, and/or requiring teachers to complete at least 15 hours of professional development annually. Additionally, school district programs administer Kindergarten readiness assessments. In the report, we provide this data, but we were unable to use it for comparison purposes because we lacked student-level demographic data to ensure comparisons were fair.

ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-K, CONTINUED

- Although the licensed childcare sector served nearly one-third of all four-year-olds and had the capacity to serve still more, we know next to nothing about the quality of pre-K services available in licensed childcare centers. The only rules governing quality in licensed childcare centers are the Mississippi childcare licensure regulations, which establish the minimum requirements that centers must meet to maintain a state license. **The licensure requirements only mandate the implementation of 5 of the 10 NIEER quality benchmarks, meaning that the public can only know with certainty that licensed childcare centers meet 5 NIEER benchmarks.** Until December 2016, the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) implemented a voluntary quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) called Quality Stars. Only 36% of licensed childcare centers with the capacity to serve four-year-old children participated. Of those, the majority were either not yet rated or 1-star centers; only the 10 centers with 5 stars definitively met at least 6 of the 10 NIEER benchmarks. In 2016, MDHS announced the suspension of the Quality Stars Program, which further exacerbates the problem of assessing licensed childcare quality.
- **The Head Start Performance Framework, which governs all Head Start programs, mandates programs' compliance with 9 of the 10 NIEER benchmarks.** The one missing benchmark is the requirement for teachers in every program to have bachelor's degrees; the Framework instead requires every teacher to have either a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree in early childhood education, child development, or the equivalent.

PRE-K SPENDING

Not only does average pre-K spending vary across program types, but different programs also fund different costs, making it hard to compare average program costs across types.

\$7,400

On average, Head Start spends approximately \$7,400 per child, the most of any of the provider types. However, this figure also includes more expenditure categories, such as for instruction, operations (facilities, maintenance, transportation), comprehensive health services, and administration.

\$4,400

School districts offering full-year, classroom-based pre-K accessible to all students spent an average of \$4,400 per child, but, in most cases, these costs only reflect spending for instruction (teacher salaries, curricula, classroom materials, etc.). Pre-K spending also varied immensely from district to district, ranging from \$1,400 to \$11,000 per child in districts that operate full-year programs.

\$4,300

State-funded collaboratives must spend at least \$4,300 for each child served in a full-day program. The state provides half of this amount while collaboratives must raise the other half. These costs are nearly all instructional.

\$4,400

On average, Mississippi parents paid an annual rate of \$4,400 in licensed childcare tuition for four-year-old children in 2015. While this number is the same as that spent on average by school districts, childcare centers spend their dollars on more comprehensive costs, including program, operations, and administration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mississippi has made great strides in providing opportunities for pre-Kindergarten children in the state, but access to early education is still very limited in some places. On average, 46% of children in 2014-2015 in each community had no access to a public pre-K seat. Moreover, the quality of programs—both public programs and licensed childcare centers—is difficult to assess, and it varies. Moving forward, Mississippi must expand pre-K access while working to build an infrastructure across all four-year-old pre-K providers that defines what quality looks like, identifies high- and low-quality providers, and improves quality when needed. Further, Mississippi should ensure that the assessment of quality of pre-K programs (public and licensed childcare) is aligned to the factors that lead to meaningful outcomes for children. We have three recommendations for early education stakeholders based on the data we have collected and reviewed in this report:

- **Expand the state-funded pre-K program.** The state-funded pre-K program, which enables all providers to participate in a comprehensive community-level pre-K plan, is the fastest way to expand high-quality pre-K. As our quality findings show, in the absence of the state-funded program, children would not have access to programs meeting 10 of 10 of the NIEER benchmarks. Furthermore, the state-funded pre-K programs have increased low- or no-cost access in communities where they are located more rapidly than any other provider—by 37% compared to 24%. The state should continue to support and expand the state-funded program.
- **Support existing programs in meeting the 10 national benchmarks.** Beginning in the 2017-2018 school year, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) will require all school districts operating a pre-K program to meet each of the 10 NIEER benchmarks. Districts will need individualized support to meet these expectations as our review found wide variation in districts' readiness for this new requirement. MDE must execute a strategic plan to ensure that districts can increase quality and implement the new benchmarks with fidelity.
- **Implement a quality assessment system for licensed childcare centers.** Parents and the public must be able to assess the quality of licensed childcare centers, which remain an important part of the early education landscape. We recommend the re-design, rather than the removal, of the Quality Stars Program. MDHS should ensure any new plan includes program quality standards and child outcome measures. Additionally, MDHS should execute a strategic plan to enroll at least 80% of licensed childcare centers into the assessment system.