



# Position Statement on Universal Pre-Kindergarten

The Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children supports voluntary access to publicly-supported Universal Pre-Kindergarten for all children during the two years prior to kindergarten entry.

Universal Pre-Kindergarten, Universal Pre-K, or UPK is an early childhood education opportunity in which parents can voluntarily enroll children three or four years of age, regardless of income or risk factors.

Universal Pre-Kindergarten is a public investment with significant immediate and long-term results for children, families and society. Indeed, Universal Pre-Kindergarten benefits all children, disadvantaged or advantaged. According to leading economists, such as Nobel Laureate James Heckman, investing in high-quality early childhood programs yields large public returns, stronger than those for most other public investments. Universal Pre-Kindergarten is akin to a rising tide that lifts all boats, meaning achievement and positive life outcomes are increased for all children.

While Universal Pre-Kindergarten is “good for all children,” gains are largest for children who otherwise would not have access to high quality preschool or are disadvantaged with risk factors for school failure. At-risk children who participate in quality Pre-Kindergarten are better prepared for success at school entry, less likely to be retained, less likely to need special education services, more likely to graduate from high school, and experience higher academic achievement. Moreover, they are less likely to be involved in crime and delinquency, are at lower risk for teen pregnancy, have greater employment and wage earnings, and have more stable family relationships as adults. Through these benefits, every \$1 invested in high quality Pre-Kindergarten for at-risk children saves taxpayers up to \$17 by the time the children reach age 40.

We believe that:

- Attending Pre-Kindergarten will help ensure that all children come to Kindergarten ready, able, and eager to learn.
- Pre-Kindergarten should be accessible, affordable, and offered to all children regardless of risk factors.
- Universal Pre-Kindergarten can help narrow or outright close the achievement gap at school entry.
- A mixed delivery system of early care and education providers for Universal Pre-Kindergarten that builds on what exists will ensure access and quality for each child, family, and community. Examples include Pre-Kindergarten in child care centers, schools, and home-based regulated providers of group early care and education.
- High quality is essential for the full potential benefits of Universal Pre-Kindergarten to be achieved. High quality Pre-Kindergarten includes:
  - Bachelor’s degreed teachers with qualified classroom assistants.
  - A well-defined professional development and mentoring system.
  - Low adult to child ratios of 1:8.
  - Maximum group size of 18 children.
  - Engagement of families, including two-way communication, parent education opportunities, family programming, and participation in program governance.
  - Curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, and meets the State Board of Education’s *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten*, aligned with the K-12 curriculum and national guidelines for curriculum and accreditation.
  - Comprehensive services, such as health, nutrition, developmental screening, and support for other special needs are provided according to need.
- While all children profit from high-quality Universal Pre-Kindergarten services, children at-risk of school failure benefit from more intense and comprehensive services.
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## Key Points:

- Pre-Kindergarten should be for all children, not just some.
- At-risk children need additional comprehensive services.
- At-risk children benefit from more intense services.
- Quality is essential to the effectiveness of Universal Pre-Kindergarten.
- Investment in early childhood education is the best societal investment.

## Frequently Asked Questions:

### ***Would Universal Pre-Kindergarten be mandatory?***

No, Universal Pre-Kindergarten by design would be a voluntary program. Universal access means that all children would be eligible for the program. Currently in Michigan and the nation, funded programs are largely “targeted” to children with risk factors, such as low-income or disability. There is space in programs for many but not all of these children. This also “leaves out” many children of the working poor and middle class whose families cannot afford to pay what quality Pre-Kindergarten would cost. In turn, without sufficient resources, centers and preschools cannot afford to build high quality programs, which further limits access to quality Pre-Kindergarten for families. Universal Pre-Kindergarten could help break this vicious cycle.

### ***Would Universal Pre-Kindergarten only be associated with public school systems?***

No, just as the option to enroll a child in Pre-Kindergarten is optional, parents would have the choice of a number of high-quality providers. Some Pre-Kindergarten sites might be associated with public schools, and others associated with licensed child care settings. However, all settings would be required to meet the high-quality Pre-Kindergarten standards in order to participate.

### ***Does one year of Pre-Kindergarten make that much of a difference?***

Yes, The evaluations of Michigan’s Great Start Readiness Program have shown that a targeted program for at-risk four year olds can improve children’s preparedness for kindergarten, scores on reading and math at fourth grade, and retention and math classes through eighth grade. Other national studies also indicate even greater effects when the programs serve children for at least the two years before kindergarten entry. Those studies show effects well into the individuals’ forties.

### ***Won’t Pre-Kindergarten just be forcing academics on a younger group of children; whatever happened to childhood?***

Quality Pre-Kindergarten focuses on all the domains of development, as well as all the curriculum areas. Developmentally appropriate programs are geared to the age of the children, each individual child’s level of functioning, and the diverse cultural context of the community and nation. Programs must include the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual domains, as well as the development of positive approaches to learning. Curriculum is designed to address state and national early learning expectations and to prepare children for success with the K-12 grade level content expectations.

## Michigan Stories:

***From the director of a private non-profit preschool:*** I have had parents break down in tears when they learn what our program costs. It’s gut-wrenching not to be able to afford a high-quality preschool for your child. How much better for children and families if we decided as a country that, “You can’t say you can’t play” and leveled the playing field so no child would be turned away.

***From an early childhood director in an elementary school:*** When the three- and four-year-olds arrived...a deeper sense of community arose throughout the building, as staff and students alike took these youngest children under their collective wing. I would say, too, that rather than curriculum being pushed down on these little ones, there was a positive ‘push’ up of developmentally-appropriate practices. After all, everyone was getting at least a glimpse of life as a three- or four-year-old.

***From the director of a state funded preschool program:*** When a family doesn’t qualify, and there aren’t any other options, the emotional wallop can be the same as being told as a child, “You can’t come to my birthday party.” It’s devastating.

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