



An Equitable Approach for Pre-K Enrollment

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+++++ INTRODUCTION +++++

Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) has positive long-term impact on a child's education, particularly for traditionally under-performing groups such as English Language Learners (ELLs) and students from low-income households. Enrollment in Pre-K has a great influence on a student's reading level and the ability to comprehend words and vocabulary in text. Every dollar invested in Pre-K programs has the potential to return 10 cents annually over the lifetime of a child.¹

The 20 members of the Teach Plus New Mexico are teachers from across 12 districts in New Mexico. We teach in a wide variety of traditional district and public charter schools and are invested in how state education policy affects our classrooms and our students. We chose to participate in Teach Plus to learn more about education policy, and become active participants in the education decision-making process. Our collective experience with diverse student populations has demonstrated the need for equitable access to high-quality Pre-K in every district in New Mexico. Our perspective as current teachers in Pre-K through 12 New Mexico public schools is important as our state works to address the need to expand high-quality early childhood programs.

Currently, just under 42 percent of New Mexico's districts offer the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) or the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) sponsored Pre-K programs. Unfortunately, one-fifth of New Mexico's children live in areas of concentrated poverty, with four counties—McKinley (67 percent), Luna (62 percent), Curry (45 percent), and Doña Ana (44 percent)—reporting rates of children living in poverty higher than that of the state as a whole. According to the FY18 NMPED Pre-K Contact Information form, of the four, only McKinley and Luna offered NMPED approved Pre-K programs in their districts. Commendably, however, New Mexico has increased state appropriations for Pre-K services from roughly \$5 million in 2005 to over \$45 million in 2016, establishing our state nationally as 16th for Pre-K access for four-year-olds and 20th for state spending.²

Despite advances in program expansion and support, the lack of accessible opportunities for families, especially in poor districts, to enroll their children in full-day programs remains a problem. Our research examined the benefits that Pre-K brings to young children and their families and, based on this, we developed a priority list for providing targeted Pre-K support for children that would benefit from this the most. The use of a statewide checklist, based on demographic and socioeconomic information, would ensure that most-in-need four-year old children in New Mexico receive a timely, high-quality education through a priority enrollment process. The goal in creating this checklist is to guide the PED, CYFD, and school districts to intentionally select at-risk students, as identified in this report, into high-quality Pre-K programs.

+++++ METHODOLOGY +++++

In our research, we conducted a review of literature on the effect of Pre-K learning and students who benefit most from extended learning through Pre-K. We collected statewide data looking at the needs of our student population, including demographic data from districts, the NMPED, and the Child Youth and Families Department (CYFD) to determine current processes for admittance into a Pre-K program for each individual student. Additionally, we referenced national data to quantify the benefits of Pre-K in various states and student population contexts.

+++++ SUMMARY OF RESEARCH +++++

- + Some states have shown that as much as 49 percent of students who participated in high-quality Pre-K programs were less likely to be placed in special education through second grade compared to their peers who did not attend Pre-K.³
- + Children in poor families are two percent more likely to be identified with a learning disability compared to non-poor children.⁴
- + 14.6 percent of students enrolled in New Mexico public schools were identified as ELL in school year 2014-2015.⁵ This population is often affected by poverty and their educational outcomes suffer as a result.⁶
- + According to a 2010 report on homeless youth, 60 percent were school-age and 40 percent were under the age of six years old. "Children experiencing homelessness are four times more likely to show delayed development and twice as likely to have learning disabilities."⁷
- + Frequent relocations and family member deployments can create inconsistencies in a child's education as well as challenges to a child's social and emotional well-being, as families are moved across states or even across different countries. According to National Public Radio, currently there are two million military children who are constantly moved throughout the country.⁸
- + Children who attend Pre-K have higher scores in math and reading than their peers, are 44 percent less likely to be retained, and 29 percent more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who do not attend Pre-K. Students who attended Pre-K rather than kindergarten alone showed an 11 percent increase in reading proficiency in third grade.⁹
- + A study conducted by The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) concluded that high-quality Pre-K on its own can close the achievement gap by 20 percent.¹⁰
- + According to the NMPED, two-thirds of children enrolled in Pre-K by a district or charter school must live in the attendance area of a Title 1 school. Currently, there are no New Mexico Pre-K programs (PED or CYFD) utilizing the same checklist or criteria to enroll children in Pre-K.

+++++++ CHECKLIST RECOMMENDATIONS ++++++

Based on our findings, we recommend that a consistent checklist be utilized statewide to identify students most in need of Pre-K services, particularly as programs expand and funding is augmented. Linking a common methodology for enrolling Pre-K students to evidence of increased learning in math and reading among New Mexico's most vulnerable student subgroups would enable the NMPED and other state agencies to make efficacious use of limited financial and human capital resources.

Putting a universal checklist into practice will ensure more equitable process for programs to enroll four year-olds throughout the state based on research-driven needs assessment. A checklist to target Pre-K programs to high-need students will also help gather data to assess how well areas of need are aligned with the allocation of resources statewide.

STATEWIDE CHECKLIST FOR PRE-K ENROLLMENT

1. Students who receive special education services in rural and smaller districts (who currently don't have access to an inclusion setting).
2. Students who are English language learners.
3. Students whose families are on welfare or are low socioeconomic status (SES).
4. Students who are homeless or in foster care.
5. Students with a parent enrolled in the armed forces in the United States, whether active duty or a parent who was killed on active duty.

In the following section, we provide New Mexico-specific research that highlights each of our recommendations for the checklist above. The recommendation areas for prioritizing Pre-K access include research and context, and rationale for why we chose each of the five items.

RECOMMENDATION 1: STUDENTS WHO RECEIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN RURAL AND SMALLER DISTRICTS (WHO CURRENTLY DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO AN INCLUSION SETTING).

RESEARCH AND CONTEXT

Over one-third of all schools in New Mexico are located in rural areas, and approximately 21 percent of students in rural areas have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) compared to 19.9 percent in non-rural areas.¹¹ Overall, there are 4,494 children with disabilities, ages three through five, living in New Mexico.¹² Many preschool-age students living in rural areas in New Mexico are provided special education services in settings without peers because they do not have access to New Mexico Pre-K programs in their districts. Children are often referred to segregated special education settings or are served in their homes. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, "Preschool children with disabilities have difficulty accessing early childhood special education services in inclusive settings. In 2013, more than half (54.3 percent) of preschool children with disabilities received early childhood special education services in settings separate from their peers without disabilities. Data trends over the past three decades indicate that the percentage of preschool children with disabilities who receive early childhood special education services in general has remained largely unchanged."¹³

RATIONALE

Students in rural areas who have been identified with special learning needs should have access to high-quality Pre-K programs including access to a classroom setting where they can interact with their peers in order to address their needs both academically and socially before they enter primary school. Providing equitable access to this subgroup in particular is of paramount importance, as high school graduation rates for students with learning disabilities in New Mexico (59.3 percent) compared to the national average (64.6 percent) present the largest gap of any special student population, including ELL and low SES students.¹⁴

RECOMMENDATION 2: STUDENTS WHO ARE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS.

RESEARCH AND CONTEXT

In 2014-15 school year, 9.4 percent of public school students in the U.S. were English language learners.¹⁵ The same year, New Mexico was one of the states in the west with the highest percentages (10.0 or more) of public schools students identified as English language learners (ELLs). These students are affected by poverty, and their educational outcomes often suffer as a result.¹⁶ In the 2015-2016 school year in New Mexico, districts enrolled 9,254, or 33.3 percent, of students in state Pre-K programs. However, preschool for Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and ELL students continues to lack adequate state support in response to their growing populations.¹⁷ Research from the Center of Public Education has found that students who attend Pre-K, “increase [their] chances of being able to make literal inferences by 21 percent,” a necessary skill to be a proficient reader by 3rd grade.¹⁸

RATIONALE

ELL students need access to high-quality early education in order to improve their learning and development.¹⁹ Prioritizing access to Pre-K programs for ELL students will promote academic achievement and future success for the ELL population and their communities.²⁰

RECOMMENDATION 3: STUDENTS WHOSE FAMILIES ARE ON WELFARE OR ARE LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SES).

RESEARCH AND CONTEXT

New Mexico has one of the highest rates of childhood poverty, reporting 30 percent compared to 19 percent nationwide. Between 2016 and 2017, the proportion of New Mexico children living in poverty increased by 4,000 children from the previous year based on the federal poverty threshold. Among New Mexico children under five years old, the rate was even worse, increasing from 32 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2016, while the national rate dropped from 23 to 21 percent. The gap in New Mexico’s childhood poverty widens for minority students, with Hispanic and Native American families far more likely to live in poverty than their White and non-Hispanic counterparts.²¹

RATIONALE

Children identified as poor have less access to high-quality schools or opportunities to attend Pre-K. Poverty is one of the contributing factors to New Mexico's depressed economy.²² It can also be a barrier to a child's education as it is a contributor to emotional, social, and behavioral problems that can inhibit a child's learning ability.²³ The Center for American Progress reports that children in poverty show higher rates of academic failure, an increased likelihood of repeating a grade, and are "about 10 times as likely to drop out of high school."²⁴ These concerning statistics can be influenced and decreased with early education opportunities such as access to high-quality Pre-K programs.

RECOMMENDATION 4: STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS OR IN FOSTER CARE.

RESEARCH AND CONTEXT

Education for students who are homeless or in foster care is often inconsistent as these students move in search of shelters or are moved from home to home in the foster care system. According to a 2010 report on homeless youth, 60 percent were school-age and 40 percent were under the age of six years old. "Children experiencing homelessness are four times more likely to show delayed development and twice as likely to have learning disabilities."²⁵ In New Mexico, 22,463 children age 17 and under are homeless.²⁶ In addition, in 2017, 2,677 children were in the foster care system with 1,133 under the age of five.²⁷

RATIONALE

"The constant barrage of stressful and traumatic experiences has profound effects on their development and ability to learn, ultimately affecting their success in life."²⁸ In order to provide students who are homeless or in foster care with consistency, allowing them access to Pre-K and early intervention can have a significant impact on their education as well as their social and emotional well-being.

RECOMMENDATION 5: STUDENTS WITH A PARENT ENROLLED IN THE ARMED FORCES IN THE UNITED STATES, WHETHER ACTIVE DUTY OR A PARENT WHO WAS KILLED ON ACTIVE DUTY.

RESEARCH AND CONTEXT

There are four military bases located in New Mexico and the state hosts 11,485 active duty military members as well as their families.²⁹ Frequent relocations and family member deployments can create inconsistencies in a child's education as well as challenges to a child's social and emotional well-being. Military children will change schools an average of six to nine times throughout their education.³⁰

Access to Pre-K is vital for continued academic success. Children who attend Pre-K have higher scores in math and reading than their peers, are 44 percent less likely to be retained, and 29 percent more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who do not attend Pre-K.³¹ Currently, NMPED and CYFD do not target Pre-K programs toward military families, who often cite unique challenges to accessing these vital services. The Pew Center on the States found that 29 percent of military families across the country cite cost as the biggest barrier for military children in need of Pre-K programs, while another 29 percent cite waiting lists, and 11 percent cite quality issues. Only 18 percent of active duty military families surveyed reported no major barriers to enrolling their children in early childhood education and care.³²

RATIONALE

Military families are often excluded from early childhood education benefits because they do not meet eligibility requirements for some state-sponsored programs. In addition to academic benefits, Pre-K for military children develops a student's social and emotional well-being and provides supports for these students who often deal with change and frequent parental absences. We recommend that New Mexico increase military families' access to high-quality Pre-K programs by identifying children of military personnel as a high-priority subgroup eligible for services in New Mexico.

+++++ CONCLUSION +++++

We have noted the benefits of early education and its impact on a child's education as well as on the populations who should first have access to Pre-K services. Using a common New Mexico Pre-K checklist will help prioritize enrollment for most-in-need students based on disabilities, English and native language proficiency, living on welfare or low socioeconomic status, being homeless or in foster care, or as a child of a member in the armed forces. A statewide checklist for Pre-K will help ensure a more effective approach to determining which students will be prioritized for Pre-K services while high-quality Pre-K continues to expand and be made available to all children in New Mexico. It will ensure fair access to high-quality early childhood education for all four-year-old children in New Mexico, as well as increased efficiency in tying funding to student populations with the greatest needs.

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