A theme running through this issue is the importance of having qualified teachers in preschool classrooms. In Illinois, where plans call for launching the nation’s first program to make state-funded preschool education available to all 3- and 4-year-olds, an issue of concern is whether there will be enough qualified teachers to serve the 32,000 additional preschoolers the program is projected to bring to the classroom when fully implemented. As the article on page 3 explains, a NIEER-funded study has shown there is likely to be more than enough teachers if one condition is met—that teachers are paid a fair wage for the education and expertise they bring to the table.

States like Arkansas are making progress by investing in teacher education and increased access to preschool education out in the country as well as in the cities. Developing a well-educated and adequately supported teacher workforce grows in importance as more states and communities move toward providing high-quality preschool education for all children. An important new book, A Vision for Universal Preschool Education, by noted Yale University scholar and NIEER Scientific Advisory Board member Edward Zigler and colleagues (see page 9) serves as a guide for policy-makers on what constitutes high-quality preschool education. In it, University of North Carolina researchers Richard M. Clifford (also a NIEER Scientific Advisory Board member) and Kelly L. Maxwell address teacher quality and supply. According to their analysis, if a voluntary pre-K program were made available to all 4-year-olds in the U.S., the country would need 180,500 lead teachers. That’s a tall order. And not all states are in the favorable position Illinois finds itself when it comes to teacher supply.

As high-quality pre-K is made available to more children, there is little doubt that the nation will need additional highly capable preschool teachers sooner rather than later. Analysts can analyze and policymakers deem that higher qualifications are required, but at the end of the day, the answer to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers boils down to this—pay them and they will come.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research supports early childhood education initiatives by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. NIEER is one component of a larger early education initiative designed, funded and managed by The Pew Charitable Trusts.
What Pre-K Teacher Shortage?

Amid Rising Demand, Illinois Finds Teachers Who Say, “Pay Us and We Will Come”

It has almost become an article of faith that the rapid expansion in preschool programs brings with it a shortage of qualified pre-K teachers. However, when that notion was put to the test by a study in Illinois, researchers found that, even with rising demand from the state’s new Preschool for All program, there should be enough teachers—as long as salaries reflect teacher’s training and education.

The NIEER-funded study Pipelines and Pools: Meeting the Demand for Early Childhood Teachers in Illinois, looked at the supply of teachers coming through college (the pipeline) and the supply of already-credentialed teachers (the reserve pool). When the researchers compared the sum of the pipeline and the reserve pool with overall projected demand, they found that teacher supply should not be a problem.

“The important takeaway is that we can make Preschool for All work,” says the report’s lead author, Jennifer Presley of the Illinois Education Research Council, the organization conducting the study. “Our data have dissolved the myth that early childhood teachers didn’t want to work in early childhood centers,” she says. Indeed, Presley and her colleagues found a majority of teachers willing to consider such settings.

When the researchers surveyed the reserve pool, teachers who are already qualified to teach pre-K but for various reasons are not doing so, they found that 83 percent expressed a willingness to work in an early childhood center setting under certain conditions.

Pay that is commensurate with teacher education was the chief condition. Yet salary expectations weren’t unrealistic. Almost half of reserve pool respondents said they required less than $40,000 to take a full-year position. Another 29 percent wanted $40,000–$49,999, with respondents from Chicago, Cook County, Northeastern Illinois and out of state requiring higher salaries than those who live elsewhere. Of those interested solely in a teacher position, 52 percent required annual minimum salaries between $20,000 and $39,999. Nearly half said they are interested in staying employed 4 to 10 years, and another 34 percent indicated they expect to stay longer.

There is little doubt that the reserve pool will be needed as Governor Blagojevich’s Preschool for All plan brings an additional 32,000 children into state pre-K. The governor has shown a willingness to deliver the funding needed. The new plan will allocate $135 million more to state-funded pre-K, making room for about 10,000 more 3- and 4-year-olds annually for each of the next three years. That’s in addition to the $90 million already provided for state-funded pre-K in Illinois. Both public schools and community-based centers qualify for the funding as long as the provider has certified teachers and salaries commensurate with the local school district.

While some of the demand will be met by newly minted early childhood teachers, Illinois hasn’t seen a big leap in the number of bachelor’s and master’s degrees conferred. When Presley and her colleagues compared the number of new teachers coming out of the pipeline with the total number in it during any one year, it was clear that “leakage” of teacher candidates is taking place. She hopes, through additional research, to locate the leaks and identify what prevents students from completing degree programs.

The concern voiced by some that tapping new graduates for pre-K will leave elementary schools understaffed doesn’t bother Presley. She says there is an abundance of graduates qualified to teach K–8 coming out of college, enough to readily meet demand. Nevertheless, she recommends higher education institutions begin looking carefully at where they’re channeling their students and where the job opportunities lie.

Illinois will need to look beyond its supply of new college graduates to those not working in early education but who already hold the necessary certification. A model constructed for the study predicts the need for an additional 800 teachers in the next three years. Recruiting one-quarter of the reserve pool would net all but a fraction of those, with the remaining teachers coming from new graduates. The exception may be in Chicago, where more difficulty finding enough qualified teachers is anticipated, since its reserve pool is smaller than elsewhere and its members are on average older. That makes Chicago more reliant on the pipeline of newly certified teachers, which hasn’t grown significantly in recent years. One potential problem the study found is that teacher preparation programs are concentrated in private institutions, which award 78 percent of the city’s early education degrees. That could make many programs inaccessible due to cost or location.

It’s insights such as these that make Presley’s research on the teacher pipeline worth the effort. Knowing that there’s likely to be enough teachers to fill demand and developing strategies to improve pipeline effective-ness and deal with regional challenges will go a long way toward ensuring that Preschool for All delivers on its promise.
Sizing Up Early Ed’s Rural Challenge

New Analysis Paints a Troubling Picture Out in the Country, Where Programs (and Children) are Few and Far Between

For Louise Davis, the disparities in rural early childhood education are an immediate, daily reality. “Many of our children have never seen a puzzle before and have no idea what to do when they do see one,” she says. “People own no property. There’s nothing, except an occasional TV the kids watch.”

Davis is trying to change that, house by house, with a technical assistance program in Mississippi called Nurturing Homes, which provides rural child care providers with toys, books and other learning materials. The program, which operates out of the state extension service, also offers providers regular coaching to show them how best to support children’s language, literacy and overall healthy development. “The children know us as the ‘book ladies,’ and they get so excited when we come,” says Davis. “So do the adults. They were doing the best they could before. But they just didn’t have any property, nothing at all.”

The main struggle in many rural communities, in fact, is just making the ends meet. Many single parents work two jobs with low wages just to stay afloat. Without a high school diploma themselves, few own books, much less have the time to read to their children. “If it’s a question between keeping the lights on and books, the lights always win,” says Cathy Grace, head of the National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives at Mississippi State University.

Given such circumstances, it’s not surprising that many children growing up in rural areas would lack the language and literacy skills of children growing up in urban and suburban areas. Yet until recently, policymakers have paid little heed to the plight of rural children. That’s partly because the stories like those of Louise Davis were anecdotal. No one had gathered the data to paint a comprehensive picture of early childhood education in rural America.

Until now, that is. This year, the National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives and Child Trends published the first comprehensive data on the subject—and it’s not a pretty picture. Rural children lag far behind their non-rural peers in key literacy skills. Specifically, they are:

- Far less likely to recognize letters,
- Far less familiar with the beginning sounds of words, and
- Far less familiar with books and reading.

As a result, they are far more likely to land in special education classes in kindergarten than children growing up in the cities and suburbs of America. The consequences for African-American children in rural communities are particularly severe—only 54 percent were proficient in letter recognition when they entered kindergarten. The new data also reveal that Native American and Alaskan native children are at severe risk of school failure.

“The gaps are real and they are wide,” says Grace, who published the new data in chartbook form with one goal in mind. “With these chartbooks available, the evidence is no longer anecdotal. Policymakers can now be held accountable for decisions they make around rural children. They can no longer say, ‘We didn’t know this.’”

The new analysis is drawn from nationally representative subsets of data about rural children collected as part of the well-known Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS). The researchers looked at data collected at entry to kindergarten, as well as data collected starting at birth. The data provided a window on a wide range of indicators about child well-being in rural America, from exposure to second-hand smoke to exposure to positive discipline.

Rural children did relatively well on some measures when compared to their non-rural counterparts. African-American children across the rural South, for example, were more likely to attend a Head Start program than many urban black children. Rural children also fared well in reports of social competence. And their kindergarten classes tended to be in safer neighborhoods and with smaller classes than those in suburbs and cities.

Yet the deficits in language and literacy create huge barriers to success in school. “We now know that we have a big job to do,” says Grace, “if we want to make sure that rural children enter kindergarten with the skills they need to

By the Numbers: Rural vs. Non-Rural Kids

Today, hundreds of teachers to early childhood teachers. Scholarships and training about a decade ago to provide an effort launched by Arkansas grew our own workforce,” says Glenda Bean, head of the Southern Early Childhood Association and long-time advocate for early care and education in Arkansas. “In Arkansas, we basically invested in new facilities and experiments in another,” says Bean. “What you learn over time is that you need to be very sensitive to the communities, very community-specific to make this work. When you come in with resources and work collaboratively, you can get a lot done.”

Collaboration is key to the success of the Nurturing Homes initiative in rural Mississippi, which has reached 500 rural child care providers in the last three years. “Everyone knows the extension service, so we weren’t a threat,” says Davis. “And many providers are excited about both the resources and the learning we bring. The coaches don’t just focus on learning outcomes—they also teach about health and safety, let providers know about the food program. We know we are improving quality on many fronts.”

That is exactly the hope of the researchers at the National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives who created the new data and chartbooks. “We know that children need and which skills they lack,” says Grace. “And we know a lot about how to work in rural communities. This data just shows us that we need to get to work.”

“The children know us as the ‘book ladies,’ and they get so excited when we come. So do the adults. They were doing the best they could before. But they just didn’t have any property, nothing at all.”

Louise Davis, Nurturing Homes

in rural Arkansas now have a credential. “That was the first step, and it’s paying big dividends,” Bean says.

The state has also helped spur expansion of early care and education across the state by providing grants to local communities to provide services. Georgia similarly provides grants and support to local communities, and has an active initiative underway to create a qualified workforce. “It’s heartening and exciting to see these new efforts,” says Bean. “What you learn over time is that you need to be very sensitive to the communities, very community-specific to make this work. When you come in with resources and work collaboratively, you can get a lot done.”

Situation Report: Pre-K One Year After Katrina

A year after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, returning residents continue to face an acute shortage of child care and preschool education. With 80 percent of licensed early care and education centers in Orleans Parish and many in Mississippi’s three coastal counties still closed, nearly every program currently open is filled to capacity. The prospect of not finding quality services—or any services, for that matter—is a factor that continues to prevent families from returning.

About 3,000 licensed child care facilities in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi were affected by Katrina, as well as an unknown number of home day care providers. So severe was the damage at many that local health departments ordered them closed. Many still await restoration and have not reopened. As a result, some services to preschool children and their families—such as child care, Parents as Teachers programs and early intervention—are now operating from scattered facilities instead of localized centers.

Like many residents in Katrina’s path, much-needed child care professionals have been displaced to neighboring states. In Mississippi, an informal system has been developed to transfer staff to centers less affected by Katrina while those more devastated are being restored. The Gulf Coast Child Care Resource and Referral Agency is helping child care professionals by connecting them with employment opportunities, recovery resources, and training options. Child care program directors predict the shortage of qualified staff will grow as more centers are reopened and more families return home.

Meanwhile, Katrina’s hard lessons are being put to use as organizations work to develop a more efficient crisis response system. The University of Missouri and Mississippi State University continue to develop the Early Childhood Atlas, a system that uses a central child care database and geographic inputs to perform spatial analysis in anticipation of and in reaction to storm damage. The National Association for Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies is working with a variety of agencies to develop a nationwide child care emergency planning initiative. A planning guide is forthcoming.
Indiana Takes Another Run at Full-Day K

While many states are implementing or considering preschool programs, Indiana seems stuck moving kindergarten forward. Not only is Indiana one of the few remaining states without a state-funded preschool program, it is also still engaged in the debate over implementing full-day kindergarten. That debate focuses on the push to expand from half-day to full-day classes for kindergartners. Two governors have tried and failed in the full-day K effort, but current Governor Mitch Daniels, who saved that battle until his third year of office when the state has a fiscal surplus, is widely seen to have momentum on his side.

Currently, the state pays only for half-day programs, while districts offering full-day kindergarten rely on federal money, grants or their own budgets to do so. With tight budgets and growing demand for full-day classes, many schools have been charging parents fees to allow their children to stay for the full day. That arrangement nearly ended when a state Supreme Court ruling in March declared that schools cannot charge for programs considered part of a free public education. To get around that, the Indiana Board of Education changed state policy to declare that full-day kindergarten goes beyond basic educational requirements, allowing the fees to continue.

There’s a problem, though. Parents with low incomes are hard pressed to find the money for a full day of schooling. The result: only about a quarter of Indiana’s kindergartners are in full-day programs. While school districts continue to charge fees, Daniels says the state budget can dish out the estimated $150 million needed for full-day kindergarten and he plans to put the issue at the top of his priority list when the General Assembly resumes in January. In the meantime, the Indiana State Teachers Association is on record saying full-day K is not enough. “We need to look at a system of early learning including preschool programs…,” says Dan Clark, deputy executive director of the association.

Missouri Lays Groundwork for P–20 Focus

At the urging of Governor Matt Blunt, Missouri has passed a bill to create a P–20 council aimed at improving both the educational and economic prospects in the state. Not a new concept, P–20 refers to creating a more seamless, effective educational system, beginning in preschool and continuing through college to graduate school. Missouri’s new council will be made up of people with expertise in economic development as well as leaders in primary, secondary and higher education. A key aim is to reduce the gaps between primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate schooling as well as between schooling and the workforce. The council is part of a plan to ensure the state’s education and economic policymakers are working together to help all students succeed and calls for regular coordination between the commissioner of Higher Education, the chair of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education, the commissioner of Education, the president of the State Board of Education, and the director of the Department of Economic Development.

The first task the council must tackle is addressing how best to prepare Missouri students in terms of math, engineering, technology and science (METS) education. The governor also signed into a law a piece of legislation to improve early childhood education in the state—a measure designed to help students be able to reach their full potential. The new law calls for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop standards for high-quality early childhood education, which will apply to all public preschool programs receiving state funds or federal Title I funds. The standards should help close the achievement gap and ensure Missouri children are offered consistent and comprehensive preschool opportunities.
South Carolina Forges Ahead, Obstacles and All

A December state trial court ruling handed South Carolina children a new promise—and its policymakers a new challenge. A long-running lawsuit from rural school districts over educational disparities led to a court order that preschool be provided to at-risk children in those districts and eventually to all at-risk children statewide.

Since then, the state education department, school readiness agencies and advocacy organizations have offered scenarios for expanding pre-K to reach rural and at-risk preschoolers. In her address to the legislature, Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum presented a budget for pre-K and ancillary services averaging $10,000 per child with a total price tag of $288 million.

State lawmakers, however, voted for a decidedly more moderate pilot pre-K program that spends $8 million to deliver services to 8,200 children from low-income families who are currently without access to 4K programs. The program is set to begin in eight of the neediest school districts involved in the court ruling.

The pilot still faces hurdles though. For starters, some of the school districts originally involved in the suit say they simply do not have the classroom space to add 4K programs to their schools. While private providers are now able to provide pre-K for low-income children through the state funds, many of these districts are also short on private preschools.

Other difficulties loom as well, such as recruiting new teachers to fulfill the state’s requirement that lead teachers either have or are working toward a four-year degree. Meanwhile, Tenenbaum has said she intends to see the pilot launched one way or another, even if she has to bring trailers to some sites to serve as temporary classrooms.

UPK Not So Sure a Thing in Massachusetts

Massachusetts had been laying the groundwork for universal preschool education since passage of an enabling statute in 2004. When it came to signing off on program specifics, however, Governor Mitt Romney recently drew back and vetoed the landmark H.4755 that had passed unanimously in the legislature. Titled “An Act Relative to Early Education and Care,” the bill instructed Department of Early Education and Care (DEEC) to come up with a 5-year plan for developing a voluntary, high-quality universal preschool program for all of the state’s 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds.

Even though the bill had no appropriation or source of revenue tied to it, Romney rejected it on a fiscal basis, saying the program could cost taxpayers more than $1 billion and require tax increases. Romney’s veto caught House Education Committee Chair Patricia Haddad and Senate Committee Chair Robert Antioni by surprise. The next opportunity for passage of the UPK legislation is in the January legislative session—after the gubernatorial election this November. Romney isn’t running and Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey, who has cultivated a pro-education image, is the Republican candidate. A Democratic candidate has yet to be chosen.

As originally designed, the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program would be delivered through a mixed system of private providers and public programs, with funding coming from grants, contracts and vouchers. It would be administered by the DEEC. Advocate Amy O’Leary, field director for Strategies for Children, says, “We’re disheartened but we’re not giving up on this.”
Gene I. Maeroff: Fostering the PK–3 Approach

Gene I. Maeroff is a nationally known education writer who has been a national education correspondent at The New York Times, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the founding director of The Hechinger Institute On Education and The Media at Columbia University. Preschool Matters talked with Maeroff about his soon-to-be released book Building Blocks: Making Children Successful in the Early Years of School and his views on how the media cover early childhood education.

Q: As a distinguished journalist covering education, you have seen school reform initiatives come and go, while student achievement has remained remarkably flat for years. Why do you think that is?
A: Schools have tended to accept achievement levels as if they were divinely ordained. In practice, this has meant not doing enough to try to affect outcomes for the students who enter grades trailing peers. Furthermore, there is the impact of life out of the classroom, especially during the years before children reach school. The older the student, the greater the challenge in trying to compensate for social, emotional and cognitive gaps.

Q: Early reports of your new book indicate that you offer a new approach to getting kids on track. What is it?
A: PK–3 represents the imperative to focus intensively on the early grades to help more students reach the fourth grade ready to do fourth grade work. It involves the alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment within each grade and across grades, from pre-K through third grade. I made field visits to sites in a dozen states, gathering examples, anecdotes, and information about how the nation’s schools might concentrate on educating the youngest students.

Q: What are the chief advantages of offering pre-K as part of a PK–3 model?
A: The learning continuum called PK–3 ought to start early, ideally by age 3 and certainly by age 4. There is no reason why all children should not have the opportunity to be in established settings for learning at these ages. The fact that most children now begin at age 5 is purely arbitrary. Pre-K is a time to ensure that more children enter kindergarten with the skills and dispositions that will be advantageous to them. This does not mean sitting young children at desks in rows and lecturing to them, but creating rich environments in which playfulness and curiosity become vehicles for growth.

Q: What is the research behind the theory?
A: There is a body of research that draws on the work of the Perry Preschool Project, Abecedarian, the Chicago Child-Parent program, and other exemplary models to demonstrate that what we normally call pre-K, augmented by reinforcement in the early grades, can produce remarkable and enduring results. The National Institute for Early Education Research has contributed further findings that strengthen this case. The literature also indicates that pre-K without quality follow through is inadequate.

Q: What obstacles do you see standing in the way of achieving the PK–3 continuum?
A: Education at all levels is a captive of the status quo. The main obstacle to a PK–3 emphasis is that it doesn’t now exist in most places. Almost unbelievably, many people don’t seem to understand that schools must lay a foundation for learning in the early grades if more children are to read fluently in the upper elementary grades and find success in secondary schools. PK–3 should have a standing and integrity of its own, whether such programs exist in separate buildings of their own or as part of a school that extends into the middle and even upper elementary grades. There are, of course, financial barriers—more classrooms for the youngest children, more teachers and higher pay for those not already part of the regular faculty, flexible schedules that allow more time for planning and consultation, possibly even smaller classes. But economists have shown that the payoff justifies the extra costs.

Q: What’s your assessment of the way the media report early education issues? What should researchers know about the media who cover these issues?
A: Journalists, like most everyone else, think in traditional ways of K–12 education. The “pre” part of kindergarten implies to many of them—as it does to the general public—that school for 3- or 4-year-olds is an add-on, not a serious part of a continuum. Hechinger, with a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, offers seminars to help journalists think more expansively about the role of pre-K. Researchers who have contact with journalists should point out that many children are put at a disadvantage by entering kindergarten without benefit of pre-K. Moreover, it would be good to help education writers understand what it could mean to long-term outcomes to create a cohesive unit that serves the years from pre-K through third grade. This period accounts for more than one-third of the entire time that a student spends in elementary and secondary education.
Executive Function: A Critical Skill for Preschoolers

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placed on even the youngest children. Some of that pressure has come from changes in the practice of education, such as increased emphasis on math skills at all grade levels, including preschool. Blair believes it is also the by-product of a system focused more on outcomes than on the development of critical thinking skills.

“We all want children to acquire knowledge and it would seem that we need direct instruction, but I think many [researchers] are concerned that too much direct instruction in preschool will be detrimental to [the development of] executive function and problem solving abilities,” says Blair.

Getting EF into the Classroom

In large part, executive function is about conforming to social norms of behavior—for example, the routines of the classroom. Although there are genetic differences that impart greater ability in some kids, researchers believe exposure to the right activities can build the skill. That’s where preschool teachers play a big role both in recognizing the problem and helping kids overcome it. The assessment Blair is developing will help early childhood educators identify kids with weak EF. He is also taking the next step to create teaching methods that build skill in this area, and he wants to incorporate executive function into teacher training.

Claire Lerner, a licensed clinical social worker with Zero to Three, wishes she had known more about EF when her now 15-year-old son was struggling to organize his thoughts and concentrate on schoolwork as a young child. But because it wasn’t a topic people in the field were talking about, she didn’t know what was happening or how to help him. “A lot of kids who seem disorganized early on and have a hard time organizing information and producing functional responses get labeled as inattentive, disorganized or hyperactive,” she says. “The danger is that like any label, it becomes the expectation.”

Lerner stresses how important it is to identify these cognitive challenges before kindergarten so that kids can develop the strong EF skills necessary to manage more demanding academic tasks. Educators can guide play and problem-solving or use a child’s interests to build attention span in activities that are particularly difficult, such as organizing puzzle pieces or bits of information. Says Lerner, “It’s about building connections that allow kids to stay involved in a task in a more elaborate way.”
Early Childhood Education Makes New Inroads in Washington State

New Funding, Cabinet-Level Department and Help from Foundations and Businesses are Brightening the Outlook for Children in the Evergreen State

It has been three years since Washington Governor Christine Gregoire laid the groundwork for the forward momentum that is pushing early childhood education higher on the ladder of priorities in her state. Having run for office as the “education governor,” she launched the Washington Learns initiative in 2003. That’s a visioning effort that tapped business, community, education, government and other leaders to study and re-envision the state’s education system from pre-K through age 20.

One result is this year’s move by Gregoire to create a cabinet-level Department of Early Learning. In doing so, Washington joins a list of states—Massachusetts, Florida, Illinois, Georgia, Indiana and Virginia—that are bringing together historically separate early care and education systems.

That wasn’t the only significant accomplishment in a state where early education has gotten short shrift. The governor is “pushing the [committee] chairs to look at it this way too,” says Karen Tvedt, executive director of Washington Learns’ Early Learning Council.

Tvedt says there has been some resistance, but the governor is “coming up with a system that really thinks differently.”

What that will look like has yet to be determined. Tvedt says there has been discussion about a P–20 system, but no conclusions. A draft report is due out in September and is rumored to include a 10-year plan for education. In the meantime, two state entities, the Division of Child Care and Early Learning and the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, which operates pre-K programs for at-risk kids, have already been moved to the new Department of Early Learning.

Formal authority for child care dollars will transition over the next year, Tvedt says.

Simultaneous public-private efforts

At the same time the nascent idea of single source delivery was taking root in government, foundations and businesses began making significant commitments to fund early education, among them a $90 million, 10-year pledge by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Citing findings from its study, the foundation’s representatives told state lawmakers that nearly one in four Washington children age 5 and under—a stark number—has two or more factors, such as poverty and parental unemployment, that increase the risk of failure in school and beyond. Their pledge was to invest in these kids. There was a catch, however. The Gates Foundation money—along with other private sector contributions—could disappear if the legislature didn’t step up with funding, they warned.

With the governor and legislature making good on their education promises, public and private funding partners joined together in early 2006 to create Thrive by Five Washington, a new organization that fosters parent education and support, child care, preschool, and other early learning programs. The group’s board of directors reads like a who’s who of state powerbrokers: the Gates and Bezos families (of Microsoft and Amazon fame, respectively), Boeing and Wells Fargo executives, former First Lady Mona Locke, and members of the state legislature, among others.

Even with less-than-adequate state funding, school districts in the state remained committed to early education in lean budget years. A 2002 study by the Economic Opportunity Institute (EOI) found that 64 percent of districts provided some pre-K and full-day kindergarten programs beyond those required for special education students.

The picture is brighter now for pre-K than at any time in recent memory. In the 2006 budget, the state legislature allocated more money and added 282 new preschool slots to the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). If successful, Gregoire’s proposed 2007 increase of more
than $2.2 million for ECEAP would bring total spending to $31 million. Whether and how the state appropriates more money for preschool will depend in part on public will. Voters have supported ballot initiatives that limit class sizes and redirect lottery money from the general fund to a fund for construction and maintenance of K–12 schools. Yet they rejected another that would have established a preschool to college fund using a sales tax increase.

Washington used legislation to integrate early care and education under one department while other states have consolidated under executive orders or other non-legislative means. That statutory backing, state advocates believe, will leave the new department less subject to the vagaries of leadership changes and fiscal fortunes. Yet the effort faces a long road ahead. Quality remains an issue, with teacher education and training requirements below where they should be. A large upgrade in early education standards will place greater demands on the colleges and universities that prepare teachers. Still, proponents of reform say the timing is right. A sympathetic governor, rebounding budgets and growing concern in the private sector about the state’s ability to produce an educated workforce have collaborated to move the reform ball forward.

Asked whether the recent events signify a move toward universal pre-K, Tvedt remains noncommittal but acknowledges that a “shift in thinking” could well be afoot. “I think what the governor is saying is if you want a learner-focused, globally competitive education system, you have to start sooner.”

NIEER Welcomes Three Leading Experts

NIEER is pleased to boost its research capability by welcoming three of the nation’s leading experts—Dorothy Strickland, Paul Holland, and Ellen Frede—to senior positions in the organization.

Dr. Ellen Frede

Dr. Ellen Frede, a developmental psychologist and associate professor at The College of New Jersey, joins NIEER as its co-director. Dr. Dorothy Strickland, a nationally-renowned literacy expert and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Chair in Education at Rutgers University, and Dr. Paul Holland, a leading expert in the field of statistical research, join NIEER as senior research fellows.

“Each person brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to NIEER and will strengthen NIEER’s ability to produce and communicate the knowledge base required to ensure that every young American child can receive a good education,” said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. “Each is, in his or her own right, a nationally-recognized expert. The combination of backgrounds and experience provides NIEER an even stronger base from which to perform objective, nonpartisan research designed to inform policy decisions about the education of young children,” he added.

Frede, a developmental psychologist specializing in early childhood education, is a widely published researcher and a former preschool teacher. She also has extensive experience in early childhood program implementation and administration. Prior to joining NIEER, she served as Assistant to the Commissioner for Early Childhood Education at the New Jersey Department of Education. Her office oversaw the implementation of high-quality preschool in more than 150 school districts, serving 50,000 children and their families.

“I’ve always believed that research results should be useful and that policy and practice should be based on sound research,” said Frede. “Serving as co-director at NIEER enables me to combine my passion for improving early learning experiences with my background as a researcher and policymaker. It’s a great opportunity.”

Dr. Paul Holland

Strickland was formerly the Arthur I. Gates Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Also a former classroom teacher, reading consultant and learning disabilities specialist, she is a past president of both the International Reading Association (IRA) and its Reading Hall of Fame. She has numerous publications in the field of reading/language arts.

“Early childhood education is receiving enormous attention in the classroom and in the public policy arena. Much of that attention is focused on early literacy and school readiness. I am pleased to be a part of NIEER, an organization that plays a vital role in providing both research and guidance to support effective and developmentally appropriate practice,” she said.

Holland held the Frederic M. Lord Chair in Measurement and Statistics at Edu-
Executive Function: A Critical Skill for Preschoolers

Impulse Control Greatly Affects School Success

Executive function enables us to plan, initiate and complete activities while controlling our temper, maintaining attention and responding to others.

Children’s ability to control impulses rates high among the skills needed for school readiness. Researchers have long known that self-regulation in children is tied to something larger called executive function (EF), the process that enables us to plan, initiate and complete an activity while controlling temper, maintaining attention and responding to feedback from others. Researchers are now using their knowledge of executive function to create a pedagogical roadmap for teachers so children have a better chance at developing this skill.

Pennsylvania State University Associate Professor Clancy Blair is leading a study to develop a measure for executive function. Too often, he says, preschool curricula focus on “crystallized intelligence” such as knowing numbers or colors rather than teaching children to think analytically. Blair sees preschool activities like circle time or games like red light-green light as excellent ways to teach children to overcome their emotional impulses and develop executive function.

Though the concept has been around for a long time, it wasn’t until relatively recently that it was applied to early childhood. A dearth of research on the subject is one reason for the delay. Lack of an effective assessment for executive functioning ability is another. “We haven’t had one well-normed single measure to use in studies and to evaluate results across studies,” Blair says.

His team of more than 30 researchers is developing and testing a reliable assessment that measures inhibitory control, working memory and attention shifting. A prototype is currently being piloted in North Carolina and Pennsylvania. It will be used this fall when Blair’s team begins assessing the 1,200 soon-to-be 3-year-olds he has been following since birth. Yearly assessments will continue until age 5. Blair hopes to extend the study through second grade and correlate the development of executive function with academic success.

Interest in EF is growing, in part because of the increased academic demands being CONTINUED ON PAGE 9 >>