

Mixed Delivery in State Funded PreK Programs: Summary of the Presentation by NIEER to the California UPK Mixed Delivery Workgroup

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On February 23, 2023, the National Institute for Early Education (NIEER) staff, Lori Connors-Tadros and Tracy Jost, together with Meghan McCormick, MDRC, presented, “Mixed Delivery in State Funded PreK Programs” to the California UPK Mixed Delivery Quality and Access Workgroup. This memo summarizes the information and provides some additional detail on the presentation by the NIEER team on how other states have developed high-quality mixed-delivery PreK settings and shares lessons learned from a forthcoming qualitative study of mixed delivery preschool programs in five states: (Alabama, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, and West Virginia). Meghan McCormick prepared a separate memo for the workgroup.

Current State of State-Funded Mixed Delivery PreK Programs Nationally

For twenty years, NIEER has conducted research on state preschool programs and published the State of Preschool Report. NIEER defines a State Preschool Program as a program that is funded, controlled, and directed by the state; and serves children of preschool age, usually 3 and/or 4 years old.¹ NIEER evaluates state PreK program policies annually based on the latest research on what constitutes high quality PreK using a framework of minimum criteria referred to as “quality standards benchmarks”. State PreK programs are given credit in the State of Preschool Yearbook annually when they have policies in place to meet the quality standards benchmarks.² The ten quality standards benchmarks, and the requirements are as follows:

Benchmark 1: Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS)—comprehensive ELDS that include children’s physical well-being and motor development, social/emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, cognition and general knowledge. The ELDS should be aligned to state standards for younger and older children and with any required child assessments and sensitive to children’s cultural and language backgrounds.

Benchmark 2: Curriculum supports—must provide guidance or an approval process for selecting curricula and support for curricula implementation such as training or technical assistance.

Benchmark 3: Teacher Degree—must require that lead teachers in every classroom have at least a bachelor’s degree.

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(2022). The State of Preschool 2021: State Preschool Yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Additional criteria for how NIEER defines state funded preschool can be found on page 25 of 394.

² California’s state profile page from the 2020-2021 State of Preschool Yearbook found here: https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/California_YB2021.pdf

Benchmark 4: Teacher Specialized Training— must require lead teachers in every classroom have required specialized training in early childhood education and/or child development.

Benchmark 5: Assistant Teacher Degree— must require assistant teachers in every classroom have a CDA or equivalent preparation based on coursework (9 ECE/CD credits).

Benchmark 6: Staff professional development—15 hours of annual in-service training, coaching, and individual professional development plans for assistant and lead teachers required.

Benchmarks 7 & 8: Maximum class size and staff-child ratio—class size of no more than 20 and staff-child ratio of 1:10.

Benchmark 9: Screening and Referrals—vision, health, and one other additional health screening required. Referrals to early intervention if necessary.

Benchmark 10: Continuous Quality Improvement System—data on classroom quality is systematically collected, local and state programs use the information to help improve policy and practice.

How Prevalent is Mixed Delivery PreK

NIEER uses the federal definition of mixed delivery preschool as defined in Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015- *A mixed delivery system is a combination of programs, providers, and settings—such as Head Start, licensed family and center-based child-care programs, public schools, and other community-based organizations—supported by a combination of public and private funds.*³

In the 2020-21 school year, NIEER’s data indicate that approximately 40% of children in state funded PreK are served in non-local education agency (LEA) settings (e.g., childcare or Head Start). All but one state (Hawaii) allows for mixed delivery in public PreK. At least eight states served more than half of children in state-funded preschool outside of public-school settings such as private childcare and Head Start. States are utilizing mixed-delivery approaches as solutions to expand preschool to address issues related to physical space and the workforce.⁴ California’s Master Plan for Early Learning and Care recommends the expansion of a mixed-delivery PreK system, particularly for 3-year-old children experiencing poverty and universally for all four-year-old children.

Family Childcare in State PreK

Including family childcare (FCC) home providers, including those providing services through a Family Childcare Home Education Network (FCCHEN) among the mixed delivery options in a state funded PreK program may offer families’ a wider array of choices in, location or approach to early education. FCC programs typically provide families with days and hours of services that are not typically provided through center-based programs, including evening and weekend care. It may be easier for families to find FCC providers who closely match children and family’s culture and linguistic preferences. For families working non-traditional hours, second language learner households, and those with limited

³ U.S. Department of Education, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2015. <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>

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(2022). The State of Preschool 2021: State Preschool Yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

options for center-based providers (including rural areas that have limited transportation and accessible childcare services), FCC programs may be best suited to meet the families' needs. Nationally FCC providers are most likely to be women and 59% are white⁵, however in California a higher proportion of FCC providers are women of color.⁶

Including FCC providers in the mixed delivery preschool system would help to increase the diversity of the early care and education workforce. When State PreK funding is made available to FCC providers, it creates an opportunity to increase professional development support and compensation for these providers, supporting a more equitable and far reaching system in addition to more opportunities for culturally responsive learning for students. Additional funding can also help FCC providers work toward meeting higher quality standards, and improving the quality of the early education experience offered in their program.

Close to half of State preschool programs *allow* for state PreK funding to go to FCC providers. In 2021, 29 of 62 programs in 24 states allowed for this method of State PreK delivery. In a survey of state administrators of PreK programs, at least 17 states reported that children may have been served in FCC homes in 2019-2020, however only 10 states were able to report the number of children served in this setting.⁷ This highlights the need for better data systems to track where and how children are receiving services, regardless of setting. Very few states directly contract with FCC providers, rather most states who allow FCCs to participate distribute funds through a subcontracting process. Subcontracting entities may include family childcare home education networks (FCCHENs) or historically underutilized businesses (HUBs), other agencies, and local school systems.

A few states have made a legislative commitment to ensure family childcare is included in the State PreK system: in Vermont, the requirement was specified in legislation and in Maryland the legislature has committed to supporting an early childhood system that is inclusive to FCC providers. There is limited research on FCC inclusion in State funded PreK. There is a need for additional research to explore participation, barriers, quality standards, and funding, as well as the relationship of these factors in family childcare to children's outcomes.⁸

Major Decision Points for States in Expanding Mixed Delivery PreK Programs

In recent years we have seen an increased interest from policy makers to expand the mixed delivery systems. This uptick in interest is likely the result of several factors including the impact of the pandemic on existing systems and providers, the learning gap resulting from disparities in access to learning resources in low socioeconomic communities, increasing awareness of the importance of the PreK years for children's development and long-term success, and the need to ensure a more diverse

⁵ Zippia (ND). In Home Care Provider Demographics and Statistics in the U.S. <https://www.zippia.com/in-home-childcare-provider-jobs/demographics/>

⁶ Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (October 2022). Profiles of the California Early Care and Education Workforce 2020. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/fact-sheet/profiles-of-the-california-early-care-and-education-workforce-2020/#FCC>

⁷ Weisenfeld, G., & Frede, E. (2021). Including family childcare in state and city funded PreK system: Opportunities and challenges. National Institute for Early Education Research

⁸ Weisenfeld, G., & Frede, E. (2021). Including family childcare in state and city-funded pre-k system: Opportunities and challenges. National Institute for Early Education Research. NIEER is working of finalizing a document of how states can best support family childcare educators within their PreK systems.

workforce that reflects the backgrounds of young children. Parents are also demanding a greater range of quality settings for their children.

Mixed delivery options offer policy makers a way to both meet parent demand and maximize resources that can be blended to fund PreK. Regardless of these concerns, the bottom line should always be, *what is best for children?* Policy decisions should reflect parent voice and needs and efficiently use funding in service of ensuring a high-quality learning experience for all children.

We do not have definitive research that clearly outlines the policy decisions that are most effective in expanding public PreK in mixed delivery settings. States have taken a variety of approaches to their decisions about governance and program oversight, funding amounts and distribution, requirements and support for program quality and other factors. These decisions are typically driven by the legislation establishing the public PreK-program, supplemental guidance and policy from the state, availability of funds, and the context and capacity of preschool programs to meet state standards for quality.

With the support of the Learning Policy Institute, NIEER conducted in-depth case studies in 5 states – Alabama (AL), Michigan (MI), New York (NY), New Jersey (NJ), and West Virginia (WV). The five states served at least one third of 4-year-olds (ranging from about 30% of 4-year-olds in NJ to almost 70% in WV, the only state in our study that was actually universal). All states met at least 7 of the 10 NIEER quality standards benchmarks. The information discussed below is drawn from the forthcoming study, *State Preschool in a Mixed Delivery System: Lessons from Five States*.⁹ Workgroup members received a summary of this study in a Research Brief as preparatory reading before the presentation.

We found that there are four major decision points (and many other related decisions) that states should consider as they expand mixed delivery options for a state funded preschool program. These are:

- Governance and Program Oversight
- Funding
- Supports for Program Quality
- Access and Equity

Governance and Program Oversight. The governance structure, authority and quality standards may vary between LEA and non-LEA settings.¹⁰ Some states (NJ & AL) require a mixed delivery approach but do not specify the percentage of slots designated per program type. Other states mandate the percentage of state funded preschool children to be enrolled in non-LEA programs. For example, NY requires 10% of slots go to non-LEA schools; MI requires 30% of slots go to non-LEA schools and WV requires 50% of slots go to non-LEA schools.

The case study states have program standards, regulations and policy guidance to support implementation that apply consistently to both LEA and non-LEA settings, but they may vary in the level of accountability and monitoring by the state. They have developed very robust systems to support implementation at the local level, most importantly continuous quality improvement systems and in some states, direct coaching with programs and/or teachers. In Alabama, the state funds a regional

⁹ Garver, K., Weisenfeld, G., Connors-Tadros, L., Hodges, K., Melnick, H., & Plasencia, S. (2023). *State Preschool in a Mixed Delivery System: Lessons from Five States*. Learning Policy Institute.

¹⁰ Note we use the term non-LEA to refer to all other program types other than school district sponsored including family childcare, Head Start, and community-based providers.

network of coaches and fiscal monitors to support local programs. For example, in MI all PreK programs must participate in the QRIS system which provides monitoring and support for quality in all settings and in AL a network of regional coaches and monitors support programs across the state. Most states do not directly recruit mixed delivery providers but may require or encourage local districts or collaborative groups to do so. Some states (such as NJ and AL) are implementing special initiatives to recruit mixed delivery providers and “get them ready” to meet state standards. WV requires county collaboratives to identify all non-LEA providers, and MI provides data to the ISD to identify and recruit non-LEAs. In Alabama, the Bold Goals Coalition pools resources to help childcare programs apply for the PreK program, and this effort has resulted in many new programs in targeted areas of the state.

Funding. How funds flow to local programs may support or impede the involvement of non-LEA providers. Funding could flow directly to LEAs and non-LEAs, or the state could allow the local intermediary (district) to sub-contract with non-LEAs. States vary in who can access public funds for PreK.

- In some states, all providers can access funds through grants or contracts with the state.
- In other states, funds flow only to local school districts or Intermediate Districts who then are able to sub-contract with other providers.
- In some states, funds flow to local collaboratives who then are able to sub-contract with other providers.

In WV, funds flow to local county boards of education because the PreK program is funded by the school funding formula. County boards of education then establish cross-sector Early Childhood County Collaboratives who are required through the PreK program standards to develop contracts with non-public providers if available in their community. Further, they have to develop a collaborative budget that accounts for PreK funds from all sources. AL contracts directly with programs that apply through a competitive process.

Funding levels vary across states, but most set a per child rate to operate the PreK program. Some states account for differential costs by setting and others set one rate for all public preschool programs regardless of setting. For example, NJ’s 2008-2009 school funding legislation includes three distinct per child rates, adjusted geographically for each county, including an annual cost of living increase:

- \$11,506: children in school district
- \$7,146: Head Start (which supplements grantees’ federal Head Start funding, and in NJ it was \$9,336/child)
- \$12,934: private provider settings

In MI, the state disburses funding to Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) to administer the state preschool program at the local level. ISDs are responsible for setting and implementing preschool fiscal policies for their catchment area to ensure program funding is spent appropriately. Funding levels are legislatively set. For the 2021-2022 school year, the per child rates are \$8,700.00 per child for a full-day program and \$4,350.00 per child for a part-day program. The rates are the same across all settings. By contrast, AL is one of the few states PreK programs nationally that establishes funding levels by classroom (rather than per child) for all program types and provides specific funding for start-up costs for first year programs.

Supports for Program Quality.

The resources and systems to support program administration and compliance with State standards needs to be established and properly funded at the state and local level to ensure consistency in implementing program quality standards. To support program quality at scale, states need to develop quality assurance systems that ensure program quality standards are being met. Research shows that preschool initiatives are most effective when they have a data-driven system of continuous improvement that includes structured classroom observations.¹¹ In each of the states studied, the agency tasked with contracting with non-LEAs is also charged with overseeing program quality. In Alabama, the state early childhood department assumes responsibility for oversight of program quality. The state hires coaches and program monitors, employed locally, who work closely with site directors to provide guidance and support to ensure that all programmatic requirements are being met through continuous coaching for improvement. Program monitors conduct planned and random on-site visits to evaluate progress, formally observing classes twice annually. In Michigan and West Virginia, intermediary agencies are accountable for supporting program quality. Coaches employed by Michigan ISDs provide supports to ensure that local providers implement GSRP with fidelity and that a written evaluation plan is used to address all required GSRP program components.

One major influence on program quality is the qualifications and experience of the teacher. Research has shown that the teacher in a PreK program is a strong driver of program quality and influences children's learning and growth. Further, most research indicates that teachers with a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood education are more likely to offer responsive caregiving and support instructional growth of young children.¹² However, there are other factors to consider in terms of the impact of teacher qualifications and training on program quality and child learning, such as the teacher's work environment, the match or mis-match between teacher and children's cultural backgrounds, and support for continuous quality improvement.¹³ The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) found that teachers in non-LEAs operating outside of public preschool programs were less likely to have a bachelor's degree, earned lower wages, and had fewer years of experience. The NSECE also found, however, that non-LEA providers operating outside of publicly funded programs had lower percentages of non-White teachers, bilingual teachers, and teachers who were born outside the United States compared to state preschool programs, school-based programs, and Head Start.¹⁴

¹¹ Derrick-Mills, T., Sandstrom, H., Pettijohn, S., Fyffe, S., & Koulis, J. (2014). Data use for continuous quality improvement: What the Head Start field can learn from other disciplines, a literature review and conceptual framework [OPRE Report 2014-77]. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
<https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>.

¹³ Whitebook, M. & Ryan, S. (April 2011). Degrees in Context: Asking the Right Questions About Preparing Skilled and Effective Teachers of Young Children, Policy Brief. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/23-2.pdf>

¹⁴ National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team. (2013). *Number and Characteristics of Early Care and Education (ECE) Teachers and Caregivers: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)*. OPRE Report #2013-38, Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Salary parity, defined as comparable salaries for lead PreK teachers in LEA and non-LEA settings, is a critical component of equity, and facilitates the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. AL and NJ address salary parity by requiring that state-funded preschool teachers in non-LEA settings receive salaries commensurate with their PreK-12 peers in LEA settings, as well as paid time for professional development and other professional responsibilities. However, both states stop short of requiring equal benefits for teachers in non-LEA settings. WV requires salary parity for preschool teachers in LEA settings relative to teachers in K-12 and requires (but cannot enforce) salary parity for preschool teachers in non-LEA settings because they are privately administered. At the time of the study, MI and NY did not have policies to address salary parity for teachers in LEA or non-LEA settings.

NIEER's research suggests that, to reach a level of high quality, programs should have policies in place to provide teachers and teacher assistants with at least 15 hours of annual professional development (PD), individual PD plans and coaching. PD hours should not all be in health and safety training.

- AL has a highly regarded coaching framework and model for early childhood teachers from birth through age 8.¹⁵ Lead teachers in LEA and non-LEA settings receive annual written individualized professional development plans and must complete 30 clock hours of education-related professional learning every year. Assistant teachers also receive annual written individualized professional development plans and must complete 20 clock hours of professional learning. In addition, PreK classrooms are observed by locally based state coaches about once a month and teachers receive on-going feedback based on data collected. Coaching staff all receive high levels of training and professional development.

NJ requires LEAs to hire at least one coach for every 20 classrooms, including in subcontracting non-LEAs. In MI, all programs are required to be a part of the Quality Rating and Improvement System. Professional development and coaching are conducted in each classroom at least monthly.

Access and Equity. For a mixed delivery PreK program to provide authentic, high-quality options for parents, states need to put in place policies to ensure that parents are aware of their choices and can easily access them and all program types are engaged in the PreK program and can efficiently implement a high-quality program. Some strategies that states are implementing to ensure these goals are met, include:

- Coordinated Eligibility and Enrollment- Some states require local collaboratives to coordinate eligibility and enrollment. West Virginia requires that each county develop a unified enrollment system that ensures all eligible children are offered a placement
- Collecting and Using Data to Track Parent Access and Program Availability- Some states collect data on the geographic location of all preschool program types so they can identify areas where additional programs are needed to support parents' choices.
- Local Capacity and Authority- Some states have established local organizations to assess family needs, recruit providers, oversee quality, and manage funds (in some cases for services 0-5). For example, WV established 54 local County Collaboratives to implement universal PreK and AL has established Regional Networks of coaches and fiscal monitors to work with programs across the

¹⁵ For more information see- <https://children.alabama.gov/for-educators/professional-development/>

state. The authority and role of local entities may vary, but they are an important conduit between state policy and local implementation.

Recommendations to Support Quality PreK in all Program Types.

States need to establish a clear system of supports for a mixed delivery UPK system that identifies local, county, regional and statewide supports for both program administration as well as classroom level instruction. Establish common program standards across settings so that all children receive high-quality preschool experiences. To assist the California Universal PreK Workgroup, we can offer lessons learned from states that are expanding mixed delivery options in high quality PreK programs. These are:

1. Address barriers that might prevent qualified non-LEAs from participating in the California State Preschool Program.
2. Ensure that both LEA and non-LEA providers receive funding and ongoing support to offer and sustain high-quality learning environments, including coaching and professional development that is embedded in a continuous quality improvement system.
3. Ensure program funding levels allow providers in all settings to meet high quality standards and retain qualified staff with compensation commensurate to their education and experience.
4. Support coordinated enrollment across the mixed delivery system to ensure family choice and provider stability.
5. Collect data and conduct research to understand families' access to high-quality preschool in different settings.