



# Preschool Policy Facts

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## The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool for All?

by W. Steven Barnett, Kirsty Brown and Rima Shore

*What do we as a society want for our children? Few Americans would quarrel with the notion that all children should be ready to succeed in school and that no child should be left behind. Wide agreement on these broad goals reflects public awareness of research showing that learning is truly lifelong, beginning in the early years, and that early experiences build a foundation for learning.*

*But how can these goals best be reached? And what is the role of government in pursuing them? On these questions there is far less agreement. One key debate pits the notion of voluntary universal early learning programs, available to all preschoolers, against targeted services, reserved for those at greatest risk of poor achievement, based on economic disadvantage, disabilities or other special needs. Most public support for preschool programs today is for targeted programs but calls for universal programs have increased and several states seek to provide preschool for all 4-year-olds.*

### The Vision:

**"...a shared agenda to ensure both a rewarding childhood and a promising future for all children."**

**National Research Council 2000**

### What We Know:

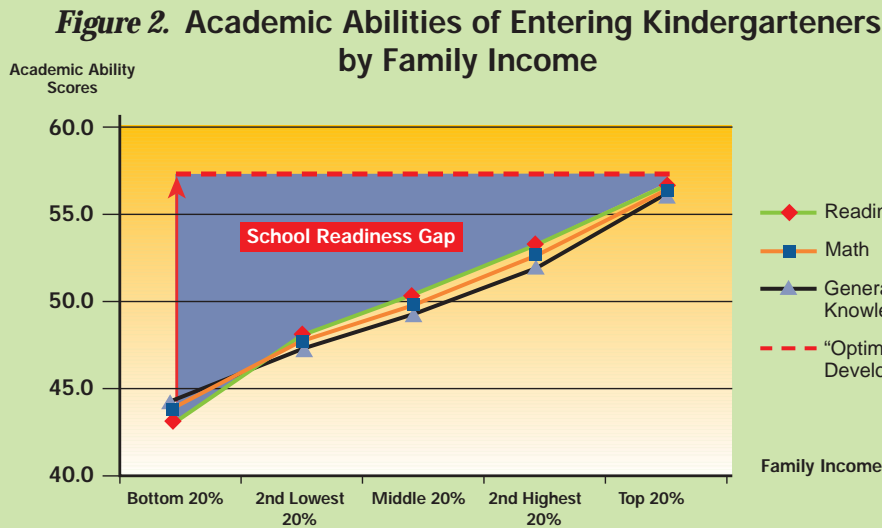
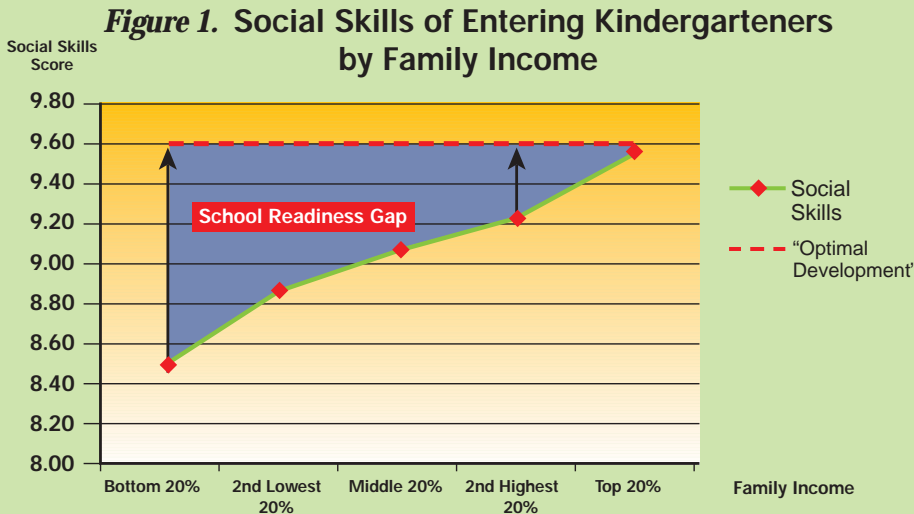
- Targeted programs have lower costs, but do not realize other presumed advantages in practice.
- Universal programs are likely to be more effective at identifying and reaching all targeted children.
- School readiness is not just a problem of the poor. Young middle-income children lag behind their wealthy peers in social and cognitive skills.
- High-quality preschool has been found to benefit middle-income children, and added benefits could far exceed costs.
- Universal programs may have larger effects than targeted programs for the most disadvantaged children.
- Universal programs are likely to receive greater public support so that they are of higher quality and reach more children than targeted programs.

### Policy Recommendations:

- The effectiveness and efficiency of investments in preschool could be increased with a shift from targeted to voluntary universal preschool programs.
- High quality standards for all children are required for effective universal preschool programs.
- Children with special needs due to poverty or disabilities may require more intensive services within universal programs.
- Expansion toward universal takes time, and patience is required to build capacity while maintaining or improving quality.
- Preschool programs could move toward universal access by gradually raising thresholds for eligibility.
- Federal matching funds could be used to encourage states to fund high-quality preschool for all.



## Moving Toward Preschool for All



- Universal programs should have high minimum quality standards for all children, but recognize that “one size fits all” is poor educational policy. Supplemental services can be offered to children with greater needs—targeting within universal. This is particularly important for families who need help meeting children’s nutrition and health needs.
- Any approach that did not first serve children currently eligible under a targeted program would not be politically feasible. States can move toward a universal coverage gradually by raising the income threshold over time or offering the universal program first in “high need” communities.
- Given the practical difficulties of creating new programs and the higher rate of current enrollment of 4-year-olds than 3-year-olds, the first step toward better policy for many states may be to create universal programs at age 4. Several states have already taken this step.
- High-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds would require roughly \$30 billion in additional public funding. This is only one percent of total government spending. The added cost to serve all 4-year-olds could be far less.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99, Fall 1998.

## A Closer Look at Targeting

When it comes to providing services to the children and families who need them most, targeted programs may not be the best approach because they:

- Are inherently unfair. Among children of similar circumstances, some receive services and others don’t.
- May be just out of reach of low-wage earners whose paychecks keep them just above eligibility cut-offs.
- Cause disruptions as family status changes, thereby changing eligibility.
- May not reach intended recipients if families do not enroll due to perceived stigma while others “work the system” to get in.
- Exclude middle-income children who could benefit, though the benefits may be smaller.
- Work against a coherent, efficient delivery system since multiple targeted programs can result in fragmented delivery.
- Incur hidden costs through establishing and monitoring eligibility.