

States expect early education benefits ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Lisa Fair, a top executive in consulting firm Arthur Andersen's tax division, was pleased to learn that Georgia was rolling out a pioneering plan to provide free preschool to 4-year-olds from lower-income families. "I feel like you should give each kid some equal opportunity," said the mother of three.

Her interest soared, though, when she learned a few years ago that the program was being expanded to all families, regardless of income, paid for with proceeds from a state lottery. Her daughter, Rachel, 4, now attends a free 6 1/2-hour program daily, where she has learned her ABCs, plays in the sandbox and does simple science experiments.

"I'm really blown away," said Fair, 38, as Rachel and her classmates excitedly shouted out answers to questions about the stars and planets one day recently. "I believe so much that this is the right answer to quick-start our educational system. We haven't done everything in Georgia we should--by far--but this program is so valuable."

Georgia's ambitious undertaking--more than 70 percent of the state's 4-year-olds are now enrolled--is but one indicator of the growing interest among states to offer extensive preschool programs to better prepare youngsters for the demands of kindergarten and beyond.

The preschool movement is spreading across the country, much as the kindergarten concept caught fire in the United States at the turn of the century. Forty-two states now offer free or subsidized preschool, and enrollment has swelled to 750,000 children, according to a recent study by the Children's Defense Fund, an advocacy group. State spending on prekindergarten programs topped \$1.5 billion last year, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, up from \$180 million in 1987.

While many of these programs are aimed at poor children, a few states are following Georgia's lead, opening them to all children, regardless of income or neighborhood.

Oklahoma and New York are among those starting to make preschool universally available. New Jersey has the ambitious goal of enrolling 44,000 of its poorest children in preschools, and state officials say the program will continue to grow. Connecticut is at the midpoint of a five-year "school readiness" plan that so far has enrolled 6,500 children in all-day programs; officials hope to include all 3- and 4-year-olds eventually.

Delaine Eastin, state superintendent of public instruction for California, has proposed spending \$5 billion to offer preschool for the state's 1.1 million 3- and 4-year-olds. "Universal preschool is one of the most important things that our nation can do for our children," Eastin said. "It will give them a firm foundation that allows them to be successful in school and, ultimately, in life."

Optional preschool is on the table in several states, including Maryland, which already has a state-funded program for 11,000 low-income 4-year-olds. A coalition of legislators and state officials proposes to expand it to cover all 4-year-olds. Supporters acknowledge little chance for approval of the \$75 million initiative this year but say they hope to spark discussion of the idea to gain support down the road.

The District has long had free prekindergarten for 4-year-olds. The program is run by the school system and serves about 3,400 children, operating on a first-come, first-served basis. Parents often wait hours to register.

Virginia has 6,100 children enrolled in a five-year-old preschool initiative designed for at-risk children. The program, which costs about \$18 million a year, takes place in Head Start centers, private schools and child-care centers.

For years now, the federal government has subsidized prekindergarten education for economically disadvantaged children through programs such as Head Start. But the funding covers only a portion of those eligible, and parents with moderate or above-average incomes have had to pay for private preschools or keep their children home until kindergarten.

Some studies suggest that disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds who participate in good preschool programs reap the benefits for years.

A study at the University of North Carolina that for two decades tracked disadvantaged children--some who attended an intensive child-care program and others from a regular program--found that those in the former group were more likely to attend college, hold jobs and delay parenthood. Another study, started in Michigan in the 1960s with 3-year-olds, obtained similar results.

The preschool issue also has caught the attention of the presidential candidates. A cornerstone of Vice President Gore's campaign is a proposal to spend \$50 billion on free preschool for all of the country's 4-year-olds; on the Republican side, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, whose state increased prekindergarten spending 30 percent in the 1990s to \$235 million, has proposed revamping Head Start to emphasize academics.

Preschool programs are costly, as even their supporters admit. Thus far, only Georgia has a fully funded program for all 4-year-olds who want to go.

Some critics say the programs force taxpayers to foot the bill for working parents to have free child care, while others point to research suggesting that benefits of preschool fade in a few years.

Darcy Olsen, director of education and child policy at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said most children don't need preschool. "I question the premise that there is an overwhelming unpreparedness--that kids are spending [the ages of] zero through 5 doing nothing, and then go through some sort of shock when they get to kindergarten," she said. "I just don't see the evidence for that at all."

While supporters emphasize that enrollment in prekindergarten is optional, Janice Crouse, a research fellow at the Beverly LaHaye Institute, a Washington think tank on women's issues, isn't sure things will stay that way.

"It's a very short step to mandating it--a very short step," she said.

Backers of such programs point out that most affluent parents already send their children to private preschools, and say that less-well-off children should have the same opportunity.

Only 36 percent of children ages 3 to 5 living in families earning less than \$15,000 were in prekindergarten last year, compared with 61 percent of those whose parents earned \$50,000 or more.

"If we are going to fix the achievement gaps and get all kids up to the standards we want, we're going to have to start earlier," said Anne Mitchell, an analyst at Early Childhood Policy Research, a New York consulting group.

Corporate America also is growing interested in preschools, with public-private partnerships to fund high-quality programs on the rise.

In January, Lucent Technologies Foundation announced a \$1 million grant to encourage universal preschool. And last month, Hugh L. McColl Jr., Bank of America's chief executive officer, told a conference of U.S. governors that "early childhood education must be among our highest priorities" if the country is to reform its educational system.

A year ago, Bank of America announced it would give \$50 million to 13 projects to help boost early childhood education. The money is being disbursed over five years by the United Way's "Success by 6" initiative, a collaborative effort aimed at improving early childhood education.

In Georgia, state-funded preschools appear to be universally popular. On registration day, working parents and at-home mothers as well begin lining up at 3 a.m. to enroll their children.

The children attend classes in day-care centers, in public school buildings, in YMCAs, in recreation centers, in converted grocery stores, on military bases and even in churches. Church programs may participate if they pledge not to provide religious instruction during the 6 1/2-hour preschool day.

"We've tried to be as flexible as possible to meet the accessibility issues of parents," said Celeste Gordon, who heads Georgia's Office of School Readiness.

For working parents, the Georgia program reduces the cost of child care dramatically. Because the state covers 6 1/2 hours each day, parents typically pay only for their child's lunch and a few hours of additional care each day if needed.

Lori Pierce, a divorced mother of two who works in the billing office of an Atlanta hotel, moved here from Texas in part because of Georgia's commitment to preschools, which she believes will give her children a better start in life. In Texas, preschool cost her \$115 a week per child, she said, but in Georgia, with the state funding, it's half as much, just \$57 a week.

"It means food and electricity to our family," she said. "It helps a lot, especially for single parents. In lots of states, they only help people in the lower income brackets. The middle-income people get no assistance. If you don't get any help, you end up struggling."

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