

# EPIC paper makes the case for universal pre-kindergarten in Minnesota

There is little question about the value of providing high-quality pre-kindergarten education for children. The growing body of research is conclusive: High-quality pre-k provides dramatic lifelong benefits to children and solid economic and social benefits to the communities in which they live.

However, these benefits accrue only to those children and families who are fortunate enough to have found high-quality programs. Many low- and middle-income families miss out.

Education Minnesota's Educator Policy Innovation Center has written a report suggesting high-quality universal pre-k is a crucial first step in addressing the equity gaps that plague Minnesota students. The six advisers on this report found states that invest in high-quality pre-k programs see immediate benefits like fewer students in need of special education services and educational remediation and higher graduation rates. The long-term benefits include an increased income and tax base, lower crime rates, lower divorce rates and reduced social services cost.

## WHY UNIVERSAL PRE-K

Some argue that programs targeted at and limited to the most at-risk children are the best and most efficient use of state funds. But limiting programs to families under specific income thresholds isn't the best or most cost-effective way to close the opportunity gap. Research shows:

- Programs targeted at specific populations fail too often to reach their intended population.
- Low-income students in universal programs benefit more than students who participated in targeted programs.
- Targeted programs do not yield as high a return rate for local economies as do universal programs.

A targeted approach also fails to recognize that both low-income and middle-income families increasingly find pre-k costs prohibitive. Although children from low-income backgrounds benefit more from high-quality programs, middle-class children can benefit substantially.

## QUALITY MATTERS

If your program isn't very good, you can't expect it to have long-term impact on kids. Compromising quality by failing to put quality benchmarks and standards in place statewide or by underfunding a program leads very quickly to a system that fails. Here are the key components of programs that are most successful:

- Universal access
- Licensed early childhood educators
- Programs run as public school offerings
- Curriculum aligned with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress
- Class size capped at 20 and student/staff ratios capped at 10:1
- Vision, hearing, and health screening and referral
- Family outreach and wraparound services

