

## Closing the Opportunity Gap: Texas Should Invest in High Quality Full-Day Pre-Kindergarten for Disadvantaged Students

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High quality, full-day Pre-Kindergarten is a smart, cost-effective investment in our children's future. Ensuring that kids start school ready to learn is one of the best ways to ensure Texans have the chance to compete and succeed in life. But the lack of high-quality Pre-K programs in the Lone Star State threatens the future of our youngest and most vulnerable students.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between school success and economic status is present as early as kindergarten. Only 48 percent of poor children enter kindergarten school-ready as a measure of early math and reading skills, learning-related and problem behavior, and overall physical health.<sup>2</sup> The resulting achievement gap, seen in lower test scores for low-income and disadvantaged-minorities children, will never fully close until policies change to address the inequity in opportunity these children face from early on in life. Investing in Pre-K, especially for economically disadvantaged children, is one approach to addressing opportunity gaps caused by unequal access to economic and educational resources, and a proven strategy for improving educational outcomes.

A 2012 study by the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) found that participation in Texas Pre-K is associated with increased scores in math and reading, reductions in being held back a grade, and reductions in needing special education services in later grades.<sup>3</sup> These promising outcomes appear to be even stronger for low-income children and those learning English as a second language. The Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas found that when comparing third grade reading and math scores of students who attended Texas Pre-K with those who did not, the greatest performance differential was for the most disadvantaged children—those from extremely poor families who also had limited English proficiency.<sup>4</sup>

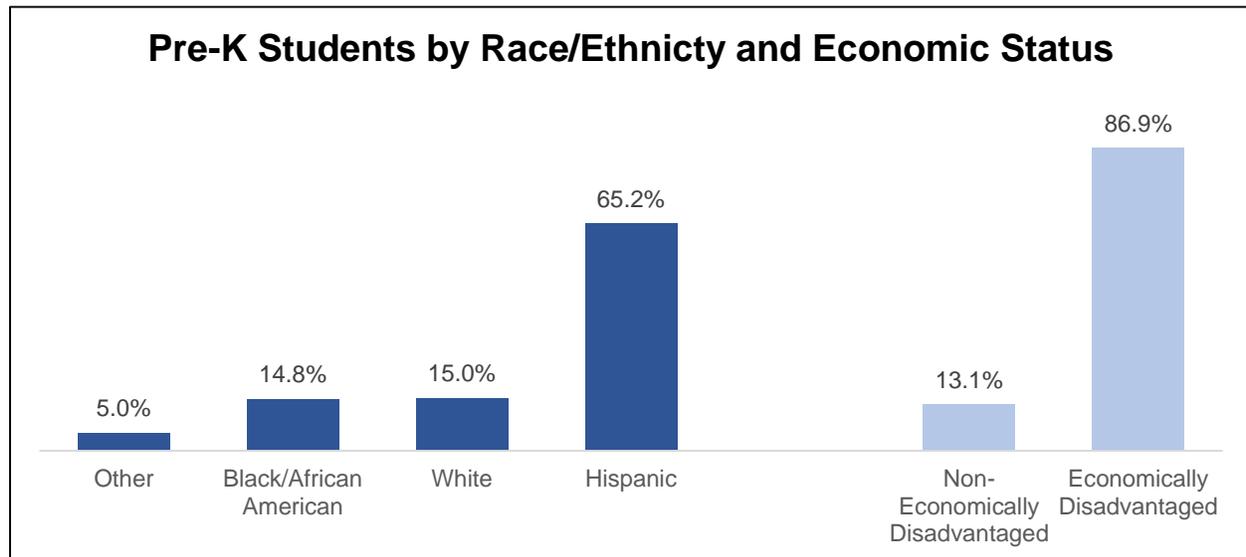
To build on the positive gains being made by the modest half-day Pre-K program Texas currently offers for English language learners and economically disadvantaged students, CPHP recommends that the Legislature:

- Establish Pre-K as a full-day program for currently eligible students;
- Improve quality standards such as class size limits, student-teacher ratios, and health screenings;
- Establish an office of early learning to encourage and oversee collaborations between Pre-K, Head Start, child care providers, and state agencies.

### Pre-Kindergarten in Texas

Texas Pre-K is a voluntary program that provides a half-day of state supported educational instruction to school districts that identify 15 or more children who are economically disadvantaged, homeless, have limited English proficiency, are in the foster care system, or have a parent who is active duty military or died during military service. The program prioritizes four-year olds, but three-year olds may enroll if the school district has the room and resources to serve them. Districts are also allowed to supplement state funding with local resources to provide a full-day of instruction, and to charge tuition for students who do not meet the eligibility criteria.

Of the 227,568 students enrolled in Texas Pre-K during the 2012-2013 school year, 87 percent were economically disadvantaged and 65 percent were Hispanic.<sup>5</sup>



*Source: TEA – Texas Public Prekindergarten Programs, August 2013. Other includes: Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (0.12%); American Indian or Alaska Native (0.46%); Two or More Races (1.54%); Asian (2.90%)*

Fifty-one percent of students enrolled in Texas Pre-K during the 2012-2013 school year were enrolled in a half-day program, and 49 percent were enrolled in a full-day program.<sup>6</sup> The Texas Education Agency defines a half-day program at a minimum of three hours and a full-day program at a minimum of seven hours a day.<sup>7</sup>

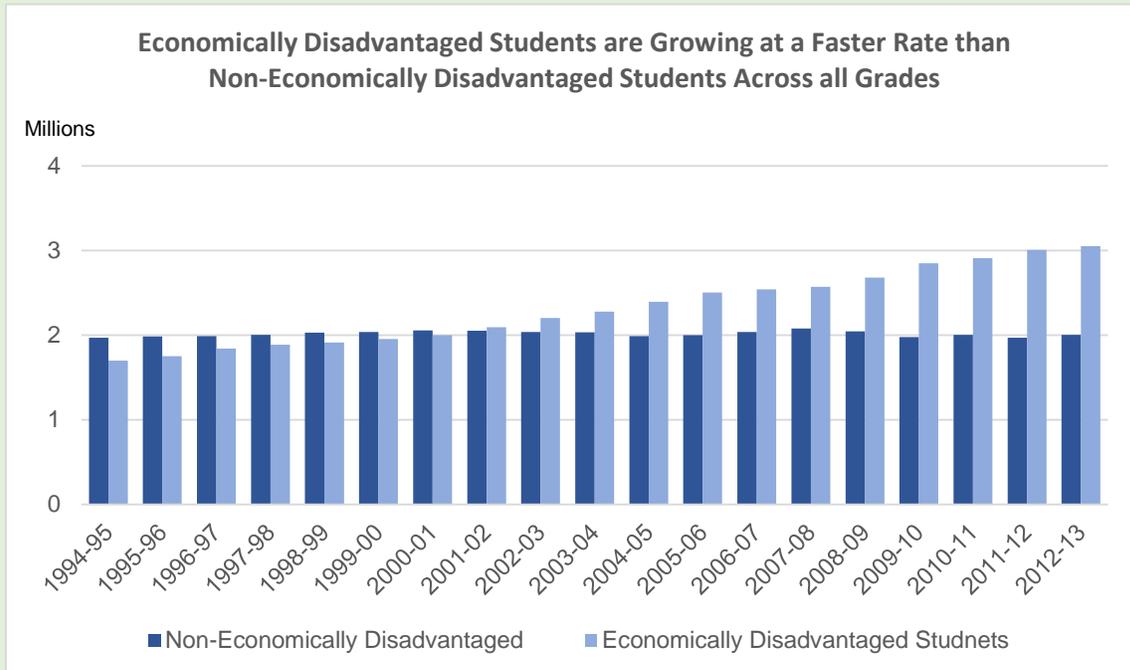
The state does not currently set class size limits or require staff to student ratios for Pre-K classrooms. However, there is evidence to suggest that a majority of Texas Pre-K programs have set their own standards of quality.

Very little school district level data is made publicly available on the Texas Pre-K program. To gain a better understanding of what the Pre-K program currently looks like, Children at Risk, a Houston-based child advocacy organization, conducted a comprehensive survey of school district's Pre-K program offerings, funding, class sizes, staff to student ratios, and barriers to expansion. The survey gathered data from 631 school districts representing 73 percent of the student population. Their key findings include:

- 59 percent of school districts surveyed have policies in place for class size limits, staff to student ratios, or both;
- 82 percent of respondents report an average class size of 20 or fewer;
- 1:10 is the most frequently self-reported staff to student ratio;
- 73 percent of school districts cited inadequate funding as the number one barrier to program expansion.<sup>8</sup>

These findings show that many school districts are making Pre-K a priority and going above and beyond state requirements to provide additional opportunities for their most disadvantaged students.

Approximately 52 percent of all Texas four-year olds and six percent of three-year olds participate in Pre-K, ranking the state ninth in the percentage of four-year olds enrolled in a state supported Pre-K program.<sup>9</sup> However, the state’s strong enrollment rankings are directly correlated with the large percentage of economically disadvantaged students in Texas schools, which has grown steadily for the last few decades.



Source: TEA Snapshot Data 1994-1995 to 2012-2013.

The average annual growth rate for economically disadvantaged students in all grades, since 1995, is 3.31 percent; while the annual growth rate for non-economically disadvantaged students is 0.09 percent.<sup>10</sup> This rapid growth in economically disadvantaged students illustrates the need to focus attention on the resources and opportunities available for low-income, English language learners, and other disadvantaged students--especially during the early years.

### Establish Pre-K as a Full-Day Program

The more exposure a child has to educational instruction, the greater the educational gains will be. For children who are significantly behind, exposure to high-quality Pre-K for extended periods is crucial for closing the achievement gap.

In a random assignment study of low-income urban districts in the Northeast, National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that children who participated in a high-quality full-day program improved twice as much on a battery of developmental assessments in vocabulary and math skills compared to those who only attended a half-day program.<sup>i 11</sup>

<sup>i</sup> A high quality Pre-K program was defined by small classroom sizes (18.5 to 13.2) and all teachers having a college degree.

Further studies ranging from local samples to large-scale national surveys support the conclusion that English language learners and economically disadvantaged students exposed to full-day Pre-K outperform their peers.<sup>12</sup> And the fact that 49 percent of Texas Pre-K students are currently in a full day program shows that expanded day programs are valued by parents and school districts; enough so that districts devote resources to Pre-K improvements even if it means dedicating considerable extra operating costs.<sup>13</sup> Expanding to a state-supported full-day program would allow all currently eligible students the opportunity to receive a full day of instruction.

## **Improve Quality Standards**

The 2013 rankings of state Pre-K programs by the NIEER ranks Texas at the bottom in quality standards measures compared to 53 programs in 40 states.<sup>ii</sup> Of the 10 quality standard benchmarks identified by NIEER, Texas Pre-K only meets two—comprehensive early learning standards and at least 15 hours a year of in-service training for Pre-K teachers.<sup>14</sup>

Texas lags particularly far behind other states in class-size limits and staff to child ratios. NIEER sets the quality benchmark for class-sizes at 20 Pre-K students or below. Most states meet this standard, while Texas has no cap on Pre-K class-sizes. Eighty-seven percent of states have staff-child ratios of 1:10 or better, but Texas Pre-K has no limit on the number of children each staff person is responsible for.

However, despite the absence of quality standards at the state level, 59 percent of school districts surveyed by Children at Risk reported having policies in place on class size limits, staff-child ratios, or both. And 82 percent of school districts reported meeting the NIEER recommended class size limit of 20 students.<sup>15</sup>

To meet these self-imposed standards, school districts are using their own operating funds to improve quality and offer a full-day of Pre-K instruction, often at the expense of other district needs. Additional state funding for Pre-K, generated by expanding to a full-day program, could potentially ease the costs associated with making quality improvements, while state-wide quality standards will create a more equitable Pre-K program.

Another area of concern is the lack of health screenings and referrals provided to Texas Pre-K students. Children will struggle to learn if they can't see what's happening in the classroom, and English acquisition is much more difficult for a student whose hearing is impaired. By not screening for vision, hearing, and other age-appropriate learning disabilities, Texas is missing out on an opportunity to detect and address issues that impact learning. Sixty-eight percent of NIEER ranked programs provide screenings for vision, hearing, health, and at least one support service—however Texas only screens for prior immunizations.<sup>16</sup>

## **Establish an Office of Early Learning**

Out of the ten most populous states, Texas is the only one that does not have an office of early learning in place to coordinate early childhood service delivery and facilitate partnerships between Pre-K and other high-quality child care programs. Currently, early learning services for children from birth to age five are spread out between six different entities.<sup>17iii</sup> Many families are eligible for a combination of services, such as child care subsidies from the Texas Workforce Commission and Pre-K from the Texas Education Agency, but

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<sup>ii</sup> There are 10 states that do not offer state supported Pre-K. Some states have more than one Pre-K program available. The NIEER rankings also include the District of Columbia and all US territories that offer Pre-K programs.

<sup>iii</sup> Five state agencies and Head Start

because service delivery is not coordinated they may miss out on important early education opportunities for their children.

Some school districts have already figured out how to partner with child care providers and local Head Start programs to address facility needs and eliminate barriers for participation for low-income working families. However, there is a lack of resources for walking districts through the process and an office of early learning could help the Texas Education Agency do more to encourage public-private partnerships among early education service providers.

Creating an office of early learning is an approach the Legislature could take toward coordinating programs and lowering barriers for low-income families. Even at a full-day, low-income working parents experience obstacles to participation such as finding child care for the hours the child is not in Pre-K and the logistics of transporting a child from between child care and Pre-K programs. A central office dedicated specifically to early education could also assist and guide districts in developing public-private partnerships that meet early education needs of their individual communities.

#### **Detailed Policy Recommendations:**

- **Establish Pre-K as a full-day program:** The current half-day Pre-K program is funded at 0.50 Average Daily Attendance (ADA) through the school finance formulas for children who meet the eligibility criteria. Bringing the ADA count up to 1 would provide the additional resources needed to expand to a full-day of instruction. A full-day program should consist of at least 7 hours of instruction per day.
- **Improve Pre-K quality:** The Legislature should require all districts to implement class size limits of 20 students per classroom and a staff to student ratio of 1:10. With parental consent, every district should also screen Pre-K students' hearing and vision for issues that may impact learning. To ensure that parents and researchers have accurate data available on Pre-K, the Legislature should also instruct the Texas Education Agency to collect data on class sizes, staff to student ratios, and other quality measures.
- **Establish an office of early learning:** The state should establish an office of early learning within the Texas Education Agency that coordinates early education service delivery and promotes public-private partnerships between Pre-K program and other service providers.

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- <sup>3</sup> Andrews, Rodney J. Paul Jargowsky and Kristin Kuhne. *The Effects of Texas's Pre-Kindergarten Program on Academic Performance*. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, November 2012.
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- <sup>6</sup> Winkler, Andrea. *Texas Education Agency Prekindergarten Programs: An Issue Brief from the Legislative Budget Board*. Legislative Budget Board. September 2014.
- <sup>7</sup> Texas Education Agency. State Initiatives: Prekindergarten Full/Half Day Programs  
[http://tea.texas.gov/index2.aspx?id=2147497206&menu\\_id=2147483718](http://tea.texas.gov/index2.aspx?id=2147497206&menu_id=2147483718)
- <sup>8</sup> Sanborn, Robert. et al. *The State of Pre-K: Realities and Opportunities in Texas*. Children at Risk, 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> Barnett, WS. *The State of Preschool 2013*. National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Texas Education Agency. Snapshot Data 1994-1995 to 2012-2013.
- <sup>11</sup> Robin, Kenneth B. Ellen C. Frede and W. Steven Barnett. *Is More Better? The Effects of Full-Day vs. Half-Day Preschool on Early School Achievement*. National Institute for Early Education Research, May 2006.
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- <sup>14</sup> Barnett, WS. *The State of Preschool 2013*. National Institute for Early Education Research, 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> Sanborn, Robert. et al. *The State of Pre-K: Realities and Opportunities in Texas*. Children at Risk, 2014.
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- <sup>17</sup> Brauer, Andrea. *Establish an Office of Early Learning at Texas Education Agency*. Texans Care for Children, 2015.

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