CEELO EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approaches to State Pre-K Eligibility Policy: Increasing Access for High Needs Children

CEELO
Center on Enhancing
Early Learning Outcomes

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Why did CEELO conduct this study?

As states seek to expand access to early childhood programs and services for children and families most in need, they are revising eligibility policy and practice with multiple goals in mind. A state's eligibility policy must balance accountability for public funds with the need to provide efficient and flexible processes for program staff in documenting risk factors. Most important, the policy should prevent unintended burdens on families to access services they or their children are eligible for.

This report provides policy makers with information on state-funded pre-K programs' eligibility policies and the common risk factors used to prioritize enrollment. The report concludes with considerations for policy makers as they review or revise eligibility to serve more children, effectively and efficiently, in high quality early education programs.

What We Know

About half of all 4-year-olds in poverty are enrolled in a public pre-K program, generally of low quality.[1] Even among states with a stated goal of providing universal access to state-funded pre-K programs, targeted or prioritized enrollment is a common strategy when programs cannot accommodate all children.

Programs often aim to first enroll the most "at-risk" children; that is, children who are more likely to begin kindergarten lagging behind their peers and to benefit from the intervention of high quality pre-K.[2]

While universal programs have the potential to produce positive benefits for all children, many states and localities do not have the financial resources or the capacity to provide access to all children, and therefore may need to ramp up enrollment over time. Agencies often prioritize or target enrollment to those children living in families in poverty, deemed most at risk.

Research indicates that there is a difference in kindergarten readiness based on income. Indeed, middle-income children are as far behind high-income children as low-income children are behind those in middle-income families.[3] Children at greatest risk often experience multiple risk factors related to family income level, parental education, and factors related to unstable family circumstances (e.g. homelessness, foster care).[4]

What did CEELO find?

The 2013 State of Preschool Yearbook from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)[5] reported on the policies of 53 state-funded pre-K programs, which are offered in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Secondary analysis provides an overview of the specific risk factors state programs use to determine eligibility and prioritize enrollment. Of the 53 programs profiled, 17 (32%) have no requirements beyond age, though the program may not be universally available, due to limited funding. **Of the remaining programs:**

• Low-income status is the most commonly used criteria in determining eligibility. About 28 programs (58%) reported using a state-specified income requirement, either on its own or in concert with other factors, including age.
• Eligibility is determined most often by individual child or family characteristics, in addition to age. This is the case in 32 of the programs (60%).
• 21 programs (40 %) report that age is the only enrollment factor for children in districts (or the entire state) where the program is offered.
• Five (9%) programs reported that income was the only risk factor used for eligibility.

Risks in addition to income thresholds (to determine eligibility or prioritize enrollment) were reported by 35 programs. Of the 12 risk factors NIEER gives programs to choose from we found:
• The average program considers five risk factors beyond income in considering eligibility for the program.
• In nine programs, children must meet a designated number of risk factors in addition to meeting the income requirement.
• In 19 programs, the income cutoff can count as one of the set number of risk factors.
• Three risk factors were used by more than half of the programs: homelessness or unstable housing; disability or developmental delay of the child; and non-English speaking family.

Income Eligibility

Most states calculate eligibility based on a multiple of the federal poverty level (FPL). FPL is calculated annually and takes into account income and family size. In 2015, families of three making less than $20,090 were considered to be living in poverty. The most commonly used eligibility criteria for state pre-K programs is 185% of the federal poverty level (or less than $37,167 for a family of three). This is also the cut-off for reduced-price lunch that is administered through the United State Department of Agriculture, and is a common definition of low income employed by public schools. Another income measure often used is a multiple of State Median Income (SMI). Because SMI is based on state-level income figures, it may be a better metric in high cost-of-living states.

Approaches to establishing eligibility policy

States can take several approaches to setting eligibility policy for state-funded pre-K programs. Some states offer "universal pre-K" with the philosophy that all children should have access to pre-K. Since funds are limited, not all districts offer pre-K, and districts with the highest percentage of low-income children are given priority for grant funds. Nonetheless, this "universal" model is one approach that takes into account research that demonstrates the benefits of low-income children participating in educational experiences alongside their more affluent peers.

For states that do establish some criteria for prioritizing or restricting eligibility, two approaches are most common. The Individual Family Risk Factors approach determines each family's eligibility for the program based on individual characteristics of the family or child. The Geographic Risk Factors approach determines where the program is offered, based on specific risk factors of residents in that jurisdiction; the program is then open to all or some of the families in that area.

Some states mix aspects of these models. For example, Connecticut reports eligibility as "All families regardless of income levels can apply for School Readiness spaces in competitive and priority municipalities; however, 60 percent of children enrolled in each town must meet the income guideline of at or below 75 percent SMI." Similarly, Iowa Shared Visions reports, "A child who meets age and income criteria is considered eligible. If a child does not meet income eligibility criteria, he/she may be eligible by meeting age and one or more secondary risk factors. However, only 20 percent of the children may qualify based on meeting secondary risk factors."

What are CEELO's policy recommendations?

High quality pre-K programs benefit children at all income levels, and children living in low-income families the most.[6] Each state determines eligibility for pre-K program enrollment based on a variety of factors, including legislative requirements, funding, program capacity and family need. Universal programs can help increase access to the program, improve program quality, and reduce administrative burdens. However, in a situation where a state cannot launch a universal program or would like to gradually expand by first prioritizing the most at-risk children, several issues must be considered in developing state policy on eligibility. In developing new or revised eligibility criteria for a state's early childhood programs, policy makers can consider the following:

- What individual factors have the strongest research evidence for placing children at risk?
- What are the options for weighting or ranking certain risk factors that are of most interest to the state or represent the greatest needs of children and families?
- What is the optimal "number" or combination of risk factors that would result in the greatest likelihood of serving the most vulnerable children?
- Which approaches to eligibility balances the goals of serving the most vulnerable children while considering the peer effect on children in classrooms?
- What capacity is needed to implement a "new" eligibility policy effectively?
- How can states balance statewide eligibility priorities with local flexibility?

Conclusion

As states seek to expand access to early childhood programs and services for children and families most in need, they are revising eligibility policy and practice with multiple goals in mind. State eligibility policies must balance accountability for public funds with the need to provide efficient and flexible processes for program staff in documenting risk factors. Most importantly, the policy should prevent unintended burdens on the communities, pre-K providers, as well as the children and families that are accessing services.

For more information on the findings of this study, read the **full report.**

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[1] i Barnett, W. S. (2010). Universal and targeted approaches to preschool education in the United States. International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy, 4(1), 1-12.

[2] Office of the Administration for Children and Families. (2015). Age of children and family income § 1305.4 eligibility. Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/hspps/1305/1305.4%20Age%20of%20children%20and%20 family%20income.htm

[3] Nores, M., & Barnett, W.S. (2014). Access to high quality early care and education: Readiness and opportunity gaps in America (CEELO Policy Report). New Brunswick, NJ: Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes.

[4] ibid

[5] Barnett, W.S., Carolan, M.E., Squires, J.H., Clarke Brown, K. (2013). *The state of preschool 2013: State preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

[6] Barnett, W.S. & Carolan, M.E. (2014). Facts about fadeout: The research base on long-term impacts of high quality pre-K (CEELO FastFact). New Brunswick, NJ: Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes. Retrieved from http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/ceelo_fast_fact_fadeout.pdf