

IMPROVING ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FROM PRE-K THROUGH THIRD GRADE IN NEVADA

PURPOSE

- To identify research on access and quality of learning opportunities in the early years.
- To discuss potential state policy levers to improve both access and quality across the pre-K through 3rd grade span.

The early childhood years are clearly fundamental in setting the stage for all subsequent learning. Early childhood education (ECE) opportunities are helpful in both supporting child development and in supporting parents' ability to work. According to the 2012 American Community Survey, 65% of Nevada's families with children from birth to 5 and 71% of families with children aged 6 to 17 have all parents in the workforce.¹⁸ However, not all ECE experiences are equivalent in terms of quality, either prior to kindergarten or during the early school years. Thus, young children in Nevada have varying levels of access to quality programming in the early years.

Access to High Quality Early Childhood Education

Access to high quality ECE is essential for school readiness and early academic success. During the early childhood years, the foundation for academic success or failure is laid. Unfortunately, a 2014 report by the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes¹⁹ found that access to ECE across the U.S. is variable, with higher income and non-rural families having access to center-based childcare more often than their lower and middle income

counterparts. The report concluded that "major inequalities in early learning and development remain common, and unequal early opportunities contribute to these inequalities" (p. 27).

Dual language learners (DLLs) often experience limited access to early childhood education (ECE). Nevada's DLL population is high and on the rise. The Nevada Department of Education's state Report Card reports a population of 66,396 children identified as English Language Learners in Nevada's K-12 schools in the 2012-2013 school year. That's about 15% of the total school attending population. Across Nevada's state-funded pre-K programs, 41% of families in the 2012-2013 school year spoke Spanish in the home and 44% of children served were recognized as having limited English skills. Nevertheless, only 1.7% of Nevada's 3 and 4-year-old children are enrolled in state pre-K. Thus, it serves only a fraction of the eligible population.

Access to Child Care. According to a 2011 report by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development,²⁰ an estimated 142,000 children in Nevada from birth to age 5 live in a household with a single working parent or in a household with two

¹⁸ American Community Survey. (2012). Selected Economic Characteristics. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved on 6/9/14 from: http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/page/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_12_1YR_DP03&prodType=table. Figures cited include both households with single parents and those with two parents.

¹⁹ Nores, M., & Barnett, S. (2014, May). *Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: Readiness and Opportunity Gaps in America*. CEELo & NIEER Policy Report.

²⁰ Insight Center for Community Economic Development. (2011). *The Economic Impact of Early Care and Education in Nevada*. Author.

working parents. The total capacity of programming for Nevada's children aged birth to age 5 is estimated at 50,845. This number includes licensed childcare, state-funded pre-K, Head Start, and Part B and C Special Education programs. In contrast, there are an estimated 174,000 children aged 6 to 12 in Nevada, and a capacity of programming of about 32,459. Programming for school-aged children includes licensed childcare, out of school care, and tribal childcare. This means that about 36% of children aged birth to 5 who are estimated to need access to ECE services actually are receiving these services in Nevada, while only 19% of children aged 6 to 12 who are estimated to need access to care are receiving it.

Access to Screenings. According to Nevada's 2013 Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant application, 3,480 children aged 3 to 21 were screened using a developmental assessment tool by Nevada Early Intervention Services in 2012. The numbers are not available by age, but this is clearly a low percentage of children given the estimated 681,000 children in Nevada with pre-existing health conditions that pose challenges to their ability to succeed in school.

Access to Home Visiting. Nevada participates in the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV) to increase the number of families receiving home visiting services, particularly in rural counties. It is challenging to estimate the total number of families who receive home visiting services because these are conducted by a variety of agencies and programs, including Public Health, Early Head Start, state Pre-K, and Head Start, to name a few. It is safe to say, however, that given the estimated population of children aged birth

through 8 in the state, that only a fraction of those families who could benefit from home visiting are receiving it.

Given these data, it seems safe to say that Nevada can do more to increase access to screening, home visiting, and childcare for the population of children aged birth to age 8. The good news is that there are several known strategies to improve access. These will be discussed in the policy section below.

High Quality Early Childhood Programming

Lack of access to ECE services is a clear issue in Nevada that deserves our attention. However, access alone is not enough. Nevada's families need access to high quality services to assure that young children thrive. A substantial body of research compiled over the past two decades suggests a number of core features of high quality early childhood programming. Instruments have been developed to assess these features, which include both structural (e.g., ratio of teachers to children, health and safety requirements) and process (e.g., quality and warmth of teacher-child interactions) elements. And, we now have clear evidence that children in high quality programs have better outcomes than children served in mediocre settings. Without fail, research continually finds that the children who benefit the most from high quality programs are those at greatest risk.²¹

Quality is a strong focus of ECE research for programs that serve children before kindergarten. Although quality has traditionally been less of a focus of research and policy for K-3 settings, several researchers and advocates have suggested that quality is no less important in the primary grades.

ECE Quality. There is clear evidence that high quality pre-school programs benefit young children's development, both concurrently and into the future.²² However, the quality of available early childhood education programs in the U.S. is alarmingly low.²³ In 2013, Nevada ranked 29th in the annual Child Care Aware report on the state of

²¹ James J. Heckman, "Schools, Skills, and Synapses," *Economic Inquiry* 46, no. 3. (2008): 289-323.

²² Steven W. Barnett et al., *Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study: Fifth Grade Follow-up*. (NIEER, 2013); Kathy Sylva et al., "Preschool Quality and Educational Outcomes at age 11:

Low Quality Has Little Benefit. (*Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 2011).

²³ National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), *State Preschool Yearbook*. (NIEER, 2013).

childcare across the U.S.²⁴ This report noted that Nevada’s childcare regulations do not meet quality program standards for many indicators (see Table 1). Research on the quality of ECE has found specifically that the first three of these (education, ratio, and group size) are particularly important features of high quality that impact young children.

Quality standards for state pre-K are notably higher than that of the general childcare population in Nevada. For example, state pre-K programs require teachers to have a 4-year degree and an early childhood teaching license. This standard is strikingly different than Nevada’s child care regulations, which require only that teachers complete a series of informal trainings each year. Unfortunately, state pre-K is serving less than 2% of Nevada’s 3 and 4-year-old children.

Table 1. Child-Care Quality Indicators ²⁴

	Nevada Regulations	National Recommendations
Lead Teacher Education	Do not require any education for its childcare workforce.	Require Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential or Associates degree in early childhood education.
Staff-Child Ratios	Does not follow recommended guidelines for any age.	Specific staff-child ratios for children by age from birth through 5 years.
Group Size Requirement	No maximum group size regulations.	Specific group size requirements by age from birth through 5 years.
Posting Inspection Reports	No public posting or monitoring of inspections or complaints online.	Ensure transparency by allowing access to inspection reports online and sharing of violations or suspension information.

K-3 Quality. The quality of classroom environments in the K-3 system, as noted previously, is an important, but often neglected, variable in predicting children’s preparation and success in subsequent grades. Especially for those children at greatest risk for poor outcomes, it is essential that high quality early learning experiences

continue across the entire continuum from birth through third grade. However, the quality of K-3 classrooms is not as strong as it could be, and may be responsible for some of the “fade-out” that some research has documented when examining longitudinal outcomes of high quality pre-K experiences.²⁵

²⁴ Child Care Aware of America. (2013). 2013 State of Child Care Centers in Nevada (excerpt from the *We Can Do Better* 2013 Update). Author.

²⁵ Gisele M. Crawford, Carolyn T. Cobb, Richard M. Clifford, & Sharon Ritchie, “The Groundswell of Transforming Prekindergarten Through 3rd Grade.” In

First School: Transforming prek-3rd grade for African American, Latino, and low-income children 2013, eds. Sharon Ritchie & Laura Gutmann (New York, NY: Teacher College Press), 9-28.

Research using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a measure of teacher-child interaction that focuses on a classroom's emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support, regularly finds that K-3 classrooms, overall, score lowest on instructional support. Instructional support scores, however, are correlated with children's positive academic and social/emotional outcomes.²⁶

Thus, it seems clear that, as with access, the quality of ECE and K-3 experiences for Nevada's young children deserves attention. In order to optimally thrive, Nevada's young children deserve access to the highest quality experiences possible. We can do better.

Policy Recommendations

Statewide initiatives are currently underway to improve both the access to and quality of ECE for Nevada's children. In addition to support for existing initiatives, some new initiatives are recommended.

Bolster and increase support for existing initiatives:

- **Nevada's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).** This initiative, paid for with quality dollars from the Child Care and Development Block Grant, is designed to support childcare centers and pre-K programs throughout the state to abide by high quality standards. The QRIS is a star rating system that provides an evaluation of the quality of a center's classrooms, along with other factors related to quality, and provides a rating to that center. Once a center is enrolled, technical support and assistance is provided to help the center to improve its quality rating. Nevada policymakers should continue to support this initiative. In addition, they could advocate for a higher state matching contribution so that more centers and family child care homes across the state can participate.

- **State Pre-K.** Nevada's pre-K programs are of high quality and have been shown to have positive outcomes on children, both concurrently and longitudinally. In the 2012-2013 school year, state pre-K participants exceeded the target improvement on measures of reading readiness and parental involvement.²⁷ Longitudinal analyses show that students who had participated in a Nevada state pre-K program in preschool scored higher on both the Reading and Math portions of Nevada's Criterion Reference Test (CRT) in third grade, compared to a randomly selected group of students who had not participated in state pre-K. More pre-K participants scored in the proficient range in both reading and math. Nevada pre-K has a proven track record. Nevada increased its funding for pre-K in the 2013 legislative session for schools with a high population of DLLs. This is commendable and should be enhanced further. With more funding, high quality Nevada pre-K can support more of Nevada's children in achieving school readiness.

- **Teacher Preparation Requirements.** In Nevada, there is an early childhood license that is designed for teachers of children from birth through 2nd grade. Although this license is required for teachers in state pre-K, and Head Start requires that teachers have a 4-year degree, no license or formal education is required for teachers in childcare centers, and most teachers in the early grades hold an elementary teaching license, which in Nevada spans from K through 8th grade. These differences in preparation should be examined carefully and the licensing structure should be evaluated to ensure P-3 students have access to teachers with the most appropriate preparation. Specifically, policymakers should consider:

- A graduated improvement of educational requirements for all teachers of children under the age of 5, through changes to childcare licensing regulations or through legislation;

²⁶ A. J. Mashburn et al., "Measures of Classroom Quality in Prekindergarten and Children's Development of Academic, Language, and Social Skills," *Child Development* 70, no. (2008): 732-749.

²⁷ Leitner, D. (October, 2013). *Nevada Early Childhood Education Program: Building a Foundation for School Readiness and Success in PreK-12 and Beyond* (FY 2012-2013 Evaluation Report. Nevada Department of Education).

- A different licensing structure that considers the unique needs of the infant/toddler population compared to the pre-K through 3rd grade population;
- Requiring all teachers of young children in the primary grades (K-3) to hold an early childhood license.

that include education requirements related to child development, the role of social and emotional development in learning, and developmentally appropriate practices. Policymakers should consider strategies for promoting ongoing support and PD for Nevada’s elementary principals, especially those with pre-K programs on site.

Consider supporting new initiatives:

- **Professional Development.** Policymakers should consider implementing standards for quality professional development (PD), to work toward ensuring that the PD provided by all facets of the ECE population is of high quality and promotes developmentally appropriate practices. Policymakers should also promote joint PD between the pre-K sector and the K-3 sector of the ECE workforce.
- **K-8 Leadership Development.** Policymakers should consider implementing core competencies for elementary school principals

- **Improving the Quality of K-3 Classrooms.** In addition to providing increased support for existing quality initiatives at the pre-K level, policymakers should support new initiatives designed to improve the quality of K-3 classrooms as well. For example, policymakers could support: (a) the alignment of standards between pre-K and K-3, (b) the adoption of developmentally appropriate curriculum in K-3 classrooms, (c) the use of appropriate formative and summative assessments in K-3 settings, and (d) promotion of teacher observation rubrics that are appropriate for use with this particular age range.

P-3 REFERS TO THE CONTINUUM OF LEARNING FROM BEFORE KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE. THIS INCLUDES ALL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS AND SERVICES THAT FOCUS ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS (BIRTH THROUGH AGE 8).

Suggested citation:

Burnham, M. M., LeJeune, J., & Wat, A. (2014). *Improving access to and quality of learning opportunities from pre-K through third grade in Nevada.* (Symposium Policy Brief #2, Governor’s P-3 Symposium: Building a Strong P-3rdGrade Foundation in Nevada). Nevada Department of Education.