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New Learning Policy Institute Report Highlights Key Strategies for Achieving High-Quality Preschool

The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons from the States describes and analyzes how four states—Michigan, North Carolina, Washington, and West Virginia—have built high-quality early education systems at scale and identifies key takeaways for policymakers, educators, and others looking to expand and deepen access to high-quality preschool.

(WASHINGTON, DC AND PALO ALTO, CA, JUNE 29, 2016) Despite strong evidence that quality preschool brings large benefits to children and society, there are major ongoing debates about how to achieve this goal. Periodic studies have questioned the efficacy of some federal and state programs, and policymakers have not known where to turn for guidance on how to achieve the best results. With renewed federal attention to early childhood education and a 12% increase in last year's state investments, it is critical that programs be effectively designed and funds well spent.

A [new report](#) by the Learning Policy Institute, *The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons from the States*, fills the information gap by describing and analyzing how four states—Michigan, North Carolina, Washington, and West Virginia—have built high-quality early education systems at scale. It also identifies key takeaways for policymakers and others looking to expand and deepen access to high-quality preschool.

“Although many studies show that high-quality preschool returns \$7 to \$10 for every dollar invested, the research shows that it is not so easy to create high-quality preschool at scale, and not all programs reap these benefits,” says [Linda Darling-Hammond](#), president and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). “This study looks deeply at how governments can design and implement programs that pay off for their children and their state.”

The findings are based on 159 interviews with stakeholders from the four states, including policymakers, program administrators, providers, teachers, parents, advocates, and researchers. The LPI research team also reviewed state-specific policy documents, studies, and data and observed programs in each state. Although the case study states vary geographically, demographically, and politically, they share a common commitment to advancing foundational elements of a quality preschool education.

Key Lessons:

- **Prioritize quality and continuous improvement.** Recognizing the critical role of program quality in achieving positive child outcomes, each state has invested in strategies to monitor and improve its early education programs.
- **Invest in training and coaching for teachers.** These four states place heavy emphasis on boosting the quality of preschool teachers, focusing on strengthening their credentials and productive interactions with students.
- **Coordinate the administration of birth-through-grade-3 programs.** Pre-k historically has been administered separately from k-12. These four states are seeking to create a seamless educational experience, aligning what is taught and how it is taught from preschool through elementary school and beyond.
- **Strategically combine multiple funding sources to increase access and improve quality.** Adequate resources are essential to assuring high-quality early education. While these four states depend primarily on state dollars as the main revenue source for early education, they also help providers integrate federal and local funding.
- **Create broad-based coalitions and support.** Launching a high-quality early education initiative — or building a bigger and better program—is hard work. These four states relied on broad-based support to advance their efforts.

“Quality early education deserves to be item #1 on every policy-maker’s list of priorities,” notes LPI Senior Fellow and report co-author [David L. Kirp](#). “Giving kids an early edge puts them on the path to success in school and in life. Across the country, the states, Republican and Democratic alike, are leading the way, investing more money and investing it wisely. What’s happening in these states offers useful lessons for other states and for Washington as well.”

The states in a nutshell:

- **Michigan** offers high-quality prekindergarten that is targeted for low-income children. It has restructured program administration to facilitate coordination across the early care and education system and made program-improvement strategies routine.
- **North Carolina** offers a “one-stop shop” at the local level, providing an array of birth-to-five services for low-income families. The state pioneered the development of a quality rating system and supports teachers to build their skills through training and salary supplements.
- **Washington** follows the Head Start model, offering a range of wraparound services to the state’s most vulnerable students. Through intensive coaching and rigorous standards, the state is improving home-based child care as a way to expand access to quality early education programs.
- **West Virginia** makes preschool available to all 4-year-olds, paying for the program with general school aid dollars. It offers communities considerable autonomy in program design and evaluation, and requires collaboration across private providers, schools, and Head Start.

“Research consistently shows smart investments in high-quality early childhood education produce economic and social dividends for children, families, and society,” says [Kris Perry](#), Executive Director of the First Five Years Fund. “As states and communities lead the way on early childhood across the country, the Learning Policy Institute’s latest report provides valuable insight into how states can convert their goals of increased access to quality early learning into a reality for children who need it most.”

[David S. Kass](#), President of Council for a Strong America adds, “early education has phenomenal return. We need to ensure states have the necessary tools to effectively implement early education so the next generation is citizen ready. Retired military leaders, CEOs, police chiefs, pastors, and athletes and coaches all know that children enrolled in high quality pre-k are healthier and better prepared for future educational opportunities and career success.”

The report was released at a [forum](#) convened by the [Learning Policy Institute](#), the [Council for a Strong America](#), and the [First Five Years Fund](#). It is authored by Marjorie Wechsler, David L. Kirp, Titilayo Tinubu Ali, Madelyn Gardner, Anna Maier, Hanna Melnick, and Patrick M. Shields.

“Quality doesn’t just happen,” notes lead author [Marjorie Wechsler](#). “You have to design for it, support it, and continually work for it, as these states have done. They’ve focused on quality through their attention to standards, by setting clear expectations for teachers’ knowledge and skills and supporting teachers to reach those expectations, and by establishing mechanisms for ongoing program improvement.”

Please click to [download](#) the report, brief, or one-page fact sheet.

For more information or to arrange interviews with report authors or individuals from the four states, please contact Sue Dorfman at [sdorfman\(at\)learningpolicyinstitute.org](mailto:sdorfman@learningpolicyinstitute.org).

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness. More information is available at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/>.