

The Oklahoma Story

In marked contrast to Florida, Oklahoma's big, statewide pre-K program operates—and is funded—primarily through the public schools.

After a series of pilot projects in the 1980's and early 1990's, mainly in Tulsa, the Oklahoma legislature amended the school-finance formula in 1998 to allow districts to count participating four-year-olds as regular pupils for purposes of claiming state education dollars. (Districts can in fact "overweight" them and claim more funds per child than they get for older students.) There was no means-testing or other targeting of eligibility; all that mattered was being four years old and living in Oklahoma.

This promised to be a fiscal boon to struggling school systems, especially in rural communities that had been shedding population for decades, and it swiftly led most systems—97 percent of them by 2006, reports NIEER—to launch or expand their offerings for four-year-olds. With those offerings came demanding statewide rules governing class size, teacher certification, and, more recently, school-readiness standards and pre-K curricula that include a definitive cognitive thrust.

Like most states, Oklahoma already had numerous Head Start operators and private preschool providers, many of them faith based and church affiliated. It would have been impolitic and wasteful to set up a new, self-contained public program in competition with them.

So the state pre-K program was designed to encourage public schools to outsource their work, under contract, to those established providers, with school systems typically retaining a portion of the funds, ostensibly to cover administrative costs. This set-up also makes it easier for operators to combine other early-childhood programs, services, and dollars with the state-funded pre-K program and present families with a seamless blend of child care and preschooling.

Yet not all that much outsourcing has actually occurred. Of the 34,000 four-year-olds enrolled in Oklahoma's state-funded pre-K program in 2007, just 4,000 were served by these "collaboration" providers. The remaining 88 percent were in programs operated directly by school systems, prompting an assistant state education superintendent to say recently that "Now it's just another grade in school, except that it's voluntary."⁶⁷

The 34,000 figure represents about 68 percent of the eligible population—a bit more than the corresponding percentages in Florida and Georgia—but doesn't mean that the other one-third of four-year-old Sooners have been ignored. Seventeen percent of them were in Head Start in 2007 and 5 percent in special-ed programs, meaning that only one in ten of these kids either had no outside-the-home arrangements or were in private programs.

It's hard to know how many Oklahoma families with four-year-olds have reaped a windfall from the new state program, which deploys public dollars to pay for programs or services akin to what the families would otherwise have obtained for themselves. Certainly the effort has had a modest upward effect on public school systems, adding about 5 percent to enrollments and a bit more than that to staffing (the pre-K program may have no more than ten children per staff member).

Program implementation has brought some conflict, too. In one camp are state and district education officials contending with

NCLB-style pressures to raise reading and math scores and thus keen to stress the pre-literacy and pre-numeracy side of early education. In the opposing camp are traditional “child development” people (along with veteran Head Start operators and staffers) who emphasize “whole child”-type programs and services.

By virtue of its universality and its \$3,400 per-pupil state price tag (augmented by local and federal dollars that raise that figure to about \$6,700), Oklahoma’s program is obviously not tightly targeted, although two-thirds of participants in the Tulsa sample cited below qualified for reduced-price lunches. Nor is the program particularly intensive: three-fifths of participating children are in half-day versions. Thus far, however, it does seem to be having a modest salutary effect on participants.

Georgetown University’s William Gormley and Deborah Phillips have twice evaluated entering kindergartners in Tulsa, first in 2001, then in 2003. The earlier study found cognitive gains among low-income and black and Hispanic youngsters who took part in the state pre-K program, but not among their white or middle-income counterparts. The later study found benefits among (Tulsa) children of all races and income levels, although the gains were larger among members of minorities and the poor. Unfortunately, no information is available on how well, if at all, those entering gains were sustained as the students proceeded through public school. As we have seen, the pattern in most such programs is a gradual fade-out of pre-K effects, usually to the vanishing point.

Will Oklahoma break that discouraging mold? It’s too soon to know.