

Miles To Go

Mississippi

Pre-Kindergarten: Time to Begin

Jackson★

SEF
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Introduction

Mississippi is the only Southern state that has no state-supported pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) program. This brief reviews how Mississippi is falling behind other states in the Deep South in early childhood education; why Mississippi needs a Pre-K program now; options for how the state can finance such a program; and current opportunities (even in economic hard times) for Mississippi to begin to build on existing assets to establish a Pre-K program for the benefit of all Mississippians in the future.

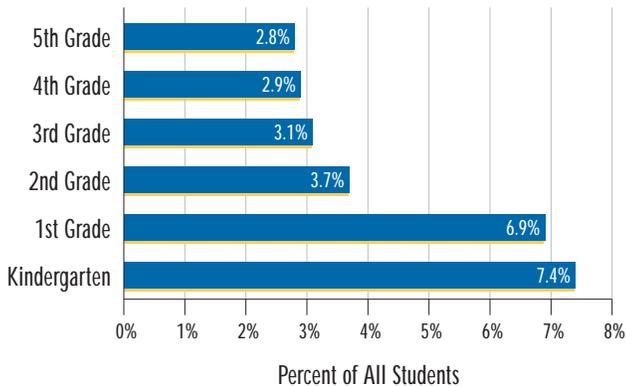
Other Deep South States Begin To Lead in High-Quality Pre-K

Mississippi's neighboring states are emerging as national leaders in Pre-K programs. Five Deep South states (Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina) are now ranked nationally for both significant Pre-K enrollment and high-quality programs. Also, Alabama ranks number one in the nation for the program's high-quality although its Pre-K enrollment remains comparatively small.

Despite the recession, every Deep South state except Louisiana increased their state Pre-K budget during the last two years. This continued growth has been the result of bipartisan leadership. In Alabama, Republican Governor Bob Riley is moving the state's Pre-K from a well-regarded pilot toward a real statewide program. Alabama's Pre-K funding increased from \$10 million to more than \$18 million between 2008 and 2010. Tennessee has moved even more rapidly under the leadership of Democratic Governor Phil Bredesen. In Arkansas, the state "ABC" Pre-K program began under Republican Governor Mike Huckabee and has grown during the term of

Mississippi Students Repeating the Same Grade

Elementary School, 2008



Democratic Governor Mike Beebe. And both Georgia and South Carolina have continued to grow state-supported Pre-K under Democratic and Republican governors during the last decade.¹

No other multi-state region or area in the country has done so well as the Deep South in advancing Pre-K in recent years. With continued growth, voluntary Pre-K is becoming the Deep South's most important comparative advantage for spurring future, unprecedented gains in education and economic growth.

Mississippi Needs High-Quality Pre-K

Mississippi has the same need for high-quality Pre-K as do other Deep South states. Far too many of Mississippi's young children are not school-ready when they reach kindergarten and begin immediately to fall behind. Many children struggle for years but never catch up, give up, and fail to graduate or barely make it out of high school.

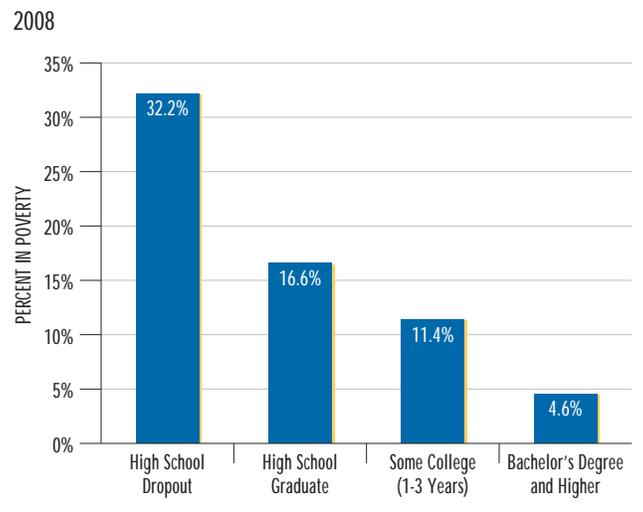
¹See *Update: Pre-Kindergarten in the South: Preserving the Region's Comparative Advantage in Education* (2010) and *Pre-Kindergarten in the South: The Region's Comparative Advantage in Education* (2007) in the "Publications" section of the SEF website: www.southerneducation.org.

²For references to the sources of data, charts, reports, and quotations cited in the report, visit the "What's New" section of SEF's website: www.southerneducation.org.

In 2008, one out of every 14 kindergarten students and one out of every 15 students in the first grade in Mississippi schools had to repeat their grade. This rate of non-promotion in Mississippi kindergarten classes is more than twice the rate of 5th grade students and has remained at the same level during the last 10 years. Here lies the origin of many of the state's K-12 problems with low academic performance and low graduation rates.²

The long-term, economic consequences of this pattern are evident throughout Mississippi – especially in hard economic times. The poverty rate for Mississippians without a high school diploma was 32.2 percent in 2008. The rate was 4.6 percent for those with a college degree.

Mississippi Adult Poverty Rates by Educational Level



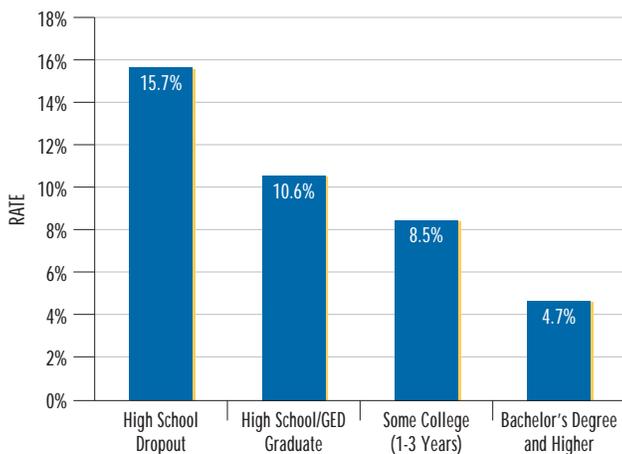
In December 2009, when the jobless rate spiked to include more than one out of every 10 Mississippi adults, the unemployment rate stood at less than 5 percent for adults with a college degree and 8.5 percent for those with some college education. The unemployment rate for high school dropouts was three times higher than the rate of those with a college degree. Education makes a big difference in jobs and income – even in a distressed economy.

High-quality Pre-K is the first, essential step toward building the educated workforce that will enable a better economic future for Mississippi. “Early education won’t fix our workforce issues tomorrow,” Mississippi Power CEO Anthony Topazi stated in 2007, “but if we don’t fix it now, we won’t have a solution for workforce issues in the next 20 years.” Pre-K can set in motion a long-range pattern of learning that helps to keep students in school, out of juvenile detention and crime, and on their way to becoming active citizens and productive workers who help increase a state’s productivity, tax base, and quality of life.

Due to its important economic impact, Pre-K in Mississippi has received bipartisan endorsement for more than a decade. Former Governor William Winter has stated: “I do not believe real education progress is possible in Mississippi without doing something significant about pre-kindergarten programs.” Governor Haley Barbour has publicly acknowledged that “effective early education will be essential to the continuing economic growth of the State.”

Adult Unemployment Rates by Educational Level

December 2009



“A lot of people think of education as kindergarten through 12th grade ... but today I’ll talk about education from pre-kindergarten to workforce training, because our efforts must go beyond K-12.”

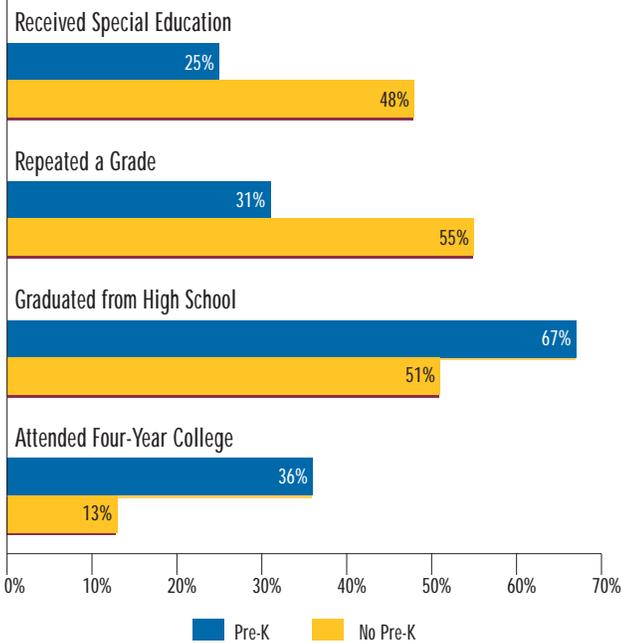
– Governor-Elect Haley Barbour, 2003

These endorsements echo the conclusion of the Nobel laureate of economics, James Heckman, who calls Pre-K the single most effective, efficient investment in developing job skills. At three and four years of age, as neuroscience indicates, children can become “hard-wired” for both how to learn and how to achieve. They can absorb qualities such as curiosity, persistence, focus, aspiration, patience, and cooperation as lifelong habits of learning. Pre-K students develop both social and learning skills, and these traits can help take a child a long way into the future.

Long-term studies of high-quality preschool education show clearly the educational and economic value of Pre-K. For example, studies of a North Carolina preschool program, Abecedarian, reveal that students in high-quality Pre-K were far less likely to repeat any K-12 grade than were children with no Pre-K. The Pre-K children also were almost three times more likely to go to a four-year college than students without Pre-K. As former North Carolina governor Jim Hunt stated in Jackson in 2002, “You can not be successful in K-12 unless you get early childhood education right.”

Long-Term Academic Outcomes of Pre-K

Abecedarian Program in North Carolina



Of course, high-quality Pre-K can not turn around the state's entire economy or educational system in 2010, but it can deliver on what Mississippi needs most in the decades ahead – helping to enlarge education, jobs, income, and a good quality of life throughout the entire state.

Paying for Pre-K in Mississippi

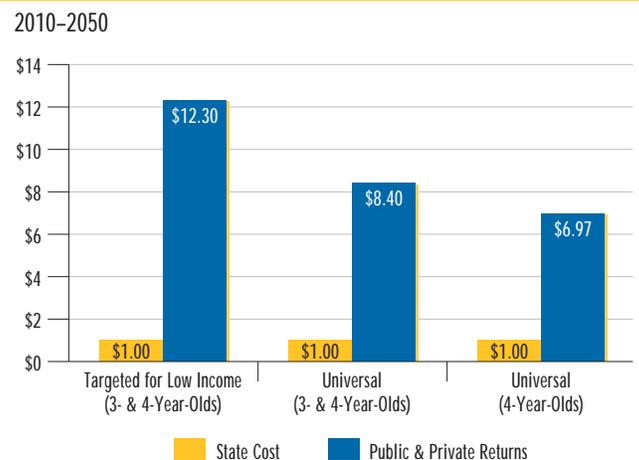
The largest obstacle to high-quality Pre-K in Mississippi apparently has been cost. During the last decade, as other Deep South states have found the means to begin and expand state-supported Pre-K, state leaders in Mississippi have decided almost by default that it alone among the Southern states is too poor to afford Pre-K. In 2003, Governor Barbour stated: “Let’s face it, in the short run, Mississippi is not going to have enough money for pre-kindergarten.” Seven years later Mississippi still has no high-quality Pre-K.

During the last decade, the state of Arkansas found money to pay for improving public education, including a state-supported Pre-K program. As former Republican governor Mike Huckabee stated: “It’s much less expensive than the alternative. Ignorance is expensive. Failure is expensive.”

Economist Robert Lynch, author of *Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation*, has developed projections that quantify how high-quality Pre-K in Mississippi can pay for itself over time. He has calculated the cost-benefit ratios for three different Pre-K options that Mississippi might consider in building the state’s high-quality Pre-K program. The returns on investment range from \$6.97 in benefits for every dollar of cost to \$12.30 in benefits for every dollar spent on Pre-K over a period of 40 years. By any measure, these are very impressive returns on investment.

The initial difficulty in financing Pre-K comes from the fact that most of the economic returns take full effect once a student graduates from school and becomes a productive, working adult. Therefore, it takes a minimum of 14 to 20 years for the

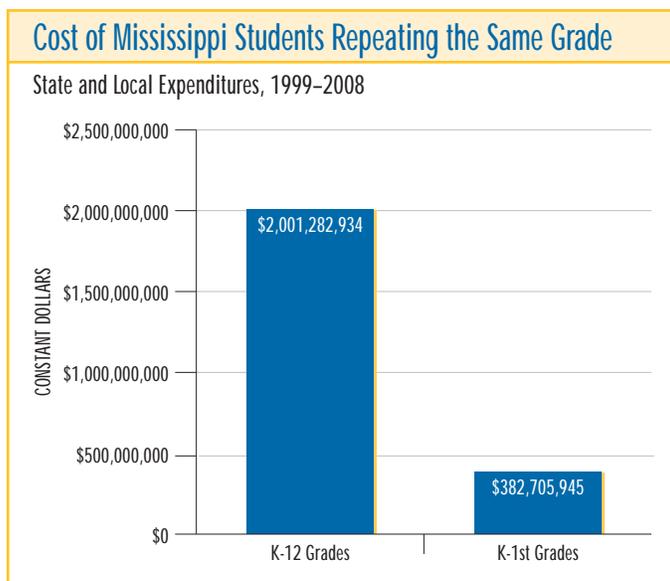
Return on Investment: Options for Mississippi Pre-K Programs



full benefits of high-quality Pre-K to take hold. But, some benefits actually begin before a child leaves school. For example, economist Robert Lynch finds that all three of his proposed options for Mississippi Pre-K would begin to pay for itself within seven or eight years of full operation.

These projections involve real savings – not ‘pie-in-the-sky’ calculations. Take, for example, Mississippi’s persisting problem with students who need to repeat a grade. During the last ten years, the high rate of non-promotion in Mississippi public schools has added more than \$2 billion to state and local educational expenditures. More than \$380 million was spent solely because children needed to repeat kindergarten or the first grade. This problem is real, costly, and precisely what high-quality Pre-K has been proven to address – and a realistic example of how over time Pre-K can pay for itself.

Because the state of Mississippi and local school districts face budget cuts in 2010, state leaders may again acknowledge the importance of Pre-K for Mississippi’s future but fail to act since the state again “is not going to have enough money for pre-



kindergarten.” More than anything else, however, Mississippi’s current problems with a growing jobless rate underscore the consequences of past failures to move forward with long-term plans for Pre-K.

Mississippi must begin now to explore how to find the necessary revenues to launch state-supported Pre-K as soon as possible. To continue a long period of delay will simply be too costly to the state’s budgets and Mississippians’ pocketbooks in the decades ahead.

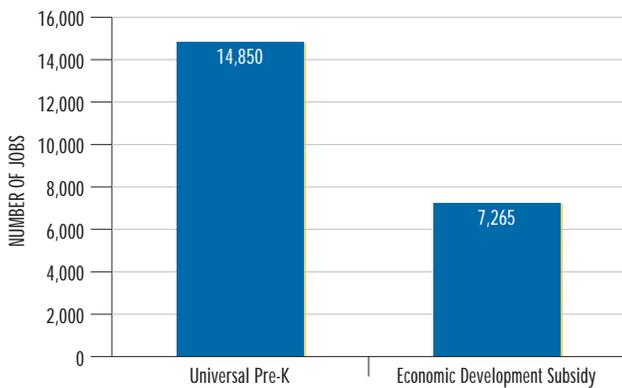
Mississippi should consider how other states have generated new revenues for Pre-K. Three Southern states now finance Pre-K programs, in part or in whole, with state-sponsored gaming dollars. Like other states, Mississippi could generate added revenue for Pre-K by reforming parts of its tax code. According to recent studies, Mississippi has the same tax rates for households making over \$400,000 as for those making as little as \$20,000. Also, a homeowner in Mississippi pays a sales tax when installing a heating unit, but out-of-state corporations pay no sales taxes when hiring the services of a Mississippi law firm.

Mississippi has accumulated over the years a very large number of existing state subsidies, tax abatements, and tax credits that drain the state treasury. Some, like the tax subsidies for the location of automobile manufacturing in Mississippi, are well-known. Other tax subsidies exist, however, which are not generally known and appear bizarre, such as the subsidies for private prisons and chain department stores.

Considering these issues is not a call for Mississippi to enact new or different taxes to finance a statewide Pre-K program. But, these issues suggest that the state needs to undertake a careful examination of the comparative costs and benefits of current and needed programs, including Pre-K.

Long-Term Effects of High-Quality Pre-K: Growing More Mississippi Jobs Than Subsidies

Annual Averages Over 75 Years



Economist Timothy Bartik has compared the effects of state economic development subsidies with those of high-quality Pre-K on job growth within states. His findings for Mississippi show what everyone would expect: economic development subsidies are by far more effective in creating jobs than spending the same amount on high-quality Pre-K during a period of 30 years. But, over a period of 75 years, Bartik finds that high-quality Pre-K would create considerably more jobs annually in Mississippi than spending the same amount of money on traditional economic development subsidies. In the long run, high-quality Pre-K can do far more for Mississippians than pay for itself.

“My goal is to make sure all students have a good, quality pre-kindergarten school.”

*Former State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds
May 21, 2007*

New Opportunities to Begin Mississippi Pre-K

Mississippi will not have to start from scratch to build high-quality Pre-K across the state. The Obama Administration is proposing an important new early childhood fund that may help the state pay for some initial and ongoing costs. The proposed Early Learning Challenge Fund will help develop new approaches to the states' early learning programs by supporting results-oriented, high-quality pre-K programs, fund programs that improve existing early learning with the goal of increasing the number of low income children who participate in high-quality Pre-K, and ensure that more children enter kindergarten ready for success.

In addition, Mississippi already has one of the nation's largest Head Start programs that serves more than 25,000 of the state's estimated 85,000 three- and four-year-old children. In past years, Head Start has helped to advance the social and educational development of Mississippi's low income children, and the national Head Start agency recently announced new efforts that should help state programs move toward delivering the kind of educational gains that high-quality Pre-K produces. In addition, the state's new Early Childhood Advisory Council, which is also federally funded, has begun to explore how the state can build a system of early care and education from existing programs.

The Mississippi Economic Council is currently operating an important pilot program, “Building Blocks,” funded by private dollars that can help determine the best strategies for improving the capacity of Mississippi child care providers to become sites for high-quality Pre-K. Other programs, like the Children Defense Fund's long-running SPARK, also offer similarly important lessons.

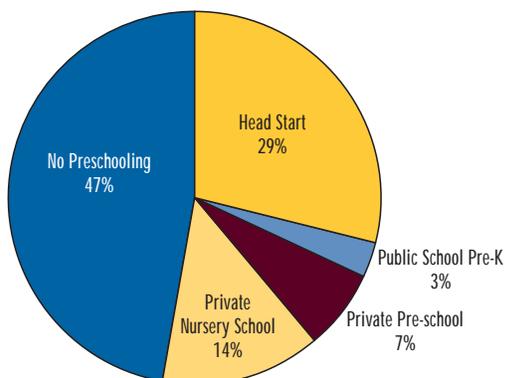
Finally, most local school districts are providing Pre-K classes using federal funding for young children with special needs and a few districts have begun pre-K classes with local revenues. There are also at least 5,900 children in private pre-school programs.

All told, an estimated 53 percent of Mississippi's three- and four-year-old children in 2008 were in some pre-school setting where adults have probably had some training and guidance in early childhood education – not simply providing adult care and custody of children. Whatever the exact number, Mississippi has a good foundation of existing private and public programs from which to build high-quality Pre-K.

Some Southern states, such as Arkansas, have developed and enacted legislation establishing the terms and structure of a statewide Pre-K program even before resolving the issues about how to finance it in future years. Others like Louisiana have started programs and later enacted legislative goals for a universal program. Sooner or later, several pivotal questions of policy and practice will need answers with public input: will Mississippi Pre-K have both public and private providers?

Preschool Settings of 3- & 4-Year-Olds – 85,307 Mississippi Children

2008



“We cannot achieve the goals we’ve got for ourselves until we break this pattern of children starting school unprepared.”

– *Former Governor William Winter,*
February 2, 2002

Which state agency or agencies are best equipped to supervise and assure high-quality Pre-K programs? How can a statewide program set and implement high-quality benchmarks with a variety of federal-state-and-local funding sources? Mississippi’s vibrant community of early childhood experts and advocates can help state leaders and all Mississippians find answers to these questions.

Pre-K is all-important, but it is not all that must be done in Mississippi to transform the long-standing patterns of inadequate education and depressed jobs. The state can not neglect or shortchange the role of parents or necessary improvements and funding in K-12 education and higher education, especially for low income students. But, it is time for Mississippi to seize the opportunity to begin Pre-K.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Mississippi needs to build a brighter future for the next generations. There is no time to lose. The state now has a unique opportunity to make up for lost time in early childhood education by building on its existing assets and taking full advantage of new federal initiatives.

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) recommends two specific actions that should take place as soon as possible:

1. The entire Mississippi Congressional delegation should work together to make the passage and funding of the Early Learning Challenge Fund a top priority and undertake every effort to help Mississippi become competitive for federal funding to begin a statewide program of high-quality Pre-K.
2. Mississippi should establish a prestigious bipartisan commission on early childhood education to engage the Mississippi people, educators, and experts in an open process to develop a complete, specific plan of action for establishing and financing a statewide program of high-quality Pre-K as soon as possible.

During the last decade, looking no further than year-to-year, Mississippi has failed to start a statewide high-quality Pre-K program because its leaders believe that it is a poor state without enough money. The truth is that Mississippi will remain a poor state without enough education, jobs, or income for its children and grandchildren if it does not undertake every effort to invest in high-quality Pre-K now. It is time to begin.

The Southern Education Foundation

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF), www.southerneducation.org, is a public foundation comprised of diverse women and men who work together to improve the quality of life for all of the South's people through better and more accessible education. SEF advances creative solutions to ensure fairness and excellence in education for low income students from preschool through higher education.

SEF develops and implements programs, serves as an intermediary for donors who want a high-quality partner with whom to work on education issues in the South, and participates as a public charity in the world of philanthropy. SEF depends upon contributions from foundations, corporations and individuals to extend its work.

SEF'S VISION

We seek a South and a nation with a skilled workforce that sustains an expanding economy, where civic life embodies diversity and democratic values and practice, and where an excellent education system provides all students with fair chances to develop their talents and contribute to the common good. We will be known for our commitment to combating poverty and inequality through education.

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SEF develops and promotes policies, practices, and creative solutions that ensure educational excellence, fairness, and high levels of achievement among low income students, including African Americans. SEF began in 1867 as the Peabody Education Fund.

CREDITS

Lynn Huntley is President of the Southern Education Foundation. Steve Suitts, SEF Vice President, is the author of this report. He had assistance in fact-checking and proofing the report from SEF Research and Program Fellows, Vanessa Elkan and Katherine Dunn, who also assisted with on-line materials relating to the report. Mary Sommers of Typographic Solutions designed the report.

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