

**STATE PUBLIC PRESCHOOLQUALITY STANDARDS CHECKLIST**

POLICY	STATE PRE-K REQUIREMENT
Early learning standards.....	National Education Goals Panel content areas covered by state learning standards for preschool-age children must be comprehensive
Teacher degree .....	Lead teacher must have a BA, at minimum
Teacher specialized training .....	Lead teacher must have specialized training in a pre-K area
Assistant teacher degree .....	Assistant teacher must have a CDA or equivalent, at minimum
Teacher in-service .....	Teacher must receive at least 15 hours/year of in-service professional development and training
Maximum class size .....	Maximum number of children per classroom must be 20 or fewer 3-year-olds 4-year-olds
Staff-child ratio.....	Lowest acceptable ratio of staff to children in classroom 3-year-olds (e.g., maximum number of students per teacher) must be 1:10 or better 4-year-olds
Screening/referral and support services.....	Screenings and referrals for vision, hearing, and health must be required; at least one additional support service must be provided to families
Meals.....	At least one meal must be required daily
Monitoring .....	Site visits must be used to demonstrate ongoing adherence to state program standards

**QUALITY STANDARDS CHECKLIST**

State policies in 10 critical areas related to quality are shown in the Quality Standards Checklist table. For each area, states receive a checkmark when their policy meets or exceeds the related benchmark standard. On the right side of the page, a box displays the total number of benchmarks met by the state.

The Quality Standards Checklist represents a set of minimum criteria needed to ensure effective preschool education programs, especially when serving children at risk for school failure. However, the checklist is not intended as an exhaustive catalog of all features of a high-quality program and meeting all 10 standards does not necessarily guarantee high quality. On the other hand, each of these standards is essential, and no state’s preschool education policies should be considered satisfactory unless all 10 benchmarks are met.

The limitations of research are such that judgment inevitably plays a role in setting specific benchmarks based on evidence. Studies find that the potential benefits from strong preschool education programs exceed costs by seven to 17 times.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we gave more weight to the risk of losing substantial benefits by setting benefits too low than to the risk of raising costs by setting benchmarks too high. Costs of many preschool programs are currently quite low; thus, benchmarks steer closer to the characteristics of programs demonstrated to produce reasonably large educational benefits for children in randomized trials and the strongest quasi-experimental studies (e.g., High/Scope Perry Preschool and Chicago Child-Parent Centers) and farther from the characteristics of programs found in rigorous studies to have weak effects.<sup>2</sup>

Four of the items we use to gauge the quality of state-funded preschool programs involve teacher credentials and training. State preschool policies are evaluated based on whether programs require teachers to have a bachelor’s degree;<sup>3</sup> whether they require teachers to have specialization in preschool education;<sup>3</sup> whether they require assistant teachers to have at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent credential;<sup>4</sup> and whether they require teachers to have at least 15 hours of annual in-service training.<sup>5</sup> Teacher qualifications receive this emphasis in our checklist because research shows this area to be crucial in determining program quality. Better education and training for teachers can improve the interaction between children and teachers, which in turn affects children’s learning.

Class size and staff-child ratios are also emphasized in the Quality Standards Checklist, with the expectation that states will

limit class sizes to 20 children at the most<sup>6</sup> and have no more than 10 children per teacher.<sup>7</sup> With smaller classes and fewer children per teacher, children have greater opportunities for interaction with adults and can receive more individualized attention, resulting in a higher quality program.

Early learning standards are also critical to quality<sup>8</sup> as they offer programs guidance and ensure that they cover the full range of areas essential to children's learning and development. States should have comprehensive early learning standards covering all areas identified as fundamental by the National Education Goals Panel<sup>9</sup>—children's physical well-being and motor development, social/emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. These standards should be state requirements or actively promoted for use in state-funded preschool education classrooms and should be specifically tailored to the learning of preschool-age children so that it is appropriate for their level of development.

The Quality Standards Checklist also addresses the comprehensive services that preschool education programs should be expected to offer. Programs should provide at least one meal;<sup>10</sup> vision, hearing, and health screenings and referrals;<sup>11</sup> and additional parent involvement opportunities, such as parent conferences, or support services, such as parent education.<sup>12</sup> These items are included because children's overall well-being and success in school involves not only their cognitive development but also their physical and social/emotional health.

It is important to note that the Quality Standards Checklist focuses on state preschool policy requirements rather than actual practice. A state with good policies may have some programs that fail to comply with these policies; conversely, a state with weak policies may have many programs that exceed state standards. While evaluating implementation of standards is outside the scope of this report, the checklist does include an indicator of whether states are taking steps to monitor programs' implementation of the quality standards. Policies requiring strong state quality standards are essential, but it is also necessary to have a means of ascertaining that programs meet those standards.<sup>13</sup> Through the examination of program practices, monitoring helps to enforce the standards and ensure high-quality education in state-funded preschool programs.

<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, A., Temple, J., Robertson, D., & Mann, E. (2002). Age 21 cost-benefit analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24, 267-303. Belfield, C., Nores, M., Barnett, S., & Schweinhart, L. (2006). The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program: Cost-benefit analysis using data from the age-40 follow-up. *Journal of Human Resources*, 41(1), 162-190.

<sup>2</sup> Temple, J., & Reynolds, A. (2007). Benefits and costs of investments in preschool education: Evidence from the Child-Parent Centers and related programs. *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 126-144. Barnett, W.S., & Belfield, C. (2006). Early childhood development and social mobility. *Future of Children*, 16(2), 73-98.

<sup>3</sup> Based on a review of the evidence, a committee of the National Research Council recommended that preschool teachers have a BA with specialization in early childhood education. Bowman, B.T., Donovan, M.S., & Burns, M.S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Burchinal, M.R., Cryer, D., Clifford, R.M., & Howes, C. (2002). Caregiver training and classroom quality in child care centers. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 2-11. Barnett, W.S. (2003). Better teachers, better preschools: Student achievement linked to teacher qualifications. *Preschool Policy Matters*, 2. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Whitebook, M., Howes, C., & Phillips, D. (1989). *Who cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America* (Final report on the National Child Care Staffing Study). Oakland, CA: Child Care Employee Project.

<sup>4</sup> Preschool classrooms typically are taught by a team of a teacher and an assistant. Research focusing specifically on the qualifications of assistant teachers is rare, but the available evidence points to a relationship between assistant teacher qualifications and teaching quality. There is much evidence on the educational importance of the qualifications of teaching staff generally. Bowman, Donovan, & Burns (2001). Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes (2002). Barnett (2003). Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips (1989). The CDA has been recommended to prepare assistant teachers who are beginning a career path to become teachers rather than permanent assistants. Kagan, S.L., & Cohen, N.E. (1997). *Not by chance: Creating an early care and education system for America's children* [Abridged report]. New Haven, CT: Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy, Yale University.

<sup>5</sup> Good teachers are actively engaged in their continuing professional development. Bowman, Donovan, & Burns (2001). Frede, E.C. (1998). Preschool program quality in programs for children in poverty. In W.S. Barnett & S.S. Boocock (Eds.). (1998). *Early care and education for children in poverty: Promises, programs, and long-term results* (pp. 77-98). Albany, NY: SUNY Press. Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips (1989) found that teachers receiving more than 15 hours of training were more appropriate, positive, and engaged with children in their teaching practices.

<sup>6</sup> The importance of class size has been demonstrated for both preschool and kindergarten. A class size of 20 children is larger than the class size shown in many programs to produce large gains for disadvantaged children. Barnett, W.S. (1998). Long-term effects on cognitive development and school success. In W.S. Barnett & S.S. Boocock (Eds.). (1998). *Early care and education for children in poverty: Promises, programs, and long-term results* (pp. 11-44). Albany, NY: SUNY Press. Bowman, Donovan, & Burns (2001). Finn, J.D. (2002). Class-size reduction in grades K-3. In A. Molnar (Ed.). (2002). *School reform proposals: The research evidence* (pp. 27-48). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing. Frede (1998). NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (1999). Child outcomes when child care center classes meet recommended standards for quality. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89, 1072-1077. National Association for the Education of Young Children (2005). *NAEYC early childhood program standards and accreditation criteria*. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>7</sup> A large literature establishes linkages between staff-child ratio, program quality, and child outcomes. A ratio of 1:10 is smaller than in programs that have demonstrated large gains for disadvantaged children and is the lowest (fewest number of teachers per child) generally accepted by professional opinion. Barnett (1998). Bowman, Donovan, & Burns (2001). Frede (1998). NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (1999). National Association for the Education of Young Children (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Current practice too frequently underestimates children's capabilities to learn during the preschool years. Clear and appropriate expectations for learning and development across all domains are essential to an educationally effective preschool program. Bowman, Donovan, & Burns (2001). Frede (1998). Kendall, J.S. (2003). Setting standards in early childhood education. *Educational Leadership*, 60(7), 64-68.

<sup>9</sup> National Education Goals Panel (1991). *The Goal 1 Technical Planning Subgroup report on school readiness*. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>10</sup> Good nutrition contributes to healthy brain development and children's learning. Shonkoff, J.P., & Phillips, D.A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>11</sup> For some children, preschool provides the first opportunity to detect vision, hearing, and health problems that may impair a child's learning and development. This opportunity should not be missed. Meisels, S.J., & Atkins-Burnett, S. (2000). The elements of early childhood assessment. In J.P. Shonkoff & S.J. Meisels (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (pp. 231-257). New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Families are the primary source of support for child development, and the most effective programs have partnered with parents. Bowman, Donovan, & Burns (2001). Frede (1998).

<sup>13</sup> Monitoring of program quality and external accountability for pre-K are essential components of program standards. Bowman, Donovan, & Burns (2001).