

# Universal Pre-K Will Have Lifetime Benefits for Maryland Children

*Position Statement Supporting House Bill 1080*

*Given before the House Ways and Means Committee*

When children have access to a high-quality pre-kindergarten education, they begin elementary school more ready to learn, generating measurable benefits decades into the future. This is why ongoing efforts to expand access to pre-K in Maryland are so important. Few educational interventions have been shown to bring greater returns both to children and to the community. Yet too many Maryland children are currently shut out of pre-K education due to high program costs and the inability of existing programs to meet demand. Implementing universal pre-K will be good for Maryland children and strengthen our state's education system—which, in the long run, means strengthening our economy. For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 1080.

A substantial body of research has found that high-quality early childhood education can yield large benefits for children, setting them up for greater success in school and, eventually, the workforce.<sup>i</sup> Studies have found that students entering kindergarten from a high-quality pre-K program score higher on reading and math tests than children who did not attend preschool. These gains in achievement are substantial in all income groups, and greatest among children who grow up in families struggling to make ends meet. The benefits of pre-K remain with children as they grow up, translating into better achievement in middle school, a greater chance of graduating high school, and higher earnings in adulthood. Children who attend pre-K are also less likely to be identified as having disabilities or placed in special education later in their school careers. Because students who attend pre-K need fewer targeted educational services during school and go on to pay more in income taxes, investments in pre-K can generate significant cost savings for the state over time.

Although Maryland boasts one of the best school systems in the country by some measures,<sup>ii</sup> there is still a significant different in educational outcomes for students from high- and low-income families, as well as between students of different racial backgrounds. Universal pre-K is one way to even the playing field because it gets all students off to a stronger start in school, not just those whose parents can afford it.

In addition, increased access to pre-K reduces costs to the state associated with neglect, eases the burden of child care costs for parents, and encourages primary caretakers of young children to rejoin the workforce earlier.<sup>iii</sup> To ensure that Maryland children and our economy see the greatest possible benefit from pre-K investments, it is important to make sure that this resource is available to as many children as possible.

Maryland currently offers free pre-K to children of families with incomes below 300 percent of the federal poverty level, currently \$61,260. However, many low-income families are not able to take advantage of high quality pre-K because there are not enough available slots in existing programs. There are approximately 32,651 slots in high quality pre-K programs in Maryland for children of all income levels, but it is estimated that there are 39,144 four-year-olds whose families qualify for free pre-K.<sup>iv</sup> Expanding the number of slots available through investment in universal pre-K would give more low-income families the opportunity to enroll their children in high quality programs and reduce the stigma associated with using income-based free pre-K. Even for families whose incomes are above the income maximum for free pre-K, the costs of high-quality programs - which can be hundreds of dollars per month - are still unaffordable. By investing more in the future of Maryland's children and building on existing pre-K programs, Maryland can generate greater benefits for children, families, and the Maryland economy.

**For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully asks that the House Ways and Means Committee make a favorable report on House Bill 1080.**

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<sup>i</sup> Chrisanne Gayl, "The Research on Pre-K," *Center for Public Education*, 2008, <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Pre-kindergarten/Pre-Kindergarten>.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Morse, "How States Compare in the 2016 Best High Schools Rankings," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 18, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/articles/how-states-compare>.

<sup>iii</sup> Lynn Karoly & James Bigelow, "The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California," *RAND Corporation*, 2005, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND\\_MG349.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG349.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Simon Workman, Bob Palaich, and Sarah Wool, "A Comprehensive Analysis of Prekindergarten in Maryland," *Maryland State Department of Education*, 2016, <http://marylandpublicschools.org/Documents/adequacystudy/MDPreKComprehensiveAnalysis011316.pdf>