



Proposed Expansion of New Mexico PreK

Community Meeting

FINAL REPORT

- This report presents results from the September 28, 2016 community meeting in Las Cruces, NM addressing a proposed expansion of the state-funded New Mexico PreK program.

CONVENER:

New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership

FACILITATOR:

New Mexico First



NEW MEXICO FIRST

Copyright 2016

New Mexico First
P. O. Box 56549
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87187
Phone: 505-225-2140
Website: www.nmfirst.org

New Mexico First typically grants permission to reproduce all or part of this document for educational or public policy purposes. Contact us for reproduction authorization.

Contents

Introduction	4
A Few Words About Terms.....	4
Convener: New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership.....	5
Facilitator: New Mexico First.....	5
Community Meeting Process.....	5
Feedback by Theme	6
Potential Advantages of Expanding New PreK	6
Increased Accessibility to Quality Services.....	6
Greater Alignment and Accountability.....	6
Positive Impacts for Families	6
Potential Challenges of Expanding New Mexico PreK.....	7
Funding and Sustainability	7
Lack of Coordination and Competition.....	7
Only a Partial Solution	7
Workforce Issues	7
Suggestions	7
Conclusion	8

Introduction

National research confirms that early childhood education programs can improve child well-being, safety, and educational outcomes while also closing achievement gaps. Recognizing the need to better position all of New Mexico's young children for success, the New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership (NMECDP) proposes an expansion of New Mexico's state-funded PreK program. They recommend providing full-day New Mexico PreK, free of charge to all three- and four-year-olds whose families are interested. Expansion would occur in a variety of settings, including child care homes, child care centers, Head Start sites, and public elementary schools. As is true now, participation would remain voluntary and there would be both school-based or center-based programs from which parents could choose. The community meeting was a chance for administrators, educators, parents, teachers and business leaders to discuss the specifics of the proposed expansion and offer input.

A Few Words About Terms

People sometimes confuse New Mexico PreK with pre-school, private pre-kindergarten programs, child care or other early learning programs. There are multiple state, federal, nonprofit, for-profit and faith-based programs providing care for children birth to five:

- **Home-based child care:** Roughly 3,600 New Mexico providers offer care in their homes, falling into three categories: unlicensed but registered (max of four children), licensed (max of six children) and licensed group homes (max of 12 children).
- **Child care centers:** About 700 licensed child care centers operate in New Mexico, many of them also offering some form of pre-school. Depending on how they are accredited, they may also provide New Mexico PreK or Early PreK. The centers may be nonprofit, for-profit and/or faith-based.
- **Pre-school or private pre-kindergarten programs:** These programs exist within child care centers. They may be half-day or full-day, depending on the center. Children transition between parts of the day that are pre-school and child care.
- **Head Start and Early Head Start programs:** Approximately 6,700 New Mexico children are served by Early Head Start and Head Start programs. There are 32 Head Start providers, of which 18 are associated with Native American tribes, and 125 centers, including three migrant/seasonal centers. Only low-income families are eligible for these programs.
- **New Mexico PreK and Early PreK programs:** This state-funded, voluntary pre-school program serves three- and four-year-olds. While not income-based, two-thirds of enrolled students must live in a Title I elementary school district. The NM Children Youth and Families Department (CYFD) administers the program in 148 child care centers. The NM Public Education Department (PED) administers the program in 145 schools.
- **Child Care Assistance Program:** The Child Care Assistance Program subsidizes the cost of child care for low-income families (at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level). Only families whose parents can prove that they are working and/or in school and have a need for child care can qualify. The average monthly enrollment, as of 2015, was 16,825 children. About a quarter of them were in four- or five-star care.

Convener: New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership

NMECDP is a public-private partnership that works with business leaders, policymakers and early childhood professionals to provide greater access to high quality early learning opportunities for New Mexico's children. The organization is dedicated to creating the public awareness and political will for investments in early childhood education in New Mexico.

Facilitator: New Mexico First

New Mexico First engages people in important issues facing their state or community. Established in 1986, the public policy organization offers unique town halls and forums that bring together people to develop their best ideas for policymakers and the public. New Mexico First also produces nonpartisan public policy reports on critical issues facing the state. These reports – on topics like water, education, healthcare, the economy, and energy – are available at nmfirst.org. The state's two U.S. Senators, Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich, serve as New Mexico First's honorary co-chairs. The organization was co-founded in 1986 by then U.S. Senators Jeff Bingaman and Pete Domenici.

Community Meeting Process

At the luncheon, participants were asked to share their thoughts on the proposed expansion of the New Mexico PreK program. The 46 registrants sat at four round tables, each led by a facilitator. Their discussion was informed by a [background report](#) that cited the pros and cons of such an expansion. Each small group discussed what they liked about the proposal and their concerns. Some groups also offered recommendations.

As expected, there was considerable commonality between the groups. To make it easier for readers to consider the ideas by topic, this report is organized around the main themes that emerged among the groups.

Feedback by Theme

The NMECDP has proposed expanding the state funded New Mexico PreK program to all three- and four-year olds in New Mexico whose parents are interested. The program would remain voluntary, and would be offered free of charge to all children. Administered by PED and CYFD, the program is offered in elementary schools and child care centers throughout New Mexico. For the 2015-16 school year, New Mexico PreK will provide half-day services to 10,783 children and full-day services to 2,155 children. The program's \$51 million dollars is funded through state appropriations.

Under the NMECDP's draft proposal, the proposed PreK expansion would roll out over five years, at an estimated cost of \$285 million. Based on the long-term assumption that 80 percent of families would want this service, NMECDP's proposal would make PreK available to an additional 24,500 children annually.

Potential Advantages of Expanding New Mexico PreK

INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY TO QUALITY SERVICES

Perhaps the largest area of overlap among the different groups at the forum, in the advantages of expanding New Mexico PreK discussion, was about increasing accessibility to quality programs. Participants shared that serving more children would translate into greater oral language development, an increase in kindergarten readiness and other educational benefits that studies show would extend through adulthood. The proposed expansion would create opportunity for more centers and schools to adopt the PreK program. Once group noted, it might also support economic development.

GREATER ALIGNMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Aligning standards with desired outcomes, suggested participants, would be a way to clarify expectations and set the bar higher for all preschool services. Were the New Mexico PreK program to be expanded, suggested one group, it could entice other programs to improve the quality of programs they provide. PreK tracks their children through school and several participants liked the idea of having that breadth of data available. Being able to continue this data tracking with more children was identified as a potential positive element. Further, participants noted, expanding an existing program would also offer greater overall alignment between services and the delivery of services.

POSITIVE IMPACTS FOR FAMILIES

Removing the financial burden of having to pay for preschool by offering the PreK program at no cost was seen as a considerable benefit for families. Bringing more children into an established and proven program would also offer additional opportunities for parent outreach that could lead to informal educational opportunities for parents. The latter could offer support to parents in ways that enable them to gain greater skills around their own parenting.

Potential Challenges of Expanding New Mexico PreK

FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Expanding a state funded program at a time when New Mexico is facing a significant budget deficit was a challenge all groups identified. Some groups also discussed the need to in the current economic climate to work to retain at least the current funding and seek alternative funding models that would provide long-term sustainability so that the program does not continue to be reliant on state funds. Other groups also identified additional financial factors, including costs of transportation as well as teacher training and licensure. All groups expressed concerns about federal funds already being sent to the state for Head Start programs having to be returned due to Head Start slots not being filled as an inadvertent result of PreK expansion.

LACK OF COORDINATION AND COMPETITION

In addition to frequently mentioned competition between Head Start and New Mexico PreK, there were concerns expressed about the coordination among local PreK providers. A significant concern was that school-based PreK programs were seen as not coordinating with – or competing against – center-based PreK facilities. One group felt that a mapping of community need and available services needed to be accomplished before new programs become approved. People also identified a fracturing between agencies (PED and CYFD) on the state level that creates issues on the local level.

ONLY A PARTIAL SOLUTION

Participants expressed concerns that expanding the New Mexico PreK program so that all three- and four-year-olds have access would not necessarily meet the needs of all children, such as those with special needs or disabilities or those that might do better in a half-day program. While some participants appreciated the full-day PreK option, others were concerned that the program, if expanded, would reduce or even eliminate half-day programs. One group believed the real focus should be expanding early learning education to include all children birth to age five, with funding for these programs being made available earlier due to the high level of brain development that occurs in early childhood.

WORKFORCE ISSUES

A shortage of qualified early learning educators was identified as a significant concern. Professional qualifications for high-quality programs requires that staff have higher education degrees and certification as well as training that is costly. This workforce shortage currently leads to competition between early learning programs for staff. For example, child care centers who offer Head Start programs cannot pay their teachers as much as the New Mexico PreK programs. This reality already leads to an inability to retain teachers in center-based pre-schools, reported participants. People were concerned this challenge would grow worse if New Mexico PreK were expanded without careful planning to avoid such competition among programs.

Suggestions

Collaboration surfaced among a number of groups, with two of the groups advocating that the NMECDP reach out to the Early Learning Advisory Council (ELAC). The council's diverse body – which includes healthcare providers, government agency officials, business leaders and the media – was seen as being a useful and necessary resource that could offer support and guidance.

One group cautioned that all existing programs, most notably the federally funded Head Start, should be full before expanding state-funded PreK. Another group recommended that NMECDP engage in a campaign, one that educates parents about the New Mexico PreK program, offering specifics about star ratings and other measurements of quality. If an expansion were to move forward, one group urged that the needs of Spanish-speaking families be incorporated into expansion plans as well.

There were also suggestions made to offer more time within the grant timeline and calendar for professional development. Finally, it was suggested that privately operated child care centers who offer New Mexico PreK be made exempt from paying state gross receipts tax particularly on the funding they receive from the state to operate PreK programs, since the school-based PreK programs do not have this expense.

Conclusion

Participants generally agreed that expanding access for New Mexico children to have rich early learning experiences is useful for children and their families, and necessary for the future success of our state. They also identified potential advantages in expanded availability of gathering reliable data on young learners.

Concerns arose regarding competition between different types of early learning programs that could inadvertently result in decreased availability of early childhood education when more accessibility is what is needed, workforce issues, and questions as to whether this particular expansion would truly meet the needs of children and families. Further, while it is important to ensure state funds are carefully allocated at all times, participants noted that this particular fiscal year would be a particularly difficult time for New Mexico to expand this or other major social programs.