

High-quality, Universal Pre-K

“Universal pre-k is not only the smart thing to do, it’s the right thing to do. Raising lifetime wages (and thereby tax revenues) and reducing the likelihood that children will drop out of school, get involved in crime and become a burden on the justice system more than make up for the costs of early education.”

–John E. Pepper, Jr, former Chairman and CEO, Proctor and Gamble, and chairman of the Walt Disney Company, and James Zimmerman, former chairman and chief executive of Macy’s



WHAT IS HIGH-QUALITY, UNIVERSAL PRE-KINDERGARTEN?

Universal pre-kindergarten provides early educational experiences to all children within a jurisdiction regardless of their families’ ability to pay. The benefits of pre-k—for children, families, and society at large—are inextricable from the quality of the program. Many components go into ensuring a quality early education, from adequate student to teacher ratios to class size limits, teacher qualifications to professional development, and a continuous improvement system that ensures strong teaching practices. The National Institute for Early Education Research, based at Rutgers University, has established a list of [ten benchmarks of pre-k quality](#) it uses in an annual assessment of state programs, which CityHealth used in its assessment of city early education offerings. In addition to these basic standards, pre-k programs must also be adequately funded and supported by educational leadership.

HOW DOES HIGH QUALITY PRE-K IMPROVE THE LIVES OF BIG CITY RESIDENTS?

High quality pre-k has been rigorously [proven to improve](#) school readiness and academic achievement, and to reduce reductions in grade retention and special education later on—especially for low-income children who may not have access to supportive environments at home. The cognitive and social emotional gains children get from quality pre-k are [associated with improved health in adulthood](#).

High quality pre-k programs are a wise financial investment. Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman estimates a [\\$7-\\$10 return on investment](#) for every dollar spent on pre-k.

Quality preschool education [can benefit middle-class children as well as disadvantaged children](#); typically developing children as well as children with special needs; and dual language learners as well as native speakers. While evidence shows the low-income children and those with special needs benefit most from high quality early education, according to a meta-analysis of the evidence the Foundation for Child Development, middle-class children can benefit substantially, and the benefits still outweigh the costs for children from all income levels.

Preschool participants are [more likely](#) to go to a doctor, receive appropriate immunizations and screenings, and get dental care.

As two thirds of mothers with children under age six are in the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015), many city and county leaders [see an additional benefit](#) in preschool programs—helping accommodate working parents’ needs for child care.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THAT UNIVERSAL PRE-K PROGRAMS WORK?

The [Community Preventive Services Task Force](#) recommends center-based early childhood education programs (ECE) to improve educational outcomes that are associated with long-term health as well as social- and health-related outcomes. According to the Task Force, the benefits from students' future earnings gains alone exceed program costs.

The benefits of pre-k are long-lived: while some of the early gains children experience from pre-k even out as they progress through school, [strong evidence shows](#) also long-term effects on important societal outcomes such as increased high-school graduation, years of education completed, earnings, and reduced crime and teen pregnancy.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE POLICY IMPROVEMENT

For cities, one of the most significant questions when it comes to pre-k is how to pay for it. While many cities are creatively braiding funding from the state and federal levels, a select few have been able to create dedicated, sustained local funding for early education. These cities use a variety of mechanisms to pay for pre-k, including sales taxes, property taxes and set-asides, social impact bond programs, family fees, and federal Title I dollars. In Philadelphia, a recently-passed soda tax will pay for the city's investment in expanding access to its pre-k program. Each of these different strategies requires political will from city leadership and buy-in from city residents.

RESOURCES FOR CITIES ON IMPLEMENTING HIGH QUALITY PRE-K PROGRAMS

American Institutes for Research: [Local Policy Guide to Expanding Pre-k](#)

National Institute for Early Education Research: [15 Essential Elements for High Quality: A State and Local Policy Scan](#)

National Institute for Early Education Research: [Early Childhood Education: Pathways to Better Health](#)

National Institute for Early Education Research: [Improving Public Financing for Early Learning Programs](#)

Center for Public Education: [Pre-K Toolkit](#)

Ready Nation: [The Business Case for Early Education](#)