

## Making strides for preschool

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist  
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New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio ran on a campaign to fund full-day public preschool for all New York City children through a modest increased income tax on residents making more than \$500,000 a year. Although Mayor de Blasio's tax proposal was not approved by the state legislature or supported by New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, the legislature did approve statewide funding for pre-K that included a \$300 million increase for New York City's preschool program.

This means that for the first time fully funded full-day quality preschool will be available for all 4-year-olds in the city. New York City is moving forward for children – and it isn't the only major city or school district making such progress.

The Boston Public Schools system (BPS) offers a full day of prekindergarten to any four-year-old in the district regardless of income, although funding limitations prevent the district from serving all eligible children. BPS ensures the quality of its prekindergarten program through high-quality teachers, professional development delivered through individualized coaching sessions, and evidence-based curricula for early language and literacy and mathematics. Prekindergarten teachers have the same requirements as K-12 teachers in BPS and are paid accordingly. And it's working. A study conducted by researchers at Harvard's Graduate School of Education examined the impact of one year of attendance in the BPS preschool program on children's school readiness and found substantial positive effects on children's literacy, language, mathematics, emotional development, and executive functioning.

Tulsa is another city making great strides. Oklahoma has offered universal preschool to 4-year-olds since 1998. In the 2011-2012 school year, three-quarters of all 4-year-olds in the state were enrolled in the preschool program. High-quality year-round programs are also available to some at-risk Tulsa children from birth through age three through the Community Action Project (CAP) of Tulsa County, which combines public and private funds to provide comprehensive services for the youngest and most vulnerable children.

Oklahoma's preschool teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree with a certificate in early childhood and are also paid equally to K-12 teachers. Preschool is funded through the state's school finance formula, although districts can subcontract with other providers of early care and education by putting public school teachers in community-based settings and Head Start programs. Researchers from Georgetown University have conducted multiple evaluations of the 4-year-old preschool program in Tulsa over the last decade and found evidence of both short and long term gains, with the most persistent gains in math for the neediest children who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch. A long term economic projection of the future adult earnings effects of Tulsa's program estimates benefit-to-cost ratios of 3- or 4-to-1.

New Jersey has offered high-quality state-funded preschool to 3- and 4-year-old children in 31 high-poverty communities since 1999 in response to a series of state Supreme Court rulings starting with *Abbott v. Burke* that found poorer New Jersey public school students were receiving "inadequate" education funding.

Researchers at Rutgers University's National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) have conducted a longitudinal analysis of the impacts of the Abbott preschool program on the

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cohort of children served in 2004-2005, and the fifth grade follow up shows participation has had a sustained significant effect on students' achievement in language arts and literacy, math, and science and reduced grade retention and special education placement rates.

Other cities also are finding new ways to move forward. In 2011 San Antonio, Texas Mayor Julian Castro convened a task force of education and private sector leaders to identify the best way to improve the quality of education in the city. The task force concluded the most effective solution would be a high-quality, full-day four-year-old prekindergarten targeted at low-income and at-risk children. The San Antonio program was launched after city residents voted for a one-eighth of a cent sales tax increase in November 2012 to fund it. It will serve 3,700 four-year-olds annually when fully implemented.

Studies have shown children enrolled in high-quality early childhood programs are more likely to graduate from high school, hold a job, and make more money and are less likely to commit a crime than their peers who do not participate. High-quality preschool is a critical piece of the early childhood continuum — and we need to celebrate and support the cities, states, and political leaders who are successfully providing this experience for all children.

Congress needs to follow their good example now by enacting the Strong Start for American's Children Act to enable millions of the nation's children — not just thousands or tens or hundreds of thousands — to get quality early childhood education including home visiting through kindergarten and be better prepared for school and for life. This should be a litmus test for our vote this November. If leaders don't stand up for children, they don't stand for anything and they don't stand for a strong American future that requires educated children.



*Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org) .*