



# Information Briefing

IOWA SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

September 2008

Vol. 2 • No. 5

# Building Quality Preschool



The Iowa School Boards Foundation  
is the research arm of the Iowa  
Association of School Boards. For more  
information, go to [www.ia-sb.org](http://www.ia-sb.org).



# Now is the Time



## Starting Early

The issue of providing quality preschool to all Iowa children has been a hot topic for years. But HF 877 took early childhood programs to the next level, creating a statewide voluntary preschool program for 4-year-old children. Now, more than 100 Iowa school districts are using state funds to provide quality preschool. However, a valid concern still remains. The reality is that even with these increases in funding and programming, many Iowa children, particularly those who are most in need, still do not have access to high-quality preschool.

## Why Does Preschool Matter?

There is little debate on the importance of a quality early childhood education. Significant evidence from research reveals a strong link between preschool attendance and children's success and progress in school, particularly for children with high-risk factors related to poverty. Children who attend preschool typically enter kindergarten with increased cognitive abilities, increased literacy and mathematics skills and they tend to get along with others better than children who do not attend preschool. Children who attend preschool are also more likely to progress through the grades successfully with lower retention rates, fewer special education placements and they are more likely to graduate than peers who did not experience preschool prior to kindergarten. Preschool attendance has also been associated with positive benefits lasting into adulthood.

## The Next Steps

To maximize the potential for quality preschool, all school leaders must be well-informed. They must understand and play important roles; they must use evidence from research to make decisions; and they must work collaboratively with community partners to successfully plan, support and monitor quality preschool program implementation. With quality preschool also comes the responsibility of making it accessible to all children. School leaders must be aware of the opportunities and must be ready to face the challenges of ensuring all children have an equal, quality early childhood education.

That's why this Iowa School Boards Foundation publication is designed to provide school leaders in



Iowa with knowledge, resources and supports necessary to ensure district preschool programs deliver on the promise of providing quality, stimulating learning environments for our youngest learners.

**Lou Ann Gvist**  
ISBF Project Director

*"The prime purpose of being four is to enjoy being four. Of secondary importance is to prepare for being five."  
-Jim Trelease, education author/advocate*

## Five Key Roles of the Board to Ensure Quality Preschool



Local research on school governance reveals school boards play important roles in improving student achievement. Reports from the Iowa School Boards Foundation's Lighthouse studies (1998-2007) describe five key ways that school board members can ensure students in grades K-12 learn at high levels: set clear expectations, create conditions for success, hold the system accountable for meeting the expectations, build collective will and learn together as a board team. See these five areas being applied to define the board's role in ensuring quality preschool on the next page.

# What are the board's roles?

## Set Clear Expectations

**Insist on a PreK-12 mindset** that recognizes preschool as an integral part of the district's learning continuum - one that does not consider preschool as an "add-on" component to the K-12 system, no matter where the program is housed.

**Set clear expectations** for both the student learning outcomes and the learning environment. Boards must expect high-quality early childhood education is provided by preschools that meet national preschool program standards and hold themselves accountable to rigorous early childhood learning standards. Children will not have increased success if the programs they attend are not of high quality.

## Create Conditions for Success

**Provide support in key areas for the implementation of a research-based, high-quality preschool program:**

### Leadership

Provide the necessary support to ensure the preschool program administrator is knowledgeable about early childhood education.

### Quality Teaching and Learning

Provide ample funds and release time for teachers to attend quality professional development. Provide supports to ensure professional development is linked to global classroom assessment measures.

### Transitions

Provide the necessary support to ensure smooth transitions for children and their families as they move from preschool into kindergarten (academic/social/emotional adjustment of children, parent connection to the school, etc.)

### Comprehensive Services

Collaborate with appropriate community partners to provide additional supports such as transportation, extended-day child care, health screenings and parent education services, etc.

### Funding

Collaborate with appropriate community partners to blend funding streams and increase resources for quality programming. Provide supports that allow children from different backgrounds, income levels, and ability levels to be served equally in the same classroom setting.



## Hold the System Accountable to the Expectations

Monitor the impact of the preschool program, using both formative and summative assessment processes. Ongoing assessment of student learning and an appropriate evaluation process that focuses both on the child learning outcomes and implementation of the preschool program standards are critical aspects of quality preschool programming.

## Build Collective Will

Create awareness of the importance of quality preschool. Achievement gaps begin early. The achievement gaps commonly seen in later years are obvious at kindergarten entry. As advocates, board members must demonstrate their commitment to early childhood education consistently through their conversations at the board table and in the community, and through their decisions and actions as a board.

## Learn Together as a Board Team

Establish learning time that encourages the board-superintendent team to study issues together and talk to one another through extensive board conversations. By dialoguing and learning together, board members build a shared commitment for providing quality preschool, which equips the board to set clear expectations, provide key supports, properly monitor the system and act as advocates in building collective will.

# Set High Standards, but Don't Stop There



The increased focus on the importance of early childhood education brings with it important questions about the components of high-quality preschool most closely associated with success in school. We know we need high standards, but are they enough to ensure quality?

Experts in early childhood education define preschool quality in two domains: **structural quality** and **process quality**. Due to the national expansion of state-funded preschool, much attention is focused on policies that mandate structural program features such as the physical classroom space, child-adult ratio and qualifications of staff. While these are important, experts also stress the need to pay attention to process quality features such as positive adult-child interactions, curriculum and learning standards. In fact, new research reveals that positive adult-child interactions are more strongly associated with how well children learn and develop during their preschool experience than structural program features.

According to experts, preschool program characteristics associated with quality indicators are necessary, but not sufficient to ensure children experience a quality early childhood education.



Educational decision makers must also pay attention to process quality features, specifically the quality of interactions between teachers and students, if districts want to achieve maximum benefits.

## Two recent large-scale preschool studies

In 2001 and 2003, two large, multistate studies were conducted to gain an understanding of what was happening in state-funded preschool across the nation. More than 700 classrooms were studied in 11 different states. These studies – the NCEDL and SWEEP studies – represented approximately 80 percent of the available state-funded preschool programs in the United States. Researchers observed and collected data on various classroom components including global classroom quality, teacher-child interactions and child assessment outcomes. The following key findings have strong implications for school leaders working to ensure that investments in preschool yield high returns in the form of children's positive cognitive, social and emotional development.

## Key findings

**Quality of state-funded preschool is variable and inconsistent; instructional quality is particularly low.**

*Only 15 percent of observed classrooms were high-quality.*

Across the classrooms studied, findings showed that access to high-quality teaching was uneven. Classrooms ranged from high-quality programs with high ratings in both instructional support and emotional climate, to mediocre programs with a mix of high, medium or low ratings in either dimension, to the lowest-quality rated classrooms with low ratings in both instructional and emotional supports.

**The students who need good teachers most are the least likely to get them.**

*18 percent of the observed classrooms were rated as low-quality, providing minimal instructional supports and a negative emotional climate. These classrooms also had the highest percentages of children living in poverty.*

Students in state-funded preschools who are typically most in need of a quality early education are the least likely to get it. These findings echo other reports that show children living in poverty tend to be in the poorest-quality early care and education environments. State-funded programs designed to provide quality preschool access for all children are not delivering on the promise of equity.

**Preschool program characteristics were not related to quality classroom ratings.**

*Highest- and lowest-quality classrooms did not differ on teacher education, class size, adult-child ratio or location (school or center).*

Studies now show structural features do not guarantee children will experience the quality process features such as effective teacher-child interactions that lead to academic gains and emotional growth.

**Observed adult-child interactions were positively associated with gains in academic skills and emotional development; structural program features were not.**

*Process feature data from observations of adult-child interactions predicted whether children were likely to make cognitive and emotional gains; program structural features were not associated with changes in academic or emotional growth.*

Researchers found that the quality of interactions between the children and the adults were closely associated to the children's skill development and emotional competence.



**Implications for school leaders and other policymakers:**

**It is not sufficient to simply expand access or mandate structural quality.**

Quality program features are designed to provide appropriate environments and key supports to promote positive outcomes for children. However, simply mandating program features is not enough. School leaders must recognize the significance of teacher effectiveness in relation to program quality. Monitoring and supporting teacher skill development is a critical role for educational policymakers with investments in early childhood education programs.

**Maximizing the benefits of quality preschool requires a significant investment in professional development.**

School leaders must work to limit barriers to quality professional development such as isolationism of teachers and scarcity of technical assistance. Creating conditions for success by committing to significant investments in quality professional development is a key role for school leaders to play for ensuring quality preschool for their youngest students.

**Measures of quality that are linked to student outcomes can and should become the targets of professional development.**

When selecting the content for professional development, experts recommend using information gained from classroom assessment measures that are linked to student outcomes. The good news is that different classroom observational tools exist to provide teachers and program administrators with vital information to help guide professional development and inform program evaluation. For example, a new instrument, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), measures the emotional and social climate and instructional supports for learning in PreK-12 classrooms.

The bottom line behind all of these studies and findings is simple and one that must be shared with parents, educators, administrators and government officials. All young children deserve access to a high-quality early childhood education, a noble goal more easily obtained by establishing policies and practices designed to support and monitor both structural quality and process quality as part of an effective preschool program.



Developing a fiscally sound budget is an essential component of providing quality preschool. As part of the application packet, those applying to the state-funded preschool program must create a proposed budget based on the number of 4-year-olds they anticipate will appear on their doorsteps in the fall of the upcoming school year. Building an effective preschool budget that will align to true implementation costs can be tricky, but with simple considerations, districts can be successful.

## Tips and Considerations for Building an Effective Preschool Budget:

### **\$ The Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program is not a money-making venture for your school district.**

- Experts say providing quality preschool costs at least the same if not more than what it costs to provide K-12 programming. Be cautious when developing your budget.
- Looking at this funding stream as one that is going to boost (or even rescue) your district budget is not reasonable, fiscally-sound thinking.



### **\$ Get to know the issues before you plan your budget.**

- The needs related to providing quality preschool are far more specific than other more general, districtwide initiatives.
- Before you plan your budget, get to know the expectations of the mandated Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards. This avoids later, unanticipated expenses that could financially strain the district.
- Work with other early childhood experts in your community such as AEA, Head Start and early care providers to identify preschool program requirements, utilize other funding streams and together create an effective preschool program budget.
- Talk to other districts already participating in the state-funded program to learn insights from their successes and challenges.

### **\$ Decide early on if you are going to provide full-day or part-day school.**

- The .6 per pupil weighting is likely not enough to fund an all-day preschool program without utilizing other funding streams to support the program.
- For a new program, start-up costs for the first year will likely be higher than subsequent years; plan wisely.
- Consider associated costs related to other services you will be providing as part of your preschool program such as transportation or wrap-around child care to ensure you budget appropriate cost amounts.

# Building an Effective Preschool Budget

## \$ Carefully decide how many children you will be serving.

- The amount of preschool funds allocated the first year will be based on your actual student enrollment count after school begins. If fewer students show up than you anticipated, your funding amount will also decrease.
- Expanding your preschool program is challenging once you get funded. The funding amount you get next year will be based on this year's enrollment; this has significant implications if you want to expand your program to serve more children.
- Consider providing enough preschool slots to serve all eligible children the first year to avoid having a funding deficit later; working with local preschool providers to help serve all eligible 4-year-olds is an advantage of the collaborative approach to providing quality preschool.

## \$ Provide ample funds to establish, coordinate and support the quality program.

- The timeline for start-up and implementation of the state-funded preschool program is extremely short; build in extra funds for administrative summer pay to get the program going.
- Experts strongly suggest hiring a part-time or full-time coordinator (depending on district size) with expertise in early childhood education to provide ongoing support to the preschool program. Don't just add more to the plate of an already busy elementary principal.
- Provide sufficient funds and release time for quality professional development for your preschool staff; districtwide K-3 professional development is likely not going to meet the learning needs of your preschool teachers and preschool associates.

Many Iowa school districts are reaping the benefits of providing their youngest students with a quality early childhood education. Getting to know the issues first and collaborating with others to build an effective preschool budget and program can ensure the district's sound investments yield high dividends in the form of improved student learning.



### Click Away

Check out the new Excel application on the IASB Web site designed to support districts interested in Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program. This tool will help school leaders develop a preschool program budget utilizing state dollars in conjunction with other funding streams.

[www.ia-sb.org/EarlyChildhood.aspx?id=5316](http://www.ia-sb.org/EarlyChildhood.aspx?id=5316)

# Why is Community Collaboration so Important?

## Access to quality preschool is still an issue in Iowa.

Research is clear: high-quality preschool benefits young children, particularly those considered most at risk for school failure. Unfortunately, studies reveal many Iowa children currently do not have access to quality preschool prior to kindergarten entry. While the majority of Iowa parents work outside the home and seek outside child care for their children, often the care choices for families are limited to low-quality options, either due to affordability or availability. Low-quality environments do little to provide the kinds of stimulating experiences all children deserve and need to ensure healthy development and learning.

That's why community collaboration is a key component of Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program. Bringing different partners to the table encourages creative, flexible thinking.



Comprehensive community planning provides a systematic approach that blends funding streams, coordinates efforts and minimizes the barriers that undermine access to quality preschool.

Ongoing, effective collaboration between school district leaders and other key community stakeholders results in high-quality preschool programs that benefit children, families, providers and the community in significant ways.

### Collaboration:

- increases access to quality preschool;
- provides comprehensive services to children and families;
- creates inclusive preschool classrooms;
- results in fewer transitions for children; and,
- unites communities around the needs of young children and families.

Collaboration brings different people and voices to the table and encourages problem solving, even between groups with limited or no collaboration history. Collaboration can turn competitors into partners and can have long-lasting, often unanticipated benefits for the community.



## Effective Collaboration Tips for Success:

### **Start early and begin learning about the issues.**

Study the preschool legislation. Talk to others and learn about potential issues that will need to be addressed during collaboration.

### **Collaborate with many different partners.**

It shows a commitment that this is a plan that is responsive to local needs as a community, not just as a school district.

### **Involve families and account for their needs.**

Families are the ultimate consumers of preschool and are important partners to include in the planning process.

### **Include a school board member.**

Involving a member of the school board as a key stakeholder keeps the entire board aware of the issues, builds board support and promotes a strong board-community connection.

### **Develop and stay focused on the vision.**

Create a vision for the preschool program that benefits children and families. Be flexible and compromise on the issues, but not the vision.

### **Build trusting and strong relationships.**

Build on existing community collaborative relationships and recognize the resources, skills and knowledge that each partner brings to the table.

### **Learn together.**

Study community data and information to develop a preschool program that meets the existing needs of children and families and fills the service gaps within communities.

### **Reach consensus.**

Encourage others with opposing views to share concerns and focus on creating win-win situations for all partners.

### **Establish channels of communication.**

Ensure everyone receives the same messages and information. Frank and open communication and decision making are at the core of community collaboration.

### **Build public will and support.**

Keep the community's perception in mind. Focus on the vision of the program: quality preschool for 4-year-olds. This will hopefully prevent misconceptions and cultivate strong community support.

### **Stay the course.**

Be persistent. Effective collaboration is ongoing; change takes time.

*"The word 'community' appears in the name of most schools. True, community is built through collaboration. I have always believed the best way to find true north on my decision-making compass and determine what the right solution may be to a given issue is to not hand down a decree or a sermon but rather through talk, discussion and asking for others to partner in the process. From that collaboration comes good decisions which can have long-term impacts on the future and help map out new solutions to new problems."*

-Larry Hill, superintendent,  
North Iowa



### **Click Away**

For more guidance on effective community collaboration, check out the ISBF Preschool Collaboration Toolkit at [www.ia-sb.org](http://www.ia-sb.org).



# Tips for Preparing a Successful Grant Application

## Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program

Schools interested in participating in Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program must submit a competitive application during the next granting process in spring of 2009. Although they are not due for several months, interested districts can get a head start now on creating their grant application packets.

Recently, the Iowa School Boards Foundation surveyed districts with successful past grant applications as well as preschool program grant readers to provide insights on writing an effective grant application.

### Tip #1 – Start Early!

- A major portion of the grant narrative focuses on the quality of your community collaboration process. Effective collaboration that results in high-quality preschool programming takes time. Now is a great time to start.
- Study the legislative rules and grant application to get familiar with the mandates. Always keep in mind that the intent of the law is based on best practice; effective, meaningful collaboration can create long-lasting, positive benefits for your community.
- Don't wait to start collaborative conversations with key stakeholders. Get going now. It's important to build in enough time to work through significant issues and questions with key stakeholders related to developing a quality preschool program.
- Provide plenty of time and additional supports to the individual(s) responsible for developing the proposal. The grant questions are comprehensive and require information and data from many sources. Due to the extensive time requirement, some districts with successful grant applications opted to pay someone to write their grant applications.

### Tip #2 – Read and Use the Scoring Rubric

- A scoring rubric is part of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program grant application packet, and it is an important tool to use at the very start of your collaboration and program planning processes. Another recommended resource is the Technical Assistance Guidance Manual available on the DE's Web site at [www.iowa.gov/educate/](http://www.iowa.gov/educate/).
- Use the scoring rubric questions and related criteria as guides to your conversations when planning your preschool program. That way you've already discussed critical questions that will be addressed in your grant application. By aligning your conversations and plans to the scoring criteria, you'll be organized and prepared to tell your story in a positive, meaningful way.

Example: Below is question #7 from the grant application. Bulleted underneath are the five criteria statements from the scoring rubric that districts must address in the narrative portion of the grant:

Question 7: What evidence is provided that the applicant has made provisions for *ongoing involvement of families* in general education preschool programming?



## Scoring Rubric Criteria

Parents/families are involved in the implementation and evaluation of the preschool program as evidenced by all of the following descriptions:

- Learn about and understand families involved in the preschool program
- Exchange information between staff and families
- Nurture families as advocates for their children and the preschool program
- Involvement in the design and implementation of program evaluation
- How the program will conduct the required home visits, family night and two family-teacher conferences

Have the conversations. Plan it so you have it when you write your grant.

Important to know: Grant readers will be looking for evidence for each of the criteria listed under each question. It is critical that the narrative describes how your program will “nurture families as advocates for their children and the preschool program.” Include specifics in your statements. Don’t just restate the criteria.

- Use the grant questions as an organizational outline to develop the narrative portion of the proposal. For example, the first paragraph(s) of the narrative will answer Question 1. The next section will address Question 2, etc. Grant readers are more likely to give more points if they can easily find the answers to the questions they are asked to score.
- Use the same words from the question in your answer: “Our collaboration team has made several provisions for *ongoing involvement of families* in our general education preschool programming. For example...”

### Tip #3 – Involve Parents in a Meaningful Way

- Developing a quality preschool program that meets the needs of children and their families should be a top priority for districts. Involving parents in a meaningful way leads to responsive, quality programming that reduces access barriers and increases preschool attendance.
- Check the rubric scoring criteria. Districts must demonstrate evidence that various methods were used to invite involvement and input from a diverse group of parents. Again, consider how you will document a variety of outreach methods to gather input from different groups of parents. Limiting conversations to staff members who are also parents is not enough!
- District applications that missed significant points on questions relating to parent involvement showed schools often waited too long to get meaningful involvement from parents or used limited methods to tap a select group of parents. Gathering meaningful input from parents takes time and is hard work, but it also pays tremendous benefits that go well beyond a successful grant application.



**This publication was made possible by the generous support of: EMC Insurance Companies, Jester Insurance Services, Inc. and the Alliant Energy Foundation.**

Content provider: Lou Ann Gvist, ISBF project director, lgvist@ia-sb.org

Layout editor: Summer Evans, IASB communications specialist, sevans@ia-sb.org

"Building Quality Preschools" is a joint ISBF and IASB publication. Questions/comments can be directed to 6000 Grand Ave., Des Moines, IA 50312 or phone: 1-800-795-4272.



**Iowa Association  
of School Boards**  
6000 Grand Ave.  
Des Moines, IA 50312-1417

Nonprofit Organization  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Des Moines, Iowa  
Permit 2111

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

## How can we help you?

Did you know ISBF staff is here to support you as you plan, collaborate and implement quality preschool? We offer a variety of services designed to meet your needs whether providing preschool is a new initiative or whether you've been implementing preschool for years.

Services include:

- free, online resources and tools to plan and implement quality preschool at [www.ia-sb.org](http://www.ia-sb.org);
- community collaboration planning support;
- collaboration meeting facilitation;
- statewide Voluntary Preschool Program grant reading tips;
- statewide Voluntary Preschool Program grant reading/review; and,
- local board workshops related to the board's role to ensure quality preschool.

Questions? Feel free to contact Lou Ann Gvist at [lgvist@ia-sb.org](mailto:lgvist@ia-sb.org) or by phone at (515) 247-7064 or 1-800-795-4272.

*"I truly believe that the support from ISBF with regard to our preschool collaboration efforts was the sole reason for our success. Not only was Lou Ann able to answer all of our questions, but she also facilitated our joint meetings with all of the early childhood providers in Fort Madison, making the process very equitable. There is no way this effort would be as far along as it is without her guidance and support."*

-Greg Smith, director of student services, Ft. Madison

## Contents

<b>Five Key Roles of the Board to Ensure Quality Preschool.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Set High Standards, but Don't Stop There.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Tips to Building an Effective Preschool Budget.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Why is Community Collaboration so Important?.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Tips for Preparing a Successful Grant Application.....</b>	<b>10</b>