

Education: The State We're In

High-quality preschool inaccessible to many

Children learn the most between birth and age 5, yet far too few young children are enrolled in early care and education programs. According to 2000 Census data, there are nearly 8 million 3- and 4-year olds in the United States. Only 4 in 10 3-year olds and 7 in 10 4-year olds attend some form of preschool whether public or private.¹

Participation in early childhood programs varies by state and strongly correlates to family income. Because state-funded preschool programs as well as federally-funded Head Start target children with the greatest need, particularly low-income children and children with disabilities, there are income eligibility requirements. While many low-income children are in such programs, those from families

whose income is just above the eligibility requirement have decreased access to preschool as their families are less able to pay for private preschool programs. Preschool enrollment among higher-income families increases with income.

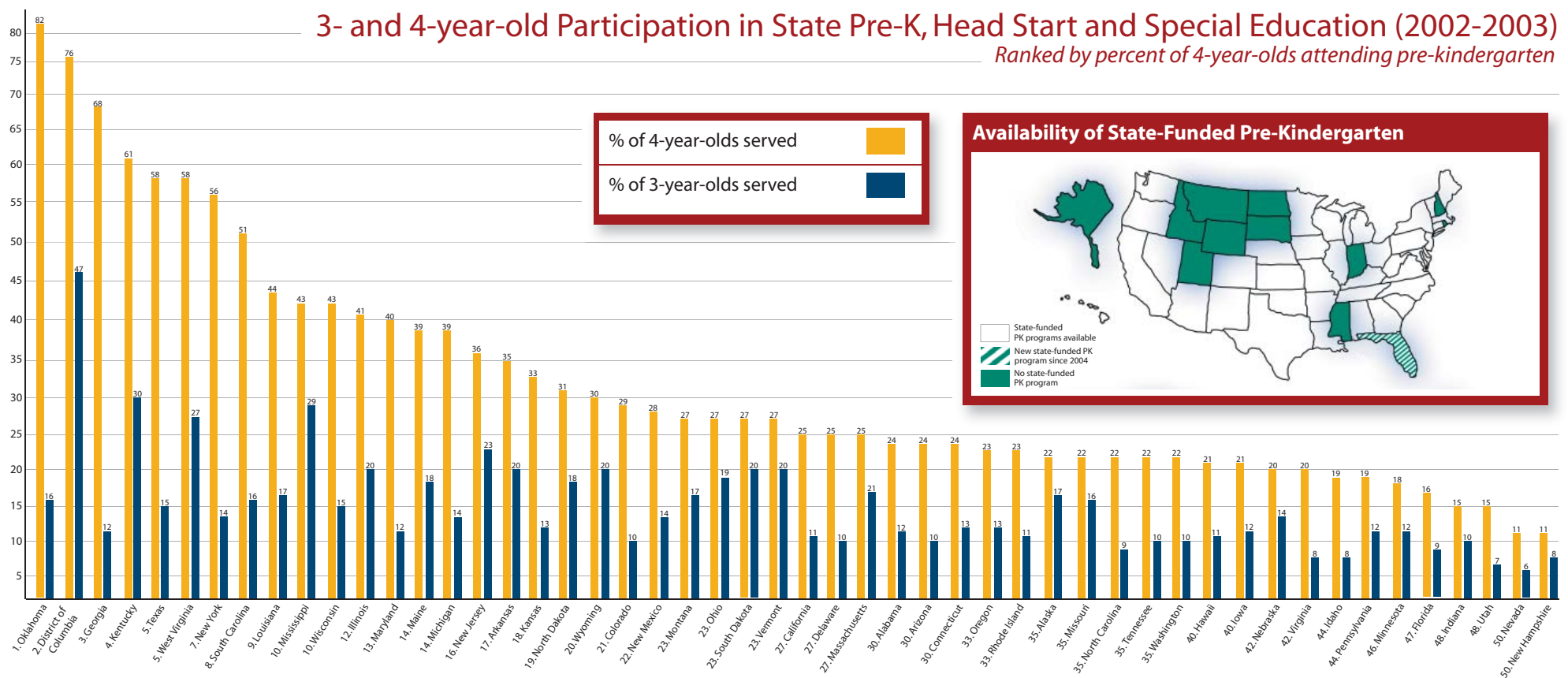
Participation, however, is only part of the story. Many children who are enrolled in programs are not enrolled in "high-quality" programs. By design, high-quality programs pay equal attention to the social, emotional, and healthy development of young children, as well as their cognitive pre-academic skill development. Programs that are high-quality provide children with a solid foundation for academic success; children who enter kindergarten ready to learn excel academically while those who begin behind are at an increased risk of staying behind throughout their academic career.

While overall enrollment in state preschool programs is increasing, spending per student has not been able to keep pace. State budget constraints are leading to reduced spending per child and cutbacks in the number of eligible children served. More than half of the 3- and 4-year olds who are not in pre-school are children from low-income families. While there are significant disparities in state spending per child, the average amount spent is about \$3,500.² Head Start spending is about twice that amount. Currently, 11 states are without state-funded preschool programs and only 2 states, Georgia and Oklahoma, truly offer universal preschool to all children.³

Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future: A National Task Force on Public Education addresses the issue by calling for universal pre-kindergarten, beginning with those most in need.

3- and 4-year-old Participation in State Pre-K, Head Start and Special Education (2002-2003)

Ranked by percent of 4-year-olds attending pre-kindergarten



Source: Barnett, Steve and Jason T. Hustedt, *The State of Preschool: 2004 State Preschool Yearbook* (New Jersey: Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 2004)

Few states required to offer full-day kindergarten

Kindergarten, the beginning of formal education in the United States, is an important time in the education of children. Unfortunately, too many children enter kindergarten under-prepared; those who participate in early childhood care and education programs begin their academic careers with a stronger foundation than those who did not attend preschool. Given the range of development among children in kindergarten, the school year is often utilized to help under-prepared students learn what others may have gained in preschool, such as the pre-literacy skills of letter recognition, familiarity with sounds, the conventions of print, listening and thinking, and so on.

Currently, only 14 states plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands require children to attend at least half-day kindergarten.⁴ The remaining 36 states have

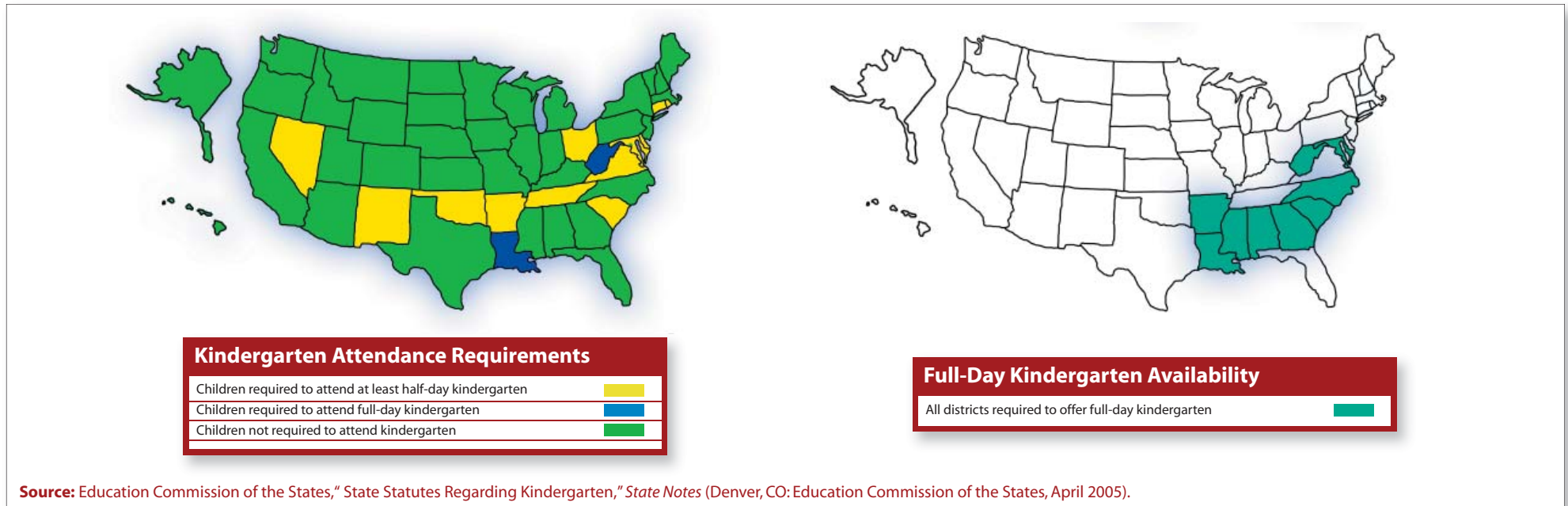
no such requirement. Although 98% of our nation's children attend kindergarten, only 60% attend full-day kindergarten.⁵ Research indicates that full-day kindergarten particularly benefits low-income and minority children, and that children in full-day kindergarten show greater academic achievement than children in half-day kindergarten. Recent studies also link full-day kindergarten to positive impacts on social and behavioral development, a reduced number of special education referrals and reduced need for grade retention, greater academic success in reading and math (compared to those in half-day kindergarten), longer-lasting effects on economically disadvantaged children, and increased preparedness for academic success beyond the first grade.

While children from low-income families are more likely to be enrolled in and benefit from full-day kindergarten, it

is a valuable experience for all children regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or language status. It is therefore a missed opportunity for children not enrolled in full-day kindergarten. Although demand is growing, particularly among families with working parents, access varies greatly from state to state. According to the Education Commission of the States, only nine states currently mandate that all school districts even offer full-day kindergarten. Two of these nine, Louisiana and West Virginia, require that all children attend full-day kindergarten.⁶

Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future: A National Task Force on Public Education addresses the issue by calling for full-day kindergarten for all students.

- Elena Rocha



Source: Education Commission of the States, "State Statutes Regarding Kindergarten," *State Notes* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, April 2005).

¹ Dr. Steve Barnett, *Testimony to the Subcommittee on Education Reform*, April 21, 2005.

² Barnett, Steve and Jason T. Hustedt, *The State of Preschool: 2004 State Preschool Yearbook* (New Jersey: Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 2004).

³ Ibid

⁴ Education Commission of the States, "State Statutes Regarding Kindergarten," *State Notes* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, April 2005).

⁵ Education Commission of the States, *The Progress of Education Reform 2004: Kindergarten*. Vol. 5, No. 4, (Denver, CO: September 2004).

⁶ Education Commission of the States, "State Statutes Regarding Kindergarten," *State Notes* (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, April 2005).