

Strategy spotlight:

StriveTogether®

What's working across the Cradle to Career Network

Outcome: Kindergarten Readiness



Essential Question: Are eligible children enrolled in quality, full-day pre-K programs?

Indicator: Access to Quality Public Pre-K, Enrollment in Quality Pre-K Programs

Impact

High-quality pre-k plays a critical role in a child's future academic and economic success. Research shows that pre-kindergarten boosts school readiness, enhances cognitive and social-emotional development, and provides long-term benefits such as higher earnings and improved health outcomes. These benefits are even greater for children from low-income families and communities of color.

Network members across the country are leading efforts to increase access to quality pre-k through innovative funding models and community-driven strategies. **Preschool Promise**, originally incubated in **Learn to Earn Dayton** in Ohio, **Seeding Success** in Memphis, Tennessee, and **Spartanburg Academic Movement** in South Carolina have expanded access to pre-K, improving kindergarten readiness outcomes for thousands of children.

The Landscape

From 2018-2022, 54% of children ages 3-4 across the country were not enrolled in a preschool program (Annie E. Casey Foundation Data Center). High-quality pre-k programs are not universally available, leaving

many families without access due to cost, capacity or geographic barriers. The lack of equitable access to pre-K exacerbates educational disparities, making it essential for communities to implement targeted strategies to improve both availability and enrollment.

Indicator and Evidence-Based Practices

Indicator: Access to Quality Public Pre-K

Why it matters: A quality pre-K program can meaningfully enhance children's early learning and development, producing long-term improvements in school success and generating benefits to both individuals and society that far exceed the costs. The positive effects of access to quality pre-K on children's math and reading achievement are even larger in districts with a majority of Black students. Although Black children enroll in pre-K at rates similar to their white peers (and have higher rates of enrollment in publicly funded programs), the quality of their experiences differs. On average, Black children attend programs rated as lower quality than white children.

Evidence-Based Practices:

- **Voter-Approved Public Investment: [Preschool Promise](#)** in Dayton secured \$4.3 million annually through a 2016 ballot initiative, making tuition assistance available for more than 1,900 4-year-olds. This funding has expanded access to quality pre-K across the region. [Preschool Promise](#) students in all eight school districts continue to outperform their peers at non-[Preschool Promise](#) sites, with 71% of students demonstrating or approaching kindergarten readiness.
- **Pay-for-Success Funding Models:** In Memphis, [Seeding Success](#) and First 8 Memphis partnered with Maycomb Capital to implement outcomes-based funding to expand pre-K access. This model provides upfront funding for new pre-K classrooms, with continued investment tied to measurable success metrics such as attendance and kindergarten readiness. As a result, First 8 Memphis pre-K students outperform 62% of their peers nationally on the Brigance Inventory of Early Development (IED) III assessment.

Indicator: Enrollment in Quality Pre-Kindergarten Programs

Why it matters: CPre-K is a foundational step into the K-12 education system and establishes a long-term trajectory for academic and life success. Children who attend high-quality pre-K programs see lasting benefits, including higher future earnings, improved health and reduced participation in social service programs. Despite these benefits, pre-K enrollment rates vary by race and geography, limiting access for many children who would benefit the most.

Evidence-Based Practices:

- **Community Engagement and Family Support: [Preschool Promise](#)** in Dayton has launched awareness campaigns to help families understand the importance of early childhood education. By providing professional development for teachers and offering family support programs, [Preschool Promise](#) ensures that children receive high-quality early learning experiences. Since its launch, enrollment has more than doubled, growing from 1,729 students in 2017 to 3,561 in 2024.

- **Operational Enhancements:** First 8 Memphis has worked with schools to remove enrollment barriers by implementing solutions such as year-round pre-K registration. These efforts have helped maintain high enrollment levels and ensure more children have access to early learning opportunities. During the 2021-2022 school year, First 8 Memphis supported 1,600 students across 80 high-quality pre-K classrooms through annual funding from the City of Memphis and Shelby County governments.

Looking Ahead

Cradle to Career Network members are leading collaborative efforts to expand pre-K access by partnering with school districts, local governments and community organizations to align resources, implement sustainable funding models and remove enrollment barriers. Through voter-approved funding, public-private partnerships and innovative financing mechanisms, they are increasing access to high-quality pre-k and improving student outcomes. With continued investment, strategic collaboration and data-driven approaches, these efforts are closing opportunity gaps and setting children on a path to lifelong success.

