

# Executive Summary

## Leaving Last in Line: Making Pre-K a Reality in Mississippi



**MISSISSIPPI  
FIRST**

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# Executive Summary

As any fourth grader knows, last in line is an awful place to be. But for Mississippi's public school fourth graders, last in line in reading and math achievement isn't a once-in-a-while woe, it is a recurring nightmare. **Mississippi has tied for last nearly every year on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP)**, also known as the Nation's Report Card. Fortunately, as every fourth grader knows, being last in line doesn't have to be permanent. Working hard in class and being on good behavior can get any child promoted to line leader. Similarly, Mississippi can take action to solve its problem of inadequate school readiness and finally lead the achievement line: forty years of excellent research support the achievement-boosting, life-long benefits of high-quality pre-Kindergarten programs.

## Promoting Pre-K

Mississippi is one of only ten states without a state-funded pre-Kindergarten program. We believe the lack of forward progress on this issue is no longer about *whether* pre-K works or *why* Mississippi should invest but *how* Mississippi should promote pre-K, given state budget constraints and political context. Our solution is a collaborative delivery model for pre-Kindergarten.



**KEY POINT:** Mississippi should adopt a collaborative delivery model for pre-K.

A collaborative delivery model is a method of providing pre-K services to four-year-olds that incorporates all available providers into one, state-funded system. These providers may include public schools, private childcare centers, and Head Start. In collaborative systems, states set program standards, operate a process to approve providers, and monitor providers' adherence to the standards. State collaborative systems may also require coordination of

services at a local level, such as within a school district or county. Funding may flow directly from the state to approved providers on a per-pupil basis or may be distributed through an intermediary such as a school district or local pre-K council.

A collaborative model is best for Mississippi because it would provide benefits to all stakeholders in early education. These models are also particularly well-suited for rural areas because they are cost-efficient and scalable across large geographic areas.

## Proposal

After studying other states' models—especially the examples set by Georgia, Oklahoma, and West Virginia—we first propose a dual-method collaborative delivery model. We further provide recommendations for establishing the pre-K program. Each of these recommendations is discussed in greater detail in the pages of the issue brief.



**RECOMMENDATION:** Mississippi should allow eligible providers two methods of participation in the pre-K program: a direct application method and a collaborative council method.

- **Method 1—Direct applications.** High-capacity providers able to meet state standards without significant external support can apply directly to the state pre-K office for the privilege to participate in the program. These providers will receive funding directly through the state office.
- **Method 2—Collaborative Council.** Public schools and local providers create a Collaborative Council to institute pre-K in the area. Working as the Lead Partner for the Council, the public school provides qualified teachers to participating providers to implement pre-K. Public schools also operate a small number of “model” classrooms and oversee the program. Funding flows from the state office to the Council to support the pre-K collaboration.



**RECOMMENDATION:** Mississippi should commit to four concepts which will support the success of the program.

1. **Preliminary capacity building:** Set a quality baseline for participation using a standardized measure and utilize existing capacity building programs to help low-quality centers reach the baseline.
2. **State office:** Establish a new state office for pre-Kindergarten in the Mississippi Department of Education.
3. **Program standards:** Adopt the 10 National Institute for Early Education Research standards as a framework for Mississippi's program standards.
4. **Pilot:** Conduct a pilot program with Mississippi school districts and a diverse group of partner providers.

## Financing

Funding has always been an obstacle to instituting a state pre-K program in Mississippi. We plan to write an issue brief focusing entirely on funding options for pre-K; in the meantime, we offer recommendations in this report that pre-K supporters can champion.



**RECOMMENDATION:** Prior to selecting a funding source for a full-scale program, Mississippi should take steps to quantify the actual cost of high-quality pre-K in Mississippi.

1. **Pilot funding:** Pilot funding sources for pre-K before making a decision about long-term financing. Consider a phased-in approach to implementation of the program statewide.
2. **Cost-benefit analysis:** Complete a new cost-benefit analysis for pre-K in Mississippi using actual expenditures for Title I pre-K programs in Mississippi.
3. **Fiscal note:** Prepare a fiscal note to quantify the cost of both a pilot program and a fully funded statewide program.

## Starting Line

Mississippi has already taken tentative steps toward a state-supported pre-K program based on a collaborative model. We find that several factors support the establishment of a pre-K pilot by Fall 2012.



### GREEN LIGHT FACTORS

- ✓ **State law.** Amendments to an existing state law creating a fund for early learning collaborations could easily provide statutory authority to begin a pre-K pilot.
- ✓ **Learning standards.** A recent alignment of our state's early learning standards for four-year-olds with the Common Core readies our standards for a pre-K pilot.
- ✓ **Current pre-K efforts.** Due to on-going pre-K efforts, several Mississippi communities have the right foundation for the collaborative model to succeed.



### YELLOW LIGHT FACTORS

- **State office.** With no pre-K personnel, the Mississippi Department of Education must create a pre-K office from the bottom up.

## Forward...Finally

Mississippi should create two committees to move this proposal forward:

1. **Pre-K Working Group** of practitioners, policymakers, and policy organizations to further sharpen this proposal before July 2012 with the intention of proposing legislation and regulatory policies that form the basis of a pilot program.
2. **Pre-K Financing Legislative Task Force** to develop funding recommendations and to draft legislation before December 2012.

We submit this brief to policymakers and the public in the hopes that it will spur Mississippi to move beyond dialogue to action on pre-K. After all, "last in line" is the last place we want to be.