

University of Northern Iowa

College of Education White Paper: Early Childhood Education
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Strong support for publicly funded preschool education is evident across the country. This year a total of 29 governors are making pre-kindergarten a priority and directing more than \$800 million new dollars to pre-k in 2008. This funding will provide more than 100,000 additional three- and four-year-olds across the country access to pre-kindergarten programs. Dr. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate economist, advocates nationally for early education. "On a purely economic basis, it makes a lot of sense to invest in the young," said Heckman. Extensive research on the impact of high quality preschool programs shows that preschool increases the school readiness skills of children and sets them on a trajectory of long term economic and social success.

In the state of Iowa, Governor Chet Culver recently signed legislation that will invest \$15 million in 2007-2008 to fund preschool for four-year-old children, regardless of income. This funding will grow to \$108 million over the next five years and is estimated to reach 90% of Iowa's pre-kindergarten children. High quality publicly funded preschool will reach children of working families who earn too much to be eligible for preschool programs that serve low-income children, and yet cannot afford access to high quality early education programs.

Three interrelated issues loom large in the discussion of early education: *quality*, *accessibility*, and *affordability*. Nationally, the majority of early education programs are not of high quality; most families do not have access to the few high quality programs that exist; and in general, high quality programs are not affordable to middle-income families that do not qualify for income-based preschool programs such as Head Start.

Factors that research shows are associated with high quality include low student-teacher ratios and small class sizes; teachers who possess bachelor's degrees with specialized training in early education; teacher salaries similar to K-12 teachers; ongoing professional development for teachers and staff; strong family involvement; curriculum that is developmentally, culturally, and individually appropriate and linked to research-based learning standards; and a system in place to monitor program quality.

The University of Northern Iowa and the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education are taking a leadership role in ensuring high quality public preschools in Iowa. UNI's efforts include teacher preparation programs for pre-service teachers; programs of professional development for practicing teachers (particularly in the high-need areas of math and science education); curriculum development research on best practices; and model programs that serve as demonstration sites for high quality early education. Outreach efforts include developing innovative professional development programs for practicing teachers; partnering with Head Start to improve teacher quality; training early childhood consultants on new methods of assessing quality; working with the Iowa Department of Education to align the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program goals with new approaches to program evaluation and professional development; working with the Iowa Association of School Boards to educate school boards about high quality preschool; and increasing public awareness across the state about the importance of high quality preschool.