SREB

Building a Foundation for Success by Getting Every Child Ready for School

2005

Southern
Regional
Education
Board

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Challenge to Lead Series

This report was developed by a team of SREB staff members, including Robin Wade and Rebecca Daugherty, educational policies research associates; and Joan Lord, director of educational policies.

It is part of the *Challenge to Lead* education goals series, directed by Joan Lord. For more information, e-mail joan.lord@sreb.org. *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead* is available on the SREB Web site at www.sreb.org. A full listing of goals, with the indicators for the goal on first-grade readiness, is printed on the inside back cover.

A Message from the President of SREB

SREB states can lead the nation in educational progress. By one important measure, *we already do lead the nation.* Four SREB states lead the U.S. in providing access to state-funded prekindergarten programs. Oklahoma, Georgia, Texas and South Carolina are ranked first through fourth in the nation. And kindergarten programs in the SREB region are virtually universal. We all take pride in these accomplishments.

But preschool *access* is just the beginning of getting every child ready for first grade.

We must also ensure that these prekindergarten and kindergarten programs reach high standards of *quality.* Our top priority in school readiness should be to move beyond access and on to higher quality. We cannot truly lead the nation without it.

Quality means comprehensive curriculum standards and sufficient numbers of high-quality instructional staff. Several SREB states are models for standards and staffing, as you can see in this report.

Building a Foundation for Success by Getting Every Child Ready for School helps you answer questions about where your state stands on access, standards, funding and assessment. It also reports on the health and social services for young children and their families that relate to school readiness yet are often overlooked. And it outlines important next steps in achieving success.

The good news is that much of the groundwork for school readiness has already been laid in our states. Policy-makers and education leaders in SREB states have stressed the importance of school readiness since the 1980s and taken action — but recent trends demand new action.

You already know, for example, that children from low-income families are more likely to be retained by the third grade unless they receive high-quality educational services early to address their problems directly. And by the time they are 18 years old, they are much less likely to have graduated from high school or to have enrolled in college.

But you may not know that the proportion of children from low-income families in every SREB state is *growing.* The odds are that in your state more than half of the children are from low-income families. This new reality requires additional and different efforts by state leaders.

If your state is one of the SREB states already leading the nation in access to preschool, congratulations. Keep it up and focus your efforts on quality. If your state is not one of the leaders, look to one of the leading states as a model to spur action. Getting every child ready for school is the foundation for your schools, your colleges, your economy and your state's quality of life.

Mark Musick
President

Building a Foundation for Success by Getting Every Child Ready for School

All children are ready for the first grade.

SREB *Challenge to Lead* Goal

In America — without excuse — every child should start first grade ready to learn. This goal will require that we make high-quality preschool available to all 3- and 4-year-olds who are at risk of starting first grade behind. Otherwise, gaps in academic achievement between at-risk and more affluent children will widen in the first, critically important years — and may never close. To those who say it is unrealistic to get every child ready for first grade, SREB's *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education ask, "Can we set our sights any lower?"

SREB states have led the nation since the 1980s in providing state-funded prekindergarten programs for at-risk children. We are proud to be first in America. But the task of getting all children ready for the first grade is not complete.

And it will not be easy. It means not only developing children's skills and knowledge, but also attending to their physical well-being, social development and eagerness to learn. Imagine a bright-faced youngster on the first day of first grade who cannot recite the alphabet or count from one to 10. Impossible, you say, for children reared in a "Sesame Street" world? Yet first-grade teachers report that many children in SREB states cannot perform basic tasks, including:

- recognizing numbers and counting from one to 10;
- identifying basic shapes;
- holding a book right side up;
- following text on a page from left to right and top to bottom;
- identifying letters of the alphabet;
- writing their first names; and
- following spoken directions.

Some 4-year-olds can do all of these things, but many 6-year-olds still cannot. Furthermore, many first-grade students enter school with few of the social interaction skills required in a classroom setting and with undiagnosed vision and hearing problems.

Families have always played the key role in guiding children before they reach first grade, and they still do. But some parents do not have the resources or knowledge to prepare their children fully for school, and thousands of children in your state are not being raised by a parent. Children from low-income families, those who have health problems, who have only one parent in their home, or who have no parent who graduated from high school are more likely to be unprepared for school than others.

First-grade teachers report that many children cannot perform basic tasks.

Research consistently concludes that such children are at a disadvantage and can benefit greatly from high-quality early childhood education programs.

- Children at risk of not being ready for school and who do not receive quality services are significantly more likely to be retained by grade three.
- Many more of these children require special education services, and many more require emergency room care.
- These children are significantly more likely to become teen parents and high school dropouts.
- As adults, these children are more likely to be unemployed, or in jail or prison.

These stakes are too high. We cannot leave school readiness to chance for our most vulnerable children. Even as SREB states are national leaders in providing prekindergarten programs for low-income children, our *Challenge to Lead* goal urges us to push further until "**All children** are ready for the first grade."

The time to act is now, because this goal is becoming harder to achieve. Why? Because the proportion of children from low-income families in public schools in SREB states has increased. A greater proportion of children today is at risk of being unprepared for school and in need of early childhood services than ever before.

We cannot leave school readiness to chance for our most vulnerable children.

How can you know whether all children in your state are ready for school? This report can help you measure your state's progress toward this goal. It presents an analysis of the availability and quality of prekindergarten programs, school-readiness assessments and child health needs in your state and focuses on key questions you should ask:

- Are all at-risk children in your state served by quality education programs?
- Is the percentage of children ready for first grade in your state, based on state standards, increasing annually? Is your state's goal 100 percent?
- Are all at-risk children served by quality, coordinated health and social services?

QUESTION 1:

Are all at-risk children in your state served by quality education programs?

Most SREB states have made substantial progress since the 1980s in providing school-readiness programs. In 1989, SREB's first report on school readiness, *Reaching the Goal of Readiness for School,* challenged SREB states to provide "programs that help all children be ready with social, mental and physical skills to begin academic work in the first grade." It raised several issues that framed an action plan for the 1990s. These issues continue to be relevant today, in spite of substantial progress. **The major issues surrounding early childhood education in your state continue to be: the availability** of programs to all at-risk children, the adequacy of state **funding** to support quality early childhood education programs, and the **quality** of the programs provided.

Availability of programs

In 1989, SREB states in large measure had reached the goal of providing kindergarten programs for all 5-year-old children. In that year, public kindergarten was available in all SREB states and was mandatory in six.

Today, nine SREB states — Arkansas, Delaware, Louisiana, Maryland, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia — require that all children attend kindergarten. Seven SREB states — Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina and Texas — do not require kindergarten attendance. Eight states provide full-day kindergarten.

The average percentage of first-graders who attended public kindergarten in SREB states in 2002 was 94 percent, with every SREB state reporting at least 85 percent. In 1989, 91 percent of students attended public kindergarten. These percentages are striking, considering that many additional children attend private kindergarten.

In 1989, nine SREB states had looked beyond the goal of universal kindergarten and had begun providing state funding to a limited number of programs for prekindergarten children. At that time, Texas' state-funded prekindergarten program was the largest among SREB states, serving about half of the eligible children — those defined as "at risk." But even those SREB states that had not started prekindergarten programs were asking, "Can we support a prekindergarten program beyond the federally funded Head Start program?"

Since then, 15 SREB states have provided funding for prekindergarten. Half have developed programs with enough seats for the estimated number of children in poverty in the state.

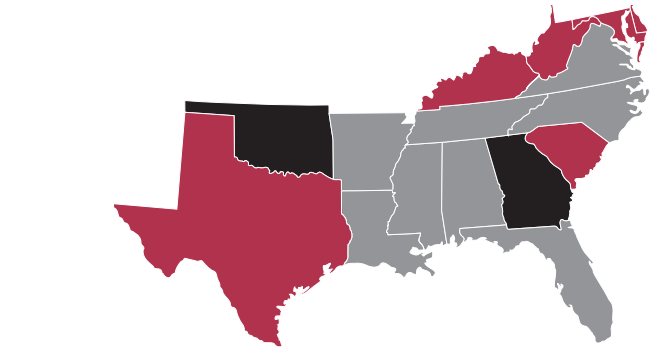
The central question, therefore, has become: Do your prekindergarten programs offer sufficient seats so that *all* at-risk children in your state can be served?

Comparing state prekindergarten enrollment to the number of children living in poverty in your state helps you know whether your state prekindergarten program is potentially serving all children in poverty. (See Figure 1 and Box 1.)

Figure 1

Children in Federal Head Start and State-Funded Prekindergarten Compared With Children in Poverty, 2003/2004*

Half of SREB States Provide Enough Prekindergarten Seats for All Children in Poverty



200% or more | 100% or more | Less than 100%

* The latest available data are from 2003 in some states and 2004 in others.

Sources: State departments of education and the Head Start Bureau.

Box 1

How is poverty defined?

The U.S. Census Bureau measures poverty by household income and size. A household of four with an income of no more than $19,484 was considered to be living in poverty in 2004.

Two SREB states — Georgia and Oklahoma — are national leaders. The prekindergarten programs in these states enroll at least twice the number of 4-year-old children in prekindergarten as the number living in poverty. (See Box 2.) Prekindergarten enrollments at least equal the numbers of children living in poverty in six SREB states — Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina, Texas and West Virginia. Maryland passed legislation in 2002 that will provide prekindergarten to all "economically disadvantaged" 4-year-olds by 2008.

Seven SREB states — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia — have prekindergarten enrollments that are smaller than the number of children living in poverty. Several of these states have recently funded expansions of these programs. Mississippi does not have a state-funded prekindergarten program. (In May 2004, Mississippi's governor signed into law authorization for local school boards, the State Board of Education, the Mississippi Association of Community Action Agencies and the Department of Human Services to develop and implement a voluntary full-day prekindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-olds.)

In access to prekindergarten, the National Institute for Early Education Research ranks eight SREB states among the top half of the 38 states that have state-funded prekindergarten programs. SREB states hold the top four positions — Oklahoma, Georgia, Texas and South Carolina. Three more are in the top 10: Kentucky, Maryland and West Virginia. Louisiana ranks 12th.

Seven SREB states rank in the top 10 among the 38 states with state-funded prekindergarten programs.

Box 2

Two SREB States are National Leaders in Prekindergarten Access for All

Georgia and Oklahoma have been recognized by the U.S. Government Accountability Office and the National Institute for Early Education Research for expanding access to prekindergarten.

The **Georgia** initiative began as a pilot program for 750 at-risk children in 1992 and was expanded in 1994 to serve all eligible 4-year-olds. Recently renamed Bright from the Start, it receives more than $270 million of state lottery proceeds to fund full-day preschool for 70,000 children ($3,830 per child). About 28,000 Georgia 4-year-olds live in poverty. Both public and private providers can apply for funding, awarded through a competitive process.

Oklahoma offers prekindergarten to all 4-year-olds in a combination of full- and half-day programs. Landmark legislation created a pilot program in 1990 for at-risk children. The Early Childhood 4-Year-Old program was established and funded in 1998 as a voluntary program. It was expanded to all 4-year-olds in 1999 and now serves more than 30,000 children. About 14,000 Oklahoma 4-year-olds live in poverty. More than $72 million in state appropriations fund the preschool program ($2,400 per child).

As your state plans to make preschool seats available, you need to know how many children may be at risk. It is a disturbing fact that, since 1990, the proportion of children in poverty has not diminished. In 1990 — and continuing in 2003 — 21 percent of children in the median SREB states were living in poverty, compared with 18 percent in the United States. Individual SREB states have seen some fluctuations, ranging from an increase of 2 percent in North Carolina to a decrease of 5 percent in Mississippi.

While SREB states have struggled to provide children living in poverty with prekindergarten and kindergarten programs over the last 15 years, states have experienced a substantial, but largely unrecognized, increase in the number of children coming from families with low incomes — those who are living just above the federal poverty line, yet qualify (or will qualify) for the National School Lunch Program. (See Box 3.)

Research indicates that many of these children also may be "falling through the cracks" and are much less likely to be prepared for school.

When we fast-forward to their academic performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, fourth-graders who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program are much less likely than others to score at the Basic level or above in reading, mathematics and science. They are more than twice as likely to score *below* the Basic level in reading, mathematics and science as other students.

- In reading, 52 percent of the students eligible for the National School Lunch Program scored below the Basic level in the median SREB states in 2003. That compares with 25 percent of students who were not eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch.
- In mathematics, 37 percent of the students eligible for the program scored below the Basic level, compared with 15 percent of those not eligible.

SREB states have experienced a substantial, but largely unrecognized, increase in the number of children coming from families with low incomes.

- In science, 57 percent of the students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch scored below the Basic level, compared with 22 percent of those not eligible.

In order to prevent or reduce these academic gaps, states should strive to offer prekindergarten to all children who are at risk of academic failure — not just those whose family incomes fall below the federal poverty line.

Box 3

What makes a student eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch?

Eligibility for the National School Lunch Program is a commonly used indicator of low income. Students from households with incomes up to 130 percent of the federal poverty level qualify to receive free lunches. Those from households with incomes up to 185 percent of poverty are eligible for reduced-price lunches.

In 2004, students from families of four with incomes up to $25,329 were eligible for free lunches. Students from families of four with incomes between $25,329 and $36,045 were eligible for reduced-price lunches.

Researchers often apply these percentages to census income data and estimate the number of children *eligible* for the lunch program. The percentages in Figure 2 reflect the children who were *approved* for the lunch program, and therefore they represent a more conservative estimate of children from low-income families than some research reports.

Eleven SREB states — Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia — had an increase of over 10 percent in the percentages of public school children approved for the National School Lunch Program from 1990 to 2003. The low SREB state increased 7 percent and the high SREB state increased 20 percent.

Two SREB states — Louisiana and Mississippi — had 50 percent or more of their public school children approved for the National School Lunch Program in 1990. By 2003, that figure jumped to 11 SREB states — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and West Virginia. This dramatic increase in the number of children coming from low-income families reflects changing demographic trends over the last 15 years. It is important for states to recognize this growing group of children from low-income families because they do not qualify for federal and state services restricted to children living in poverty. (See Figure 2.)

Adequate state funding

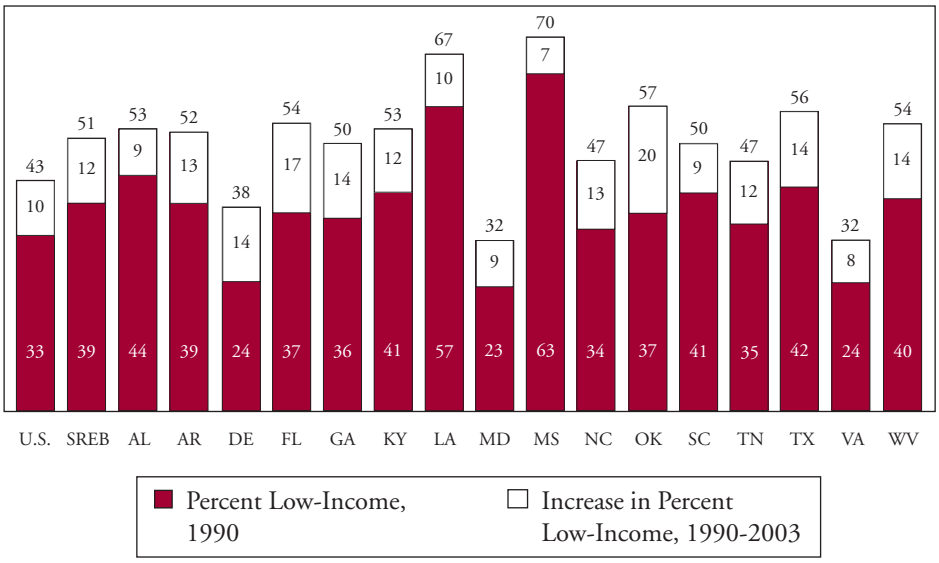
The federal government provides funding to every state to operate Head Start programs for prekindergarten children living in poverty. (See Box 4.) This funding, totalling $2.1 billion in SREB states, is a solid foundation. But it is not adequate to meet the need for prekindergarten programs for **all** 3- and 4-year-old children in poverty, and it is not intended to serve all who are low income and likely not to be ready for school.

SREB states that serve more 4-year-olds in prekindergarten than the number living in poverty appropriate substantial state funding to supplement the money received from Head Start and other federal programs. (See Figure 3.)

According to a national survey, in 2004, Oklahoma provided both full- and half-day prekindergarten options and spent an average

Figure 2

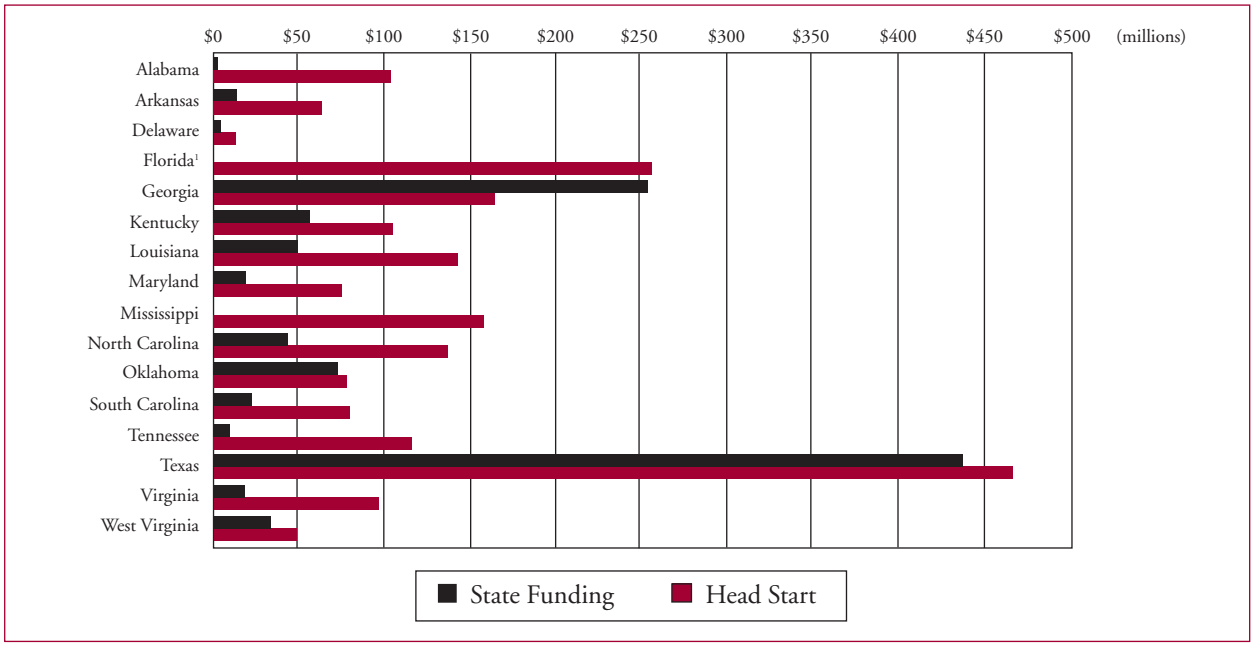
Percent of Children Approved for a Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
SREB States Show Dramatic Increases in Children from Low-Income Families
1990 and 2003



Sources: *SREB Fact Book;* U.S. Census Bureau; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

Figure 3

Federal and State Funding for Prekindergarten Programs 2003



[1] Florida provided $100.3 million in prekindergarten funding in 2002. Recent legislation will completely reorganize prekindergarten programming in Florida. The state expects to provide more than $400 million in funding in 2005.

Sources: State departments of education, the National Institute for Early Education Research and the Head Start Bureau.

of $2,400 per child. Seven other SREB states provided full-day prekindergarten — Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. The median state among these spent $3,640 per child. Six SREB states provided prekindergarten less than full day — Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina, Texas and West Virginia. The median state among these spent $2,550.

In 2005, 15 states nationwide increased their prekindergarten funding, according to researchers at the Trust for Early Education, an advocacy group supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts and others. Of those, **seven are SREB states** — Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Virginia. Four of the seven — Alabama, Arkansas, North Carolina and Virginia — serve fewer children than the number living in poverty, and they are expanding their programs to serve more children.

Five SREB states decreased funding in the wake of state revenue shortfalls — Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, South Carolina and West Virginia.

Box 4

Head Start funding is based on the number of low-income children the state serves. Children are eligible to participate if their family income is below the poverty line or if their family is eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Supplemental Security Income. In 2003, Head Start funds totaled $6.4 billion; SREB states received about $2.1 billion.

Funding remained about the same in Tennessee and Texas. In 2002, Florida voters passed a referendum requiring the state to develop a universal prekindergarten program; in 2004 the governor signed legislation defining program requirements. Funding allocations are yet to be determined but are expected to exceed $400 million in 2005 — nearly $2,700 per child. Mississippi does not have a state-funded program, although in 2004, legislation authorized local agencies to develop and administer voluntary, full-day prekindergarten programs.

Quality of programs

Beyond adequate enrollments and funding, states should ensure that both prekindergarten and kindergarten programs have high standards of quality. Research shows that only high-quality programs have proven effective in improving children's readiness for school. (See Box 5.)

Box 5

Will prekindergarten really improve at-risk students' academic performance and quality of life?

- **Oklahoma's prekindergarten investment is proving to be worthwhile.** In a recent study of Oklahoma's prekindergarten program, researchers found that, after taking into account factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, family income, age and the education level of the mother, children who had attended prekindergarten outperformed children starting school without prekindergarten on readiness assessments designed for young children. They scored:
  - 21 percent higher on a pre-mathematics assessment;
  - 27 percent higher on a pre-writing assessment; and
  - 52 percent higher on a pre-reading assessment.

  These results indicate that a high-quality prekindergarten program increases children's readiness for school — especially their readiness to begin reading.

- **The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project shows positive impact.** Studies of the project begun in the 1960s show that the children who attended the preschool program:
  - had higher IQ scores when they entered school;
  - earned better grades in school;
  - made higher scores on achievement tests;
  - required fewer special education services; and
  - graduated from high school in higher percentages.

  The positive benefits were still evident through age 40. ***Adults who had attended the preschool were more likely to be employed, earned higher wages, were arrested fewer times and spent less time in prison.*** **Clearly, the benefits extended beyond school readiness to greater levels of lifetime success.**

  The Perry project and studies of a number of other preschool programs show that these programs provide economic benefits to government in addition to the benefits to the participants. The Perry study calculated a public benefit of more than $195,000 per participant — a return of $12.90 per dollar invested in the program, adjusted for inflation. It documented the tangible lower costs resulting from participants requiring less special education, imprisonment and public assistance — plus the increased tax revenues generated by the increased earnings of the participants.

Prekindergarten

SREB has advocated since 1989 for quality prekindergarten standards. SREB's *Improving Children's Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!* reviewed research on prekindergarten and identified five essential characteristics. It recommended that SREB states incorporate these elements in their prekindergarten programs. (See Table 1.) They include:

- proven curriculum and learning processes;
- high staff-to-children ratio and small class size;
- qualified, well-compensated teachers;
- strong health and safety standards; and
- meaningful involvement by parents.

Curriculum standards: The first critical indicator is the quality of the standards used to develop the curriculum and guide the instruction. Quality programs cannot be developed without comprehensive standards in place. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, quality prekindergarten standards should be developed specifically for prekindergarten and cover the areas of literacy, mathematics, science and social studies, as well as social/emotional skills, cognitive development, health and physical development. Twelve SREB states have specified a curriculum for prekindergarten, and five SREB states — Arkansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Oklahoma and Texas — have established comprehensive prekindergarten standards.

Five SREB states — Arkansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Oklahoma and Texas — have established comprehensive prekindergarten standards.

Staff-to-children ratio and class size: High staff-to-children ratios and class sizes of 20 or fewer children are essential for quality programs. Many researchers recommend that the ratio of fully certified teachers to students should be 1-to-10. A teacher plus teacher aide could serve up to 20 students. Of the SREB states with a prekindergarten program, 13 follow both recommendations — Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. Florida's summer program will follow the recommendations. Its school year program will not.

Thirteen SREB states follow recommendations for staff-to-children ratios and class size.

Teacher credentials: Qualified, well-compensated teachers are necessary to ensure the success of children in prekindergarten classes. Head Start now requires that half of teachers in center-based programs have at least an associate's degree in early childhood education. All classes must be led by one of these teachers or by one who has a Child Development Associate credential or equivalent. (See Box 6.)

The National Institute recommends that lead teachers in prekindergarten programs have bachelor's degrees or higher, possess specialized training in early childhood education and complete at least 15 hours of professional development per year. Assistant teachers should have a Child Development Associate credential.

Box 6

A Child Development Associate credential is an entry-level, non-degree credential that was developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. It is currently administered by the Council for Professional Recognition. Candidates must complete an assessment that includes a site visit. (See www.cdacouncil.org.)

Tab

Prekindergarten Qua

State	Instructional Standards	Staff-to-Children Ratio			
	Comprehensive Curriculum Standards	Maximum Class Size No More Than 20	Staff-to-Children Ratio 1-to-10 or Better	Lead Teacher Has Bachelor's Degree	S T Le
Alabama		✓	✓	✓	
Arkansas	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Delaware		✓	✓		
Florida (year)[2]		✓			
Florida (summer)[2]		✓	✓	✓	
Georgia		✓	✓		
Kentucky		✓	✓		
Louisiana[3]	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Maryland	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mississippi [4]					
North Carolina		✓	✓	✓	
Oklahoma	✓	✓	✓	✓	
South Carolina		✓	✓	✓	
Tennessee		✓	✓	✓	
Texas	✓			✓	
Virginia		✓	✓		
West Virginia		✓		✓	

"TBD" means state policies are yet to be determined.

[1] Child Development Associate credential. See Box 6.

[2] Based on state legislation for a program available in 2006. Some standards are yet to be determined by the state Department of Education.

[3] Based on Louisiana's LA4 and Starting Points programs combined. Louisiana's additional prekindergarten programs [the 8(g) Student Enhancement Bloc

[4] Mississippi does not have a state-funded prekindergarten program.

Sources: State departments of education and the National Institute for Early Education Research — (www.nieer.org).

Most SREB states require the lead teacher to have a bachelor's degree. Eleven SREB states require specialized training in early childhood education but not necessarily a bachelors' degree. And 11 SREB states require that teachers receive at least 15 hours of professional development per year.

Most SREB states require the lead teacher to have a bachelor's degree.

Health and safety: The National Institute recommends health standards for prekindergarten. Students in prekindergarten should have direct access or referral to vision, hearing and health screening to identify health problems early. Eleven SREB states provide these services to their

le 1

ality Standards, 2004

Qualified Teachers			Health and Safety Standards		Parental Involvement
Specialized Training for ead Teacher	Assistant Teacher Has CDA[1]	At Least 15 Hours/Year of Professional Development	Vision, Hearing, Health Screening	At Least One Meal	At Least One Support Service
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD
	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD
✓			✓	✓	✓
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
		✓	✓	✓	✓
✓		✓	✓		✓
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
✓		✓		✓	✓
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
					✓
			✓	✓	✓
✓		✓	✓		

k Grant and Nonpublic Schools Early Childhood Development programs] rate similarly but not exactly as these do.

students. In addition to these health services, programs should provide at least one meal per school day to their students. Eleven SREB states mandate that programs offer students at least one meal per school day.

Parental involvement: Studies show that meaningful parental involvement is, indeed, a very powerful element of effective prekindergarten programs. It is also the most challenging to achieve. Support services offered through prekindergarten programs often benefit from meaningful involvement by — and for — parents. Some examples of such support services include parental training and support, referrals to social services, parent involvement activities and parent conferences. Thirteen SREB states offer at least one support service to parents of prekindergarten children.

Kindergarten

Now that kindergarten programs are virtually universal, availability and access are no longer the key issues. SREB states should focus on the **quality** of kindergarten programs. Research has shown that gains from preschool programs diminish if they are not reinforced regularly. Having children move from prekindergarten programs into kindergarten is the most effective way to ensure that the benefits of quality prekindergarten are not lost.

All SREB states have kindergarten standards and curricula that include mathematics, reading, English/language arts, social studies and science. Some states include health, physical education, music/arts and foreign language.

The duration of instruction in kindergarten also is an important factor in ensuring success. Full-day kindergarten builds upon the groundwork laid in prekindergarten and prepares children for the full-day first grade that comes next.

Eight SREB states — Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and West Virginia — require districts to offer a full-day program. Maryland currently requires half-day programs but will require full-day programs beginning in 2008.

Seven other states — Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia — require districts to offer half-day kindergarten programs at a minimum. These states allow districts the option of offering full-day kindergarten. Nine SREB states require students to attend kindergarten, either full day or half day. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

Minimum Kindergarten Requirements
Half of SREB States Offer Full-Day Kindergarten

State	Districts Must Offer		Attendance Is Mandatory
	Full-Day	Half-Day[1]	
Alabama	✓		
Arkansas[2]	✓		✓
Delaware		✓	✓
Florida		✓	
Georgia	✓		
Kentucky		✓	
Louisiana	✓		✓
Maryland[3]		✓	✓
Mississippi	✓		
North Carolina	✓		
Oklahoma		✓	✓
South Carolina	✓		✓
Tennessee		✓	✓
Texas		✓	
Virginia		✓	✓
West Virginia	✓		✓

[1] States that offer half-day kindergarten permit districts to offer full-day kindergarten.

[2] Students are required to attend half-day kindergarten.

[3] Maryland passed legislation in 2002 requiring all districts to offer full-day kindergarten by the end of the 2008 school year.

Sources: State departments of education.

QUESTION 2:

Is the percentage of students who are ready for first grade increasing, based on your state standards?

Without student assessment, your state cannot know whether all children in prekindergarten or kindergarten programs are ready for the next level. If teachers do not know what deficiencies their children have, they cannot develop learning experiences to help them. Since SREB's first report on school readiness in 1989, SREB has emphasized that the analysis of information is key to improving programs that promote school readiness.

Readiness measures tend to give special attention to reading. But they also focus on general language development; mathematics; physical well-being; and motor, social and emotional development. Because preschool children cannot read and write, these assessments require one-on-one interaction with the test administrator; they are generally more effective when the administrator is a teacher that the student knows.

Currently, all SREB states except one — Kentucky — assess the readiness of students before they enter kindergarten or first grade, depending upon which is the state's entry point to school. (See Box 7 for why Kentucky does not assess its preschool children.)

In all SREB states that administer school-readiness assessments, teachers use the results diagnostically — to identify the needs of individual students — so they can focus instruction to meet those needs. In most SREB states, the results are also available to school and district personnel. And in four states — Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina and South Carolina — the results are reported to the state education agency and used to guide educational policy. In these instances, individual student records are not reported; instead, only the compiled results are forwarded and used.

Box 7

An Alternative Position on School-Readiness Assessments

Kentucky has an ungraded primary program; it does not place children in traditional grade levels in the early grades. Kentucky informs parents of their children's progress based on student performance in the program, but it does not use a standardized assessment to evaluate student progress because of concerns that early assessments may be misused.

Six SREB states administer school-readiness assessments to evaluate children before they enter kindergarten and first grade — Delaware, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. Eight other states administer school-readiness assessments before children enter kindergarten — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina and Tennessee. Georgia administers a first-grade readiness assessment. (See Table 3.)

School-readiness assessments are used for several reasons. In most SREB states, the information gathered by the readiness assessment is used strictly to inform the teachers and the parents about an individual child's abilities. While this is valuable information, states would be better served if they also used the assessments to determine their children's preparedness on a statewide level so that needed changes can be made in policies and programs. (See Box 8.)

Table 3

Most SREB States Require School-Readiness Assessments, 2003

State	School-Readiness Assessment		Level of Use			Notes
	Kinder-garten	First Grade	Teacher and Parents	Schools and Districts	State Agency	
Alabama[1]	✓		✓			
Arkansas	✓		✓	✓		Children entering public school for the first time in first grade must complete a school-readiness screening specifically for first grade.
Delaware	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Florida	✓		✓			Children enrolled in the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program must complete a statewide kindergarten screening.
Georgia		✓	✓	✓		
Kentucky						Kentucky has an ungraded primary program without the traditional grade levels of kindergarten, first, second and third grades.
Louisiana	✓		✓	✓	✓	Children entering public school for the first time in first grade must complete a school-readiness screening specifically for first grade. Portfolio assessment is used for prekindergarten. Developmental readiness is reported to the state Department of Education on a yearly basis.
Maryland	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Mississippi[1]	✓		✓	✓		
North Carolina[1]	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Oklahoma[1]	✓	✓	✓			Statewide assessment is in development.
South Carolina[1]	✓	✓	✓	✓		South Carolina cannot use statewide results for accountability but may in the future use them for curriculum refinement.
Tennessee[1]	✓		✓			
Texas[1]	✓	✓	✓	✓		A reading instrument is administered in kindergarten, first and second grades.
Virginia	✓	✓	✓			Districts administer PALS (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening) to all kindergarten and first-grade students.
West Virginia[1]	✓	✓	✓	✓		The Informal Reading Assessment is administered to children in kindergarten through third grade.

[1] Kindergarten assessments in these states are considered "diagnostic" rather than "readiness" but are used to assess school-readiness skills.

Sources: State departments of education.

Box 8

Two SREB States Have Led the Way in Preschool Assessments

South Carolina

In 1978, South Carolina enacted legislation requiring that a readiness assessment be administered to all public school students at the beginning of first grade. In 1979, the state adopted the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery to measure children's readiness for the first grade. The results of the assessment were used to inform teachers and parents of the needs of each child and to track results statewide.

In 2001, the new South Carolina Readiness Assessment was piloted. This assessment relies on teacher observation and documentation. The performance indicators are in line with South Carolina curriculum standards. The assessment is re-administered over a two-year period to follow a child's progress and determine if the child is ready for the first grade and later, second grade. The results from the assessment are not used for accountability purposes. After South Carolina has sufficient data, it may use the results for curriculum improvement.

The test measures student's developmental skills in three areas: personal and social development, English language and mathematics. Children are rated on the following scale: 1) consistently demonstrates, 2) sometimes demonstrates, or 3) rarely or never demonstrates a readiness skill.

Maryland

In 1999, the Maryland General Assembly launched a Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families to focus on improving services for children from birth to 5 years old. The Maryland State Department of Education was given the responsibility of identifying and implementing a school assessment by the end of the 2001 school year.

School-readiness information is collected and reported annually by the department. Kindergarten students are evaluated by their teachers using the Work Sampling System Kindergarten Checklist. It is a performance-based measure, where children demonstrate behaviors, knowledge and skills in their classroom environment. The readiness assessment has three categories: Full, Approaching and Developing Readiness.

- **Full Readiness** — The child consistently demonstrates skills, behaviors and abilities needed to meet kindergarten standards.
- **Approaching Readiness** — The child inconsistently demonstrates skills, behaviors and abilities needed to meet kindergarten standards.
- **Developing Readiness** — The child does not demonstrate skills, behaviors and abilities needed to meet kindergarten standards.

The information gathered is not used to label children, to place them in special programs or to rate a teacher's performance. It is used in the education process.

- **Teachers** use the information to determine how to help and group certain children, to make reports to parents and to make referrals for further evaluation.
- **Parents** use the information to support their child in learning in school and at home.
- **School officials** use the information for program development and to complete the school's report card to the state.
- At the **district level,** results are used to identify needs and to make school funding decisions.
- At the **state level,** results are used to help make policy and budget decisions.

QUESTION 3:

Are at-risk children in your state served by quality, coordinated health and social services?

The physical well-being of young children can dramatically affect their readiness for school. *Challenge to Lead* notes that "discussions seemingly unrelated to school — about prenatal care, childhood immunizations and the quality and availability of child care, for example — are also discussions about readiness and learning."

Challenge to Lead calls on state education agencies to work closely with public health and social service programs. Kentucky's efforts serve as an excellent model. (See Box 9.)

Two indicators show how well the physical needs of children are being met in your state: the percentages of children receiving childhood immunizations and the proportion covered by health insurance. The importance of timely immunizations is well-documented and seemingly obvious. Children without health insurance coverage also risk having many physical problems go undetected and untreated — from hearing and vision deficiencies to chronic asthma. Yet all children do not get their vaccinations on time, and many are uninsured.

Immunizations

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the minimum vaccinations that every child should receive by age 3. The median SREB states match the national average in vaccinations against the primary early childhood diseases.

Box 9

Kentucky Integrates Health and Education

While vaccinations are the primary domain of the public health system in states, **Kentucky** recognizes the importance of health and social services to education and has a taken a comprehensive approach to school readiness. Established in 1990 as a part of the Kentucky Education Reform Act, the Kentucky Family Resource and Youth Services Centers provide health, social and community assistance to students and families as needed. The mission is to promote early learning and successful transition into school, academic achievement and well-being, and graduation and transition into adult life for academically at-risk students.

The centers are school-based to provide accessibility to services. For elementary students, the centers provide full-time child care for 2- to 3-year-olds, child development monitoring for new parents, home visits, parent and child education, after-school child care and summer/school holiday child care for ages 4 to 12. To be eligible, schools must have at least 20 percent of their students eligible for the National School Lunch Program. In 2004, $48.5 million were allocated for funding at 782 centers. Kentucky's goal is to ensure that all children at risk of not being ready for school are served by quality, coordinated programs from education, health and social-service agencies.

In the median SREB states and in the United States, 82 percent of children 19 to 35 months old have received the recommended vaccinations. Eight SREB states — Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Virginia — exceed the national average in the percentages of young children who have received the recommended vaccinations on time.

Eight SREB states exceed the national average in the percentages of young children who have received the recommended vaccinations on time.

States have made gains in the percentages of children getting immunized on time. In fact, from 2002 to 2003, the SREB median states increased the proportion of children 19 to 35 months old receiving the recommended immunizations by 3 percent — from 79 percent to 82 percent.

- Twelve SREB states — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia — increased vaccination coverage by a range of 2 percent to 6 percent.
- In two states — Tennessee and West Virginia — the percentages of vaccinated children remained the same.
- In two states — Delaware and Georgia — the percentages declined.

The median SREB states have not reached the percentages for immunizations for diseases like measles, rubella and diphtheria that public health officials believe are necessary to protect nearly all children. Recommended percentages range from 85 percent for rubella to 94 percent for measles. But SREB states — and the nation — are very close to meeting these targets. Policy-makers should continue to place a priority on vaccinating more children in order to protect against outbreaks.

Health insurance

Since 2000 in the United States, the percentage of children covered by employer-based health insurance has declined, and the percentage of children covered by Medicaid and the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) has increased. The percentage of children who are not covered by health insurance also has grown.

In the United States in 2003, there were 48 million children insured though private and employer-based health insurance programs. An additional 20 million children — 26 percent — were covered by Medicaid and/or SCHIP. Nine million American children had no insurance coverage — nearly 12 percent.

Of these uninsured children, nearly 3 million represent a growing proportion of children who are not eligible for any government-sponsored insurance program and who are not covered by a private or employer-based program.

Nine million American children had no insurance coverage in 2003.

A disproportionate number of these uninsured children live in SREB states. In 2003, 14 percent of all children in SREB states were uninsured. (See Table 4.) Of these, 70 percent were eligible for but not enrolled in Medicaid or SCHIP. In most cases, a child eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP who has a medical emergency can be enrolled immediately and the medical costs will be covered. But until an emergency arises, these children do not receive routine preventive care, and chronic conditions may go undetected.

Table 4

Percent of Uninsured Children Under Age 18
SREB States Average 14 Percent in Uninsured Children
2003

	Percent of Children Uninsured	Percent of Uninsured Children	
		Eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP	*NOT* Eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP
United States	12	70	30
SREB states	14	70	30
Alabama	9	68	32
Arkansas	11	54	46
Delaware	9	55	45
Florida	16	69	31
Georgia	14	69	31
Kentucky	11	76	24
Louisiana	15	77	23
Maryland	9	73	27
Mississippi	12	77	23
North Carolina	13	71	29
Oklahoma	17	68	32
South Carolina	9	54	46
Tennessee	11	45	55
Texas	20	74	26
Virginia	9	66	34
West Virginia	9	56	44

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics.

It is also important that these programs ensure a continuity of coverage because, as family incomes fluctuate, children's enrollment in these programs tends to be sporadic from one year to the next. Many children may not be eligible for Medicaid — but may become eligible for SCHIP. Policy-makers should aim to get children who are eligible for these programs enrolled and keep them enrolled as long as they are eligible for a government-sponsored health care plan, so that they can have continuing access to preventive care.

What Can You and Your State Do?

- **Offer prekindergarten to all children who are at risk of academic failure,** not just those from families living in poverty. All SREB states have growing numbers of at-risk children, as evidenced by the rise in the percentages of children eligible for the National School Lunch Program. If more of these youngsters had a better start, they would be able to develop and build on skills essential for success in kindergarten and first grade.

  You need to ask two questions: "How many more prekindergarten programs does my state need in order for us to serve all children at risk — and what will it take for us to reach this number?"

- **Strive to meet quality standards for your programs.** Prekindergarten curriculum standards are the foundation of high-quality programs. From these standards, state educational leaders can develop curriculum, instructional strategies and assessments for their programs. States should also maintain appropriate staff-to-children ratios, hire qualified teachers, implement strong health and safety standards, and engage parents in order to promote learning and school readiness.

  If your state does not meet all of the quality indicators for prekindergarten, particularly comprehensive curriculum standards and qualified teachers, you need to ask: "Why not?"

- **Ensure that all children participate in an assessment of their readiness before they enter first grade.** Teachers and school leaders should use the information first to assist the child in developing skills. It should be shared with parents to assist them in helping their children become ready for school. Beyond that, the information should be made available to district and state leaders to guide further curriculum development, program effectiveness and improvement, and coordination between prekindergarten and school programs.

  If your state does not collect school-readiness information statewide, you need to ask: "How do we know whether our students are ready for school?"

- **Continue to place a priority on programs that encourage vaccinations and health insurance for children.** Policy-makers in the SREB states should continue to make efforts to coordinate health, safety and other social services to ensure that all children are ready to learn. Because the number of children without health care is growing, policy-makers cannot afford to ignore the social and health problems that affect learning.

  You need to ask: "How closely do my state's preschool programs coordinate with all state agencies, including public health, to ensure that all students are physically and emotionally ready to begin school?"

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The following reports may be found on the SREB Web site at www.sreb.org.

Challenge to Lead Education Goals Series

Creating College Opportunity for All: Prepared Students and Affordable Colleges, 2005.

SREB's *Challenge to Lead* goals call on states to ensure that many more youth — particularly from minority groups and low-income families — prepare for, enroll in and graduate from college. This means that college must be affordable for these students. This report, a part of the *Challenge to Lead* education goals series, examines the current affordability gap and what steps could make college a possibility for more young people. It focuses on the need for state-funded financial assistance and ways that states can help prepare a new generation of residents for the future.

Getting the Mission Right in the Middle Grades, 2004.

This report documents SREB states' progress in getting middle grades students ready for high school. The analyses are based on scores and standards of state achievement tests and on results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The report also describes promising practices for preparing middle grades students for high school, based on technology applications that have been implemented in SREB states and on the work of SREB's *Making Middle Grades Work.*

Mastering Reading and Mathematics in the Early Grades, 2004.

This report documents SREB states' progress in getting early grades students ready for the middle grades. The analyses are based on scores and standards for state achievement tests and on results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The report also outlines how federal funds for reading programs are distributed to districts and schools, what states are requiring of students who do not meet state standards at the end of third or fourth grade, and what retention and promotion policies states have developed for students who do not meet standards.

Progress Being Made in Getting a Qualified Leader in Every School, 2004.

This report documents SREB states' progress in redesigning the preparation and development of school principals. The analyses are based on information collected in interviews with state agency personnel on six key indicators. The report also outlines actions that states can take to make progress on each indicator, describes promising practices being implemented by some states and identifies challenges states face in creating new policies that can drive more effective programs and practices.

Resolve and Resources to Get a Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom, 2004.

Every student deserves qualified teachers, but states do not have enough qualified teachers for every subject in every school. This report documents SREB states' progress toward getting a qualified teacher in every classroom. It highlights the essential policies that SREB states should resolve to develop and to support with adequate resources.

Challenge to Lead Goals for Education

1. ***All children are ready for the first grade.***
   - *The percentage of children ready for the first grade based on state standards increases annually until it reaches 100 percent.*
   - *All children at risk of not being ready for school are served by quality, coordinated programs from education, health and social-service agencies.*
2. Achievement in the early grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
3. Achievement in the middle grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
4. All young adults have a high school diploma — or, if not, pass the GED tests.
5. All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for post-secondary education and a career.
6. Adults who are not high school graduates participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.
7. The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.
8. Every school has higher student performance and meets state academic standards for all students each year.
9. Every school has leadership that results in improved student performance — and leadership begins with an effective school principal.
10. Every student is taught by qualified teachers.
11. The quality of colleges and universities is regularly assessed and funding is targeted to quality, efficiency and state needs.
12. The state places a high priority on an education *system* of schools, colleges and universities that is accountable.

The Southern Regional Education Board has established these Goals for Education. They are built on the groundbreaking education goals SREB adopted in 1988 and on a decade-long effort to promote actions and measure progress. The new goals raise further the sights of the 16 SREB states and challenge them to lead the nation.

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