Kansas Sees A Path To Prosperity By Getting More Kids Into Child Care And Preschool

By CELIA LLOPIS-JEPSEN (/PEOPLE/CELIA-LLOPIS-JEPSEN) • AUG 26, 2019

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Kansas sees a way to help growing children and their parents' incomes through early childhood education. But expanding access isn't easy.

CELIA LLOPIS-JEPSEN / KANSAS NEWS SERVICE

Originally published on August 27, 2019 10:28 am

Listening...

COFFEYVILLE, KANSAS — Preschool was a logistical boon for Delice Downing and an educational bonanza for her son, Adrian.

The head volleyball coach and director of student life at Coffeyville Community College had ruled out day care when she heard the price: several hundred dollars a week.

Then Adrian reached preschool age. Coffeyville offers something most Kansas communities don't: free attendance at a preschool with room for nearly all kids in town whose parents want it.

About 200 3- and 4-year-olds attend the school district's Early Learning Center either half or full-day.

(https://www.kcur.org/sites/kcur/files/styles/medium/public/201908/EditedIMG_7175.jpg)

About 200 children have access to preschool for free in Coffeyville, a town where one in five kids lives in poverty.
CREDIT CELIA LLOPIS-JEPSEN / KANSAS NEWS SERVICE

"I'm a coach. It's impossible — we travel all the time," Downing said. "So having him here these past two years has helped. … I know that he's in good hands. He is safe."

Quality options that keep kids safe and nurtured run in short supply in Kansas — and often break the bank. A run-of-the-mill day care can cost more than college (https://www.epi.org/child-care-costs-in-the-united-states/#/KS). Preschools like Coffeyville's require staff, space and money that many districts don't have.

State officials want a solution.

Better access to child care and preschool would help more parents balance work and family, they say, maintain steady incomes and learn parenting skills. Kids would get the extra nurturing that strengthens their academics in the short-term and cuts crime and poverty down the road.

Some communities have forged ahead by splicing together school and Head Start funds, child care subsidies, grants, and gifts from philanthropists and local businesses. How many towns and cities can find similar paths?

Cornelia Stevens leads The Opportunity Project in Wichita, or TOP. It serves 600 mostly low-income kids ages one through five, largely for free.

"If you don't have a safe place to take your child, you can't work," Stevens said. "And that's a reality."

Yet even TOP, one of the state's most celebrated models for increasing early childhood education, can't serve all the families that need it.

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"We actually have conversations almost annually about, 'OK, do we expand?'" Stevens said. "We're trying to make sure first that we can really provide the level of support that's needed to serve the children and families."

Quality versus 'nothingness'

During his two years at preschool, Adrian blossomed from a shy, quiet toddler into a talkative 5-year-old toting books home from the mini library and bubbling with stories for mom

about teacher praise for his excellent napping skills.

Children practice writing their names at Coffeyville's preschool.
CREDIT CELIA LLOPIS-JEPSEN / KANSAS NEWS SERVICE

"He says, 'Mom, I'm the best sleeper,'" Downing chuckles. "I said, 'OK, that's good, son!'"

By the time he finished last May, Adrian had begun learning "sight words," common written vocabulary.

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Coffeyville's Early Learning Center has a small library where preschoolers can borrow books to read with their parents.
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"It's a blessing," Downing said. "It's just been awesome."

Coffeyville preschoolers learn how to open milk cartons and pick up lunch trays. At storytime, they explain to their teachers what words like "author" and "illustrator" mean.

At playtime, pouting and fits over who gets which toy dissipate when kids tick through their list of options with teachers. They can ask to trade toys, or to share. They can ask to use it next time.

"Is it OK to be angry?" teacher Aleisha Weimer prompted her 3- and 4-year-olds last May. "Yeah," several replied. "We can't scream," one little boy added.

This is what early childhood researchers like to see: teachers who "scaffold," helping children connect mental dots without doing all the work for them.

Don't underestimate how much these social and emotional lessons pay off for academics, fellow teacher Lianakay Wilson said.

"If you're mad, you're not going to want to sit down and listen to a teacher talk 'one, two, threes' and 'A, B, Cs,'" she said. "You're stuck on whatever you're mad about."

To critics who say early childhood risks becoming too academic, the founder of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University says the opposite remains true. Most facilities fall short of giving kids the stimulating surroundings where they thrive best.

"What we see is vast hours of nothingness," Steven Barnett said. "Playtime that's not engaged."

Sure, children can spend a morning happily stacking blocks, he says. But they flex more social, analytical and vocabulary muscles if they chat with teachers about what they're building, how and why.

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Coffeyville preschoolers practice opening milk cartons. Meals are just one way they pick up motor skills.
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Happy children, healthy brains

A stressed-out early life can hinder healthy brain development, researchers at Harvard say (https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-science-of-early-childhood-development/).

Maybe there's violence at home or crime down the street. No decent grocery stores or doctor's offices around. Mom and Dad live paycheck to paycheck. An eviction notice shows up on the door.

Good child care and preschool can boost baby brains even in tough conditions. Home-visit programs hone parenting knowhow to reinforce the effect.

But libertarians wary of ever-bigger and more costly government remain skeptical. They point to disappointing results in some studies that check preschoolers years later for academic gains, and call others unrigorous. The picture remains too fuzzy (https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/we-have-no-idea-universal-preschool-actually-helps-kids), they argue, to pour major public money into broad access to early childhood education.

(https://www.kcur.org/sites/kcur/files/styles/medium/public/201908/editedimg_7294_1.jpg)

Toys help kids learn letters and their sounds at the preschool in Coffeyville.
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The U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse reviewed 40 studies (https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/InterventionReport/636) on Head Start and tossed out 39 for falling short of its research standards.

But longitudinal studies have shown ample returns that transform people's lives.

A famed Ypsilanti, Michigan, preschool project from the 1960s continues to spark fresh research and inspire interest from a new generation of academics still scrutinizing the lives of participants who are now in their mid-50s, and even the lives of their now-adult children.

"This program has helped in lifting multiple generations out of poverty — for sure," said Ganesh Karapakula, a doctoral student in economics at Yale University who co-authored recent papers (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3401131) on the topic with Nobel laureate James Heckman at the University of Chicago Center for the Economics of Human Development.

The pair applied a "worst-case scenario" statistical analysis to see whether flaws in the Ypsilanti experiment — including small sample size and possible randomization errors — would explain away remarkable long-term outcomes that range from reductions in violent crime to more stable marriages and healthier bodies.

It didn't.

"I did not expect that we would find these results," Karapakula said. "That they would survive the worst-case analyses."

Earlier this year, the Learning Policy Institute released a review (https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/untangling-evidence-preschool-effectiveness-report) of the most rigorous studies on early childhood programs. Overall, they showed benefits for early reading, math skills and more. Cost-benefit analyses consistently find preschool pays off.

Savings can come in the form of kids not repeating grades or needing special education. Or they finish high school, go to college. They stay out of jail and pour bigger paychecks better lives for their kids.

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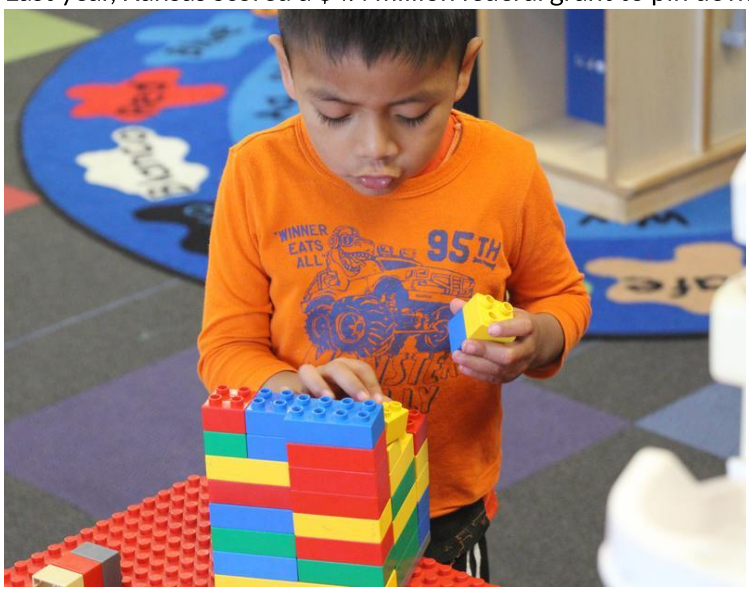
Policymakers should move past the question of whether early childhood programs work, the institute says, and focus instead on the difference between good and bad ones.

Supply, demand and *more* demand

Last year, Kansas scored a $4.4 million federal grant to pin down the state's early childhood needs and chase down ideas for increasing quality and access.



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Coffeyville businesses helped raise money for the town to offer more full-day preschool spots. Community leaders say preschool helps with economic development.
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Officials from four state agencies that deal with early childhood health and education fanned out to hear from parents (https://kschildrenscabinet.org/early-childhood-initiatives-in-kansas-2019/) and others at scores of townhall-like meetings.

Over and over, parents and businesses described a dearth of options, or a fragmented patchwork of public programs that are difficult to navigate and stigmatized.

Tallies from the Rutgers institute (http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Kansas_YB2018.pdf) suggest about one in 10 Kansas 3-year-olds get spots at public preschools, and Kansas 4-year-olds do.

By contrast, Oklahoma serves slightly more of its 3-year-olds, and offers universal preschool (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/oklahomans-have-embraced-free-universal-early-education-and-its-working) for 4-year-olds.

Don't expect Kansas to follow that recipe — and not just because of the money it would take. Child advocacy groups and state officials worry a state-funded statewide preschool program would sink day care centers that make ends meet by watching over babies *and* young kids.

Infant care could become harder to find, they fear, in a state where most counties already lack enough day care (https://ks.childcareaware.org/wp-content/uploads/SupplyDemand2018Final.pdf) spots (https://ks.childcareaware.org/wp-content/uploads/SupplyDemand2018Final.pdf) to serve kids whose parents work.

If not the Oklahoma way, then what?

Melissa Rooker made a name for herself spearheading efforts in the legislature to increase funding for public schools. Now she heads the Kansas Children's Cabinet.

"We can't depend on an answer coming entirely from the state budget or federal budget," she said. "The idea is to embrace what we call 'the mixed-delivery system.'"

Kansas aims to have a draft strategic plan in October, followed by more public meetings and a finalized list of recommendations by the end of the year.

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What to expect? Officials want to blur the line between day care and education by promoting best practices for early learning wherever adults work with babies and kids.

The town of Coffeyville, population 10,000, lies just minutes by car from Oklahoma, which offers universal preschool.
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"It doesn't matter where," Rooker said. "Every single environment that they are in is a learning environment."

Though state-funded universal preschool is off the table, the plan could call for more funding, streamlined regulations, tweaks to statutes or program eligibility. It could highlight towns that raised money locally and coaxed matches out of foundations and businesses.

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A Coffeyville preschooler pretends that a doll is feeling sick and that she is caring for it.
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Scrutinizing how the state administers its myriad public early childhood programs and funding sources would reflect a national movement along similar lines.

Funders each set their own rules that can flummox parents and school districts alike. For preschools that mix and match, it can mean extra safety inspections or keeping at least a few kids on waitlists at all times, even when their goal is not to.

The Bipartisan Policy Center ranks Kansas one of the worst states in the country (https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/ece-administration-state-by-state/) at integrating early childhood programs and other measures meant to improve options for families.

And child advocates have long faulted the state for questionable use of tobacco settlement dollars, welfare funding and other pots of money meant to help families. That's ranged from leaving federal resources untapped to diverting family aid to plug state budget holes.

This month Kansas canceled a contract (https://www.kcur.org/post/kansas-cancels-contract-kids-reading-program-over-millions-questionable-spending#stream/0) with a private company that it says spent welfare dollars flagged for childhood literacy on its owners instead.

Still, reviewing and streamlining programs may only get Kansas so far.

"People somehow think that there's a lot of duplication … and that if we somehow blended and braided, we could serve more kids better," he said. Maybe it could serve kids better, but serve much more of them? "That's just wrong."

For now, if Kansas doesn't have the money to expand early childhood education significantly, he suggests focusing on communities with the most at stake. They offer the biggest bang for the buck.

In other words, don't just tie help to low family incomes and spread limited dollars thin across Kansas. That leaves elementary schools without enough better-prepared children to revamp kindergartens and later grades. Preschoolers can end up rehashing what they've learned, and losing their gains.

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Aim instead for critical masses of kindergarten-ready tykes in the poorest neighborhoods.

"It makes sense," Barnett said. "Where are the highest concentrations of poverty? Let's just knock them off (the list) one at a time as we can."

The Kansas Reading Roadmap office in Topeka. A company that runs the program lost its contract over alleged inappropriate spending of welfare dollars.

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