

## **Missouri Panel on School Readiness: Focus on Pre-Kindergarten Education**

Final Report Submitted to the Missouri Coordinating Board for Early Childhood  
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### INTRODUCTION

Catalyzed by school districts' increasing provision of educational services for three and four year-olds and a conversation with Governor Matt Blunt, the Missouri Coordinating Board for Early Childhood (Coordinating Board), with guidance from an appointed sub-committee, decided in Spring 2008 to convene a high-level statewide panel to inform its efforts to develop a system of high quality, publicly funded pre-kindergarten.

The first meeting of the Missouri Panel on School Readiness: Focus on Pre-Kindergarten Education (Pre-K Panel) took place on May 29-30, 2008. The 33 members<sup>1</sup> convened by the Coordinating Board were selected to represent a cross section of the state in terms of geographical representation, engagement with early care and education, and variety of viewpoints. (See Appendix A) Although initially convened for three meetings, ultimately the panel met a total of four times between May 29<sup>th</sup> and October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The panel, under the leadership of its chair Thomas (Tom) Watkins, Esquire, concluded its deliberations with approval of nine recommendations that speak to the essential components of a publicly financed pre-kindergarten system.

The May 29-30 Pre-K Panel meeting was not the first step in this important work, however. Beyond consideration of the panel's membership and selection of a chair, careful attention was given to the Pre-K Panel's name and Charge. Of particular importance was locating the work of developing a pre-kindergarten system in the context of the Coordinating Board's larger interests in a comprehensive and cohesive early childhood system and its adoption of the Early Childhood Comprehensive Services (ECCS) Plan as a long-term strategic framework.

With this in mind, the panel's official name — Missouri Panel on School Readiness: Focus on Pre-Kindergarten Education — was chosen to convey the role of pre-kindergarten as one element of children's school readiness. The Charge to the Pre-K Panel (See Appendix B) leads off with a similar reminder and charged the panel with making recommendations regarding six questions:

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<sup>1</sup> Note: One of the 33 members resigned from the panel due to a job reassignment and was not replaced.

- ❑ What should be the purpose for the State’s publicly funded pre-kindergarten?
- ❑ Who should be served with public funds? Should the State’s publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs target three- and four-year olds or only four-year olds?
- ❑ Should publicly funded pre-kindergarten serve only children identified as at-risk for school success or should these programs be universally available to families on a voluntary basis?
- ❑ Should all publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs be required to meet similar standards? If so, what areas should be addressed by these standards?
- ❑ Which programs serving preschoolers should be qualified to offer publicly funded pre-kindergarten?
- ❑ How should oversight for Missouri’s pre-kindergarten programs be structured in order to ensure accountability for the State’s investments?

In turn, these six questions were clustered and organized by three overarching policy topics: Access; Accountability; and Delivery. These policy topics provided an organizational framework for the panel’s small group work and the process used for developing its recommendations.

What follows is presentation of the Pre-K Panel’s final recommendations, the rationale for these recommendations, and an overview of the panel’s work process. Presentation of this content in terms of these three components (recommendation, rationale, work process) adheres to the guidelines set forth in the contract with the author.

A wealth of documents supported the panel’s work. They are referenced throughout the Final Report and can be found in the accompanying appendices.

## PRE-K PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS AND RATIONALE

Approved at its final meeting on October 7, 2008, the Pre-K Panel’s recommendations were forged through small and whole group work, careful review of the growing analytical and research literature on pre-kindergarten, extensive debate, and public input. The panel’s nine recommendations and the rationale in support of each recommendation are listed below. The Pre-K Panel separately voted on each recommendation and then unanimously voted to approve the nine recommendations as a whole.

The nine recommendations respond to three broad policy questions, but ultimately they reflect the panel’s deliberations regarding what is necessary for creating a strong system for pre-kindergarten in Missouri.

1. Who should be served by Missouri’s publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs?
2. Should Missouri’s publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs be held accountable in some way? If so, how and for what?
3. How should Missouri’s publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs be delivered?

The recommendations are sequenced to convey the interconnections between and among the policy elements of a state pre-kindergarten system. Importantly, the nine recommendations are bound by the panel's commitment to an explicit purpose for Missouri's publicly funded pre-kindergarten system:

*To ensure that Missouri's children have access to high-quality pre-kindergarten learning experiences that prepare them to succeed in school and life.*

Honed through repeated review and editing, the panel's purpose statement represents a succinct presentation of the intent and outcome expected of a publicly funded pre-kindergarten system derived from these recommendations.

Intentionally absent from the panel's deliberations were questions of financing. Beyond the issues of time constraints and content expertise, the overarching intent was to keep the panel's attention on the design of the best possible pre-kindergarten system for Missouri. Additionally, the issue of finance was deemed the purview of the Coordinating Board to ensure that this question was answered in the broader context of the Coordinating Board's responsibilities for a comprehensive, coordinated system for young children birth to five.

***The Missouri Panel on School Readiness: Focus on Pre-Kindergarten Education respectfully submits its recommendations to the Missouri Coordinating Board on Early Childhood. Twenty two members were present for the vote unless otherwise noted.***

***Recommendation 1.*** *By the end of the 2011 Missouri legislative session, statutory authority should be established for publicly funded pre-kindergarten in Missouri. A sliding fee scale or other financial structure should be in place by December 2011 to ensure that program enrollment is accessible and affordable to all age-eligible children. (Vote: Unanimous)*

#### Rationale

Research indicates that children identified as at risk for success in kindergarten benefit most from pre-kindergarten and that these benefits are greatest when they are served in diverse groups of children.

***Recommendation 2.*** *Any center- or family-based program (e.g., private, for-profit, non-profit, faith-based) that meets the standards established for publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs in Missouri should be able to participate and receive public funds. (Vote: 21 in favor; 1 abstention)*

#### Rationale

Reliance on a mixed/diverse delivery system that is inclusive of all early care and education sectors will:

- Improve the quality of all of Missouri's pre-kindergarten programs.

- Strengthen and expand the existing early childhood infrastructure.
- Give parents a wider array of options.
- Be more culturally responsive.

***Recommendation 3.*** *Enrollment in publicly funded pre-kindergarten should be voluntary for Missouri families. (Vote: Unanimous)*

Rationale:

- ❑ Participation in pre-kindergarten is at the choice of the parent/guardian.
- ❑ Families of young children should be able to choose the programs that work best for them and their children.
- ❑ Kindergarten in Missouri is voluntary; the same should be true for pre-kindergarten.

***Recommendation 4.*** *Enrollment in publicly funded pre-kindergarten should be available to Missouri’s children for two years prior to their entry into kindergarten. Enrollment in publicly funded pre-kindergarten should begin in fall 2012. (Vote: Unanimous)*

Rationale:

- ❑ Research indicates that “an earlier start and longer duration [do] appear to produce better results for children.”<sup>2</sup>
- ❑ Accepted best practice and research on child development suggest that young children benefit from being served in mixed-age groups.

***Recommendation 5.*** *All publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs should be held accountable for meeting identified, research-based program standards that will be established by the State and required of programs at the time of the pre-kindergarten program’s initiation in fall 2012. These program standards should address:*

- *Safe and healthy environments*
- *Responsive interactions*
- *Child health and social-emotional development*
- *Developmentally-appropriate learning goals*
- *Developmentally-appropriate curriculum*
- *Staff qualifications*
- *Class size and teacher: student ratio*
- *Parent/guardian involvement*
- *Community involvement*
- *Length of the pre-kindergarten day and duration of the year*

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<sup>2</sup>Barnett, W.S. (2008). Preschool education and its lasting effects: Research and policy implications. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. .

*The Missouri Coordinating Board for Early Childhood will be responsible for recommending, monitoring, and advising the processes related to (1) establishing these standards and guidelines and (2) establishing the initial variances and timelines for rectifying them. (Vote: Unanimous; 21 members were present)*

Rationale:

- ❑ All publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs should be held accountable to the same standards.
- ❑ Uniform and universal program standards will promote consistency in program quality across settings.
- ❑ Alignment with national research/evidence-based standards within these domains will ensure a holistic focus on the child, thereby increasing the child's ability to enter kindergarten prepared to succeed. Ensuring the child's success in kindergarten may include making connections to existing resources in the community.
- ❑ Findings from research indicate meaningful economic benefits for children and society when children participate in high quality pre-kindergarten programs. Program standards provide the means by which this empirical knowledge base can be incorporated into policy and practice.

***Recommendation 6.*** *All publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs should be required, at the time of the pre-kindergarten program's initiation, to use a uniform, standardized child assessment process for tracking and monitoring children's progress and informing the instructional process. (Vote: Unanimous; 21 members were present)*

Rationale

A centralized and uniform tracking and monitoring system will

- establish baseline data for pre-kindergarten programs.
- help determine each child's and program's progress.
- help identify children's unmet needs.

***Recommendation 7.*** *By fall 2012, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's data tracking system (MOSIS) should be used to establish a uniform, child-specific (aggregate level)<sup>3</sup> longitudinal measure of outcomes for children participating in the State's pre-kindergarten program. (Vote: Unanimous; 21 members were present)*

Rationale

Use of MOSIS for this purpose will establish a systematic process for longitudinal tracking of program- and child-specific progress, providing information that can be used for system accountability and for systems change.

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<sup>3</sup> "At the aggregate level" refers to the statistical compilation of individual data as a collective sum total to ensure that the scores of individual children do not unfairly judge them or their programs and that the scores can be used for program improvement and systemic enhancements on behalf of children's school readiness.

**Recommendation 8.** *At the state level, a system of oversight for the State’s publicly funded pre-kindergarten should be established. The system’s functions should include:*

- *Coordination and collaboration,*
- *Standards alignment,*
- *Maximization of fiscal resources,*
- *Enforcement of program standards, and*
- *Data collection and analysis. (Vote: Unanimous; 21 members were present)*

Rationale:

A designated system for oversight will ensure

- that all pre-kindergarten programs perform to the same standard.
- that children experience early learning environments associated with positive child outcomes.
- the effective use of state and local resources.

**Recommendation 9.** *The state system of oversight should identify a local or regional entity to facilitate design of a mixed delivery system that is responsive to community needs and resources. (Vote: 18 members approved; 2 members abstained; 20 members were present)*

Rationale

A local/regional system of coordination will

- promote increased community ownership in young children’s early care and education,
  - respond to diversity among communities,
  - increase community-level coordination of services and reduce duplication,
  - enhance children’s and families’ transitions from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten,
  - encourage effective use of scarce resources, and
  - help effect a more streamlined system.
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- A Missouri kindergarten program must provide continuous high quality learning experiences.
  - Young children need the security that comes from continuous relationships with both caregivers and places of care.

## THE PRE-K PANEL’S WORK PROCESS

The Pre-K Panel was scheduled to meet three times:

- May 29-30, 2008
- July 22, 2008
- October 7, 2008

When it became evident to the Pre-K Panel that additional, deliberative time was needed, a fourth meeting was added and scheduled for September 8. All meetings were held in Jefferson City.

Each meeting, with the exception of the panel's first meeting, was one-day in length. The first meeting included a dinner the night before the day-long meeting and was designed to achieve three purposes:

1. Provide a face-to-face review of the Coordinating Board's Charge to the panel;
2. Offer an opportunity for panel members to meet and relate to each other on a personal level, and
3. Present an orientation to the panel's work.

Toward this end, an evening presentation by Paula Nickelson (Prevention Services Coordinator, Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services) placed school readiness in the context of Missouri's Early Childhood Comprehensive Services Plan. Kathy Thornburg (Director, Center for Family Policy & Research, University of Missouri-Columbia) followed with a presentation on state and national data and issues, with a focus on pre-kindergarten.

A Fact Sheet outlining and defining pre-kindergarten terminology and offering brief descriptions of Missouri's current pre-kindergarten programs (informed by state agency early childhood leaders; See Appendix C) further grounded panel members in the Missouri pre-kindergarten context. The following day, Robert Grunewald, Associate Economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, widened members' lenses by presenting findings on the well researched economic benefits of investments in high quality pre-kindergarten.

Beyond its Charge from the Coordinating Board, the panel's work was driven by three documents:

1. Guidelines for Working Together, behavioral norms and decision-making rules approved at the panel's first meeting on May 30<sup>th</sup> (See Appendix D);
2. An approved Work Plan, also approved on May 30<sup>th</sup> (See Appendix E); and
3. An evolving Statement of Purpose (See Appendix F), approved in final form at the panel's last meeting on September 7.

One week prior to each meeting, members received

1. The meeting agenda (See Appendix G for copies of the four meeting agenda).
2. Briefing materials carefully selected to represent the most current thinking and viewpoints (See Appendix H for a list of briefing documents; copies of the panel's briefing materials can be found at [www.mocerrn.org](http://www.mocerrn.org)).
3. The option to participate in Optional Orientation Calls. These calls were organized to provide a meeting overview, pose questions to help participants organize their thinking, and respond to questions.

Meeting agenda were carefully crafted to be results-oriented. Two panel meetings (July 22 and September 7) involved “homework assignments.” These assignments, which members dutifully completed, provided a mechanism for collecting and organizing members’ aspirations and concerns related to a state pre-kindergarten system and for identifying areas of emerging consensus and potential omissions in the panel’s thinking.

To ensure that all members had the opportunity to express his or her point of view on issues, the panel initially worked in six small groups of five members each, creating a more “intimate” conversation setting and making it possible for diverse viewpoints to be expressed and discussed. As the process evolved, related groups merged to create three groups of approximately ten members each. A range of facilitation techniques were implemented to allow members from different groups to interact with, critique, and assist one another in reaching consensus on the final recommendations. The panel relied on a Blueprint (See Appendix I) so consistency in format and content would exist across recommendations.

In accordance with Missouri’s Sunshine Law, all Pre-K Panel meetings were open to the public. To further promote transparency regarding the panel’s deliberations and encourage public awareness of the work, all meeting agenda, Meeting Notes, and briefing materials were placed on the Missouri Child Care and Resource Network’s (MOCCRRN) web site ([www.moccrn.org](http://www.moccrn.org)). Members were encouraged to promote linkages from other web sites, and MOCCRRN provided a prominent link to the documents on its home page. Prior to the panel’s final meeting, its Draft and Emergent Recommendations were posted on the web site, and viewers were invited to provide input to the panel to inform its final deliberations.

In closing: Pre-K Panel chair Tom Watkins repeatedly emphasized that he wanted the panel’s deliberations to be thoughtfully considered and diverse perspectives to be fully debated in search of common ground. Achievement of this aspiration was evident throughout the five month process, including the panel’s decision to add an additional meeting and its willingness and desire to review the Final Report prior to its submission. Perhaps most telling was the consistent attendance by almost three-fourths of the members and the fact that the timeframe for the final meeting extended beyond its ending time by almost an hour in order to ensure that members’ concerns were fully explored.

A parting gift of appreciation from the Coordinating Board was a personal copy for each member of *The Little Engine That Could*. The group convened by the Coordinating Board demonstrated that it *could* fully meet its Charge, and there is every indication that it is now willing to focus its collective energies on next steps.

Congratulations to all.

[List of Appendices](#)