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Find the report at: <http://www.policymattersohio.org/Pre-KPinch.htm>

Middle-class families struggle to pay for early care and education

New report finds increased state pre-k investments have brought preschool to more children

In Ohio, the average family would need to earn about 1.3 times the state's pre-K income eligibility levels to afford a typical early care and education program on their own, according to a new study from the national advocacy organization Pre-K Now, released in Ohio by Policy Matters Ohio. This means that the families of some 11 percent of middle-class children here are struggling to afford early care and education.

"The cost of early education and care is one of the highest expenses for families with young children," said Albert Wat, the report's primary author. "Although many states face tight budgets, increasing access to pre-k would provide relief to middle-class families and would more than pay for itself in cost savings down the road," said Wat.

Ohio does well when compared to the 20 states that provide state-funded pre-k but use income as one eligibility guideline. The state gets an above-average rating because our income guidelines make more families eligible than many other states that have income criteria, and because living expenses are lower in Ohio than in most of the other states studied. Of these 20, Ohio is one of only seven states where a family earning as much as \$42,400 could enroll a child to a state pre-k program. But insufficient funding to cover all who are eligible and a copayment that is beyond many families' reach leaves Ohio with pre-k enrollment rates that are low compared to other states; according to a 2008 study by Policy Matters Ohio, some 87 percent of eligible children under age 13 do not receive childcare assistance in Ohio.

In Ohio, even families earning as much as \$58,000 would struggle to pay for early education on their own, according to the Pre-K Now study. The most generous among these 20 states – neighboring Michigan and Pennsylvania – provide assistance to families earning up to \$63,600.

Twelve states provide no state assistance with pre-k expenses, confining eligibility only to those families poor enough to qualify for federal Head Start programming. Another 18 states provide state funding, but do not use income as an eligibility criterion. Eight states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation to extend pre-k eligibility to all children. More than 60 percent of four-year-olds in Oklahoma are enrolled in state-supported pre-k, the highest percentage among the 50 states.

The Pre-K Pinch: Early Education and the Middle Class outlines the difficulties facing families who earn too much to qualify for state pre-k programs but too little to pay for quality care on their own, and highlights the well-documented benefits – to these cash-strapped families, their children, and society as a whole – of providing high-quality, voluntary pre-k to all three- and four-year-olds.

Ohio has nearly doubled state funding for preschool since 2007. Nationwide, states have increased their funding for preschool by 37 percent since 2005, and enrollment has increased by 28 percent. Because children who have attended quality preschool have better success in elementary school, require less remedial education, graduate at higher rates, earn more, and are less likely to have children as teens or commit crimes, these state investments will reduce state costs in the long run.

Among the report's recommendations:

- Fully fund Ohio's early childhood education system, in order to reach more children whose families are already eligible but are who are not enrolled in pre-k;
- Create a phase-in plan for a gradual expansion of pre-k to all children beginning with the most vulnerable children and families, and moving to include those in the middle class;
- Use factors other than income to define eligibility. For example, quality programs can provide much-needed stability for children in foster care or those from single-parent households;
- Create full-day programs that meet the needs of working families, so parents don't have to rely on multiple providers to cobble together a full day of care and education for their children.

"Ohio's last budget set the state in the right direction," said Piet van Lier, senior researcher at Policy Matters Ohio. "This report highlights the need to continue to focus on early care and education to keep moving Ohio forward."