

## The promise of Pre-K

By Michael Shields

Quality preschool improves children's educational outcomes into the elementary grades, and good programs with wraparound childcare anchor family financial stability by enabling parents to work. Yet, too few Cincinnati children have access to a good preschool or any preschool at all. A levy on this November's ballot seeks to change that by adding a new local funding source for both preschool and K-12 education.

Issue 44 asks voters to approve a \$48 million per year - \$33 million for K-12 schools and \$15 million to expand access to quality preschool throughout Cincinnati. The proposal forges a partnership between parents, educators, the Cincinnati Public School District and Preschool Promise advocates. The proposal, which combines two separate initiatives, would fund preschool for all 4-year-olds and for some at-risk 3-year-olds. This would be transformative for children and families in Cincinnati.

A new report by Policy Matters Ohio lays out the current preschool landscape, discusses the challenges families now face to accessing quality early care and education, and identifies opportunities for the city to leverage new and existing funds to deliver top quality education to all Cincinnati young children and their families.

The report says families face barriers to quality programs because of cost. Available slots for quality programs and wraparound childcare are lacking, and good programs are located too far from neighborhoods where they are needed.

The report also discusses how investing in staff is a vital component in delivering a high quality center, and urges the city to devote resources from Issue 44 to teacher development and compensation.

### Policy Recommendations

- Pass Issue 44 to increase resources for K-12 and undertake a broad initiative to build out quality preschool options for Cincinnati
- Restore initial eligibility for publicly funded childcare to 200 percent of poverty level.

### Key findings

- Only 46 percent of Cincinnati preschool-aged children are in preschool.
- In some neighborhoods, space shortfalls in quality centers exceed 100 seats.
- Quality "deserts" are worst in western Cincinnati neighborhoods, where 30-100 percent of families live below 200 percent of the poverty level.
- Issue 44 would deliver \$15 million per year to preschool, providing access to all Cincinnati 4-year olds.

- Boost reimbursement rates to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile so that families can choose from an array of programs, including top-rated programs. The 75<sup>th</sup> percentile is the point that would meet the cost of the most affordable 75 percent of programs.
- Increase participation in quality ratings programs. Making Step Up To Quality rating mandatory is a step in the right direction. Delivering the resources programs need to make it work is the next step.
- Increase preschool offerings in public schools where quality is high and demand far exceeds capacity
- Explore partnerships between public preschools and good extended-hours childcare centers and home providers to provide the best pre-academic learning and wraparound care. Rate in-home providers using SUTQ.
- Invest in teachers. Substantially increase teacher pay to attract high quality staff with strong credentials, and keep them focused on their work.