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Why Oklahoma's public preschools are some of the best in the country

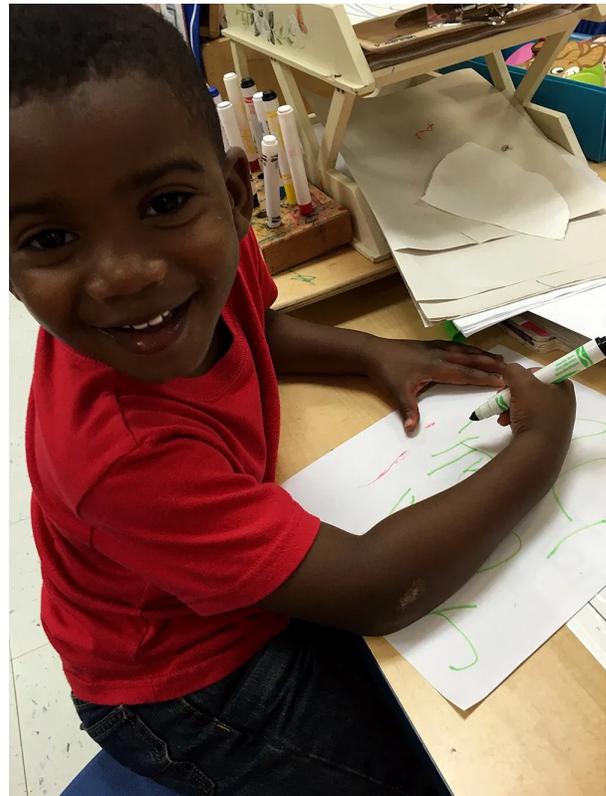
Oklahomans trend conservative, yet they've embraced free, universal early education

by **LILLIAN MONGEAU**

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CLINTON, Okla. — One of the biggest employers in this hardscrabble working class town in western Oklahoma is the Bar-S Food Company meat packing plant, where many of the city's 9,521 residents work. Clinton also boasts a Route 66 Museum, a somewhat epic indoor waterpark, and free universal preschool for every 4-year-old in town.

Ninety-one percent of the town's 170 4-year-olds enroll in a public program annually, said Tyler Bridges, the assistant school superintendent here. One hundred forty attend the state-supported district preschool while another 15 children attend the



Kash McDaniel, 4, practices writing his name in Nerissa Whitaker's classroom at the Early Childhood Center in Muskogee, Oklahoma. So far, he's pretty much at "K."

Credit: Lillian Mongeau

local Cheyenne-Arapahoe Head Start program.



Those high numbers are impressive, especially since only 53.7 percent of 4-year-olds attend school nationally and the U.S.

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ranks 30th for preschool enrollment

among developed nations. That's despite decades of research showing that early education often improves students' chances of succeeding in school. But in Clinton, some things are just taken for granted: the movie-worthy sunsets, the churches on nearly every corner, and sending kids to preschool when they turn 4.

"[Prekindergarten] has been around long enough now, I don't think anyone thinks about it," Bridges said.

76 percent of Oklahoma 4-year-olds are enrolled in the state's universal prekindergarten program.

The same might be said of the state as a whole. Oklahoma has fully funded 4-year-old preschool for every child, regardless of family income, since 1998. As long as a child is 4-years-old by Sept. 1, he or she is qualified to attend school. Seventy-six percent of the

state's 4-year-olds were enrolled in 2014, a total of 40,823 children and one of the highest enrollment percentages in the country, **according to the latest annual State of Preschool** report by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

"I think it is popular because it is funded," said Oklahoma State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister. "As more attend, you can have a more enriched opportunity for everyone."

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Public preschool is high on the Democratic agenda right now. In 2013 President Barack Obama called for **\$10 billion in federal funding** to help states start new programs or expand existing ones, primarily for children from low-income families — a call he has repeated every year since. Congress hasn't approved his grand vision, but it has incrementally increased funding for Head Start in recent years. And, since 2013, the U.S. Department of Education's Preschool Development Grant program has awarded **more than \$226 million** to states hoping to expand or establish state preschool programs. Another **approximately \$882 million** has been handed out through the federal Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge competitive grant program.

But offering preschool to all kids might seem to be an even more radical move. Oklahoma is one of just four states (the other are Florida, Vermont and West Virginia) along with the District of Columbia that offer universal preschool access to all age-eligible children regardless of family income. Oklahoma's program was the first of the four states and enrolls more students than Vermont or West Virginia. Florida's program enrolls nearly four times as many kids, but its **quality standards are far lower.**

“I'm not sure [public prekindergarten] is a liberal or conservative issue. It's about people wanting to do the best thing for kids.”



Janice Scott, a teaching assistant at the Early Childhood Center in Muskogee, Oklahoma, leads a morning session with many of the center's students while their teachers prep art and science lessons. Credit: Lillian Mongeau

A few other states, like Wisconsin and New Jersey, come close to offering universal programs, but most states are light years behind the leaders. Even Massachusetts, generally seen as a leader in education, only **serves 14 percent**

of its 4-year-olds in state preschool.

While the discussion of a federal expansion of early education funding has become mired in partisan politics, free universal preschool is widely accepted here. “We’re not certainly battling this at the legislature,” Hofmeister said. “That is not a conversation that I hear.”

Clinton parent Shanna Barron said the public money spent on the program made sense to her because “you can see it’s going to good use. It’s not like they’re wasting it.” And, she said it was critical for her own child, who has learned new songs, all his colors and how to identify shapes. “I think it’s a good program because single moms, like myself, we don’t have to pay for daycare,” Barron said.

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Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, called Oklahoma a role model for the many other states currently considering expanding their public programs.

“Oklahoma provides universal preschool as part of the public education system,” Barnett said. “So that means bringing all of the quality standards, all of the focus on learning and teaching, to the preschool program. And most states don’t do that.”

On a fall afternoon in Clinton, it was easy to see how preschool students benefitted from having the power of the K-12 system behind them. At Nance Elementary School, the town’s center for all of its prekindergarten through first grade students, Anita Smith’s pre-K students had scattered around a basement “maker space” stocked with high- and low-tech toys. The room, meant to inspire interest in science and technology, was paid for with a district-wide grant from the **Oklahoma Educational Technology Trust**.

At one table, Payton Hoffman, 4 and Yatzil Uribe Solis, 5, used an iPad equipped with a camera to play a game in which they tried to figure out the first letter of a new word. There might be a picture of a hand and the text “_ _AND,” for example.

“Ha, ha,” they said, making the “H” sound out loud before Payton, aided by having the letter in her own last name, reached for a bright plastic “H” and held it under the camera. The image on the screen filled in the new letter to spell “HAND,” then switched to a new image.

At a table across the room Matthew Hernandez, who recently turned 5, played with LEGO-like toys that contained tiny electronic circuits. When clicked together properly, they made a light flash. Meanwhile, Lexa Panana, 5, zoomed a remote control robot around the floor in front of the whiteboard and Layla Lee, also 5, put together blocks called “cubelets,” to build her own robot. Asked what she was doing, Layla barely looked up to explain the obvious: “I’m playing,” she said.

Critics of prekindergarten programs attached to K-12 schools have worried that such programs could become too focused on building academic skills in developmentally inappropriate ways. Drilling young children in their letters and numbers has actually been found to be counter-productive. **Research shows** that while children taught by drill do better on early assessments, they don’t remember what they learn as long as children who are taught primarily through hands-on, play-based activities.



Lexa Panana, 5, controls a robot named Dash in the technology-focused maker space in the basement of her school, Nance Elementary in Clinton, Oklahoma. Credit: Lillian Mongeau

Nance prekindergarten teacher Tonya Gaunt has a mental list of all the things she wants her students to be comfortable with before they head to kindergarten: “Scissors, coloring, interactions with other kids and teachers, identifying their own name, the ABC’s and early numbers,” she said. “When they leave, I want them to want to go to school the next year.”

Gaunt has taught prekindergarten for 18 years in Clinton. She loves what she does and she likes to keep up with the latest technology to make sure her classroom is on the cutting edge. Like every prekindergarten teacher in Oklahoma, Gaunt holds a bachelor’s degree in education with a specialization in prekindergarten. Paired with Oklahoma’s strong early learning standards, the teacher training requirements are a big part of what makes the state’s program work for young children, Barnett said.

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An ongoing study of the Tulsa school system’s prekindergarten program, led by Deborah Phillips and William Gormley of Georgetown University, has repeatedly demonstrated that Oklahoma’s program is having an effect.

30th — U.S. rank for preschool enrollment among OECD countries.

Many researchers have used Georgetown’s Tulsa data to run **analyses and reports** on the effectiveness of the program. Gormley and his colleagues found that **third grade reading scores for children who attended the program after 2006 have risen**. Phillips and her colleagues found that preschool grads’ **attentiveness in class had increased and timidity had decreased** by a significant amount. And economists, led by Timothy J. Bartik of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, a think tank, have even **predicted Tulsa preschool grads will earn higher salaries** based on their elementary school test scores, which have previously been linked to earnings.

Those findings don't cover programs in smaller districts like Clinton, though teachers here cite similar anecdotal advances.

Looking at the state as a whole, Oklahoma was one of only 13 states to see growth on fourth grade reading scores this year as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Oklahoma was the fourth most-improved state in that category. Its **fourth grade reading scores have trended upwards** since 2002, the year before its first cohort of preschool grads reached third grade. And though Oklahoma has a long way to go to catch top scorers like Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont, the state is now on par with the national average fourth grade reading score for the first time in over a decade.



Lillian Renfro, 5, "roasts" a "marshmallow" during free-play time in Lissy Cabaniss' classroom at Nance Elementary School in Clinton, Oklahoma. Pretend play has been shown to help young children develop self-regulation and critical thinking. Credit: Lillian Mongeau

It has taken years for the long-term benefits of the program to show up. And some benefits, like the earnings predictions, are yet to be realized. Oklahoma's first preschool cohort, those who attended programs in 1998-99, are just turning 22 this school year. Research shows that it took a few years of working out kinks in the program before students started to show strong positive effects beyond their first few years in school, so it will likely be another several years before the impact of the program on students who are now adults can be seen. That delayed gratification can be hard for policymakers to stomach, but it might also be Oklahoma's most critical lesson for other states.

"One of the things [Oklahoma] offers as a model is that this is something you're in for the long

“We’re not certainly battling this at the legislature — that is not a conversation that I hear.”

haul,” Barnett said. “It’s a decade to ramp up your program and deliver high quality to all your kids.”

Many Oklahomans point to another key reason they think preschool works here. Towns and districts are given plenty of leeway to create programs that fit their needs as long as they meet some basic quality standards.

Local control is important in Muskogee, 222 miles east of Clinton, a small town near the Arkansas River that looks more Old South than Wild West. At Muskogee’s Early Childhood Center, Principal Malinda Lindsey leads 15 prekindergarten classrooms serving 285 children, the vast majority of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a federal indicator of poverty. She takes the idea of local control all the way to the classroom, allowing teachers to design classroom environments that work for them even if that means things look vastly different from room to room.

In Nerissa Whitaker’s classroom, Kash McDaniel, 4, practiced writing his name at a well-stocked writing and art station. So far, he was only particularly clear on how to make a “K,” but he was assiduously making dozens of them. Down the hall, in Elizabeth Salas’ classroom, Dante Larson, 5, served coffee and bacon from a play stove to Natalie Hernandez, also 5, who snuggled a baby doll while chatting on a play cell phone. In yet another classroom, this one lit softly and featuring nature-oriented toys and decorations, Grace Marder, age 4, tried to find the right words to describe the leaf she found during an earlier nature



Teacher Jana Dunlap works with Grace Marder, 4, to come up with adjectives to describe a leaf the child found on a nature walk outside the Early Childhood Center in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Credit: Lillian Mongeau

walk with her class. The leaf was now glued to a piece of white printer paper.

“It’s red,” she told her teacher, Jana Dunlap. But then she struggled to find another adjective. Dunlap prompted her with a list of possibilities: smooth, bumpy, rough? “Bumpy,” Grace said finally and watched as Dunlap carefully wrote, “It’s red and bumpy,” below the leaf.

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With so many struggling to make ends meet, most of her students’ families could not afford private preschool, Lindsey explained.

“For children like these, the opportunity to get a free public education offers them a strong start that is vital to success later on,” Lindsey said.

It also offers them the opportunity to do things they might not get to do at home, she said. Ra’Kyla Brown, 4, agreed. In fact, when asked, she offered a very long list of such opportunities, such as: having some crayons, putting your name on things, having computers, sitting on the carpet, watching a movie, making handprint chickens, doing letters, having some toy boxes and making pictures.

Lindsey said support for preschool in Oklahoma transcends politics. While offering free universal preschool to all can sound like a liberal talking point on its surface, Lindsey pointed out that it was also in line with traditional conservative values of protecting children and helping families.

“I’m not sure it’s a liberal or conservative issue,” she said. “It’s about people wanting to do the best thing for kids.”

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Lillian Mongeau is a Senior Editor and the Western Bureau Chief. Her future as a writer was not a foregone conclusion. "I would like to see her put more effort into her writing," Ms. Gill wrote on Lillian's... [More by](#)

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