



The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons From the States

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Abstract

Although there is considerable research on the elements of high-quality preschool and its many benefits, particularly for low-income children and English learners, little information is available to policymakers about how to convert their visions of good early education into on-the-ground reality. This brief summarizes a study that fills that gap by describing and analyzing how four states—Michigan, West Virginia, Washington and North Carolina—have built high-quality early education systems. Among the common elements of their success are strategies that:

- prioritize quality and continuous improvement,
- invest in training and coaching for program staff,
- coordinate the administration of birth-through-grade-3 programs,
- strategically combine multiple funding sources to increase access and improve quality, and
- create broad-based coalitions and support.

External Reviewers

This report benefited from the insights and expertise of two external reviewers: Jeffrey Henig, Professor of Political Science and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University; and Arthur Reynolds, Professor of Child Development, University of Minnesota. We thank them for the care and attention they gave the report. Any remaining shortcomings are our own.

The full report can be found at: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/our-work/publications-resources/the-road-to-high-quality-early-education-lessons-from-the-states>.

Introduction

Early education has emerged as a critical issue for state policymakers, who during the 2015–16 fiscal year alone invested nearly \$7 billion in programs for our country’s youngest learners. In all, 45 states and the District of Columbia took action, with 32 states boosting their funding from the previous year.¹ Support for preschool is broad and diverse and present in large and small states, those densely and sparsely populated, and in states led by both Republicans and Democrats.

With this new money and expanded support come new challenges. Although there is considerable research on the elements of high-quality preschool and its many benefits,² little information is available to policymakers about how to convert their visions of good early education into on-the-ground reality. This brief fills that gap by describing and analyzing how four states—Michigan, West Virginia, Washington, and North Carolina—have built high-quality early education systems.³ Our analysis is based on reviews of policy documents, studies, and data in each state, as well as observations of programs and interviews with 159 individuals, including policymakers, program administrators, providers, teachers, parents, advocates, and researchers.

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These states exemplify an array of promising practices that are designed to meet a state’s needs and to satisfy its priorities, and that have shown positive results. In selecting the states we considered the following criteria:

- 1. Quality.** Each state meets at least eight of the 10 quality benchmarks of the National Institute for Early Education Research, and each has been the subject of research that found positive outcomes for children.
- 2. Scale.** Each state has been able to expand its early learning programs without sacrificing quality.
- 3. Diversity.** These states vary in geography, demographics, and political context.

Despite their differences, these states share a common commitment to advancing foundational elements of a quality preschool education. They have worked hard to make sure that children have supportive interactions with their teachers that stimulate learning. They mandate curricula grounded in sound principles of child development, such as the use of play-based instruction and opportunities for hands-on learning. They stress the importance of children’s social-emotional, physical, and academic development. And they use assessments that reveal how children are learning, as well as what they know, favoring unobtrusive observation-based instruments over paper-and-pencil tests.

To make these engaging, age-appropriate programs a reality, each of the states relies on common overarching strategies: establishing standards for quality and systems that incentivize improvement; investing in knowledgeable and skilled educators; coordinating and aligning early education programs; seeking sufficient funding sources and mechanisms; and building broad-based support for their programs.

Michigan: Quality From the Start

The Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) is Michigan’s state-funded preschool program for 4-year-old children. The program is targeted to preschoolers with a maximum family income of 250% of the federal poverty level (\$60,750 for a family of four), and children are prioritized for enrollment based on income and other risk factors, such as a diagnosed disability, primary home language other than English, or parent(s) with low educational attainment. A maximum of 10% of enrolled GSRP children may be from families with incomes above 250% of the federal poverty level who pay tuition on a sliding scale, based on family income.



Since its inception in 1985, the program has grown to serve 38,213 students,⁴ reaching 51% of the eligible 4-year-old population. The program’s biggest expansion occurred when Governor Rick Snyder added \$65 million to the budget in 2013 and again in 2014, essentially doubling the state’s investment in preschool. Eighty percent of all participating children attend full-day programs.⁵

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A longitudinal evaluation of GSRP,⁶ conducted by HighScope Educational Research Foundation, found that children who attended GSRP had better kindergarten readiness,⁷ fewer grade repetitions, and better reading and math proficiency than students who did not attend GSRP.⁸ In 2012, HighScope released its report on high school graduation and retention rates, showing that 57.3% of the GSRP group graduated on time, compared to 42.5% of the non-GSRP group, a statistically significant difference.⁹ Effects were slightly more pronounced for students of color.¹⁰

In 2011, Michigan centralized the administration of early childhood programs with the establishment of the Office of Great Start, housed in Michigan’s Department of Education. The Office of Great Start brings numerous early childhood programs together under a single administrative umbrella, making it possible to devise a unified vision and strategy for providing services. Intermediate school districts—regional government agencies generally organized around county lines—administer GSRP at the local level. This local infrastructure strengthens the state’s capacity for program monitoring and for delivering support tailored to the needs of individual districts.

Michigan fosters program quality through clear, integrated standards and expectations for learning, measured by a quality rating system that integrates classroom-based support for continuous improvement. The state has adopted a comprehensive system of standards that address structural elements, such as teacher qualifications, a research-based curriculum, and student-teacher ratios, as well as process elements, such as student-teacher interactions. The state

measures progress toward these standards through its Great Start to Quality rating system. On-site coaching, provided to every teaching team by experienced and qualified consultants, addresses identified weaknesses. This integrated and cohesive approach ensures that GSRP classrooms statewide will maintain a specified level of quality and engage in a process of continuous improvement.

Since the program's inception 30 years ago, Michigan has been improving GSRP by updating standards, rethinking administrative structures, establishing a quality rating and improvement system, and addressing problems identified by program evaluations. Policymakers, administrators, program directors, advocates, and community leaders recognize that there is always room to improve, and they take that challenge seriously. The next steps for Michigan include increasing the number of child care centers that participate in the Great Start to Quality system, expanding offerings for children from birth to age 3, and improving the links between early education and k-12.

West Virginia: Pre-K for All



West Virginia Pre-K (WV Pre-K) is a voluntary, universal pre-k program for 4-year-olds and 3-year-olds with identified special needs. Since WV Pre-K's inception in 2002, the state has invested significant resources in building the program, gradually achieving universal access and improving quality standards. In the 2014–15 school year, WV Pre-K enrolled 15,472 children,¹¹ including an estimated 75% of its 4-year-olds—a high rate relative to other states.¹²

From its inception, West Virginia's program was designed to foster school readiness,¹³ and an independent, peer-reviewed study of WV Pre-K indicated that it has been successful at meeting this goal.¹⁴ Researchers found that a year of WV Pre-K

produced substantial gains in print awareness at kindergarten entry. Further, WV Pre-K meets all 10 of the National Institute for Early Education Research's quality standards.¹⁵

WV Pre-K has benefited from several initial design choices. For example, the legislature set realistic timelines for the rollout and expansion of the program, allowing 10 years in which to achieve full implementation. Further, integrating WV Pre-K into the k-12 school aid funding formula has provided a relatively stable source of funding to support universal access for 4-year-olds and has helped to firmly root the pre-k program within the state's broader educational landscape.

The administration of WV Pre-K is a highly collaborative endeavor. At the state level, an interagency team with representatives from early learning, preschool special needs, child care, and Head Start supports pre-k implementation. This structure is mirrored at the county level, where similar teams manage local implementation. This commitment to cooperative governance maximizes resources and encourages the sharing of expertise between the early care and education sectors. It also helps to foster the development of a broadly shared vision for WV Pre-K that supports cooperation among program partners.

WV Pre-K relies on both state and local efforts to promote ongoing quality improvement in pre-k classrooms. The state's data-driven continuous quality improvement approach calls on county-level teams to create improvement plans based on an assessment of local needs and priorities, and to target resources to support program improvement. Counties also are responsible for providing professional development for pre-k teachers based on local data. Offerings may include coaching, coursework, and other trainings. The state, for its part, retains an important role in quality improvement by developing and managing the policies that guide

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local implementation. For example, the state has gradually raised the program’s minimum teacher qualifications and has developed evidence-based early learning standards and assessments to encourage effective instruction. To support counties in their work, state agencies also offer extensive resources and technical assistance, including professional development opportunities, policy guidance, and triennial program reviews.

West Virginia continues to expand and improve its early care and education programs. In 2016–17, the state will offer expanded instructional time in WV Pre-K classrooms, moving from locally determined operating schedules to five-day, full-day programming during the academic year. Recognizing the potential of early interventions to promote long-term school success, West Virginia also has begun to focus on alignment between early childhood programs and the early elementary grades. The state also has begun to consider options for expanding early learning opportunities for children from birth to age 3. In 2014, a governor-appointed task force released a 10-year development plan for the state’s birth-to-5 system. Although fiscal constraints have prevented the realization of the plan, the state has continued to make incremental changes while planning for future implementation, illustrating its continued commitment to young children and their families.¹⁶

Washington: Pre-K and Child Care for the Whole Child



Washington state is home to a high-quality state-funded preschool program that serves more than 10,000 of the state’s most vulnerable children.¹⁷ Washington’s Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) was modeled on Head Start and stands out for the extensive wraparound services that have been integral to the program since its inception in 1985, when it was among the few state-funded pre-k programs in the country.¹⁸ The program is relatively small and highly targeted, serving 3- and 4-year-old students whose families earn no more than 110% of the federal poverty level, or \$26,730 for a family of four.¹⁹

A 2014 evaluation by the Washington Institute for Public Policy showed that the state’s preschool students made impressive test score gains in both reading and math, gains that persisted through 5th grade and that bucked the common trend of test score “fade-out” seen in some large-scale programs.²⁰ Compared to their matched pairs who did not participate, preschool participants showed gains equivalent to a 7% boost in reading and a 6% increase in math scores in 5th grade. These effects are almost twice as large as those found from other early childhood programs that have been deemed effective.²¹

The “whole child” preschool model that Washington initially chose may be part of the reason for this success. The state has maintained wraparound services despite a price tag of about \$7,000 per child for its part-day program.²² Given tough economic times, this is no small feat. This stability is partly attributable to a bipartisan, united coalition that has kept lawmakers’ attention on early learning. The coalition has included governors and a cadre of legislators who have led the charge, as well as a united group of grassroots and grassroots advocates who have coalesced around a common mission. To justify new expenditures, preschool advocates have relied on locally conducted research demonstrating the positive impact of their early learning programs.

Administratively, Washington has worked toward a more unified vision of quality early learning by streamlining its bureaucracy. The state consolidated programs in the cabinet-level Department of Early Learning in 2007. This department now oversees most of the state’s early childhood programs, including preschool, child care, and home visiting. Washington has also cultivated relationships among agencies that work on children’s issues by creating a state-level Early Learning Partnership in 2009. In addition, a public-private partnership, Thrive Washington, has coordinated business, philanthropic, and government leaders who fund and administer early learning initiatives.

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The state recently began efforts to expand access to high-quality early learning by making historic investments in the early learning workforce and birth-to-age-8 alignment, catalyzed in part by funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the federal government. Starting in 2017, state preschool and subsidized child care providers will be assessed using the state's new quality rating and improvement system, called Early Achievers, which was developed with private dollars and federal Race to the Top grants. The new system sets a minimum threshold for quality child care, and is accompanied by significant investments in quality improvement, including grants for providers, tuition for ongoing staff education, and on-site coaching. Lawmakers hope that by investing in coaching, the state can help close the quality gap between child care and preschool.²³ To build alignment between preschool and k-12, the state recently developed a kindergarten-readiness assessment, again with federal and foundation funding, which will be administered in both kindergarten and pre-k.²⁴

For all of its strengths, Washington's state preschool program still does not serve many eligible children. Legislators have mandated that there be enough space to enroll all eligible children by 2020, which will require the program to double in size.²⁵ This expansion poses serious challenges for both funding and infrastructure; the state already faces a shortage of teachers and space. However, policymakers, advocates, and administrators are generally in agreement that however they proceed, they will focus on maintaining the program's proven quality.

North Carolina: Birth-to-Age-3 Leads the Way



North Carolina has long been a trailblazer in early education. In 1993, the state developed Smart Start, a groundbreaking public-private partnership, to assess community needs and coordinate early education services. As a result, in 2001, when the state introduced public preschool—then known as More at Four and later renamed NC Pre-K—the program was smoothly integrated with existing early childhood services in counties across the state. The targeted preschool program serves around 30,000 4-year-olds each year from families whose income is 75% or less of the state median income (\$51,000 for a family of four).²⁶ All children participate in full-day programs.

Research conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Duke University found positive effects associated with participation in Smart Start and NC Pre-K. Research on Smart Start found that child care quality increased in the study sample, that Smart Start-funded activities were positively related to classroom quality, and that quality was positively related to children's outcomes.²⁷ For example, in the first cohort of participating counties, the percent of child care classrooms scoring "high" on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale increased from 13% in 1994 to 41% in 2002.²⁸ Frank Porter Graham researchers also conducted annual statewide evaluations of NC Pre-K, which found that NC Pre-K participants made greater gains than would be expected for normal developmental growth, with particular benefits for dual language learners and low-income students.²⁹ Further, participation in NC Pre-K reduced the gap in average 3rd grade test scores between low-income children and their peers who did not qualify for free or reduced-price meals.³⁰ Finally, since 2005, NC Pre-K program standards have satisfied all 10 of the program quality benchmarks established by the National Institute for Early Education Research.³¹

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North Carolina has relied on several mechanisms for driving quality improvements in the state's early childhood system. The Frank Porter Graham research has enabled state administrators to identify promising practices to improve quality, such as focusing professional development on high-quality teacher-child interactions. Also, North Carolina is one of just a handful of states to integrate its child care licensing and quality rating and improvement systems, requiring that all early childhood programs receive a program quality rating. Child care providers must maintain a three-star license (out of five stars) to continue receiving state subsidies, and NC Pre-K providers must maintain a four- or five-star license.

In return, the state offers financial incentives and technical assistance for program improvement activities, including greater child care subsidy reimbursements for better-rated providers. Finally, North Carolina has also invested substantial resources in early childhood workforce education. The Child Care Services Association runs T.E.A.C.H. and WAGE\$, two nationally recognized programs that offer higher education scholarships and wage subsidies to early care and education professionals. All NC Pre-K teachers in both public and private programs are required to have a B.A. in early childhood education or child development, as well as a birth-through-kindergarten teaching license. All teachers receive three years of coaching support and evaluation before earning a fully qualified credential.

Even in the face of cutbacks, North Carolina has continued to break new ground and model innovation in the field.

Smart Start and NC Pre-K have a history of receiving strong political and financial support; however, both programs suffered budget cuts in 2011. There has since been pushback from a wide array of supporters. Despite the funding uncertainties, North Carolina continues to improve its early childhood programs by updating its quality rating and improvement system, strengthening alignment of NC Pre-K with the k-12 system, and increasing child care subsidy funding. North Carolina will require sustained investment to continue as a national leader in delivering high-quality early education. Even in the face of cutbacks, however, the state has continued to break new ground and model innovation in the field.

Lessons From the States



Although there is no single roadmap to excellence, the experiences of these states provide important insights into how best to leverage resources and develop the policies and practices to improve and expand early learning opportunities. The successes achieved and challenges faced by early education champions and implementers in Michigan, West Virginia, Washington, and North Carolina thereby become lessons for education leaders, policymakers, and preschool advocates throughout the country.

1. Prioritize Quality and Continuous Improvement

Recognizing the critical role of program quality to positive child outcomes,³² each of the states has invested in strategies to improve its early education programs. Key lessons include:

- **Define and use state quality standards that incorporate assessments of adult-child interactions, as well as structural factors, such as adult-child ratios and facility requirements.** Washington uses CLASS (the Classroom Assessment Scoring System) to collect observational data on teaching practices and guide professional development. Michigan uses the Program Quality Assessment developed by HighScope.
- **Develop quality rating and improvement systems to support continuous improvement, reinforce quality standards, and provide a basis for program accountability.** Michigan, North Carolina, and Washington have made significant investments in developing state quality rating and improvement systems that convey statewide, coherent visions for quality and a common approach for improvement. West Virginia relies on a county-led continuous quality improvement process.
- **Link funding to ratings as a tool for promoting quality.** In Michigan, North Carolina, and Washington, providers must achieve a minimum rating on the state quality rating and improvement system to participate in the pre-k program. Washington also recognizes the importance of investing to enhance quality, and thus provides a range of grants and tuition subsidies designed to help providers boost their quality rating.

- **Develop a strong local infrastructure to meet the needs of diverse communities.** State agencies cannot effectively operate or support quality improvements on their own. Michigan has turned to intermediate school districts, while in North Carolina and West Virginia, counties have substantial managerial responsibility. Besides increasing capacity, creating a strong local infrastructure is the most effective way of addressing regional needs or concerns.

2. Invest in Training and Coaching

These four states place heavy emphasis on boosting the quality of preschool teachers, focusing both on their credentials and their interactions with students. Key lessons include:

- **Invest in strengthening teacher quality by providing specialized training.** Community and four-year colleges are especially critical in strengthening preparation and professional development programs. The strongest programs are those that include significant clinical training linked to useful coursework and that emphasize teaching and learning as well as child development. All four states require their lead teachers to have a degree with an emphasis in early childhood education, child development, or a related field. Michigan, West Virginia, and North Carolina require that lead teachers have at least a bachelor's degree. As these states phased in this standard, they gave teachers several years to meet the degree requirement.
- **Make training programs accessible to providers.** This can be done by offering courses regionally in community colleges, county offices of education, and districts or through online platforms. In West Virginia's apprenticeship program, child care workers and pre-k assistant teachers remain employed and receive mentoring while taking classes at West Virginia's community and technical colleges. West Virginia and Washington offer online courses to make opportunities accessible in rural areas.
- **Encourage teacher advancement and retention through scholarships and salary supplements.** All four states offer scholarships and salary supplements to teachers who have returned to school for additional training. West Virginia, North Carolina, and Michigan have adopted a nationally known program, Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.), which awards scholarships for additional teacher education. North Carolina also has adopted WAGE\$, another nationally known program that subsidizes preschool teachers' salaries based on their levels of education.
- **Provide coaching to improve program quality.** Coaching tied to assessments of adult-child interactions can strengthen teaching and learning. Michigan employs county-based Early Childhood Specialists who offer onsite improvement support based on results of the Program Quality Assessment to all pre-k teaching teams throughout the year. Washington offers onsite support to both state preschool teachers and child care providers through its quality rating and improvement system.

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3. Coordinate the Administration of Birth-Through-Grade-3 Programs

Pre-k historically has been kept entirely separate from k-12, but these four states are seeking to create a seamless educational experience for youngsters, aligning what is taught and how it is taught from preschool through elementary school and beyond. Key lessons include:

- **House all children's services under one umbrella or create a cabinet-level department that works across agencies.** For example, Washington's Department of Early Learning is an independent, cabinet-level agency. Michigan's Office of Great Start is housed in the Department of Public Instruction, which strengthens coordination with k-12. North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education is housed in the Department of Health and Human Services, which strengthens coordination with child care and health services.

- **Improve coordination across programs and systems by sharing data and aligning curriculum and assessments.**

West Virginia’s data system includes a pre-k component that includes individual child assessment, health, and attendance data, as well as program assessment information. This rich database helps in designing programs and provides teachers with relevant information, easing children’s transitions from pre-k to kindergarten. Washington employs the same child assessment tool for both state pre-k and full-day kindergarten classrooms.



4. Strategically Combine Multiple Funding Sources to Increase Access and Improve Quality

Adequate resources are essential to assuring high-quality early education. While these four states depend primarily on state dollars as the main revenue source for early education, they also take advantage of federal and local funding. Key lessons include:

- **Fund early education programs with dedicated state dollars combined, or braided, with funding from Head Start and other federal programs (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Early Head Start) to make the most efficient use of available resources and to expand access and quality.** By combining Head Start and other federal programs with state money, the states have been able to deliver pre-k to more children—universally as in West Virginia, or targeted as in Washington, Michigan, and North Carolina. In West Virginia, state funds make up about two-thirds of pre-kindergarten funds, while community partners raise the balance through Head Start, TANF, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Child Care Development Fund. In Michigan, community partners combine state and Head Start dollars to operate blended classrooms. However, because each of the federal and state programs has its own eligibility and reporting requirements, braiding such complex funding streams can be difficult for many local providers.
- **Leverage short-term funds and public-private partnerships.** North Carolina requires county-based early education nonprofits to raise 17% of their budgets (a portion of which supports pre-k providers) from private sources. In Michigan, Washington, and North Carolina, federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grants underwrote investments in quality rating and improvement systems and assessments. Washington leveraged an investment from the Gates Foundation to pilot and study coaching supports and also to pilot the state’s quality rating and improvement system. It then leveraged its Race to the Top funds to expand the system.

5. Create Broad-Based Coalitions and Support

Launching a high-quality early education initiative—or building a bigger and better program—is hard work. These four states relied on broad-based support to advance their efforts. Key lessons include:

- **Bring together advocates, politicians, philanthropists, practitioners, and business leaders, working closely with policymakers, to promote high-quality, accessible early education.** Michigan business leaders became early childhood supporters after reviewing the positive evaluation results of the state’s preschool program and recognizing the substantial return on investment. In North Carolina,

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evidence of long-term gains in crime reduction led prosecutors and police officers to support early education. A broad-based coalition can promote increases in early childhood investments by sustaining momentum for the program. For example, when Washington legislators proposed an increased investment in child care and state preschool, coupled with heightened quality standards, the Early Learning Action Alliance helped to broker a unified response among its member organizations. Two tools that can catalyze broad-based coalitions are the use of local research and the development of public-private partnerships. In Washington, the business community and philanthropic partners have come together with the state to support early education.

- **Offer parents a choice of providers.** Incorporating private, as well as public, early education providers in state programs has helped to win over caretakers and parents who can choose the setting they believe best meets the needs of their children. Such partnerships operate in all of these states. Michigan requires that community partners receive 30% of the state’s preschool slots and West Virginia mandates that at least half of all preschool classrooms be run either jointly with Head Start or with private providers.
- **Cultivate champions.** A political champion is key to launching a major early education initiative and garnering support for greater investments as a program grows. In three of the states we reviewed, governors led the charge. During the 1980s, Booth Gardner advocated for pre-k in Washington, and 20 years later, Christine Gregoire led the drive to expand the program. In Michigan, Jennifer Granholm established a public-private partnership to support investments in early education, and her successor, Rick Snyder, led the push for expanding the preschool program. In North Carolina, James Hunt launched a program for infants and toddlers, and his successor, Michael Easley, made prekindergarten a signature initiative. In West Virginia, legislators such as Senator Lloyd Jackson and Senator Robert Plymale championed the creation and implementation of a universal preschool model, receiving important support over the years from governors and other political leaders.

Conclusion

These states, committed to public early education, are striving to make preschool better, understanding that quality is essential to realizing preschool’s potential. They have taken the lead in this endeavor, addressing challenges that reach from the statehouse to the classroom. By supporting continuous program improvement efforts, focusing on teacher training, coordinating the administration of early education programs, creatively combining funding sources, and building a broad-based coalition of support, these four states are advancing high-quality early education opportunities for their youngest citizens.

Delivering top-quality early education is a complex undertaking and none of these states is ready to declare, “Mission accomplished!” It will take time and effort—as well as public investment—before the goal of delivering seamless, high-quality support for young children can be fully realized. But these four states are heading in that direction, and their experiences and lessons provide valuable guideposts for policymakers nationwide who are committed to providing high-quality preschool for all.

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The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to inform evidence-based policies that support equitable and empowering learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute works with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others who care about improving education to address the complex realities facing schools and their communities.

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