

Maine Voices: Maine families need universal pre-K

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By Jeremy R. Fischer

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I moved to the Aroostook County community of Presque Isle when I was three years old with my mother and sisters. While my mom started a new job and my sisters started at new schools, someone needed to look after me. We didn't have friends or family in the area, so I attended the Head Start program near her new job. I spent my days receiving high quality – and publicly funded – pre-K in a nurturing and safe environment.

Because of my pre-K experience, I started kindergarten ready to learn. I excelled academically, from elementary school through law school. I went on to serve three terms in the Legislature, and I now “pay it forward” as an advocate for expanding pre-K across Maine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy R. Fischer serves on the Yarmouth School Committee. The views expressed are solely his own.

My experience with public pre-K is typical of low and middle income kids who get the opportunity. Research shows that such programs have broadly positive impacts. In the short term, studies show that they increase kindergarten readiness and decrease disciplinary issues. In the long term, they boost rates of high school graduation and college attendance, and reduce juvenile incarceration. Public pre-K didn't just work for me, it works for millions of American kids every year.

Unfortunately, public pre-K isn't available in every community. Why? Starting a program is often prohibitively expensive. It involves lots of planning, hiring teachers, purchasing classroom equipment and materials, and finding physical space. Additionally, there's often a perception that most parents can (and should) pay out-of-pocket for private pre-K, so it's simply not a priority in school budgets.

My wife and I moved to the coastal community of Yarmouth for the same reason that many young families move to town – the schools. When our oldest was approaching four years old, we learned that Yarmouth didn't offer public pre-K. We were surprised and disappointed. We sent our son to private pre-K, but I decided to run for the school committee with the goal of starting a public pre-K program in our district.

In June 2021, I was elected to the school committee and got to work. My focus (some might say obsession) on pre-K is sometimes a source of amusement for my colleagues. I often joke that there are three things that happen at every school committee meeting – the pledge of allegiance, approval of prior meeting minutes, and me talking about pre-K. That persistence – along with the hard work of our administrators and the support of my colleagues – has turned decades of our community talking about public pre-K into meaningful action. On March 10, we formally approved the program, and our district will welcome its first class of 96 public pre-K students in September.

President Biden has proposed a national expansion of pre-K programs, but regardless of what happens at the federal level, Maine lawmakers should make universal public pre-K a priority. Here are some policy changes that they should consider:

- Competitive pre-K expansion grants paid for with American Rescue Plan Act funds should not end when the pandemic relief runs out. Maine should invest state dollars in these grants.
- Maine's school funding formula should be changed to recognize the lower student/teacher ratios required in pre-K classrooms. This will ensure more sustainable program funding.
- State funding should be conditioned on greater partnerships between school districts and private local providers. In some cases this may mean co-locating public pre-K classrooms with private providers to avoid unnecessary construction costs. In other communities, it may mean closer collaboration on professional development and "wrap around" care before and after the school day.

With these modest policy changes, Maine can turn decades of talking about public pre-K into action, just like we did in Yarmouth this year. Providing this "head start" to every Maine kid will give them a more equal opportunity to succeed in their education and their lives. And we'll all benefit from their success.

— *Special to the Press Herald*

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