

POLICY BRIEF

Four-Year Old Kindergarten: A Solid Start for Our Children

Rich Wisconsin 4K history

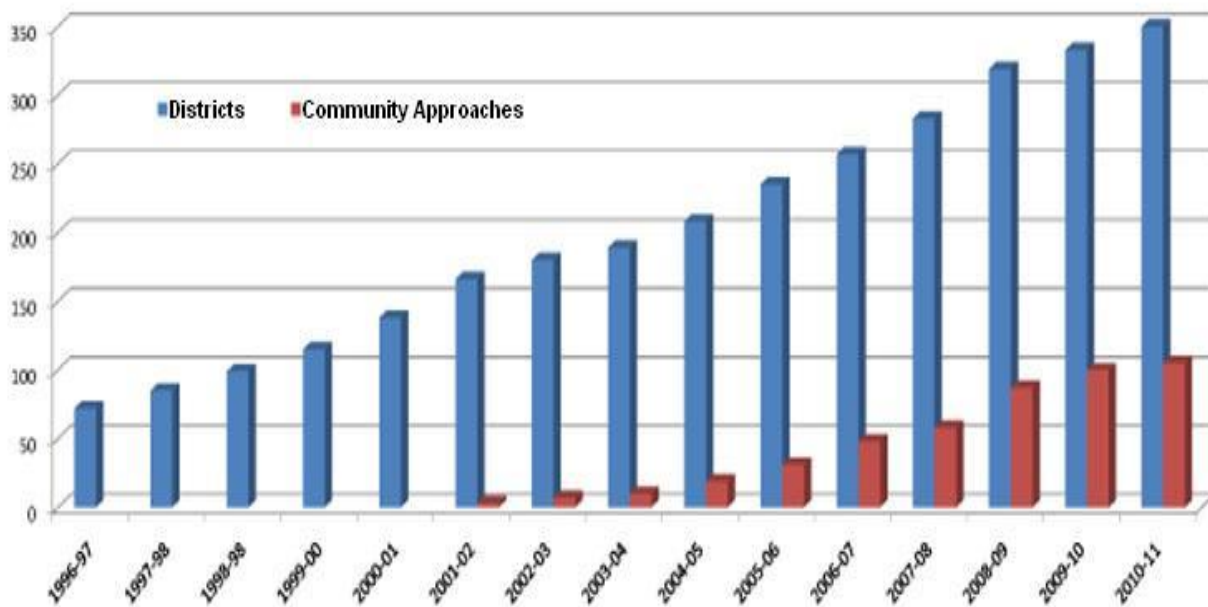
4-year-old Kindergarten (4K) has been part of Wisconsin's educational landscape since the birth of the state. Wisconsin included education for 4-year-olds in its Constitution in 1848. The first private kindergarten in the country was established in Watertown in 1856, and Wisconsin's first public kindergarten began in 1873 in Watertown. Typically those early kindergartens enrolled 4- and 5-year-olds. By the end of the 1800s, about 75 percent of Wisconsin 4-year-olds attended public schools.

Wisconsin's 4K beginnings were based on Friedrich Fröbel's philosophy that the early years form the foundation for children's success in school and in their later lives. That philosophy continues to drive 4K expansion in the state.

Recent Surge of 4K

After a decline in public 4K from 1920 to 1970, interest grew leading to a steady expansion of 4K in the last 20 years. Today, 85 percent of Wisconsin school districts with elementary programs--350 districts out of 414--have 4K programs. A total of 41,192 children--an estimated 58 percent of all Wisconsin 4-year-olds--are enrolled.

Expansion of 4K: 1996-97 to 2010-11



(Source: Department of Public Instruction website)

30 percent of districts serve children in community-based settings, like child care, Head Start, and private preschools. The number of districts using community approaches to 4K delivery has grown particularly in the last 10 years, as school districts have increasingly worked in collaboration with private programs providing early childhood services.

Incentives for Community Approaches

4K start-up funding was made available by the state in 2008 through 2011 to help districts start up 4K with community partnerships. In the last five years, 64 percent of the districts starting 4K used a community approach to delivery.

A study of community approaches found that public/private partnerships help improve the overall quality of private programs, improve coordination with the district, and improve transitions for children going from pre-k to Kindergarten. Many districts with community approaches view it as a win-win proposition—for children, for parents, for the private early care and education community, and for the schools.

Local Control Delivery

4K is delivered through local school districts, with state funding from the school aid funding formula. School districts have significant autonomy in determining the content. Wisconsin has developed Model Early Learning Standards as a guide to school districts and teachers. Wisconsin 4K teachers must have a Bachelor's Degree and a teacher license.

Research on 4K

Wisconsin was part of a five-state study of early education programs by the National Center for Early Development and Learning in 2003-2004. The study showed that Wisconsin 4K students were above the national average on three of the four academic skills assessed. Both poor and non-poor students attending 4K programs in Wisconsin gained language and social skills.

National research studies have found impressive impacts from preschool education across the country. For instance:

- **Higher graduation rates** - Chicago children who attended a pre-k program were 20 percent more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who did not have pre-k. (Source: Chicago Longitudinal Study, UW-Waisman Center, 2003)
- **Reduction in grade repetition** - Maryland fifth graders who attended pre-k were 44 percent less likely to have repeated a grade than their peers who did not attend pre-k. (Source: "State Efforts to Evaluate the Effects of Pre-Kindergarten", Yale University Child Study Center, 2004)
- **Reduction in special education placements** - Among Chicago children, those who attended pre-k were 41 percent less likely to require special education services than their peers who did not attend. (Source: Chicago Longitudinal Study, UW-Waisman Center, 2003)

A 2004 economic analysis of 4K investments in Wisconsin indicated that for every state dollar invested in 4K, 68 cents would be returned in savings to the education system, with even higher savings in Milwaukee.

Bottom Line

Four-year-old kindergarten is an important part of Wisconsin children's educational. 4K helps all children be prepared for school, regardless of what families can afford. The recent development of community approaches has helped to build bonds between public schools and private community-based programs, with positive outcomes for children and families.

WCCF supports a strong 4K program throughout the state, with increasing emphasis on public-private partnerships.