

# CUYAHOGA COUNTY OHIO

## PROGRAM

Universal Prekindergarten

## FUNDING MECHANISM

Property Tax Referendum for Health and Human Services and Matching Private Funds

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## OPPORTUNITY

In 2016, a new Cuyahoga County Executive—Armond Budish—was elected and determined, after conversations with community leaders, that expansion of the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program was the most transformational action he could take for the future of Cuyahoga County (Cleveland Metro area).

UPK was developed over a year-long community planning process involving every community sector: business, philanthropy, education, early care and education, state and local government and child development experts. Nationally known consultants developed the program and financial models. The Partnership Council of community leaders, chaired by the County Executive and a local business leader, monitor the program and the use of the private dollars.

## SUMMARY

Created in 1999, Invest in Children is Cuyahoga County's public/private partnership focused on providing a continuum of services from prenatal to kindergarten to young children and families. A core component of the initiative is to improve the quality of child care in the community through training and technical assistance.

In 2007, Invest in Children decided to build a Universal Prekindergarten program (UPK) on the foundation of quality that had been established. UPK began by serving 1000 children in existing sites across the county using a mixed delivery system of public preschools, private community centers, Head Start programs and family child care homes.

UPK provides funding to programs (selected through an RFP process) to enhance quality and also provides significant training and technical assistance on classroom quality, family engagement, professional development, and community resource referrals. In addition, UPK provides scholarships to reduce tuition costs to families under 400 percent of the federal poverty level. The program was able to expand to the current 4600 slots in 2017 and further enhance its programmatic approach in family engagement and serving children with special needs.

## CHALLENGES

**Cost Prediction in Mixed Delivery System** // A core principle of Cuyahoga County’s UPK program was to build upon the existing mixed-delivery system and provide gap funding to reach the “true cost” of meeting the standards set by UPK. While this approach of providing funding through a “last dollar in” approach is cost effective and customized to program need, it presents challenges. For example, calculating the real funding gap for programs is difficult as program revenues change from year to year. In addition, the approach makes it difficult to provide a single “per seat cost” as funding varies among programs based on their other revenue sources. It is therefore more difficult to predict costs of taking the program to scale. Thus, the program uses an average cost when making these calculations.

## GETTING TO ACTION

- 1999** County establishes Invest in Children, a public/private partnership focused on providing a continuum of services from prenatal to kindergarten to young children and families.
- 2007** Invest in Children decides to build a high-quality Universal Prekindergarten program (UPK). UPK began by serving 1000 children in existing sites using a mixed delivery system.
- 2013** Voters approve a 3.9-mill tax for five years to support children and adult health and human services programs.
- 2016** Voters approve a two-year renewal of the 3.9-mill health and human services tax. The newly elected County Executive commits \$10 million to expand the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program (in addition to the \$4.7 million already in the annual budget). The private sector is challenged to match those dollars. The private fundraising campaign exceeded its goal and raised over \$12 million. These private dollars are in a donor advised fund at the Cleveland Foundation.
- 2017** The UPK program expands to the current 4600 slots and further enhances family engagement and serving special needs children. The combined budget of \$22.5 million will allow the program to operate for three school years. A sustainability strategy to maintain the expansion is currently being developed.

# RESULT

A rigorous independent evaluation of the program is underway by Case Western Reserve University and the results thus far indicate that UPK, when compared with a similar high-quality program, produces significantly greater readiness for kindergarten. The effect is most pronounced when children attend for eighteen months or more of UPK. This holds true even when a wide range of demographic variables are held constant, isolating the impact of UPK.

Dr. Rebekah Dorman, Director of Invest in Children states, “We are truly gratified that the Case Western Reserve evaluation demonstrates that UPK is truly making a difference for children in preparing them to be ready to succeed in school. The results show that the investment in UPK is producing significant returns through the life trajectories we are changing. We now must work together as a community to sustain and expand it. We look forward to the day when the program can become truly universal and serve all children in the county.”

# KEYS TO SUCCESS

Based on Invest in Children’s experience in implementing the program for twelve years, here are some of its key takeaways:

- ▶ *Ensure that you have an evaluation plan and data collection procedures in place before you start the program to capture both outcome and process evaluation*
- ▶ *Find high profile champions in the private sector*
- ▶ *Continue to enhance the model—even a good program can get better*
- ▶ *Listen to providers but also hold them accountable*
- ▶ *Build your program so that it is scalable*

For more information about Cuyahoga County’s program please see: *Investing in High Quality Preschool: Lessons from An Urban Setting* in a special issue of *Early Years: An International Research-Contemporary and Critical Perspectives on ECE in the United States*. Volume 37, Number 1, March 2017. Contact Cuyahoga County's Invest in Children Office of Early Childhood Staff: <http://investinchildren.cuyahogacounty.us/en-US/contact-us.aspx>



## HOW DOES PROPERTY TAX WORK IN NORTH CAROLINA?

Local governments in North Carolina have the authority to raise property taxes for specific purposes designated by the North Carolina General Assembly. Within the area of “community development programs and activities” child care, health and education are listed explicitly. However, in consulting with several NC local government experts, it remains unclear if a broader set of early childhood programs or initiatives could qualify as a specified purpose.

Alternatively, local governments can adopt a resolution that affirms a desire to provide early childhood services with a portion of the property tax.