



State of Arizona
Office
of the
Auditor General

ANNUAL EVALUATION

**AT-RISK PRESCHOOL
EXPANSION PROGRAM**

Report to the Arizona Legislature
By Douglas R. Norton
Auditor General
January 1997
Report No. 97-2



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STATE OF ARIZONA
OFFICE OF THE
AUDITOR GENERAL

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January 28, 1997

Members of the Arizona Legislature

The Honorable Fife Symington, Governor

The Honorable Lisa Graham Keegan
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Transmitted herewith is a report of the Auditor General, an Annual Evaluation of the At-Risk Preschool Program. This report is in response to the provisions of A.R.S. §15-715.

This is the second in a series of annual reports. Reports are scheduled to be released annually on or before December 31 during each year in which the Program is in operation. Our evaluation finds that while the Program has generally made progress toward meeting the State's goals for early childhood education, private sites lag behind public sites in quality. In addition, although the Program's effectiveness is dependent on how well the goals are met, ADE performs minimal monitoring to ensure that school districts implement the Program in a way that will meet the goals. We also report that many of the children who attended the At-Risk Preschool Program during the 1995-96 school year began preschool more than three months after the start of the school year and that children who receive this shortened program experience are unlikely to perform as well as those who start on time. Finally, we report that the Program has had some limited positive impacts on the children who attended an At-Risk Preschool Program from 1991 through 1994.

My staff and I will be pleased to discuss or clarify items in the report.

This report will be released to the public on January 29, 1997.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Douglas R. Norton".

Douglas R. Norton
Auditor General

Enclosure

SUMMARY

The Office of the Auditor General has completed the second-year program evaluation of the At-Risk Preschool Expansion Program (Program) administered by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). The evaluation was conducted pursuant to A.R.S. §15-715. This report is the second in a series of reports that the Office of the Auditor General will prepare annually on the Program.

Arizona's At-Risk Preschool Program provides services to four-year-old children from low-income families. These children are considered at risk of failing in school. National studies have shown that children living in poverty are less likely to attend preschool and are more likely to be part of families with limited English proficiency, and with parents who lack high school diplomas, are unemployed, or are single parents. The above factors are associated with a high risk of failing in school and long-term negative outcomes, such as welfare dependency and unemployment.

For the 1995-96 school year, an estimated 4,592 Arizona children participated in at-risk preschool programs in 94 school districts, in one of 3 major settings: public, private, or Head Start classrooms.

Implementation Meets State Goals, Yet Private Sites Lag Behind Public in Quality (See pages 7 through 13)

Our first annual evaluation noted that ADE had designed a program that followed nationally recognized standards and goals. This year, in reviewing how schools have implemented the program design, we found most public and Head Start sites are generally meeting these goals. These preschools use developmentally appropriate practices, meet staff qualifications, provide staff development, offer linguistic and cultural integration, involve parents, comply with health care requirements, follow nutritional guidelines, and are involved in the community. However, public and Head Start preschools need improvement in the following important areas to ensure program success: providing social services, conducting child assessment, and self-evaluation.

Private sites, however, were not as successful as public and Head Start sites in meeting the goals most essential to a quality program. Crucial goals not met by private sites include the use of developmentally appropriate practices and curriculum, linguistic and cultural integration, providing social services, child assessment, and self-evaluation. Additionally, private sites lagged behind public and Head Start sites in meeting other goals, such as child nutrition and community involvement.

Limited Review and Monitoring Affects Program Quality (See pages 15 through 18)

Although the Program's effectiveness depends on how well its goals are met, ADE does not require school districts to adhere to the Program's goals to receive or maintain monies; in fact, a few programs that did not meet these requirements received financial support. In addition, ADE performs minimal monitoring to ensure that schools implement the Program in a way that will meet its goals. ADE staff visited 18 districts and wrote 12 reports for the 94 school districts that operated over 250 preschool programs during the 1995-96 school year. ADE's limited monitoring is mostly attributable to its philosophy that school districts are accountable for program quality, including the quality of classes operated by private contractors and the use of state monies, and that ADE should conduct only limited monitoring of program operations. This philosophy explains an inadequate number of staff being assigned to monitor the Program.

ADE should improve program review and monitoring by holding school districts accountable for implementing the State's guidelines for early childhood programs, by monitoring more sites, and by better documenting information about the sites that are visited.

Children Receive Shortened Services (See pages 19 through 22)

Forty-four percent of the children who attended the At-Risk Preschool Program during the 1995-96 school year did not begin preschool until more than three months after the school year began. While the school year begins in August for most Arizona children, only one-quarter of the children in the Program began attending preschool by the end of September 1995. Some children were enrolled as late as June 1996. On average, children started attending preschool 83 days after school started. Children who start late are unlikely to perform as well in school as those who start on time.

While the data for the 1996-97 school year are not yet available for analysis, the start of the preschool program was again delayed. Programs began after the start of the school year. Eighty-six of the 95 school districts that proposed At-Risk Preschool programs were not fully approved and funded until late September. As a result, districts could not plan, recruit, hire, or train staff, and purchase the needed materials to operate a quality preschool. By devoting more staff to the at-risk preschool application review process, and by starting the process earlier in the year, ADE can reduce the likelihood of children receiving a shortened preschool experience.

**Early Results Show
Minimal Student Gains
(See pages 23 through 26)**

Analysis of preliminary data on children who attended an at-risk preschool program from 1991 through 1994 reveals that the Program has had some limited positive impacts. Data on these children and a demographically similar comparison group of children who attended the same schools, but were not enrolled in the At-Risk Preschool Program, show that both groups score below national averages on standardized assessments. However, modest differences exist in academic performance between the at-risk and comparison groups. For example, at-risk children show some gains over the comparison group children in math and reading in second grade, but this small gain disappears by third grade. In addition, while at-risk children show an initially higher reliance on academic support programs than the comparison group children, their reliance on such programs decreased over time, suggesting that participation in the At-Risk Preschool Program may reduce children's needs for, and the costs of, such programs.

**Statutory Annual
Evaluation Components
(See pages 27 through 33)**

Responses to legislative questions regarding program participants, providers, costs, and recommendations are described in detail in the final section of this report.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Office of the Auditor General has completed the second-year program evaluation of the At-Risk Preschool Expansion Program (Program) administered by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). The evaluation was conducted pursuant to A.R.S. §15-715. This report is the second in a series of reports that the Office of the Auditor General will prepare annually on the Program.

Background

Research shows that preschool provides children with both short- and long-term benefits. First, children's educational experiences prior to entering school play a major role in determining their success in elementary school. For example, preschool may improve children's school readiness, early academic achievement, and school success, such as consistent promotion to the next grade and fewer children being placed in special education (Currie and Duncan, 1994; Reynolds, 1995). Second, preschool participation contributes to beneficial longer-term outcomes. Children who attend preschool are less likely to drop out of school or become delinquent, and are more likely to be employed when they become adults. (Berrueta-Clement, et al, 1984; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1993; Groginsky & Kroshus, 1995).

Arizona's At-Risk Preschool Program provides services to four-year-old children from low-income families. These children are considered at risk of failing in school. National studies have shown that children living in poverty are less likely to attend preschool and are more likely to be part of families with limited English proficiency, and with parents who lack high school diplomas, are unemployed, or are single parents. The above factors are associated with a high risk of failing in school and long-term negative outcomes, such as welfare dependency and unemployment.

In Arizona, approximately 22 percent of all children live in poverty. For the 1995-96 school year, there were approximately 33,000 Arizona children eligible for the Program based on family income.

Arizona At-Risk Preschool Legislation and Appropriations

Arizona first officially supported at-risk preschool programs in 1990. However, the Legislature has changed the Program three times since it was initially established.

- Laws 1990, Chapter 345 established a pilot program that provided preschool services to at-risk preschoolers. As a result, 10 at-risk preschools began operating during the 1990-91 school year. The following year, 23 additional schools created at-risk programs.
- Laws 1994, 9th Special Session, Chapter 2 expanded the At-Risk Preschool Pilot Program and increased its appropriation. The 1994 laws enabled private day care centers, federally funded programs, and private schools to provide direct services to the Program.
- Laws 1995, 1st Special Session, Chapter 4, placed the program appropriation into a block grant with four other state-funded programs: full-day kindergarten, kindergarten to grade 3 at-risk (K to 3 at-risk), dropout prevention, and gifted support. The block grant was approved for the 1995-96 school year.
- Laws 1996, 5th Special Session, Chapter 1, §8 placed the at-risk preschool program into an early childhood block grant that included full-day kindergarten and K-3 at-risk. Gifted support was eliminated from the block grant and the dropout program has been discontinued. The 1996 Law does not require that money be targeted to at-risk children; districts could redirect financial support to children in kindergarten to third grade.

The program changes that have occurred since 1990 have been accompanied by changes in appropriations. Figure 1 (see page 3), shows how the appropriations for the At-Risk Preschool Program, and the other programs that are part of this block grant, have changed over time.

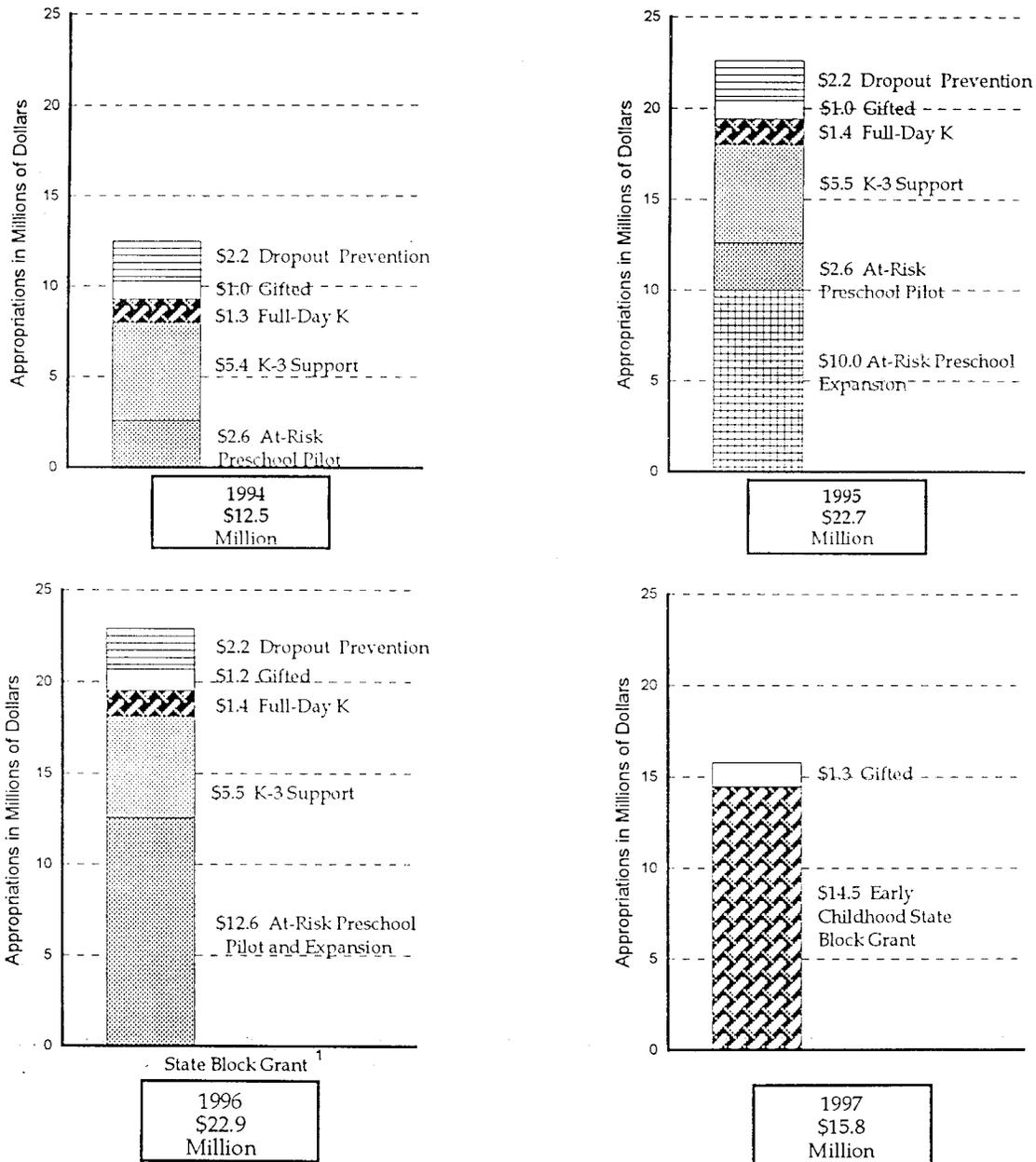
Allocation Process for 1995-96 School Year

ADE allocated program monies to local school districts for school year 1995-96 based on an estimated number of age- and residence-eligible children as required by the legislation, and at-risk eligible as defined by a family income that meets low-income eligibility guidelines. ADE used the district estimates to compute a maximum grant amount for each district. The formula is based on the estimated number of eligible children in each district, the total number of eligible children in the State, and the total amount of monies available for distribution across the State. ADE based the 1995-96 school year allocations on an amount of \$17.5 million available for distribution. Of this total, \$5 million was carryover from the nonrevertible unspent 1994-95 expansion appropriation, \$2.5 million was from the pilot program appropriation for 1995-96, and \$10 million was appropriated for the 1995-96 expansion program.¹

¹ Approximately \$100,000 of the \$2.6 million pilot program appropriation was retained by the ADE for program administration.

Figure 1

Appropriations for At-Risk
Preschool and Other Programs
Years Ended or Ending June 30, 1994 through 1997



¹ Proposed appropriations are reported. Final appropriation was made as a block grant of \$22.9 million.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of Appropriations Reports for the years 1994-97.

Using the formula, 196 of 198 elementary and unified school districts were eligible for allocations; 2 districts did not have age-eligible children. ADE provided a program application package to each of the 196 districts eligible to receive an allocation. Districts had to complete the application package and return it to ADE by September 25, 1995, in order to receive an allocation. Ninety-five districts applied and received money to operate an at-risk preschool program.¹ ADE allocated approximately \$450 for each eligible preschooler and expected to serve 10 to 20 percent of eligible children. Of an estimated 33,000 eligible children, approximately 4,600, or 14 percent, were served. The balance of monies for the Program from the districts that did not submit applications was redistributed to the participating school districts in November 1995 using a new formula. All 15 Arizona counties received allocations.

For school year 1995-1996, program monies were distributed to school districts beginning in September 1995 and continuing until December 1995. Most program sites did not start operating until several months after the 1995-96 school year began. Approved program budgets ranged from \$4,626 to \$1,554,854.

Program Types

For school year 1995-1996, an estimated 4,592 Arizona children participated in at-risk preschool programs. The 253 at-risk preschool classrooms fall into one of three categories: 1) 159 public,² 2) 56 private,³ and 3) 38 Head Start classes.⁴

Evaluation Scope and Methodology

A multi-method approach was used in collecting and analyzing data. Methods included:

-
- ¹ Ninety-five districts received grants, but only 94 provided services to children. One district used part of its funds for planning purposes and returned the balance.
 - ² A public site is operated by a public school district. Public sites include special education classes that provide education to children who have been identified as having special needs. In some cases children are "reverse mainstreamed," which means placing children who are not special education into a special education classroom to serve as role models and to develop their own self-esteem and modeling behaviors.
 - ³ Private sites are private child care centers and private preschools that have subcontracted with a public school district to accommodate at-risk students. These sites are expected to comply with the 12 state early childhood guidelines to receive state resources.
 - ⁴ Head Start classrooms are operated by Head Start (federal early childhood program for at-risk children) providers who have subcontracted with a public school district to accommodate at-risk students. These sites are expected to comply with the 12 state early childhood guidelines to receive state resources.

1) structured program observations; 2) interviews; 3) document review; and 4) collection and analysis of data on children who attended at-risk preschool programs. Pertinent meetings, such as those of the Early Childhood Advisory Committee and the At-Risk Preschool Networking Consortium, were also attended.

- **Program observations**—This was the first year of a two-year plan to observe the quality of programs. Additional sites will be observed and results will be discussed in our third report.

The structured observations conducted during the 1995-96 school year included large and small districts, urban and rural areas, and districts from 13 of Arizona's 15 counties. Although 49 sites were systematically observed, the preliminary results in Finding I (see pages 7 through 13), were derived from systematic observation of 41 at-risk preschool classrooms. The other eight sites include special education, family literacy, Even Start, and other community-based classes. For these types of classes, there were not enough cases to meaningfully summarize the data. Of the total number of at-risk funded classrooms in the State, 25 out of 159 public (15.7 percent)¹, 10 out of 56 private (17.9 percent), and 6 out of 38 Head Start (15.8 percent) sites were observed.

- **Interviews**—The evaluation team interviewed program coordinators, teachers, and teaching assistants as part of site visits.
- **Document review**—ADE documents and files, including program and pilot program budget applications, were reviewed and analyzed.
- **Data on three separate groups of children was collected and analyzed**—The first set of data is on children who attended preschool programs prior to the 1995-96 school year. The second set of data is on a group of children who serve as a comparison group for the first set. The third set of data is on children who attended preschool during the 1995-96 school year.

—**Data collected on children who attended preschool before the 1995-96 school year.** Schools that operated pilot preschool programs from academic years 1990-91 through 1994-95 were requested to report academic information on the children since they entered the At-Risk Preschool Program. Only 14 of the 27 districts that operated pilot programs complied with the request. Districts that did comply completed follow-up information on the children for each year through the 1994-95 school year. Data reported include standardized test scores, placement in special education and in other special programs, and school attendance.

—**Data collected on comparison children.** Data on a comparison group of children who entered kindergarten in the same schools, at the same time as the pilot preschool

¹ All percentages are based on the number of classrooms that school districts reported they operated.

participants who attended preschool from 1990 through 1995, was also collected by the districts. Again, only 14 of the 27 pilot districts submitted this data, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized.

- **Data collected on children who attended the 1995-96 preschool program.** Districts were requested to submit basic background and performance data on the children who attended the 1995-96 preschool program. Data from 41 of the 94 districts that operated programs is available for analysis.¹ Data on children who will serve as a comparison group is being collected in the 1996-97 school year.

The first-year At-Risk Preschool Program report focused on how the Program was designed to meet nationally recognized standards and goals. In addition, the distribution of monies, problems with monitoring, and the Program's slow start were addressed. In this second-year report, how well the Program is operating, the strengths and weaknesses in its operation, and how the Program has affected the children who have attended it are analyzed. Specifically, the evaluation focuses on:

- Differences in the quality of programs supported by at-risk preschool monies.
- ADE's lack of program monitoring.
- The problem of children receiving a shortened enrollment due to the late distribution of program monies.
- The impact the pilot programs had on the children they served.
- Information on the annual program evaluation requirements.

The third-year report will primarily concentrate on implementation across sites, student performance outcomes, and whether participant outcomes vary across sites.

The Auditor General and staff express appreciation to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the management and staff of the Arizona Department of Education, for their cooperation and assistance throughout the evaluation. We also wish to thank the many preschool program coordinators, teachers, and assistants who welcomed us into their classes during the school year. The district staff who collected and submitted data on thousands of preschool children should be acknowledged for their contributions to this evaluation. Finally, ADE's Division of Research and Evaluation provided invaluable assistance in the collection and management of student data.

¹ Individual data for children from some districts were either not submitted by districts or entered by ADE in a timely manner.

FINDING I

IMPLEMENTATION MEETS STATE GOALS, YET PRIVATE SITES LAG BEHIND PUBLIC IN QUALITY

Based on the 41 sites visited during the 1995-96 school year, it appears that the At-Risk Preschool Program has made progress toward meeting Arizona goals for comprehensive early childhood programs. Public and Head Start sites complied with the majority of requirements specified for program quality; however, many private sites visited failed to achieve goals in critical areas. All preschools, especially private sites, need to address deficiencies to ensure the Program meets its potential.

Background

Our first annual evaluation noted that ADE had designed a program that has the potential to provide quality education for at-risk four-year-olds. To ensure a quality program for the State, the Early Childhood Advisory Council (Council) developed Guidelines for Comprehensive Early Childhood Programs in 12 goal areas.¹ ADE incorporated these goals into its program application process. Districts that operate at-risk programs were required to specify the activities and techniques they would implement to achieve each of the following 12 goal areas. The goals are listed in order of importance as determined by the Office of the Auditor General:

- Preschool program operation: developmentally appropriate practices and curriculum
- Program administration: staff qualifications
- Staff development: providing supervisory support and in-service training
- Linguistic and cultural integration
- Parental involvement
- Social services

¹ The Council has statutorily defined authority to review the At-Risk Preschool Program.

- Child assessment
- Self-evaluation of the program
- Health care
- Nutrition
- Community school district support and involvement
- Program meets the needs of the working parent.

This year's evaluation predominantly focused on the goals that were most critical during the Program's formative years (i.e., the first eight goals listed above). Subsequently, the goals are addressed in this report in order of importance. Based on the ECAC guidelines, Auditor General staff selected indicators to measure the extent to which sites achieved the goals. The current evaluation did not address the last goal.

Public and Head Start Sites Meet Most Arizona Goals

Most public and Head Start sites met eight of the goals specified by the Early Childhood Advisory Council (Council). These preschools use developmentally appropriate practices, meet staff qualifications, provide staff development, offer linguistic and cultural integration, involve parents, comply with health care requirements, follow nutritional guidelines, and are involved in the community. However, preschools need improvement in the following important areas to ensure program success: providing social services, conducting child assessment, and self-evaluation. See Table 1 (page 9), for an overview of how well preschools are achieving goal compliance.

Private sites, however, were weak in achieving the goals that were most critical for a quality program. Crucial goals they are not meeting include the use of developmentally appropriate practices and curriculum, linguistic and cultural integration, providing social services, child assessment, and self-evaluation. Additionally, private sites lagged behind public and Head Start sites in other goals, such as child nutrition and community involvement. Private sites need to correct these deficiencies to provide a quality program.

Preschool program operation—Overall, the majority of public and Head Start sites have met Arizona's standards for program operation. Most public and Head Start programs use developmentally appropriate curriculum, have sufficient materials, and provide children the opportunity to learn through an array of creative, child-directed activities. Although the public and Head Start sites meet the most critical goals, there is room for improvement

Table 1

**At-Risk Preschool Program
Percentage of Program Sites
Meeting Project Goals
Based on Selected Indicators
Year Ended June 30, 1996**

	25 Public	6 Head Start	10 Private
Preschool Program Operations¹	93%	89%	57%
Staff Qualifications²			
■ Meets minimum criteria	100	100	100
Staff Training and Development			
■ Program's early childhood curriculum training	81	100	87
■ Developmentally appropriate practices training	76	100	89
Linguistic and Cultural Integration			
■ Classrooms have learning activities, materials, and equipment that reflect diversity	90	75	60
■ Classroom instruction in English and the child's primary language	90	100	38
■ Bilingual staff	100	100	89
Parental Involvement			
■ Telephone, newsletter, conference, and meetings	95	75	88
■ Home visits	83	100	67
Social Services			
■ Referrals and follow-up with families and agencies	67	75	30
■ Information on child care resources and agencies distributed	47	25	30
■ Collaborates with other agencies in determining family needs	53	50	40
■ Information on child care facilities and early childhood education provided	41	75	44
Child Assessment	67	75	30
Self-Evaluation of site staff	40	43	30
Health Care			
■ Each child's health history (i.e., medicine, growth, allergies, immunizations, and limitations)	85	100	88
■ Health screening (i.e., medical, vision, hearing, dental) provided	91	100	75
Nutrition			
■ Meals provided according to a written plan	87	100	67
■ Adults sit with children during meals	79	100	55
Community Involvement			
■ Participation in district and school meetings and activities	95	100	25
Average	78%	84%	59%

¹ Reported in more detail in Table 2 (see page 11).

² Reported separately in Figure 2 (see page 12).

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of site observation data.

in the area of learning materials. As noted in Table 2 (see page 11), the private sites have multiple deficiencies in meeting this goal.

The program operation goal is the most critical to ensuring the children's success. The goal focuses on the use of developmentally appropriate curriculum, teaching strategies, and materials. Accomplishment of the goals means that children are learning in an environment with materials and in ways that are appropriate for four-year-olds.

Staff qualifications— Teachers at public and private sites have more than the recommended minimum requirements. Although the Head Start teachers are likely to have only the minimum requirements, the Child Development Associate Certificate (CDA), they all receive necessary early childhood training and are closely supervised.¹ This year's evaluation identified the educational levels of at-risk preschool teachers and differentiated them by site. Figure 2 (see page 12), shows teachers' educational levels.

Public site instructors have more teaching experience than private site instructors. The majority of private teachers have 2 or fewer years of teaching experience. One-fourth of public teachers have taught for 3 to 5 years, and over one-third have taught for 9 or more years. It is recommended that districts focus not only on raising teaching credentials but also require more relevant teaching experience for their preschool teachers, and more specifically, for those teaching at private sites.

Staff training and development— Most of the public, private, and Head Start sites are providing teachers with training. Most of the public and private, and all of the Head Start teachers, have received training in the Program's early childhood curriculum and in developmentally appropriate practices.

Linguistic and cultural integration— Public and Head Start sites are responsive to young children's multicultural backgrounds. The majority of public and Head Start classrooms have learning activities, materials, and equipment that reflect children's cultural and gender diversity. Public and all of the Head Start staff provide instruction in both English and the child's primary language, while private sites lag behind, with only 38 percent providing instruction in another language. Most sites employ a bilingual staff for children and parents. Because the Program serves many children whose only language is not English, linguistic and cultural integration is necessary.

Parental involvement— Most sites complied with the minimum requirements for parental involvement. Program staff communicated with parents through phone calls, notes, regular classroom newsletters, conferences, and meetings. However, about one-fifth of public and one-third of private sites failed to make the required home visits. In a quality preschool, exchanges between parents and teachers encourage parents to support their child's academic growth.

¹ A Child Development Associate Certificate requires 120 clock hours in early childhood education and 480 hours of experience with children.

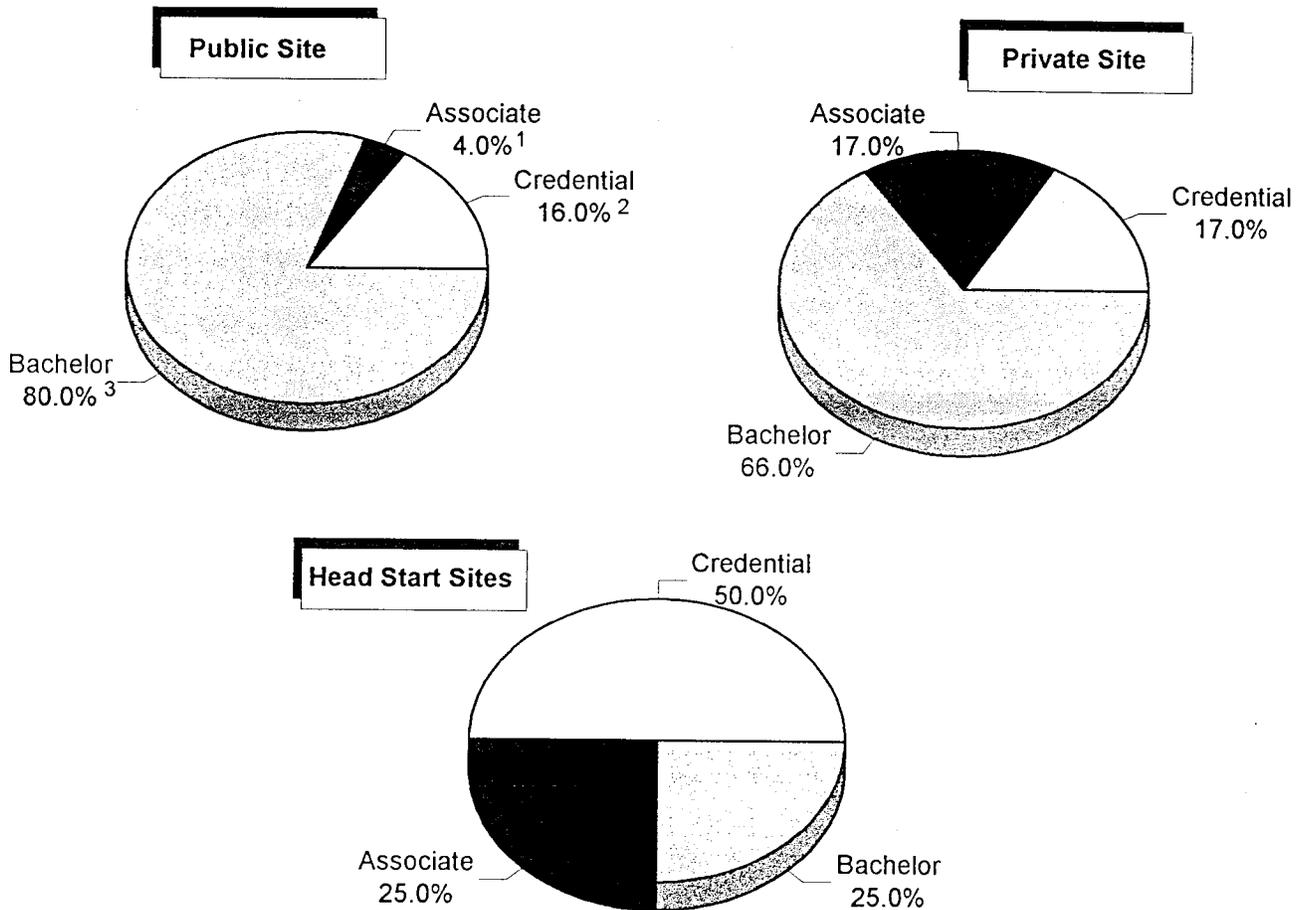
Table 2
At-Risk Preschool Program
Percentage of Program Sites Meeting
Ten Elements of At-Risk Preschool Program Operation Goal
Year Ended June 30, 1996

Preschool Program Operations	25 Public	6 Head Start	10 Private
Sufficient learning materials	71%	50%	20%
Developmentally appropriate curriculum used	92	100	70
Children work individually and informally in groups	100	67	100
Children have the opportunity to develop social skills	92	100	70
The learning environment provides children the opportunity for active exploration and interaction with adults and materials	96	100	60
Projects and learning centers used	92	75	60
Teachers' expectations match and respect children's developing capabilities	96	100	50
Teachers move among groups and individuals to facilitate involvement with activities	96	100	40
Teachers talk and read to children	96	100	50
Teachers listen carefully to children, encouraging them to extend their ideas	96	100	50
Average	93%	89%	57%

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of site observation data.

Figure 2

At-Risk Preschool Program
Staff Qualifications by Level of Education
Year Ended June 30, 1996



¹ Associate: Associate's degree in Early Childhood Education Child Development.

² Credential: Child Development Associate Certificate.

³ Bachelor: Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, Child Development, or Elementary Education, or Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education plus Early Childhood Endorsement.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of site observation data.

Social services—One-half of preschools failed to collaborate with other agencies in examining families' needs for child care and early childhood education. All sites need improvement in this area because of the special population they serve. For example, 70 percent of Arizona's private sites and 33 percent of its public sites do not make referrals or follow up with families and agencies to ensure social services were satisfactorily provided. Moreover, the majority of sites failed to give parents information on child care resources and referral agencies.

Child assessment—Many at-risk preschool sites lacked adequate child assessment. Child assessment should provide parents and teachers with an understanding of how a child is developing and performing, and identify areas they may need to concentrate on developing. One-third of public and one-fourth of Head Start sites fail to conduct appropriate child assessment; furthermore, 60 percent of private sites neglect this important component.

Self-evaluation—School districts rarely dedicate resources to adequately evaluate their at-risk preschool programs. Although self-evaluation is one of the Council's goals, the majority of preschools fail to comply. Each site should evaluate its program on an annual basis in order to acknowledge its strengths and weaknesses. As specified in the goals, participants in the evaluation should include teaching and support staff, administrators, and parents. Classroom observations, staff and parent questionnaires, and summary sheets should be used to determine goals for the following year.

Health care—The majority of all sites followed the goals required for health care services. Program staff document each child's health history (i.e., medication, growth, allergies, immunization, and main surgeries) and provide health screening (i.e., medical, vision, hearing, and dental and developmental assessment). The goals specify that preschool programs should include support for those health needs that directly affect a child's ability to achieve social competence. No major problems or differences were found at the sites.

Nutrition—Public and Head Start sites follow nutritional guidelines for preschool children. The majority of public and Head Start sites provide meals according to a written plan and the adult staff members sit with children during meals. However, one-third of the private sites do not provide the meals as specified and instructors at one-half of the private sites fail to sit with students at meals. Private sites need additional improvement in these two areas. The Program's goal is to help staff, children, and families understand the relationship of nutrition to health, and to apply their knowledge in developing sound eating habits.

Community involvement—Private sites need to become more involved in the community. Almost all of the public and Head Start sites are integrated into the school and district through involvement in meetings and activities; yet the majority of private sites failed to collaborate with schools and districts in this way.

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FINDING II

LIMITED REVIEW AND MONITORING AFFECTS PROGRAM QUALITY

ADE's funding process and its failure to adequately monitor the Program jeopardizes its quality. Additionally, ADE has not devoted the resources to provide adequate monitoring and technical assistance to districts with at-risk preschools.

Background

Our first annual evaluation (Auditor General Report 96-1) described the benefits of monitoring. Monitoring programs is important to ensure programs are adhering to the 12 early childhood program goals. Program monitoring in the early years is a key element in ensuring quality. Through the monitoring process, it is possible to identify programs that are in need of improvement and allow technical resources to be targeted to those programs. Guidelines and requirements alone are not sufficient to ensure program quality. Monitoring can help guarantee that programs meet the minimum guidelines designed to ensure quality, that children receive services in settings that have a positive impact on their development, and that public monies are well spent.

Funding Process Allowed Poor-Quality Programs to Operate

The Arizona Department of Education does not require districts to address in the applications the early childhood program goals to receive or maintain financial support. As part of the application for monies, districts that operate at-risk programs are required to identify activities, processes, and techniques they will implement to achieve each of the 12 goals developed by the Early Childhood Advisory Council (Council). Applicants are also required to identify time lines for each activity, the person responsible, and the evaluation criteria for each goal. However, several districts did not address the 12 goals in the applications, and still received monies.

Arizona Department of Education Continues to Inadequately Monitor At-Risk Preschool Sites

Our first report on the At-Risk Preschool Program (Auditor General Report 96-1) also highlighted the fact that ADE failed to commit resources for program monitoring and technical assistance. This inadequacy persists. Although 95 districts operated as many as 250 at-risk sites, ADE staff visited only 18 districts and wrote only 12 reports during the 1995-96 school year. While ADE found that 6 out of the 12 districts did not comply with 3 or more goals, staff failed to visit enough sites to obtain an overall picture of the Program's strengths and weaknesses. In addition, ADE failed to check the progress sites had made toward improving compliance with the 12 goals.

Finally, the 12 reports written during the 1995-96 school year provide limited information for use in future monitoring and compliance checks. ADE's reports do not disclose the names of the preschool sites visited in a particular district. Furthermore, only one report per district is required, regardless of how many sites staff visited. This process is ineffective and obscures problem areas because it merges information from all sites into one report. Lack of specific information would be particularly problematic if the author of the report left the Department.

Arizona Department of Education Limits Program Monitoring

ADE's limited program monitoring can be largely attributed to its philosophy regarding a state agency's appropriate role. ADE believes that school districts are accountable for program quality and the use of state monies, and that ADE should conduct only limited monitoring of local districts' use of these monies. Because the Program is so new, it needs additional monitoring; however, ADE has not assigned enough staff to monitor the Program.

ADE's position regarding program monitoring— ADE's philosophy regarding oversight has limited the number of staff it assigns to monitor the Program. Because of ADE's philosophy of local accountability and limited state oversight, the Department has been significantly downsized since January 1995. In addition, ADE has specifically taken the position that it is not its role to monitor any of the private sites, placing that responsibility with the districts that directly contract with the private sites. However, since some districts have problems with the classes they operate and are not meeting the 12 program goals, their ability to monitor the private sites is questionable.

The Department also reports it is responding to the intent of the Legislature and the Joint Legislative Budget Committee (JLBC) by providing little or no review of program applications or monitoring of program implementation. The Legislature gave the JLBC responsibility to review ADE's plan to distribute monies provided through the state block grant. ADE reports

that through this review, JLBC staff and members indicated applications should be very simple, with little review by the ADE, and districts should control how the monies are spent.

Staffing below approved levels— Because of ADE's philosophy regarding monitoring, it rarely maintains the number of staff the Legislature has approved for the Program. The professional staff who are assigned to the Program are assigned only part-time and must also devote time to other programs.

Although the early childhood state block grant's legislation authorizes 5.7 FTE, the Division rarely operates with this number of staff members dedicated strictly to early childhood education. As of June 30, 1996, there were 4.5 FTE actually assigned to the block grant. In addition, some At-Risk Preschool Program staff are assigned only .5 FTE on at-risk while .5 FTE is spent on other programs (for example, Title I, II, VI; Even Start; Goals 2000; and Bilingual, Migrant, and Homeless Education). A program specialist who works only 20 hours per week on the Program does not have enough time to perform the following duties for over 94 school districts:

- Provide districts with technical assistance in developing program applications
- Review and approve applications and amendments
- Evaluate programs
- Participate in the Early Childhood Advisory Committee
- Conduct at-risk preschool program site visits
- Develop early childhood legislation.

Need more experience before Department releases control of the Program to districts— Local control of programs may be appropriate in the future. However, the large-scale implementation of this new Program in districts that often lack expertise requires technical assistance and site monitoring to ensure quality programs. While some Arizona districts have experts in early childhood education on staff, many districts are operating programs without knowledge of appropriate practices for this age group. There are local collaborative efforts to increase and share knowledge through forming a networking group dedicated to improving the Program. However, these efforts are limited to larger urban districts and are not a substitute for the state department's technical assistance and oversight. In time, local districts should be better able to operate quality programs with little technical assistance and monitoring from the State.

Recommendation

1. The Arizona Department of Education should ensure school districts are adhering to program goals by increasing its role in monitoring and evaluating at-risk preschool programs.

FINDING III

CHILDREN RECEIVE SHORTENED SERVICES

Forty-four percent of the children who attended at-risk preschool during the 1995-96 school year did not begin preschool until more than three months after the school year started. This resulted from ADE's late distribution of the 1995-96 at-risk preschool expansion monies to school districts, which were also distributed late for the 1996-97 school year.

Background

Our first year report (Auditor General Report 96-1) noted that a change in ADE administration at the beginning of 1995, along with the multiple steps required for approval of the At-Risk Program, resulted in a slow start for the 1995-96 school year. Although much planning had occurred with the prior administration, the Department implemented major changes in the Program's design under the new leadership. By statute, the program design then had to be reviewed by the Early Childhood Advisory Council (Council), the State Board of Education, and the Joint Legislative Budget Committee. Next, ADE had to solicit, review, and approve districts' funding applications.¹ As a result, allocations were disbursed starting in September 1995, and continued through December, well after the school year began. Consequently, many children received shortened services.

Children Started Preschool Late

As a result of late allocations, most of the children who attended at-risk preschool classes during the 1995-96 school year attended for a shortened period of time. Starting late can result in children not doing as well in school as if they had started on time.

On average, children started attending preschool 83 days after the start of school. Although some preschool programs began as early as August 1995, others began as late as June 1996. Only

¹ The steps involved in the fund allocation process are: 1) ADE determines which districts are eligible to receive program monies, 2) ADE computes an allocation for each eligible district, 3) ADE notifies each eligible district of its allocation, and provides directions to complete an application if the district chooses to receive the allocation, 4) interested districts complete and submit applications, 5) the Council and ADE review applications, 6) State Board of Education approves applications, and 7) monies are distributed to the districts.

one-quarter of the children in the Program began attending preschool by the end of September 1995. Table 3 illustrates when children entered preschool.

When children are not exposed to the Program for the intended length of time, its positive effects will be limited. According to experts, children who participate in preschool programs for the entire program do better on tests and do not need to repeat grades as often as children who are not in the Program, or who participate for only part of it.

Table 3

**At-Risk Preschool Program
Preschool Start Times
Year Ended June 30, 1996 ¹**

Number of Months between Start of School Year and Children's Start in At-Risk Preschool	Percentage
1	25.6%
2	18.6
3	11.4
4	6.1
5	14.7
6	16.4
More than 6	<u>7.2</u>
Total	<u>100.0%</u>

¹ Based on data submitted for 2,280 children of the approximately 4,600 children who attended preschool. Data on all children is not available for analysis.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Arizona Department of Education.

**Second-Year
Allocations Delayed**

While data are not yet available for analysis, it is expected that the preschool program again started late in the 1996-97 school year. Many of the allocations from the early childhood block grant and those provided by the at-risk preschool continuation grants for 1996-97 were not

distributed until after the fiscal year started.¹ Several factors have caused delayed disbursal, and both ADE and the districts are responsible. As a result, districts' efforts to plan, recruit, hire, or train staff, and purchase the materials needed to operate a quality preschool, are delayed.

Allocations were not distributed until after the start of the 1996-97 school year. Districts that submitted their applications for the early childhood block grant on time received their money by August 20. These monies did not require review by the State Board of Education or the Early Childhood Advisory Council in order to be distributed. Districts that submitted applications on time for the at-risk preschool continuation grants received their money in September. Nine out of 10 districts contacted felt they should receive allocations in July to allow time to prepare an adequate at-risk preschool program.

Delayed distribution of monies significantly affects program planning and staff recruitment and hiring. For example, one district reported that they were still waiting for money in September. Because of the delay, they had not hired teachers for their preschool and the first teacher interview was scheduled for September 25.

A variety of factors contribute to money being distributed late:

- The application process begins too late in the year. Districts prepare applications, and the ADE and the Council review them prior to the State Board of Education giving its approval. The application process for the 1995-96 school year was not initiated until June 1995, and the applications for the 1996-97 school year were sent to districts in May 1996.
- Limited ADE staff are available to review applications. If staff are not able to do a timely review and prepare applications for the Board's approval, the approval is delayed until the next monthly Board meeting.
- Early childhood block grant applications were approved on a first-submitted, first-reviewed basis because they required only departmental approval. The At-Risk preschool continuation applications, which must be approved by the Board and the Early Childhood Advisory Council, could not be approved until the Board and Council met in late August. This delayed the distribution of continuing allocations until September.
- Some districts fail to submit applications by the due date, thus delaying the review process.

ADE should have started the application process earlier to avoid the late distribution of monies. As a result, it could distribute money earlier in the school year to give districts adequate time to prepare for the Program.

¹ The continuation grants are from \$5 million in carryover money from 1994-95 and were allocated to schools that operated with program allocations in 1995-96.

Recommendation

1. ADE should start the application process earlier and should consider devoting more staff to review applications and reduce processing time.

FINDING IV

EARLY RESULTS SHOW MINIMAL STUDENT GAINS

Analysis of data on children who were served by the At-Risk Preschool Pilot Program prior to the 1995-96 school year suggests the Program has had some limited positive impacts. While the children perform below national averages on standardized tests, they may be performing better than they would have without the Program. The children's decreasing reliance on academic support programs also suggests that the At-Risk Preschool has an ongoing positive impact on them. The findings on student outcomes are generally consistent with other research in this area.

Background

Since most school districts only began operating At-Risk Preschool Program classes in school year 1995-96, outcome data is not yet available; however, some data is now available from the original pilot program sites that began operating in school year 1991-92. To determine the extent to which the At-Risk Pilot Program impacted the children it served, data was collected on three groups of pilot preschool participants. These three groups of children attended at-risk preschool pilot programs in school years 1991-92, 1992-93, or 1993-94. Data was available on the 1991-92 group for kindergarten through third grade. Data is available on the 1992-93 group through second grade and for the 1993-94 group through the first grade. In addition, similar information was collected on a comparison group of children. The comparison group consists of children who started kindergarten at the same time, at the same school as the at-risk pilot preschool participants. There is a comparison group for each of the three at-risk groups.

The data collection was designed to assess student achievement and overall success in school. Data was collected for children's scores on standardized tests, mathematics, reading, and language. In addition, information was collected specific to children's attendance and placement into special education and bilingual programs and programs for educationally at-risk children. This information was included because previous research suggests that preschool programs have been found to improve student outcomes in these areas.

Only limited generalizations can be made about the findings reported here. First, small numbers of children are included in the analysis because many districts do not administer standardized tests in the early grades. Second, data for only half of the pilot programs was available.

A discussion of the data collection procedures, the differences between the comparison group and the at-risk group, and the limitations of the evaluation is presented in Appendix A (see a-i through a-v).

Student Performance

Analysis of children's performance on standardized tests suggest that the at-risk group performs minimally better than comparison group children. Both the at-risk and the comparison group children scored below national norms on standardized assessments. However, preliminary analysis reveals modest differences in academic performance between the at-risk and comparison groups. At-risk children show some gains over comparison group children in math and reading. At-risk children were, however, much more likely to be placed in special education. While at-risk children show an initially higher reliance on programs that provide additional services for children who are educationally disadvantaged or limited-English proficient than comparison group children, their reliance on such programs decreased over time. This decrease suggests attendance in the At-Risk Preschool Program may, over time, save educational costs for these children. Finally, no difference was found in the two groups' attendance patterns.

At-risk and comparison group children perform below national norms— Both the at-risk and comparison group children scored below national norms on standardized tests that were administered during the 1995-96 school year. For example, although the national norm is established at the 50th percentile, the at-risk children's norms for reading are at the 38th national percentile in first grade, with similarly low scores for the comparison group children. Table 6 (see page 30), presents the percentile scores for language, reading, and math for both at-risk and comparison children.

Academic performance— Small differences are found in the academic achievement between the at-risk and comparison children. The differences favor the at-risk children in grade two, who did better than comparison group children in mathematics and reading. Although some at-risk children scored higher in language performance, the differences are not statistically significant.

- **Mathematics**— The at-risk children performed better than comparison children in mathematics in second grade, but this difference disappeared by third grade. Analysis failed to reveal any significant differences in mathematics achievement between the two groups during kindergarten and first grade.
- **Reading**— Reading outcomes paralleled the mathematics achievement findings. There were no real differences in reading achievement between at-risk and comparison groups during kindergarten and first grade. Differences became evident in the second grade. By third grade, the scholastic lead for at-risk students began to disappear.
- **Language**— While the at-risk and comparison groups showed no statistically significant differences in language achievement, because of the relatively small number of cases, a

seven-point difference between the at-risk children who attended preschool in 1991-92 and their comparisons is evident. Although this data was not statistically significant, the seven-point difference is noteworthy and suggests that there are some effects.

Additional information is presented in the Statutory Annual Evaluation Components, question 4 (see page 28), and in Table 6 (see page 30).

Special education placement—Eight percent of the at-risk children were placed in special education compared to 4 percent of the comparison group children. Of the children who were placed, at-risk children were placed in special education earlier in their schooling than were the comparison group children. For example, of those placed, 60 percent of the at-risk children were placed before kindergarten, whereas only 29 percent of the comparison group children were placed by this time. The rates for both groups are below the 10.5 percent of the Arizona school population that has been identified as needing special education.

Currently we do not have information as to how placements are made, or the types of special education services for which placements are made. Additional data needs to be collected in this area before this finding can be interpreted and conclusions drawn.

Academic support programs placement—We examined differences between at-risk and comparison groups regarding children being placed in academic support programs that provide extra assistance to educationally disadvantaged and limited-English proficient children. This analysis showed that while at-risk children were initially more likely to be enrolled in these programs, their rate of participation decreased more rapidly than the comparison group's. Enrollment in at-risk preschool is equivalent to early identification of children who need additional help, leading to their initially higher rates of enrollment in academic support. However, their reduced reliance on academic support programs over time suggests the programs are effective and may save academic support dollars over time. Such placements were examined because research suggests that children who attend at-risk preschool will come to rely less on academic support programs over time. The academic support programs that were examined are described in Appendix B (see page b-i). Analysis was conducted for three years to identify trends over time. Table 4 (see page 26) shows the participation rates in these programs over time. The findings generally parallel those for academic achievement, with decreased reliance emerging by second grade.

Table 4

**At-Risk Preschool Program
Percentage of Preschool and Comparison Children
Enrolled In Academic Support Programs
at Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2**

	Academic Support Programs					
	Title 1		Other At-Risk		Bilingual	
	Preschool	Comparison	Preschool	Comparison	Preschool	Comparison
Kindergarten	76%	72%	70%	55%	58%	42%
Grade 1	76	75	66	28	54	46
Grade 2	61	85	54	29	42	40

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of at-risk preschool database.

No differences found in school attendance—The school attendance patterns of the comparison group were contrasted to those of the at-risk group, and no differences were found.

Linking Findings with Other Research

A number of studies have shown that quality preschool programs can improve children's school readiness and early academic achievement. The direct effects of preschools on children's academic performance (as measured by standardized tests) generally begin to disappear by third grade. However, other measures of children's achievement, such as teacher ratings of children's adjustment to school and the rate of children being promoted to the next grade, continue to benefit from preschool programs. In addition, research has shown that children who attend at-risk preschools rely less on academic support programs over time. There is also evidence that children who attend preschool are less likely to drop out of school or become delinquent, and are more likely to be employed when they become adults. While quality at-risk preschool programs have positive effects on children's subsequent achievement, it is now widely acknowledged that it is unrealistic to expect preschool by itself to permanently alter children's academic and social performance. The educational environments children enter after preschool and the resources they have at home will influence their subsequent achievements. There is evidence that for many children, intervention beyond preschool is necessary for their continued success in school. (King, 1994; Woodhead, 1988; Reynolds, 1995).

STATUTORY ANNUAL EVALUATION COMPONENTS

Laws 1994, 9th Special Session, Chapter 2, §30, requires that the Auditor General conduct an annual program evaluation of the At-Risk Preschool Project and provide the evaluations to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the President of the Senate, and the Governor on or before December 31, 1995, and each year thereafter. We provide a response to each evaluation requirement.

1. Information on the number and characteristics of the children and the families of the children participating in the Program.

Analysis of school district applications for at-risk preschool funds indicated that 4,592 children would be served by the At-Risk Preschool Program during the 1995-96 school year. Information on 2,342 children from 41 out of 95 school districts who were served by the Program is available for analysis. Due to data management problems, data for children from the remaining districts was not available. Analysis of the information on the 2,342 children provides the following profiles.

The majority of the children in the Program are Hispanic (61 percent). Anglo children represent 25 percent of the participants, African-Americans 6 percent, and Native American children 5 percent. Asian and other children account for the remaining 3 percent.

The children served are 51 percent male and 49 percent female. The majority of the children, 61 percent, speak English at home, and 37 percent speak Spanish. The remaining children speak another language at home. Eight percent of the children have no siblings, and 60 percent have one or two siblings. Thirty-two percent of the children have three or more siblings. Thirty percent of the children live in single-parent households, and 15 percent of the children live in households where no one is employed. Sixty-four percent of the children live in homes where one adult works, and the remaining children live in homes where 2 or more adults are employed.

2. Information on the number of public schools, private day care operators and federally funded preschools participating in the project.

Ninety-five districts are providing at-risk preschool services at an estimated 253 classes consisting of 159 public school sites, including 7 special education classes and 5 mixed-age classes, 56 private child care classes, and 38 Head Start. Twenty-eight districts contracted with Head Start to provide services, and 25 districts contracted with private child care providers for services.

3. Information on the average cost for each participant.

Costs for each at-risk school participant were calculated to show differences between the Pilot Program and the Expansion Program. The Pilot Program was created in 1990 and initially operated at-risk classes in the 1990-91 school year. The Expansion Program is the at-risk preschool program expanded by the 1994 legislation. Both programs operated during the 1995-96 school year.

Cost per participant was calculated based on the number of students in the Pilot Program as reported to ADE, and on the number of students in the Expansion Program as reported to our Office through a phone survey of school districts. Additionally, cost per participant was calculated to include and exclude capital outlay for the 4,592 participants in the Pilot and Expansion programs. The costs suggest that after initial capital expenditures for program start-up that cost per child will be reduced.

Cost per child is shown in Table 5. Cost the for Pilot Program is based on 797 children. Cost for the Expansion Program is based on 3,795 children.

Table 5

**At-Risk Preschool Program
Cost per Child
Year Ended June 30, 1996**

	Including Capital Outlay	Not Including Capital Outlay
Pilot Program	\$2,885	\$2,812
Expansion Program	3,798	2,923

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data collected from at-risk preschool applications, data provided by the Arizona Department of Education, and data gathered through an Auditor General phone survey of school districts.

4. Information concerning the scholastic performance of previous participants in the project including but not limited to:

- (a) The performance of past participants on a nationally standardized norm-referenced achievement test, and*
- (b) The performance of similar students who did not participate in the project.*

The information presented in this section and under item 6 is a more detailed and technical version of information presented in Finding IV (see pages 23 through 26).

Information reported in this section is based on data collected on children who attended the at-risk preschool programs that began in 1990. Information was collected on 2,712 children who had participated in at-risk preschool pilot programs at 14 districts. Follow-up information was completed for each year they attended school. Data were collected to examine the connection between children's participation in state-supported at-risk programs and their academic and social performance over time. Similar information was collected for a comparison group of children. These data collection efforts resulted in a small number of children followed through third grade, data on a larger number of children collected through second grade, and additional children followed through first grade.

See Appendix A (pages a-i through a-v), for a description of the procedures used to gather the data that have been analyzed and reported here and a description of the at-risk children and the comparison group children for whom data were collected.

At-risk and comparison group children perform below national norms— Both the at-risk and comparison groups of children score below national norms on standardized tests. However, small differences are found in the academic achievement between the at-risk and comparison children. The differences favor the at-risk children. Table 6 (see page 30) shows the average national percentile scores on standardized tests for the three groups.

- **Mathematics**—The at-risk children performed better than comparison children in mathematics at second grade, but this difference disappeared by third grade.
- **Reading**—Reading outcomes paralleled the mathematics achievement findings. There were no real differences in reading achievement between at-risk and comparison groups during kindergarten and first grade. Although the at-risk children outscored the comparison groups in second grade, the difference disappeared by grade three.
- **Language**—No significant differences between the at-risk and comparison groups were evident for language achievement.

(c) The performance of all students in the same grade at each of the schools at which the program was operated.

This analysis was not conducted due to the small number of children who could be tracked over time, and the even smaller number of children who are still attending the same school they attended for preschool. If higher testing rates for fourth grade result in this comparison being feasible, it will be presented in next year's report.

Table 6

**At-Risk Preschool Program
Average National Percentile Scores on Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests for Three Groups
of At-Risk Preschool and Comparison Children¹**

Grade	Test	Children Attending Kindergarten in 1992-93			Children Attending Kindergarten in 1993-94			Children Attending Kindergarten in 1994-95		
		At-Risk Preschool	Comparison		At-Risk Preschool	Comparison		At-Risk Preschool	Comparison	
1	Language	16.6 (17)	19.7 (57)	22.1 (42)	21.6 (74)	23.5 (23)	23.0 (66)			
	Reading	38.0 (17)	34.9 (57)	28.7 (44)	32.9 (74)	38.7 (24)	38.3 (66)			
	Math	20.8 (17)	20.9 (57)	25.4 (46)	27.3 (84)	34.5 (24)	27.4 (69)			
2	Language	28.6 (20)	21.6 (62)	18.5 (62)	17.1 (83)	-	-			
	Reading	33.4* (46)	24.8 (77)	27.9*** (255)	19.3 (101)	-	-			
	Math	35.1** (47)	25.1 (81)	28.5* (72)	22.2 (89)	-	-			
3	Language	23.7 (35)	25.9 (39)	-	-	-	-			
	Reading	23.9 (55)	21.1 (52)	-	-	-	-			
	Math	25.4 (33)	25.4 (43)	-	-	-	-			

¹ To compare at-risk children to comparison children read across the rows. Using the first group as an example, 17 at-risk children scored an average 20.8 on the grade 1 math test compared to 20.9 for the 57 children in the comparison group. To compare achievement over time, read down the columns. For example, the at-risk average math score increased to 35.1 in grade 2 and the comparison group average score increased to 25.1. The ** indicates that 35.1 is significantly higher than 25.1.

* Significant at .1 Level.

** Significant at .05 Level.

*** Significant at .005 Level.

Number in parenthesis = Number of children.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Arizona Department of Education.

5. A summary of the program information required to be provided under section 26 of this act.

ADE's application package for the 1995-96 at-risk program and the 1996-97 at-risk continuation program requires districts to provide information in the following areas. It was noted in Finding II (see pages 15 through 18), that ADE did not strictly require districts to address all of these areas, and distributed monies to districts that did not adequately address each area. Following the directive of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, ADE has simplified the application for the State's Early Childhood State Block Grant for 1996-97. The application requires only that districts report the number of sites, type of program provided, number of sessions and participants at each site, and the number of hours of operation. Districts are no longer required to adhere to the 12 goals for comprehensive Early Childhood Program.

- (a) *An assessment of the needs of the at-risk preschool children who reside in the school attendance area.*
 - (i) *An assessment of the academic and readiness needs of children in the at-risk program.* Districts are required to address assessment in the application.
 - (ii) *The most appropriate number of days and hours per week during which the program will operate.* Districts must report the number of sessions per day, number of hours per session, and number of days per week for each site in the application.
 - (iii) *Child care needs including nutrition.* Districts must address nutritional services under goal 9.0 of the application.

- (b) *A proposal detailing a program specifically designed to provide assistance to the at-risk preschool pupils.*
 - (i) *A description of the procedures used to identify the at-risk children.* In the application the ADE has defined eligibility as residing in the district, being four years old as of September 1, and being eligible for the federal free lunch program. Districts are to use a screen to prioritize children in the event that they have more applications for the program than they have spaces.
 - (ii) *A description of clearly defined goals for meeting the academic and readiness needs.* Districts must address these areas in the application.
 - (iii) *A description of the instructional approach to be used in meeting the identified needs of the at-risk preschool pupils which is developmentally appropriate and consistent with nationally recognized standards of early childhood education.* Districts must address this issue in Goal 2.0 and Goal 3.0 of the application.

- (iv) *A list of the qualifications and experience of the staff. The Guidelines for Comprehensive Early Childhood Programs provide minimum qualifications for staff. In addition, districts must address this issue in Goal 1.0 and 5.0 of the application.*
- (v) *A plan for the provision of in-service training for personnel involved in the preschool project. Districts must address this issue in Goal 5.0 of the application.*
- (vi) *A description of the service delivery model including the extent to which the project will collaborate with other at-risk preschool programs in the district attendance area. Districts must address this issue in Goal 11 of the application.*
- (vii) *A plan showing how the programs developed under this Act will be articulated with existing programs in kindergarten programs and grades one through three. This area is addressed through Goals 1.0 and 11.0 of the application.*
- (viii) *A plan for involving families of at-risk preschool pupils in the program. Districts must address this issue in Goal 4.0 of the application.*

6. An evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the pilot project based on performance-based outcome measures, including the subsequent scholastic performance of participants.

In Finding IV (see pages 23 through 26), it is reported that children who participated in the At-Risk Preschool Program and the comparison group are achieving below-national averages. It is also reported that the at-risk children entered kindergarten more likely to be in academic support programs than did the comparison group, but that their reliance decreased more rapidly over time than did the comparison group's. At-risk children were more likely to be placed into special education than were the comparison group, but the placement occurred earlier for the at-risk group. This may indicate that at-risk preschool functioned as an effective early intervention. There were no differences in school attendance for the at-risk group in contrast to the comparison group.

7. Recommendations regarding the effectiveness of the project.

The following recommendations are presented in Finding II (see pages 15 through 18):

- (a) *ADE should ensure school districts are adhering to program goals by increasing its role in monitoring and evaluating at-risk preschool programs.*

In addition, based on the analyses provided in Finding III (see pages 19 through 22), we recommend:

(b) ADE should start the application process earlier and should consider devoting more staff to review applications and reduce processing time.

8. Recommendations regarding the continuation of the Program.

Due to the limited data currently available, the Office of the Auditor General has no recommendations regarding the continuation of the Program at this time.

9. Any other information or evaluative material that the Auditor General determines to be useful in considering the programmatic and cost-effectiveness of the project.

As noted in Finding IV (see pages 23 through 26), a number of studies have shown that quality preschool programs can improve children's readiness and early academic achievement but the direct effects on academic performance (as measured by standardized tests) generally begin to disappear by third grade. However, other measures of children's achievement show that children continue to benefit from preschool programs after the third grade. In addition, research has shown that children who attend at-risk preschools rely less on academic support programs and are less likely to drop out of school or become delinquent, and are more likely to be employed as adults. While quality preschool programs have been shown to have long-term positive effects on the children who attended them, it is widely acknowledged that preschool by itself is unlikely to permanently alter children's academic and social performance. The persistence of economic and social conditions that originally placed the children academically at-risk, and the educational environments they enter after preschool, will have direct influences on children throughout their education.

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Agency Response

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State of Arizona
Department of Education

Lisa Graham Keegan
Superintendent of
Public Instruction

January 22, 1997

Mr. Douglas Norton
Auditor General
2910 N. 44th Street, Suite 410
Phoenix, AZ 85018

Dear Mr. Norton,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your annual program evaluation of the At-Risk Preschool program which was conducted pursuant to Laws 1994, Special Session, Chapter 2, §30. The At-Risk Preschool Program has provided invaluable services to those children and their families most in need. This program has had a positive impact on the lives of many. I wish to extend my appreciation to your staff for their professionalism during this review.

I continue to be committed to high quality comprehensive educational programs that encompass: accessibility and high achievement by students throughout Arizona; provide for local control, which includes as much as possible for program design by school districts and schools; provide for parent involvement, which includes avenues for parents to choose the types of programs best suited for their children; and programs which provide partnering opportunities with community based organizations and business.

The Preschool Expansion Program, administered by the Arizona Department of Education, is one of the quality programs administered by the department which meets standards of high quality comprehensive educational programs.

The focus of the At-Risk Preschool Program continues to build local partnerships amongst service providers, including public, federal and private. The method of program development, which seeks complimentary and effective partnerships between public and private agencies, places the program at the vanguard of state-level early childhood programs. Clearly, the program is poised to meet the challenges that the future holds for education programs. The Arizona Department of Education has discussed the details of program development with many agencies to ensure statutory compliance and to provide the most effective program possible.

While parental choice continues to be an important element in early childhood programming, we recognize the differences identified throughout this report. Private program sites are either in their first or second year in the delivery of Preschool Program services. Clearly public, federal and private program sites have distinct variables based upon curriculum, philosophy, accreditation, administration, as well as many other factors. Through these differences parents are able to choose the program site best suited to meet the individual needs of the child and family. The recommendations made in this report will serve as a basis for strengthening the program in the future.

The report cites a lack of compliance monitoring on behalf of the Arizona Department of Education. It should be recognized that compliance monitoring is only one component of program oversight. The Department provides oversight of its preschool projects through problem identification and subsequent technical assistance to project sites identified through contacts with district administration, site coordinators, program managers, teachers and parents. Oversight is also achieved through comprehensive reviews of preschool project applications and the investigation of complaints or referrals to the Department for review.

This degree of oversight provided by the Arizona Department of Education appears to be working, in as much as your report details success in finding I, stating that the At-Risk Preschool project has made progress toward meeting Arizona goals for comprehensive early childhood programs.

I recognize the differing outcomes of site evaluations conducted at public, private and federal programs by your staff. Although programs were not required to incorporate the indicators identified into program curriculum, they were however, consistent scoring tools utilized with all site observations by your staff. The results indicate variations in program content and approach, they do not identify failure on the part of program sites. The Arizona Department of Education considers the indicators utilized throughout this report as best practices in early childhood programming, and should be considered when identifying areas for improvement.

The Arizona Department of Education requires each school district address each of the 12 goals identified in the Comprehensive Early Childhood Guidelines as developed by the Early Childhood Advisory Council within every application. All of the applications reviewed and approved have addressed these twelve goals. At times the Childhood Advisory Council has requested clarification of specific goal areas regarding project applications. Local districts are contacted for clarification and the information is provided to the Council.

In reference to Finding III of this report, "Children Receive Shortened Services", we agree that delays in funding forced a number of school districts to begin program operation after the beginning of the school year. It should be noted that the delays were caused, to a large part, by the statutorily imposed funding, allocation and project approval

process, and were not the result of inefficiency on the part of the Arizona Department of Education staff.

As indicated on Finding IV, the program is working. Although both the Preschool and control group students are scoring below national standards, the Preschool participants are exhibiting higher scores than the control group. The children who participated in the At-Risk Preschool Project show a decreasing reliance on academic support programs which also suggests that the At-Risk Preschool Project has an ongoing positive impact on them.

Once again thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important report. Your recommendations will be utilized to strengthen the program and continue to provide our young children with early intervention opportunities, through the At-Risk Preschool program.

Attached are our comments to the specific findings of your annual report of the At-Risk Preschool project. If you have any questions, please contact Ralph Romero at 542-7462.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lisa Graham Keegan". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Lisa Graham Keegan
Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Response to the Office of the Auditor General's Report

on the

Arizona At-Risk Preschool Expansion FY96

**Arizona Department of Education
Lisa Graham Keegan, Superintendent**

January 22, 1997

Response to Finding I. Implementation Meets State Goals

Introduction (page 7)

We concur with your in finding that the At-Risk Preschool project has made progress toward meeting Arizona goals for comprehensive early childhood programs.

Public and Head Start Sites Meet Most Arizona Goals (page 8)

The report recognized that private providers were not as successful as Head Start & public school sites. While this fact is not disputed, it is important to cite that private providers are either in their first or second year in the delivery of Preschool Program services. The Department will assist public, private and federal providers participating in the program to make necessary curriculum and instructional changes in order to meet the standards of this program.

The report cites programs for failure to meet the “required” indicators. The indicators were developed with the intent of identifying examples of strategies to meet the 12 program goals. The indicators were suggestions to programs, not program requirements.

Parental involvement is just one of the indicators used throughout this report to compare program success. Comparisons are made identifying differences between public, federal (Head Start), and private programs, using indicators as a comparison, as cited on pages 8-13 of this report.

Parental involvement is a crucial component of any successful education program. With this in mind, we recognize the results identified in this report comparing home visitation ratios among public, private and federal programs. The report cites “about one-fifth of public and one-third private sites failed to make the required home visits”. While this statistic relating home visitation frequency is most likely accurate, home visitation is only one option of several available to school districts to meet their parental involvement goals.

Each program participating in the At-Risk Preschool funding was required to address the twelve goal areas as stated in the Comprehensive Early Childhood Guidelines, developed by the Early Childhood Advisory Council. One component of the guidelines are the indicators which serve as suggestions of activities programs may incorporate into programming in order to meet the twelve goals. While ADE recognizes the indicators as best practice, they are not the only strategies by which program goals can be achieved.

Response to Finding II.

Limited Review and Monitoring Affects Program Quality

Funding Process Allowed Poor Quality Programs to Operate

The report cites approval of program applications which did not address the 12 goal areas. ADE requires each school district address all of the 12 goals identified in the Comprehensive Early Childhood Guidelines as developed by the Early Childhood Advisory Council within every application. All of the applications reviewed and approved have addressed the goals. However, it is common for some districts to provide more detail than others regarding each of the twelve goals. The Early Childhood Advisory Council has requested clarification of specific project applications in the past. When this occurred the ADE staff contacted the districts in question and provided the information to the Council.

Arizona Department of Education Limits Program Monitoring (page 16)

The report cites limited monitoring by the Arizona Department of Education on page 15 of Finding II. We disagree with the insinuation that compliance monitoring contributes to a lack of program oversight by the Department. The Arizona Department of Education ensures quality program oversight through a variety of activities, of which on-site compliance monitoring is only one component. The Arizona Department of Education provides guidance on issues affecting school districts and charter schools, to ensure program compliance and minimize the need for future recourse. Other forms of oversight include the following: identification of problems through the comprehensive review of applications; review and investigate inquiries or complaints by parents and community members regarding ineffective programs; identify potential budgetary and funding problems through the review of program budgets and payment schedules; determine program compliance through the review of program amendments, program audits, and through feedback from the on site reviews conducted by the Auditor General's office.

The Arizona Department of Education provides technical assistance and professional development to public, private and federal program providers to assist them in avoiding possible compliance issues.

Response to Finding III. Children Receive Shortened Services

Children Started Preschool Late

We agree with the finding that payments to school districts have been late, due to delays in funding. The delays however, are due to the various statutory and legislatively mandated funding and project approvals. These delay the approval of funding allocations and payment of funds to school districts.

The delays school districts experience in securing funding allocations of At-Risk Preschool funds make extending teacher contracts difficult. Pursuant to A.R.S. §15-538.01 et.seq. District Governing Boards must make offers for teaching contracts to school personnel between March 15 and May 15. The Early Childhood budget is usually not approved by the legislature until after this date.

As stated in the report prior to the Arizona Department of Education initiating payments to school districts, the Joint Legislative Budget Committee must first approve the funding distribution formula, including application format. The Early Childhood Advisory Council must review all applications and make formal recommendations to the Arizona State Board of Education for approval. The Arizona State Board of Education convenes on the last Monday of every month for ten months a year, unless determined otherwise by the board. In order for an item to be placed on the Board's agenda, it must be written in the form of a contract abstract and submitted 3 weeks prior to a meeting date. The Arizona State Board of Education must approve the program applications and allocations.

No funding can be disbursed prior to the completion of each of the steps. Consequently, this process delays funding to school districts by 90 days or more.

Response to Finding IV. Early Results Show Minimal Student Gains

Student Performance (page 24)

The analysis by your staff indicates that although both the Preschool and control group are scoring below national standards, the Preschool participants are exhibiting higher scores than the control group. This analysis also concludes that children who participated in the At-Risk Preschool Project show a decreasing reliance on academic support programs suggesting that the At-Risk Preschool Project has an ongoing positive impact on them. These two conclusions are indicators of academic success by children participating in the program and support the effectiveness of the program.

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APPENDIX A

Methodology Used to Measure Effects of the At-Risk Preschool Program on Children

Data collection efforts target children's progress over time— Data were collected on children who attended the at-risk preschool pilot programs, which were initially funded in 1990. A total of 27 school districts operated at-risk preschool pilot programs before the 1995-96 program expansion. The districts that operated at-risk preschool pilot programs from academic years 1990-91 through 1994-95 were requested to report academic information on the children since they began participating in the At-Risk Program. Information was collected on 2,712 children who had participated in at-risk preschool programs in 14 districts. Follow-up information was completed for each year they attended school. Data were collected to examine the connection between children's participation in state-supported at-risk programs and their academic and social performance over time. Similar information was collected for a comparison group of children. Data were collected on children who participated in the Program during 1995-96; however, it is too early in their schooling to report on their academic outcomes.

Data collected on 1990-91 through 1994-95 participants— Academic information collected on the children include standardized test scores, placement in special education, placement in special programs, and school attendance.

These data collection efforts resulted in a small number of children followed through third grade, data on a larger number of children collected through second grade, and additional children followed through first grade and kindergarten.

Data on a comparison group of children were also collected. The comparison group consists of children who started kindergarten at the same time, at the same school as the past preschool participants. Children who attended the same schools as the at-risk children could be assigned to the comparison group. Children were randomly assigned to the comparison group but there was no assurance that they had the same important background characteristics as the at-risk children. The comparison group of children did not participate in the state-supported At-Risk Preschool Program; however, districts were unable to report if these children attended another preschool program, such as Head Start or a private program.

Three groups followed over time-- Data on three separate groups of children were collected and analyzed. Information was also collected on two additional groups, but because there were so few children and they have been in grade school only a short time, no meaningful conclusions could be made. Table 7 provides information on the at-risk and comparison groups whose data is analyzed and reported.

Table 7

**At-Risk Preschool Program
Distribution of Children
in At-Risk Preschool Study**

School Year Children Attended Kindergarten ¹	Grade Children Were in During 1994-95 School Year	Number of At-Risk Children	Number of Comparison Children
1992-93	3	325	484
1993-94	2	752	779
1994-95	1	897	1,069

¹ Attended at-risk preschool during previous school year.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Arizona Department of Education.

Characteristics of comparison and at-risk children-- While the at-risk and comparison groups are similar in respect to gender distributions, the groups differ in the distribution of children who speak Spanish at home and are Hispanic. At-risk and comparison group children have about equal amounts of males and females; however, for two of the three groups that have been followed, there are significant differences in language spoken at home and race/ethnicity.

There are significant differences in the percentage of children who speak Spanish at home or are of Hispanic heritage. Tables 8 and 9 (see page a-iii), present the language and ethnicity differences.

Table 8

At-Risk Preschool Program
Percentage of Spanish Speakers in Three Groups of
At-Risk Preschool and Comparison Children ¹

Year Attended Kindergarten	At-Risk Preschool Children %	Comparison Group Children %
1992-93	50	44
1993-94	62	47
1994-95	62	46

¹ Percentages based on cases available for analysis.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Arizona Department of Education.

Table 9

At-Risk Preschool Program
Percentage of Hispanic Children in Three Groups of
At-Risk Preschool and Comparison Children ¹

Year Attended Kindergarten	At-Risk Preschool Children %	Comparison Group Children %
1992-93 ²	78	76
1993-94	87	74
1994-95	84	72

¹ Percentages based on cases available for analysis.

² No significant difference.

Source: Auditor General staff analysis of data provided by the Arizona Department of Education.

Nationally norm-referenced tests used as major outcome— Scores on nationally norm-referenced tests are used as the major outcome for this evaluation. National percentile scores and normal curve equivalent scores were collected and analyzed. Results using national percentile scores are reported because they are easier to interpret. In addition, more districts were able to report national percentile scores. National percentile scores are the percentile at which the child's test score falls in relation to the national group of children that the test was "normed" on. For example, a 25th-percentile score means the child scored better than 25 percent of the group used to norm the test.

Common criticism of norm-referenced tests include: 1) they do not measure children's abilities; 2) they measure a child's knowledge of material that may not yet have been taught; and 3) the tests may be culturally biased. In addition, many educators do not believe that norm-referenced tests are appropriate for young children.

The tests do provide a method of making comparisons across different groups. Major standardized testing programs include the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), the California Achievement Tests (CAT), the Metropolitan Achievement Tests (MAT), and the Stanford Achievement Tests (SAT).

Electronic database created and files matched to Iowa Test of Basic Skills database— ADE created an electronic data set from the data collected and submitted by districts. Child records in the data set were matched to child records in the state level 1995-96 ITBS test result data set. ITBS mathematics, reading, and language total scores were added to the original data set for the records that could be matched. Low percentages of matches resulted from student mobility and the small number of children who are tested with standardized tests in the primary grades.

ITBS was group-administered in the first through the twelfth grades. Developmental standard scores were used for all analyses and are comparable across test levels. Tests were administered under standardized procedures by school personnel.

The major disadvantages of the research design include:

- Student information from a significant number of districts was not available. The data set has no information for children from the pilot programs in the following school districts:

Aquila Elementary
Balsz Elementary
Cedar Unified
Eloy Elementary

Indian Oasis Unified
Maricopa Unified
Mesa Unified
Osborn Elementary

Pinon Unified
Red Mesa Unified
Tuba City Unified
Tucson Unified
Union Elementary

The data includes information on children from the following school districts:

Creighton Elementary
Douglas Unified
Isaac Elementary
Murphy Elementary
Phoenix Elementary

Picacho Elementary
Roosevelt Elementary
Somerton Unified
Sanders Unified
Stanfield Elementary

Sunnyside Unified
Washington Elementary
Wilson Elementary
Yuma Elementary

- Differences in the characteristics of the comparison and at-risk group. The at-risk group includes significantly more children who do not speak English at home and includes a higher percentage of Hispanic children.
- Many children cannot be tracked because of high student mobility.
- Small number of schools that administer the ITBS or other standardized tests for first, second, and third grades, which is the population being studied. Schools in Arizona are not required to test children in these grades;
- Imprecise data: For example, the incorrect spelling of a child's or mother's name could confound a "match" in the data set;
- The test information provided by the school districts is not in alignment or consistent for a longitudinal study; that is, schools used different standardized tests over time. For example, students took the ITBS/TAP norm-referenced test for school year 1995-96, and the ASAP for 1994-95; and for the 1996-97 year, Arizona public schools will be testing students in third through twelfth grades using the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition.

Data collected on 1995-96 participants – All districts that participated in the 1995-96 Program were requested to collect demographic and assessment information on all children served by the Program. Data was to be collected and reported at three points: children's enrollment into the Program; at mid year; and when children left the Program. Participating districts were responsible for submitting all data to ADE for data entry. The data collected included pre- and post-administration of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), which measures young children's language and vocabulary development. The Office of the Auditor General's analysis of the pre- and post-testing and other outcomes will be presented in the report scheduled to be released in 1997.

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APPENDIX B

Academic Support Programs

Other at-risk programs—Other programs that support children diagnosed as candidates who have the potential to fail in school.

Bilingual programs—Monies provided to each school district that has ten or more limited English-proficient pupils in any kindergarten program or grade in any school and which provide a bilingual program or English as a second language program for the limited proficient pupils.

“Limited English proficient” means having a low level of skill in comprehending, speaking, reading, or writing the English language because the individual is from an environment in which another language is spoken.

Title I—Federal monies provided to local education agencies to supplement the education of children who are educationally disadvantaged.