



## Why the Mountain West Is Still Holding Out on Pre-K

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October 28, 2016

When you think of America's western mountain states, what comes to mind? Wide, open spaces? Majestic peaks? Infinite blue skies? Pervasive lack of investment in pre-k?

This sparsely populated region, unique in both its striking landscape and rugged individualist ethos, is not exactly the center of attention when it comes to matters of public policy. So perhaps it is not surprising that while almost all states across the country have moved toward greater investment in pre-k, this region's resistance to do so has, to a certain degree, escaped scrutiny.

As the body of research confirming the critical importance of a child's earliest learning experiences has grown, so has political momentum behind investment in publicly funded pre-k. In states both conservative and liberal, rural and urban, pre-k is receiving more attention, more support, and more funding. Indeed, though funding remains severely inadequate on the whole, nearly every state now dedicates at least some state funding to pre-k initiatives—a trend that has been researched, analyzed, and discussed considerably in recent years.

But far less discussed are those states that have bucked this national trend toward investment in pre-k—"those last holdouts," in the words of President Obama just this week. Five states—Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Wyoming—still do not provide any state funding for pre-k, meaning parents must either pay full tuition out of pocket, rely on a scarce supply of federal subsidies, or forego pre-k altogether. And all but one of those five states are clustered in the mountainous west.

To answer why this region is unable or unwilling to invest in pre-k, I examined a number of factors to determine what sets these specific states in this particular area apart. Having considered everything from state education spending and political leadership to polling data, demography, and geography, a number of trends emerged that, taken together, may help explain their lack of action when it comes to funding pre-k.

Perhaps the most influential factor is the unique set of political and cultural values that shapes this region and sets it at odds with public pre-k investment. Aside from being some of the most reliably "red" states in presidential elections since 1968, this region has held onto a certain rugged individualist ethos that can be traced from its earliest frontier days to its current

resistance to public pre-k. For although the American west is no longer “wild,” the enduring libertarian influence remains a significant part of its political and cultural identity. In fact, a 2006 report from the libertarian Cato Institute found the most libertarian states to be those in the “Goldwateresque, ‘leave us alone’ Mountain West” and New Hampshire. (New Hampshire, the “Live Free or Die” state, also happens to be the one state outside of the Mountain West that does not fund pre-k.) The unique blend of conservatism and libertarianism embraced here manifests itself in a collective exaltation of personal freedom, privacy, and a general skepticism of the government’s role in their daily lives. It would make a certain sense, then, that, in these states where the idea of limited government is venerated, what could be seen as another government entitlement program or an encroachment of the “nanny state” into the domain of child rearing may be looked upon with suspicion.

But political and cultural identity alone does not explain these states’ lack of pre-k investment. After all, similarly conservative and rural states like Georgia and West Virginia have robust public pre-k programs, as do other libertarian-minded, western states like New Mexico and Nevada.

Instead of falling back on regional caricatures, it’s important to look at the actual demographic forces at play. What seems to set these five states apart is a combination of the following three demographic and economic measures: percentage of children in single-parent households, poverty rate, and population density. All four pre-k holdouts in this region rank considerably lower than average on these three measures.

Nationally, an estimated 35 percent of children live in single-parent households, but among the four holdout states, the average is just 28 percent. By comparison, Georgia and West Virginia (those conservative, rural states with robust pre-k programs) have an estimated 39 and 37 percent of children in single-parent households, respectively. And New Mexico and Nevada, comparably rural, western states with relatively large pre-k investments, are at 40 percent.

These holdout states also have relatively low poverty rates in comparison to other rural, conservative areas. Georgia, West Virginia, Nevada, and New Mexico have an average poverty rate of 18.2 percent. In the four western states without pre-K funding, the average poverty rate is just 13.8 percent—well below the comparison states and the national average of 15.5 percent.

So why are rates of children in single-parent households and poverty relevant to a state’s action or inaction on pre-k? When these closely intertwined measures are low, public pre-k may not be as high of a public-policy priority. That’s partly because with relatively low poverty rates, state policymakers and citizens may be less likely to be persuaded by arguments that pre-k is necessary as a tool to lift children and parents out of poverty. And with similarly low percentages of children in single-parent households, fewer families may rely on pre-k as a vital source of affordable, academically enriching childcare. In other words, there simply may not be the same level of urgency (although to be clear, there is still a need) and political will, to invest in pre-k like those which exist in otherwise comparable states.

The final characteristic that may help explain why these states remain pre-k holdouts is low population density. This is especially relevant in Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, and Wyoming, which make up four of the country’s seven least dense states. When children are more physically spread out, states and providers face greater obstacles to providing pre-k. A 2008 report by the

Pew Charitable Trusts found rural areas face significant barriers related to school funding, transportation, facilities, and qualified educator recruitment.

These factors, taken together, help shed light on why funding pre-k for the most part has been a relatively low policy priority in these states. Admittedly, this is a picture painted with generalizations. Additional research is needed to evaluate the unique political, economic, and cultural intricacies of each state. And this is not to say that there are not states with similar characteristics that are investing in pre-k. Utah, North Dakota, and Nebraska all share comparable features. Yet, with the exception of Nebraska where investment was driven in part by the philanthropic community, these states' investment in pre-k are extremely limited and only a fairly recent development.

Between Montana, South Dakota, Wyoming, Idaho, and New Hampshire, there has been real potential for progress in terms of pre-K funding. Montana's governor, Steve Bullock, for example, has made investment in pre-k a top priority of his administration, helping to secure a \$10 million Preschool Development Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to bolster existing pre-k programs. (But this grant offers only temporary federal funding—the state itself still does not dedicate any funds towards pre-k.) And New Hampshire has also demonstrated an effort to move on pre-k, applying for a multi-million dollar Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant in 2013. However, that application was not awarded.

Moving forward, rural states like those in the mountain west with low population density may be wise to look at how similar places such as New Mexico and Nebraska are investing in pre-k in ways that fit their circumstances. Nebraska in particular, deserves close attention as it shares many of the same political, economic, and social characteristics of the four states.

In all states, tremendous progress is to be made before high-quality pre-k is available to all children. We know that high-quality pre-k works—improved cognitive and social-emotional skills, increased graduation rates, and higher future earnings are just a few of its measured benefits. Fortunately, most states across the country have already taken the first, if not more, steps to funding and expanding pre-k. When policymakers begin to understand the unique political, economic, and cultural circumstances that exist in each of the remaining “holdout” states, they'll come closer to ensuring that the thousands of children in Idaho, Montana, South Dakota, and Wyoming are not left out of high-quality early-learning opportunities. And perhaps one day, high-quality pre-k will be as much a part of the fabric of the mountain west as big mountains and blue skies