Your Questions:

1) Looking across the U.S., or even internationally if it’s readily available, how many states have proposed or instituted mandatory, full-time or even part-time, pre-K programs (including proposed methods of funding such programs)?

2) Could you provide any information on cost-benefit analysis of preschool programs and how participating students fared through subsequent school years and careers? Are there any related studies showing positive or negative outcomes of having a pre-K education?

3) Anything on the cost to states and the impact preschool programs have on an economy, including the ability for parents of preschool-aged children to return to the workforce? Is there anything more recent than 2009 or any other resources that have a greater scope of data? Any other sources that can speak to the economic return of such programs?

Our Response:
As you are likely aware, the attention pre-K has gotten has steadily increased over the past decade. The COVID-19 pandemic has really exacerbated many existing issues regarding funding, access, quality and others. The following information looks at compulsory education requirements, the short- and long-term effects of pre-K on outcomes, and return on investment information.

Compulsory Attendance Requirements
Across the United States, compulsory school attendance information can be used to determine if any state requires pre-K attendance, either full- or part-time. A 2020 ECS resource on compulsory attendance shows that while three states (Florida, Illinois and Wisconsin) begin to provide free education at age 4, no state requires mandatory attendance at age 4. According to this resource, 38 states require compulsory attendance at age 5 or age 6. In comparison, Nevada’s compulsory school requirements are age 7-18; only 12 other states require attendance at 7 or older.

In 2021 legislative sessions thus far, only Georgia is proposing to make pre-K mandatory with this introduced legislation. This bill also includes the method by which they would provide funding. While pre-K may not be mandatory in any state, several states have near universal attendance in their state pre-K programs. This is the only bill I’ve seen in recent years that would make this change. The District of Columbia, Florida and Vermont do not cap funding amounts, enrollment numbers or deadlines in their pre-K programs. Seven additional states have relatively high attendance (GA, IL, IA, NY, OK, WV and WI). The National Institute for Early Education Research’s annual pre-K report has more in-depth information on enrollment in its state profiles.

Internationally, several countries have strong pre-K programming. An NCSL resource provides a high-level summary of the early learning and care efforts in different countries (Element #1, pages 11-13). Additionally, the graphic at the top of this NCSL early learning working group report shows the percentages of students attending pre-K across several countries, compared with the United States.

Cost-Benefit/Return-On-Investment Research
There have been a handful of resources that analyze the cost-benefit of existing pre-K programs. A 2016 article on the economic returns of early childhood education can serve as a primer on the topic. This meta-analysis from the Brookings Institution also breaks down this topic. In question 3 below, I provide additional resources specific to economic and other benefits.

The economic benefits of pre-K have been written about extensively. Generally, these estimates range from 2:1 (conservative) up to 13:1 for every dollar invested. Based on ECS’s review, a 2:1 to 4:1 range is defensible; the 13:1 range has been frequently cited, however. Below are a few resources based on the range they cite:

- 2:1 Rand Corporation (full report)
- 2:1 to 4:1 Brookings Institution meta-analysis (full report)
- 13:1 The Heckman Equation (1-pager and full report)

Pre-K Effectiveness Research

In June 2020, ECS released an updated review of the effectiveness of pre-K programs on educational achievement, in addition to social and emotional learning and other areas (e.g., graduation and more). Refer to pages 3 and 4, which provide visual overviews of the studies’ findings. Above all else, there is strong research that supports the short- and long-term impacts of high-quality pre-K, not just having access to pre-K.

For additional information on several research studies/evaluations of pre-K programs, please see a 2019 information request completed by ECS. The Brookings Institution also did a meta-analysis in 2017 with top researchers from around the country (consensus statement and full report).

Additional Information on Pre-K (Workforce and Survey)

A 2018 study by the Center for American Progress reviewed the impact of the District of Columbia’s universal pre-K program on mothers returning to work, and found a 12% increase. One caveat is that D.C.’s program provides full-day pre-K for children ages 3 and 4 (most states just have this for 4-year-olds).

There has been a lot of writing on the importance of providing high-quality and accessible child care as it pertains to getting parents back to work to simulate the economy. The same arguments made here would apply to pre-K. A recent poll found that this issue has strong bipartisan support among voters.

Additional Resource

- 50-State Comparison: Early Care and Education Governance (ECS, 2020). This database contains information on state agencies that provide supports including home visits, child care, pre-K, special education and more. Coordinated governance structures across agencies can lead to more efficient and streamlined service delivery for children and families.