



Pennsylvania's Pre-K Mixed Delivery System

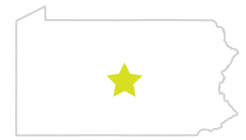
Summary

Why Pre-K Matters

Four decades of research by brain scientists, educators, and economists have created a new understanding of the importance of children's earliest years. We now know that a high-quality preschool experience has lifelong benefits and can close the school readiness gap between low-income and affluent children.

Policymakers and business leaders increasingly understand the implications of early learning in a competitive global economy, as well as the investments necessary to build a system that can serve all children in need. In the early 2000s, Pennsylvania began building an early learning system including public pre-k programs—the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP) and PA Pre-K Counts (PKC)—and a quality improvement system for the child care sector, Keystone STARS.

HSSAP and PKC are serving 29,000 preschoolers (ages 3–5) in FY 18–19. Head Start, administered by the federal government, reaches 25,936 preschoolers, and Child Care Works subsidies, funded by federal and state dollars, provides high-quality pre-k for another 11,000 children. Despite its early innovations, Pennsylvania has fallen behind as other states expanded their programs to reach more children. As of 2018, 44 percent of eligible children are being served. Still, more than 97,700 eligible children across the state lack access to publicly funded pre-k.



Our Mixed Service Delivery System Meets Diverse Community & Family Needs

From the outset, Pennsylvania focused on meeting the varying needs of diverse communities and families. Local resources, transportation challenges, workforce patterns, and family composition and schedules require different approaches to delivering pre-k. For these reasons, Pennsylvania's system was designed to serve children in a variety of settings—school districts, child care centers, Head Start centers, licensed private academic nursery schools, and home-based care.

The state also helps programs attain and maintain high-quality standards. High-quality centers often survive on the slimmest margins but blending public and private funding sources can provide stability and sustainability—and allows providers to serve children with the full range of backgrounds and abilities in inclusive classrooms. While a mixed delivery system does provide many options for families, there are limits to how well it responds to family and workforce needs.

Partnerships: Best Practices for School Readiness & Children's Futures

Pre-K Counts encourages meaningful partnerships between private early learning centers and school districts. These partnerships foster communication, advance professional development, and align goals and expectations among early learning providers and school systems. Partnerships can provide a strong backbone that creates community buy-in and strengthens the quality of children's early experiences and transition to kindergarten, especially when school districts are formal partners.

Current challenges in the early childhood mixed delivery system pose hurdles to growth; solutions are interconnected and will be system-wide.

As our pre-k system is brought to scale, some current challenges will be exacerbated. Scarce funding at federal and state levels pits service expansion against adequate

per-child funding—and decent pay for pre-k teachers. Low pay in the sector spurs staff turnover and inhibits quality achievement goals.

For parents, navigating the different eligibility rules and policies of each public program on attendance, absenteeism, and vacation times can be confusing. The state can respond by growing the programs with the most flexibility for local communities.

The state's own budget process is also a challenge. The unpredictable annual budget means that slots aren't guaranteed. The lack of year-to-year predictability can hurt even in expansion years. Providers don't know how many new seats they will be awarded until at least August, when the timeline for expansion may be too short.

In order to grow, pre-k programs often need capital not tied to child care slots. More private sector support and a statewide fund for quality would ameliorate this burden and facilitate expansion efforts by high-quality providers.

The state can also do more to support partnerships between schools, intermediate units, and community-based providers. A variety of challenges can prevent successful partnerships. School districts may lack space for pre-k classrooms, and those with the physical capacity may not be able to afford to offer pre-k because of their higher teacher salary scale. Districts interested in partnering may lack quality centers with which they can partner.

Attracting and keeping a qualified workforce may be the biggest hurdle of all.

Pre-k providers speak of a crisis in staffing: they cannot find or afford enough certified or B.A.-trained head teachers, but more often they cannot find qualified assistant teachers either. At an average hourly rate of \$9.80 for assistants, the system consistently bleeds staff to other sectors where the work is easier. Salaries at all levels must be boosted to increase retention.

The state can build on its strong system by bringing together all the stakeholders in early childhood education—taxpayers, parents, teachers, child care operators, elected school boards, superintendents, and principals—to find solutions to current challenges. And it is up to elected representatives at every level to allocate funds needed to support the collective goal of giving every child an equal start in life.

For the full report, please refer to economyleague.org/publicprek