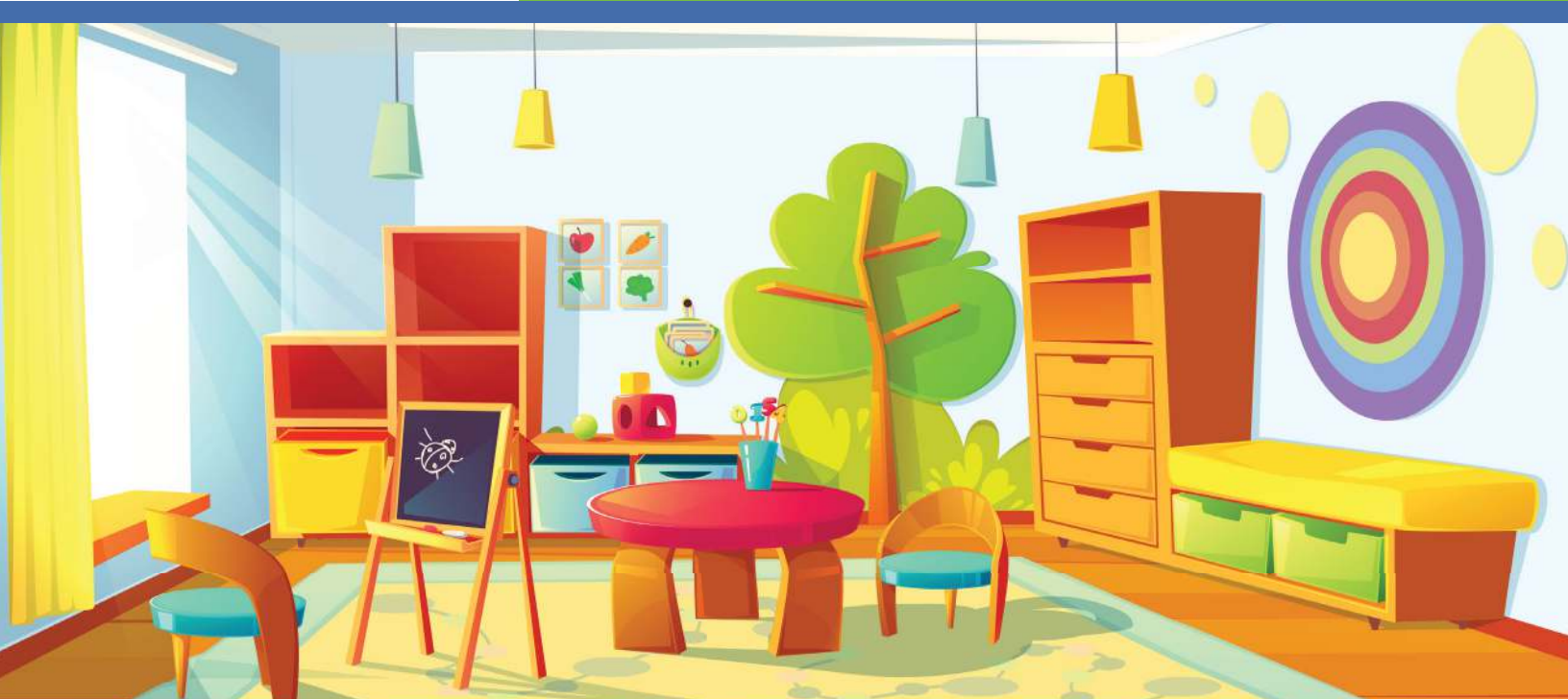


The Road to Academic Success Includes High-Quality Pre-K



High-quality, publicly funded pre-kindergarten is necessary for preparing our 3- and 4-year-olds to enter kindergarten ready to learn. Pennsylvania's record is commendable for showing a strong, bipartisan commitment to investing in pre-k over nearly 20 years, including recent support for the program during the pandemic, when not all states continued to invest in this area. The level of policymaker support has provided access to thousands of pre-k children in Pennsylvania. However, more work needs to be done as 61% remain unserved, or 101,500 eligible children. **Pennsylvania falls in the middle of the pack when looking at a per capita ranking of states with similar quality pre-k programs, ranking 14th out of 27 states. This report analyzes how a per capita spending analysis can assess increased access and quality across states with varied population sizes, geographies, and political landscapes.**

Making high-quality, publicly funded pre-k available to more eligible preschoolers starts with an increase of \$70 million for Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program in the 2022-23 state budget. Beyond this necessary investment, the following analysis considers specific improvement measures to increase the quality of Pennsylvania's pre-k programs and looks at similar states to model innovative approaches.

High-Quality, Publicly Funded Pre-k in Pennsylvania

The Pre-K Counts program—founded in 2007—gives eligible 3- and 4-year-olds access to high-quality, publicly funded pre-k. Eligibility requirements include children living in households below 300% of the federal poverty rate, English Language Learners, or children with an increased risk of barriers due to community factors, academic difficulties, or economic disadvantage.

Pennsylvania is also one of a few states with a Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP). While Head Start is mostly federally funded, the commonwealth began to provide supplemental funding to pre-k providers in 2004 to serve more children and extend the academic instruction year. Children living in families earning at or below 100% of the federal poverty rate are eligible for HSSAP. Currently, HSSAP serves 6,774 children¹ across the commonwealth, and over \$69 million in total funding has been allocated.²

Pre-K Counts and HSSAP are discretionary programs and are not mandatory areas of spending, yet policymakers have grown investments to more than \$311 million for both programs since their inception.³ Currently, the programs provide high-quality pre-k education for 33,445 children across Pennsylvania.⁴

An analysis of Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill showed positive impacts for children participating in the program compared to those who did not participate. Children participating in Pre-K Counts have significantly higher language and math skills and gain an additional four to five months of learning than their peers.⁵ This study was the first academic evaluation of one of Pennsylvania's high-quality pre-k programs, and the results proved investments made in pre-k are paying off.

The State of Preschool Yearbook and Determining Per Capita Rankings

Significant national research exists on the impacts of early childhood education, but the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) is considered the gold standard. For two decades, NIEER has surveyed every state oversight agency on child enrollment and funding for pre-k programs, assigning scores for the quality standards of programs and releasing the results in its annual *State of Preschool* report. NIEER's most recent report—using data from the 2019-20 school year— shows:

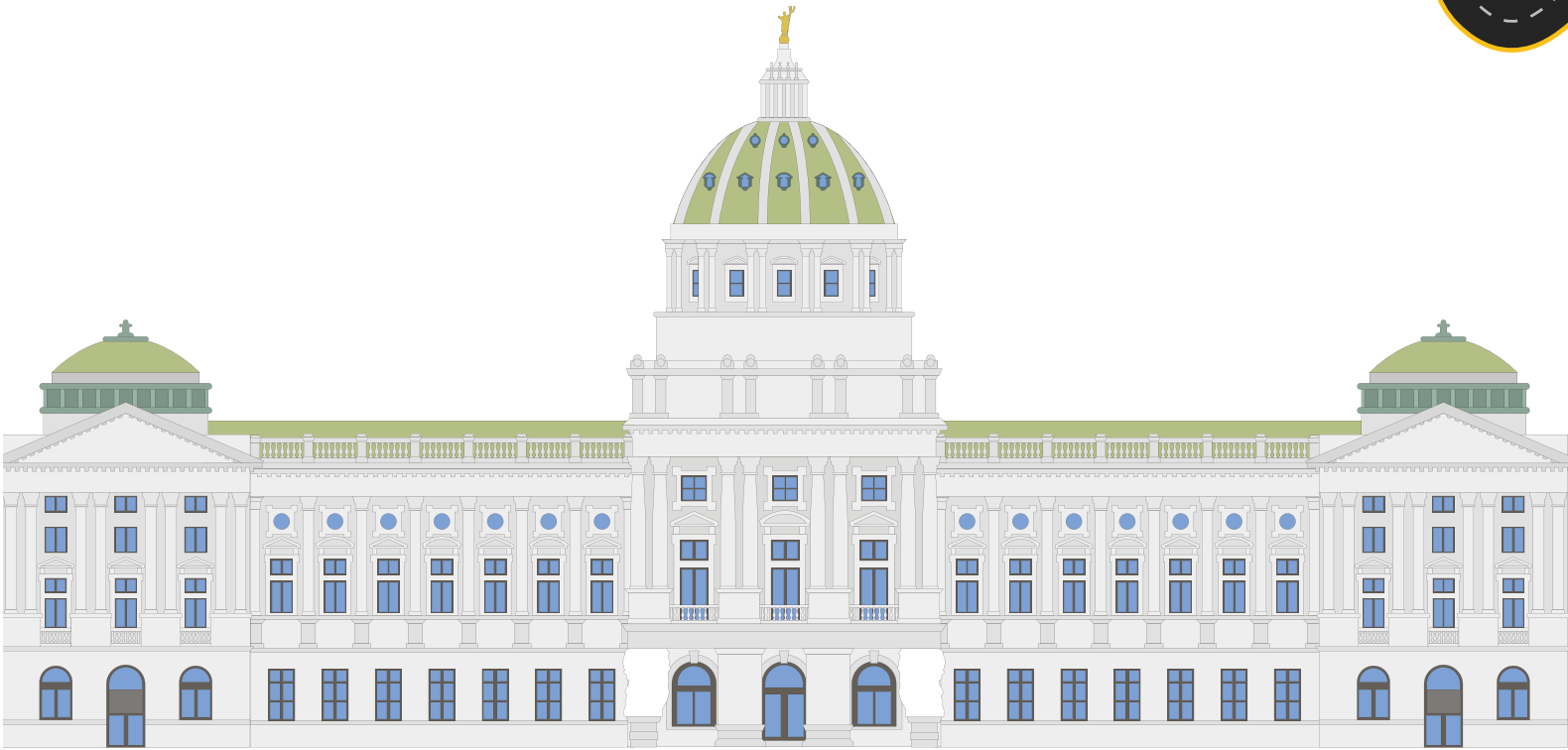
- Most states spend too little per child to support high-quality, full-day pre-k, and few states serve all eligible children, including all children in low-income families.
- Further commitment is needed to ensure high-quality pre-k for all, beginning with those in the lowest-income families.⁶

Using NIEER's Yearbook and updating fiscal data for states based on their most recently-passed budgets—most commonly the 2021-22 budget—we can then determine a *per capita* ranking of states. We looked only at states that received the same or higher overall quality rating than Pennsylvania, as provided by NIEER, or a cumulative score of 7 or higher. Quality rankings are determined based on 10 benchmarks programs need to achieve, including maximum class sizes and staff-to-child ratios, degree and professional development requirements, the early learning standards utilized in the classroom, and continuous quality improvement systems.

What is “per capita” and why is it important for this ranking?

Meaning “per unit of population,” per capita refers to adjusting a measurement by a geographical unit's population. Here, per capita is the amount of investment each state is making across the population of age-eligible children, thereby adjusting for the population size in each state, so there is a like-to-like comparison.





Pennsylvania Ranks in the Middle of the Pack Compared to Other States that Fund Pre-K

When comparing quality standards and state spending across the country, Pennsylvania ranks 14th in per capita state spending compared to the other 26 states with similar quality ratings of their pre-k programs. Pennsylvania's per capita spending is \$1,103, far less than neighboring New Jersey—which is ranked 1st—and spends nearly \$4,000 per capita on high-quality pre-k education. The top 10 states that make more significant per capita investments in preschoolers are geographically and politically diverse. This diversity reveals broad bipartisan support for high-quality pre-k, as seen in red states like Alabama, Oklahoma, and West Virginia; blue states like New York, Oregon, and Vermont; and purple states like Michigan and Georgia.

Of the 27 states, 10 have Republican-controlled legislative and executive branches, 11 have both branches controlled by the Democratic Party, and 6—including Pennsylvania—have split control, which

illustrates an authentic bipartisan approach and level of support for expanding pre-k access for children.

In Pennsylvania, investments in pre-k have spanned administrations from both parties and shifting legislative majorities. In just the past 10 years, investments have increased by over \$190 million.⁷ While this spending is significant, more is needed to serve all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds. Other states with varying political compositions—including more conservative or liberal states—are outpacing Pennsylvania in per capita spending.

Still, Pennsylvania is one of only 14 states that invested in pre-k during the 2021-22 budget cycle. Policymakers made a \$30 million increase for eligible preschoolers to attend high-quality, publicly funded pre-k (with \$25 million allocated for Pre-K Counts and \$5 million for HSSAP).

Even more laudable is that state funding is discretionary and not required like in other budget areas, which speaks to policymakers' commitment to ensuring early learners have access to high-quality early childhood education.

Per Capita Ranking of States with Similar High-Quality Pre-K Programs

PER CAPITA STATE RANKING	STATE	NIEER QUALITY RATING	PER CAPITA RATE	GOVERNOR PARTY AFFILIATION	LEGISLATURE MAJORITY PARTY AFFILIATION
1	New Jersey	8	\$3,966	Democratic	Democratic
2	Vermont	7	\$3,705	Republican	Democratic
3	Michigan	10	\$3,134	Democratic	Republican
4	Georgia	8	\$2,822	Republican	Republican
5	West Virginia**	9	\$2,578	Republican	Republican
6	Alabama	10	\$2,511	Republican	Republican
7	New Mexico	9	\$2,027	Democratic	Democratic
8	New York	7	\$1,907	Democratic	Democratic
9	Oklahoma**	9	\$1,873	Republican	Republican
10	Oregon	7.7	\$1,572	Democratic	Democratic
11	North Carolina	8	\$1,467	Democratic	Republican
12	Arkansas	8	\$1,466	Republican	Republican
13	Illinois	8	\$1,379	Democratic	Democratic
14	Pennsylvania	7*	\$1,103	Democratic	Republican
15	Iowa	7.9	\$1,020	Republican	Republican
16	Maine**	9	\$964	Democratic	Democratic
17	Maryland	7	\$953	Republican	Democratic
18	Kentucky	8	\$769	Democratic	Republican
19	Rhode Island	10	\$733	Democratic	Democratic
20	Washington	8	\$705	Democratic	Democratic
21	Louisiana	7.9	\$668	Democratic	Republican
22	South Carolina	7	\$585	Republican	Republican
23	Tennessee	9	\$551	Republican	Republican
24	Nebraska**	7	\$528	Republican	Republican
25	Hawaii	10	\$517	Democratic	Democratic
26	Mississippi	10	\$431	Republican	Republican
27	Delaware	9	\$274	Democratic	Democratic

*For this report, Pennsylvania's quality ranking is based on the scores received for Pre-K Counts and HSSAP, which received 8 and 7, respectively. The NIEER Yearbook also includes funds from the state's Ready to Learn Block Grant and Kindergarten for 4-year-olds, assigning a cumulative score of 6.7 across the four programs. These two programs are not included in this analysis. Similarly, other states also had lower-quality programs not used to determine their rate, including Oregon and Iowa.

** Confirmed FY 2021-22 funding was not available before the release of this report. Instead, FY 2019-20 funding was used as reported in the NIEER Yearbook.

Investments in High-Quality Pre-K Make a Difference

The NIEER Yearbook identifies 10 research-based policy standards related to preschool program quality.⁸ These benchmarks are to be used by state leaders to enhance the quality of their pre-k programs and promote academic learning. Only five states meet all 10 of NIEER's benchmarks for quality: Alabama, Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi, and Rhode Island.⁹

NIEER's 10 Benchmarks for Quality:

1. Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS)
2. Curriculum supports
3. Teacher degree
4. Teacher specialized training
5. Assistant teacher degree
6. Staff professional development
7. Maximum class (20)
8. Staff-child ratio (1:10)
9. Screening and referrals
10. Continuous Quality Improvement System (CQIS)



When assessing Pennsylvania's quality rating compared to the NIEER benchmarks, the state meets 7 (HSSAP) or 8 (Pre-K Counts) of the 10. Teacher degrees, staff professional development, and Continuous Quality Improvement System (CQIS) are the three areas not meeting benchmarks for HSSAP, while Pre-K Counts does not meet benchmarks for assistant teacher degrees (or aides as referred to in state regulation) as well as staff development.¹⁰

Policymakers should increase funding to work toward meeting these minimum quality standards consistently in all preschool programs to strengthen quality standards and improve pre-k education throughout the commonwealth. Pennsylvania can implement strategies from other states to meet these benchmarks, such as:

Increasing the qualifications and compensation of teachers, including assistant teachers.

Pennsylvania could invest in a salary wage scale for preschool teachers or have requirements around

salary or compensation parity. West Virginia's Apprenticeship for Child Development Specialist program combines college work with on-the-job training. The preschool setting agrees to provide supervision and increase wages upon successfully completing the program. Illinois and Alabama require preschool teachers to receive comparable salaries and benefits as K-12 teachers.¹¹

Increasing requirements and supports for assistant teachers. Pennsylvania could require assistant teachers in Pre-K Counts to have specialized training in early childhood education. This should be equivalent to at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. The requirements are simply a high school diploma or GED in current regulation. What is essential is that the qualification supports enhanced performance by the assistant teachers. Assistant teachers can be permitted time to acquire a credential if they do not have one and should receive financial support and guidance on obtaining a strong credential. As with lead teachers, adequate compensation for assistant teachers ensures that strong teaching staff is hired and retained. Louisiana has developed an Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate, aligned to the national CDA required of all preschool teachers.¹²

Enhancing the continuous quality improvement system to include a more robust professional development system. Pennsylvania could look to bolster professional development for both assistant and lead teachers, including coaching for all teachers and individualized improvement plans for assistant and lead teachers developed in conjunction with coaches. The state has an essential leadership role in ensuring that the continuous improvement system produces desired improvements in quality and outcomes from year to year. This requires adequate funding and staff at the state level to administer and conduct this work. New Jersey includes funding for lead teachers and utilizes a preschool self-assessment to support continuous quality improvement in its mixed delivery

preschool programs.¹³ West Virginia's [Universal PreK Guidebook](#) is a comprehensive manual developed by the state outlining requirements for preschool programs in all settings, including child assessment, program assessment, and continuous quality improvement.¹⁴

What is meant by "high-quality" in Pennsylvania?

To determine high-quality pre-k programs in Pennsylvania, we use a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) called Keystone STARS (Standards, Training/Professional Development, Assistance, Resources, and Supports). There are four primary goals for Keystone STARS:

- To improve the quality of early childhood education
- To support early childhood education providers in meeting their quality improvement goals
- To recognize programs for continuous quality improvement and meeting higher quality standards; and
- To provide families a way to choose a quality ECE program.¹⁵

There are four levels to the STARS system, with Pennsylvania recognizing STAR 3 and 4 levels as high-quality programs. All STAR 2, 3, and 4 programs must meet specific STARS Performance Standards that each has quality indicators and develop a continuous quality improvement (CQI) plan. Eligible, high-quality providers include Head Start, Keystone STARS 3 and 4 center and group child care, PDE-licensed nursery schools, and school districts.

Investments are Needed to Enroll More Eligible Pennsylvania Children

Continued investments in high-quality pre-k are essential to ensuring more eligible children are enrolled before beginning their kindergarten year. While states receive federal funding to support pre-k, states must also include

investments to reach the number of children eligible to enter programs. Recently, pre-k funding had bipartisan support in the federal Build Back Better Act plan. The proposal included funding for the federal share of the cost of a universal pre-k program for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Although negotiations have stalled on Build Back Better, with bipartisan support of the pre-k proposal, there is still an opportunity to significantly invest in pre-k education federally. However, state investments are still needed to keep pace with the federal investments to expand access.

The Pre-K for PA campaign—comprised of statewide partners representing providers and nonprofit child and early childhood care and education professional advocacy organizations—understands the importance of high-quality, publicly funded pre-k access for families across the commonwealth. Since 2014, the campaign has advocated for increased state investments in Pre-K Counts and HSSAP to allow more of the 101,500 eligible, unserved children to access the programs. Continued support and investments are needed to ensure every eligible child has the opportunity for academic success through high-quality pre-k education.

Governor Wolf proposes investing \$70 million in pre-k in the 2022-23 state budget, including \$60 million for Pre-K Counts and \$10 million for HSSAP. This investment would increase reimbursement rates for Pre-K Counts programs to \$10,000 per full-day slot and \$5,000 per half-day slot. The proposal also expands access to the program for over 2,300 preschoolers in the state. The Pre-K for PA campaign applauds the proposed investment and encourages state policymakers to include the investment in their finalized budget.

Pennsylvania needs investments in both access and quality. The rate increases for Pre-K Counts support paying providers closer to the cost of quality and help the commonwealth keep pace with the NIEER quality standards and other states' pre-k programs.

Without continued bipartisan support from policymakers, Pennsylvania will continue to lag other states who make more significant investments in their young children.

States with Similar Political Landscapes but Higher Per Capita Investments in Pre-K



New Jersey Preschool Expansion Program

Ranking: 1

Governor: Democratic

House/Senate majority: Democratic

Per capita spending on pre-k: \$3,966

3- and 4-year-old population: 209,674

Total spending on pre-k (2021-22) \$831,471,254

[New Jersey Preschool Guidance and Materials](#)



West Virginia Universal Pre-K

Ranking: 5

Governor: Republican

House/Senate majority: Republican

Per capita spending on pre-k: \$2,578

3- and 4-year-old population: 37,555

Total spending on pre-k (2019-20): \$96,812,321

[West Virginia Universal Pre-K Guidebook](#)



First Class Pre-K: Alabama's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program

Ranking: 6

Governor: Republican

House/Senate majority: Republican

Per capita spending on pre-k: \$2,511

3- and 4-year-old population: 119,323

Total spending on pre-k (2021-22): \$151,215,130

[First Class Pre-K Guidelines](#)

Recent Research in Pre-K Across the Nation



[*Predicting Students' Mathematics Achievement Through Elementary and Middle School: The Contribution of State-Funded Prekindergarten Program Participation*](#) shows Georgia's pre-k program positively predicted math achievements through seventh grade, showing a long-term impact of benefits from participation in a state-funded pre-k program.¹⁶

[*Racial Disparities in Pre-K Quality: Evidence From New York City's Universal Pre-K Program*](#) found significant disparities in the quality of providers experienced by Black and White pre-k students, which impacts the ability to reduce racial achievement gaps through access to the program.¹⁷

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