

What is Pre-K?

[North Carolina's Pre-K](#) program was launched in 2001 and serves at risk 4-year-old children. It is designed to provide high-quality educational experiences to enhance school readiness for eligible four-year-old children. The NC Pre-K program is designed to address the following developmental domains:

- Approaches to Play
- Language Development
- Health and Physical Development
- Language development and communication
- Cognitive development

A recent study, [The State of Preschool 2018](#), by The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found North Carolina met 8 out of 10 benchmarks for Pre-K Quality Standards. "NC Pre-K is one of the highest-quality programs in the US with proven results for at-risk students". To be eligible to enroll, children must be 4 years old by August 31 of the year they enter and must come from a family whose gross income is equal to or less than 75% of the state median income. Up to 20% of enrolled children may come from households with incomes above that level if the children fall in another high risk category. Those categories include developmental delay, identified disability, a chronic health condition or limited English proficiency. Additionally, certain military families may be eligible without regard to income.

Why Pre-K?

The preschool years of a young child's life are a crucial time in their social, emotional and cognitive development. A high-quality early education program sets up children for academic success. Strong early literacy skills establish later success in reading. Research has demonstrated that enrollment in a high-quality pre-k program helps improve children's reading proficiency by third grade. Proficiency in reading by third grade impacts a child's entire educational experience and is correlated to graduating on time as well as attending college. Currently in North Carolina, only 52 percent of first-grade students and 56 percent of second-grade students are reading at grade level. The percentage of third-grade students passing the state's reading test has dropped from 60.2 percent in the 2013-14 school year to 55.9 percent last year. Although North Carolina has spent more than \$150 million dollars on its Read to Achieve program, [a study from NC State's College of Education](#) found the program did not result in more third and fourth-graders passing state reading exams. In contrast, a [study from Duke](#) looked at middle school students and found that participation in NC Pre-K had positive impacts on students' test scores in reading and math and these benefits did not fade with time. The study concluded:

The allocation of state funds for Smart Start and More at Four (NC Pre-K) programs to a county in a given year continued to have positive effects on the population of targeted students in that county as they progressed through middle school. Higher levels of program funding improved students' math and reading scores, decreased the likelihood that they would be placed in special education, and reduced the probability of repeating a grade. The More at Four program effects varied significantly across subgroups within the population, with larger positive impacts on children from less well-educated, more economically disadvantaged, and African American families.

Pre-K is a crucial stage to a child's development

- Children who attend preschool gain confidence by learning the expectations and routines of school through close communication with other children.
- Pre-K is a place where children learn to socialize, make decisions, interact with others, and negotiate—all of which are important to child development.
- According to an annual assessment, NC Pre-K students made significant gains from pre-K through kindergarten in language and literacy skills, math skills, general knowledge, and behavior.

Children who attend Pre-K programs are more self-sufficient in the future

- Children who went to preschool were consistently employed, more likely to have full time jobs, less likely to rely on public assistance, resulting in overall positive future outcomes.
- Children who attend preschool are more likely to have a savings account, and own a house and a car.

Attending Pre-K decreases both achievement and skill gaps

- Research shows that state pre-K programs have positive impacts on children's cognitive skills, including both pre-reading and pre-math skills.
- 123 studies across four decades of early education research found that by third grade, one-third of the achievement gap can be closed by early education.
- Children who attended pre-K usually have a higher grade point average and are more likely to graduate high school and college.
- Fundamental skills like eye contact, self-confidence, work efficiency, attention span, and control of temper are developed during the earliest stages of childhood are enriched in Pre-K
- Latino children and other dual language learners greatly benefitted from NC Pre-K, making gains in the program at a greater rate than other students.

Pre-K decreases delinquency

- Children who attended pre-school are less likely to develop alcohol or drug problems, commit a felony, and go to prison. They are half as likely to be arrested.

Early education saves the State money in the future

- Every \$1 invested in preschool saves taxpayers up to \$13 in future costs in incarceration, education, tax collections increases, and welfare.
- Pre-K offers a better return on investment than the stock market. The annual rate of return for preschool spending is between 7-10%; stocks have an average return of 5.8% per year.
- Investment in pre-K pays off by reducing the number of children placed into special education classrooms in the third grade by 39%; special education costs nearly twice as much as regular classroom education.

The most effective preschool education programs share common features

- A well-implemented, evidence-based curriculum.
- Coaching and continuous training of Pre-K teachers.

- High rates of child engagement.
- Positive classroom environment.
- Teachers who engage children in more complex language interactions.

Current state of North Carolina's pre-kindergarten program

- Since the program became statewide in 2003-04, NC Pre-K has served more than 350,000 children.
- In 2018 29,509 eligible 4-year-old, or 47% were served by NC Pre-K
- During the same time period, 32,778 of eligible 4 year olds were not served
- In 2018 dollars, at its height, state spending per child enrolled was \$8,459 in 2002.
- In 2018, state spending per child enrolled was \$5,428.
- In 2008, North Carolina enrolled 22% of its eligible 4 year-olds. Enrollment has remained fairly stagnant and in 2018, North Carolina enrolls only 23% of eligible 4-year-olds.
- Average state funding is far less than the actual cost per child.
- The [difference in cost is met by](#) funding from counties, Smart Start Funding, Title 1 funding from federal sources, donations and funding from existing administration and infrastructure of larger organizations
- Monthly reimbursement rates by the NC Pre-K Program vary by the type of classroom and teacher qualifications, ranging from up to \$400 per child (in Head Start sites) to a maximum of \$650 (private sites with a B-K-licensed lead teacher), with an approximate average annual cost per child of \$5,000.
- [House Bill 90](#), passed in February, 2018, included a plan to eliminate the Pre-K waiting list by adding funding for approximately 3,000 additional Pre-K seats over the following two years. This funding was intended to replace the nearly 6,000 slots cut since 2011.
- A 2017 study by NC DHHS found the overall cost for a slot in the NC Pre-K program is \$9,126, with State funding covering 61% of the cost, or approximately \$5,534.
- In March 2017, Gov. Roy Cooper proposed a two-year budget that includes funding for 4,700 additional pre-K spots. His goal is to go from 22% participation to 55% by 2025.
- [A 2016 UNC study showed](#) about two-thirds (66%) of Pre-K teachers held a Bachelor's degree and the remaining one-third (34%) held a Master's degree.

What about those Pre-K "Waiting Lists"?

The NEEIR analysis found county "waiting lists" are not an accurate measure of either need or demand for NC Pre-K:

- The term "waiting lists" used in state budget language actually refers to county capacity to enroll more children – not an actual list of children seeking to enroll.
- Counties are not required to maintain actual waiting lists, and no consistent statewide policy exists for creating such lists.
- At best, waiting lists only address the number of excess applicants in a single cohort of 4-year-olds at a static point in time.
- As funding for NC Pre-K has increased, so has demand that cannot be met, far exceeding the number of children on any "waiting lists."

Barriers to Pre-K Access

In 2019, the National Institute for Early Education released a [report](#) looking at why eligible children were unable to enroll and benefit from the high-quality pre-K program offered in North Carolina. Research has shown clear benefits from the program, but many children are unable to enroll due to insufficient funding, the report found. Approximately 23% of four-year old children have access to Pre-K in North Carolina. This percentage is below the national average. There are almost 33,000 children who are eligible but not enrolled due to lack of access. [Participation in NC Pre-K varies widely](#) from county to county. Approximately 1 in 4 counties serve 75 percent or more of their eligible children, while 40 percent of counties are serving less than half of their eligible children. The NEEER report looked at barriers to expanding Pre-K. Over the past two years, the general assembly has appropriated money to expand Pre-K slots, but some counties have turned down the money. The report states that the overriding, fundamental barrier to expanding NC Pre-K is that NC Pre-K funding is inadequate to cover the full costs of expansion.

According to the report, barriers to expansion include

- Rising operating costs, including costs to recruit and retain qualified teachers, expand facilities and provide transportation.
- Stagnant state reimbursement rates since 2012 that fail to cover NC Pre-K costs.
- Failure to adequately cover administrative costs associated with Pre-K programs
- Lack of physical space for expansion. One of the unintended consequences of the recently mandated K-3 class size reductions is that less space will be available for NC Pre-K as public school systems will require more space to serve K-3 children.

NIEER Recommendations for Expanding Pre-K Access

- Develop targets for expansion to reach 75% of eligible children statewide, with particular attention to underserved child populations and areas within the state where NC Pre-K services are least available.
- Offer financial incentives for four- and five-star private centers, already providing pre-K for 4-year-olds, to meet the higher-quality standards to become NC Pre-K sites, thereby allowing them to receive state funding.
- Increase reimbursement rates to account for rising costs and address specific barriers to expansion, including startup costs, thus incentivizing counties and providers to enroll at least 75% of eligible children.
- Provide supplemental funds for NC Pre-K teacher compensation to achieve parity between private centers and public schools.
- Increase the artificially low, allowable amount of funding that can be used to cover administrative costs.
- Explore mechanisms to better utilize child care subsidy funds and NC Pre-K funds to serve the same child at private centers and public schools that provide NC Pre-K.
 - Explore shifting NC Pre-K funding into the public-school funding formula in such a way that all children served can be jointly funded by state, local and federal dollars.

HB 485 Virtual Pre-K

Legislators recently proposed [HB 485](#) a bill that aims to provide access to [pre-K by introducing a virtual Pre-K program](#). The bill proposes to implement the “Upstart” online early learning program for eligible 4-year-olds. Expanding access to Pre-K is clearly a worthwhile goal. However, an important component of Pre-K is social and emotional learning including navigating relationships with peers and teachers. A virtual Pre-K program would not allow children to practice face-to-face interactions, teach them about navigating peer relationships, or how to get along in a group setting nor would it encourage children to be outside. Online learning is not a replacement for a high-quality Pre-K. Most experts agree, kids need less screen time, not more. Research has found [correlations with increased media use](#) in preschool aged children and higher risks of obesity, impaired sleep and a tendency to develop poor executive functioning. Another [recent study](#) found increased screen time correlated with a higher likelihood of being diagnosed with ADHD. What’s desperately needed is adequate levels of funding that cover the actual cost to deliver a high-quality Pre-K program. A return to pre-recession level funding would be a great start.

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