

Preschool Expansion: A Parent's Roadmap

By Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst



A strong early care and education system that includes high-quality preschool provides young children with the educational foundation they need to be successful in kindergarten and beyond. For more than 20 years, New Jersey's nationally recognized preschool program has served thousands of young children throughout the state. State-funded pre-k is offered in some school districts—but not all. However, that number has been growing.

Since 2017, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has made significant investments in expanding preschool to additional districts.

What about your district?

Parents can play an important role in bringing preschool to their communities—and it is important to know the facts! Here's what parents should know about preschool expansion and how they can advocate to bring it to their community!

What parents should know about preschool expansion:

- **Not every district is eligible.** Only districts that have more than 20 percent of their students eligible for free-and reduced-lunch are eligible. A list of districts that are eligible and/or have received funding can be found at www.acnj.org
- **Eligible districts must apply for the funding.** The School Funding Reform Act of 2008 mandates preschool expansion, but the state cannot require all eligible districts to provide the program until it is fully funded—and currently, it is not. Interested eligible districts must apply for the funding. Over the last three years, the application process began once additional funding was included in the state budget—which meant the process has begun in early July, after the state budget was finalized.



- **Not every eligible district has applied for funding.** Although all children can benefit from our state's high-quality preschool, it is the district that must initiate an application for preschool expansion.
- **Most eligible districts that have been awarded funding have yet to offer the program for all their 3- and 4-year-olds.** Facilities play an important role in district expansion planning. Frequently, districts do not have enough room in their own buildings to house the “universe” of 3- and 4-year olds in their community.* The good news is that school districts can collaborate with local child care providers and Head Start to implement the same standard of quality preschool and maximize the number of children who can benefit!

What can parents do to advocate for preschool expansion:

- **Find out whether your district is eligible.** Go to www.acnj.org to find out the preschool status of your district!

**Calculating a district's preschool universe is determined by multiplying by “2” the number of students in the district's first grade.*

If the district is eligible for preschool expansion, but has not applied, parents can be the voice for preschoolers! School districts that have yet to apply, need to hear that there is a need and a demand for preschool expansion!

If parents find out that their district is eligible but hasn't applied, the following are a few advocacy steps that they can take:



Write a letter.

Send the district superintendent and the school board president a letter stating that the district is eligible for preschool expansion funds. Urge district officials to apply for funding when additional funds become available. Ask them why the district has yet to apply for the funding.



Meet with the district superintendent.

Voice your support for preschool expansion with a face-to-face meeting. The district leader often has the most influence as to whether or not a district applies for funding.



Speak at a school board meeting.

Bringing the issue to the attention of the members of the school board and the public-at-large is an important way to engage others.



Engage other community leaders.

Let your mayor, town council and state legislators know that there is support for preschool expansion in communities they represent.



Bring along friends. Volume matters and when broad support is shown, it makes a difference!

If the district has already applied, but not all preschoolers are being served:

Districts are urged to develop programs that provide a classroom for every 3- and 4- year old in the community. If there are preschoolers that are not in the program because of space, urge the district to think "outside of the box" when it comes to implementing the program.

Urge them—using the advocacy steps above—to engage local child care providers and Head Start to become part of the program, so that there is enough room for all.

If your district is not eligible for preschool expansion state funding:

Urge the district superintendent and the school board to help preschoolers attain that educational foundation critical for academic success by providing quality preschool through federal (Title I) or local funds.

Questions? Contact Cynthia Rice at crice@acnj.org.



The Parent's Roadmap was funded through grants from the Maher Charitable Foundation and the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation.

Want to Connect with ACNJ?

www.acnj.org