

Preschool Expansion: A Provider's Roadmap

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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 through a delivery system using public preschool, child care and Head Start classrooms. 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 are the facts about preschool expansion and child care/Head Start?

Child care programs can play an important role in providing high-quality preschool in new, eligible preschool expansion districts, so that the maximum number of 3- and 4-year-olds can benefit from this early learning experience. *But it is important to know the facts!*

What child care providers and Head Start 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 to apply for state funding. A list of districts that are eligible and/or have received funding can be found at 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!
- **Districts are not required to collaborate with child care and Head Start programs.** Although NJDOE strongly urges districts to work collaboratively with community programs so that more children can be served, it is not a requirement.
- **Child care and Head Start programs cannot separately apply for preschool expansion dollars.** Only districts are eligible to apply for the funding.

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

- **Districts can collaborate with child care and Head Start programs located OUTSIDE their own community.** Collaboration between school districts and community programs is not exclusive to programs located in a specific community but can include others located in neighboring towns, so long as they are serving age-eligible district resident children.

What can child care and Head Start programs do to be a part of preschool expansion:

- **Measure your classroom(s).** All preschool classrooms, regardless of where they are located, are required to be a minimum of 950 square feet, consisting of 750 square feet of usable space, 150 square feet of storage and equipment or furnishings that are either built in or not easily moveable and 50 square feet of a toilet room. According to the July 1, 2019 Notice of Funding Opportunity from NJDOE, all district and provider classrooms must meet facilities requirements. Waivers may be submitted for any space that does not meet code.
- **Find out if your school district is eligible for preschool expansion.** Go to acnj.org to find out the preschool status of your district! Eligible districts currently fall into two different categories:
 - * Eligible and have applied for funding
 - * Eligible and have not applied funding
 If a child care or Head Start program is located in or near an eligible district, it is important to know the district's status.
- **If the district is eligible for preschool expansion, but has not applied.** Let district officials hear from you! Tell them that funding for quality preschool is a good thing for 3- and 4-year-olds and collaboration with child care and Head Start is a proven way to serve more children.

The following are a few advocacy steps providers can take:



Write a letter.

Send the district superintendent and the school board president a letter stating that the district is likely eligible for preschool expansion funds in the future. Urge them, should funding be available in the next fiscal year, to apply. A sample template letter to use can be found at acnj.org.



Meet with the district superintendent.

The district leader often has the most influence as to whether or not a district applies for funding. Tell them you are excited to be part of a future collaboration.



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.

Inform your mayor, town council and state legislators that there is support for pre-k school expansion in their community.



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 to benefit.

- **Be persistent!** It may take more than one letter or one call to cultivate a future relationship! If one approach doesn't work, try another.
- **Don't wait!** On November 15, 2019, all districts receiving state preschool funds are required to report to NJDOE its projected preschool enrollment figures for the 2020-21 school year. This means that if the district plans to increase the number of preschool classrooms for the next school year, they will have to have determined where those classrooms will be located. This leaves only a few weeks for potential collaborations between school districts and child care/Head Start to begin!

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



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