

NJ Preschool Expansion: A School District's 2023-24 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. As state-funded preschool expansion has been a priority of the Murphy administration, the proposed FY2024 state budget includes an additional \$109 million in preschool expansion funding, including \$40 million to assist new districts to launch programs.

The opportunity to take advantage means planning begins now. As the new legislature adds the finishing touches to our state budget, eligible districts should seriously consider using this time to begin the planning process to apply for the funding.

What are the facts about preschool expansion and “mixed delivery?”

- **New Jersey’s vision of “preschool expansion” is to serve all 3- and 4-year olds in a school district, regardless of available district classroom space.** Few districts have the classroom capacity to add two additional grades (3- and 4-year-olds) and will need to look to community programs to attain the goal of providing preschool to their universe of 3- and 4-year-olds.

- **Preschool expansion funding is not a “grant.”** Once a district applies for and receives preschool expansion funding, those funds become part of that district’s state aid. Current funding levels will continue.

- **The “mixed delivery” model between a school district, Head Start and child care programs is based on a contractual relationship.**

In order to maximize the number of children who can benefit from full-day, public preschool, school districts can enter contractual relationships with one or more child care and/or Head Start programs. These providers agree to meet the same high-quality standards in their classrooms that is required of the school districts, including:

- * A teacher with a BA and P-3 certificate
- * A teacher’s assistant
- * A maximum class size of 15
- * The implementation of a research-based curriculum



* Classrooms that are 950 square feet or 750 square feet of usable space.

- **Regardless of where the program is housed, oversight to ensure the implementation of the high-quality preschool rests with the district.** Whether students attend preschool at a community program or inside a district classroom, the district is responsible for implementation and quality. Funding to support that oversight is included as part of state aid.
- **State funding flows through the district.** Eligible districts receive state dollars and then distribute those funds to collaborating Head Start and child care programs based on per pupil county rates. Those dollars are to be used to provide their staff with “comparable” salaries and benefits to their public school colleagues, in order to reduce teacher turnover. Districts are permitted to hold onto a percentage of the child care/Head Start funds to pay for district oversight costs, including master teacher salaries and professional development. State funding for Head Start is approximately half of the amount provided to participating child care programs because the program receives federal dollars that help pay for the preschool expansion program.
- **Child care and Head Start staff are not employees of the district.** Although collaborating programs must meet the same standards as school districts, their staffs remain child care and Head Start employees.

- **Districts can collaborate with child care and Head Start programs located in and out of their 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.

Steps districts can take NOW to plan for preschool expansion:

For Planning

- **Determine whether the district is eligible.** Previously, districts that have more than 20 percent of their students eligible for free-and reduced lunch have been eligible to apply for state funding. A list of districts that have been eligible and/or have received funding can be found at www.acnj.org.
- **Determine your district's preschool universe.** In order to determine the number of 3- and 4-year-olds in a community, eligible districts should review their most recent first grade enrollment data and multiply by 2, representing both 3- and 4-year-olds. Enrollment data can be found at <https://www.nj.gov/education/data/enr> Once that number is determined, an approximate number of classrooms needed to meet the universe can be determined by dividing the number by 15, the maximum number of preschoolers permitted in each classroom. The actual number of classrooms will be higher because children who have been identified with special needs will not have been included in the final universe number, but should be included in preschool classrooms.
- **Assess building facilities.** 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. Identifying classrooms in any district facilities will provide them with an idea of how many young children can participate in an in-district program, and approximately how many classrooms will be required in community settings.
- **Become familiar with the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Program Guidelines/Teaching and Learning Standards.** Understanding the high-quality preschool program requirements will help you plan your program and develop the most comprehensive preschool expansion application. <https://www.state.nj.us/education/ece/peea/>

- **Consider including preschool expansion in the district's next strategic plan.** Incorporating preschool as part of a district's strategic plan will allow districts to thoughtfully plan on how to provide program access to the maximum number of 3- and 4-year olds.

For Outreach

- **Gauge parent interest.** Districts that have begun expanding preschool have experienced a high demand for the free, full-day program. Interested districts that have yet to begin expanding will likely experience the same level of interest. Engaging families early in the process will help develop community support for any future program.
- **Contact child care and Head Start providers.** Child care and Head Start programs provide education and care to children from birth through age 5 in most communities. County Resource and Referral Agencies can provide school districts with a complete list of the community programs in and near school districts. <http://www.childcarenj.gov/Parents/CCRR>
- **Meet with potential community partners.** If providers meet the classroom facilities requirement, employ or are willing to hire BA teachers with P-3 certificates, and wish to collaborate with a district, a meeting between them and the district should be scheduled. Holding the initial meeting at the child care or Head Start center will allow district staff to see first-hand the state of the facility and assess the program's operations and leadership.
- **Engage state legislators.** In order for new districts to begin preschool expansion, additional funding will need to become available in the FY2024 state budget. Districts should let their state legislators know that they wish to expand preschool in their communities and urge them to support additional preschool funding in the next budget cycle.

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