



Issue Brief: Pre-K Students

North Carolina ranks high in the nation for offering high quality Pre-K education but 29th in access. **NC Pre-K allowed for up to 27,928 children to enroll in the program during 2023-24. Unfortunately, that was only enough to fund 57% of the nearly 49,000 four-year-olds eligible for participation.**¹

Data shows that students who participate in NC Pre-K are more proficient in reading and math, less likely to repeat elementary school grades, and less likely to be placed in special education classes. Because NC Pre-K only enrolled 57% of the State's eligible four-year-olds in 2024, early education stakeholders aim to increase the percentage of eligible enrollment to 75% in each county by 2030² (which is in line with the NC Department of Health and Human Services' Early Childhood Action Plan, though their original goal year was 2025).³ Currently, only 36% of counties have met this enrollment goal.⁴ To meet and exceed these goals, the State must invest in young students *now* to prevent future costs associated with ill-prepared adults, whether they be related to the prison pipeline, unplanned pregnancy, or workforce inadequacy. **While NC Pre-K state and federal funding has consistently increased over the past few years to the current \$182 million funding level, this increase has not proven to be enough to meet the needs of North Carolina's Pre-K population.**⁵

NCSBA Position & Recommendations

- 1.** Considering that early education supports student and life readiness, while reducing the demand for childcare, **NCSBA recommends that the General Assembly expand state-funded Pre-K with a goal of making it universal** by raising the income level for NC Pre-K eligibility and funding Pre-K programs at a higher rate. While NC Pre-K has specifically produced results, Pre-K programs in general have proven to be a game changer.
- 2.** Beginning in January 2025, Pre-K students enrolled in a Pre-K classroom at a public school with a school population of 300 or greater are shown on the

¹ myFutureNC Dashboard, NC Pre-K Enrollment, last updated 2024.

² myFutureNC Dashboard, NC Pre-K Enrollment, last updated 2024.

³ NC Department of Health and Human Services, Early Childhood Action Plan, Goal 8: High-Quality Early Learning.

⁴ myFutureNC Dashboard, NC Pre-K Enrollment, last updated 2024.

⁵ NC General Assembly Fiscal Research Division: Division of Child Development and Early Education presentation to the Joint House and Senate Appropriations Committees on Health and Human Services, March 5, 2019.

Principal's Monthly Report for the purpose of calculating the school principal's salary.⁶ Yet, they still aren't counted towards that public school's ADM for funding. If Pre-K students are already reflected in the principal's salary, **NCSBA recommends that the General Assembly also accurately funds the total number of students attending the school by including even our youngest learners in ADM for funding purposes.**

Background

North Carolina has provided state-funded pre-kindergarten education since 2001, originally through the More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program. During the 2011-2012 school year, the program was renamed the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Program, and administrative control moved from the Department of Public Instruction to the Department of Health and Human Services. **The NC Pre-K program is the State's pre-kindergarten program designed to deliver high-quality educational opportunities for at-risk four-year-olds and other eligible children.** Additional Pre-K options include the federally funded Head Start program and the State's special education program, which are both offered to eligible three- and four-year-olds.

All Pre-K programs, whether in public or private settings, are required to earn high-quality ratings under the state child-care licensing system to participate in NC Pre-K. As a whole, **North Carolina meets 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks** according to the National Institute for Early Education Research: Early Learning & Development Standards, Curriculum Supports, Teacher Degree, Teacher Specialized Training, Assistant Teacher Degree, Maximum Class Size, Staff to Child Ratio Benchmark Screening & Referral, and the Continuous Quality Improvement System Benchmark.

Structure and Funding:

Funding for NC Pre-K includes State general appropriations and North Carolina Education Lottery receipts, federal funds, and local funds. NC Pre-K classrooms operate statewide in settings such as privately licensed Head Start programs, childcare centers, and public schools.

The 2023-2025 State Budget passed by the legislature (Session Law 2023-134) included a provision to increase NC Pre-K staff-to-child ratios. Specifically, beginning in October 2023, staff-to-child ratios increased from 1:9 with a maximum

⁶ School Attendance and Student Accounting Manual, NC Department of Public Instruction, accessed February 2025.

class size of 18 children to 1:10 with a maximum class size of 20 children, with at least one teacher and one teacher assistant per classroom. The NC Division of Child Development and Early Education did not support this provision because:

- 1. NC Pre-K is specifically designed to serve the most at-risk children,** including those with developmental and/or educational challenges. Increasing staff-to-child ratios may have a negative impact on classroom quality due to increased demand on teaching staff, decreased ability to provide focused one-on-one support to all children, and increased likelihood for behavioral challenges in the classroom.
- 2. Without additional funding for the NC Pre-K program to increase funds and slots at the county level, increasing staff-to-child ratios will lead to local level disruptions/disparities** (e.g., increasing capacity at one site could result in decreasing capacity at another site).

NC Pre-K programs are required to operate 6.5 hours per day for 36 weeks each year and serve as many eligible children as funding levels permit. **Eligibility generally requires children to be in a household with income at or below 75% SMI, but up to 20% of children may be in a household with a higher income if they have another designated risk factor.**⁷ Risk factors include a developmental delay or identified disability, a chronic health condition, or limited English proficiency.

Notably, higher percentages of eligible children are not being served in urban and suburban areas on average, even where local funding tends to be greater than what the state provides, which covers only 60% of the cost of NC Pre-K. Rural counties additionally have the largest variation in the number of children who are eligible but not being served. **While some rural counties serve all eligible students, others are serving fewer than 25% of eligible four-year-olds.**

⁷ NC Pre-K / North Carolina Prekindergarten Program, North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education, accessed February 2025.