



New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase I: The Foundation

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RUTGERS

Graduate School of Education

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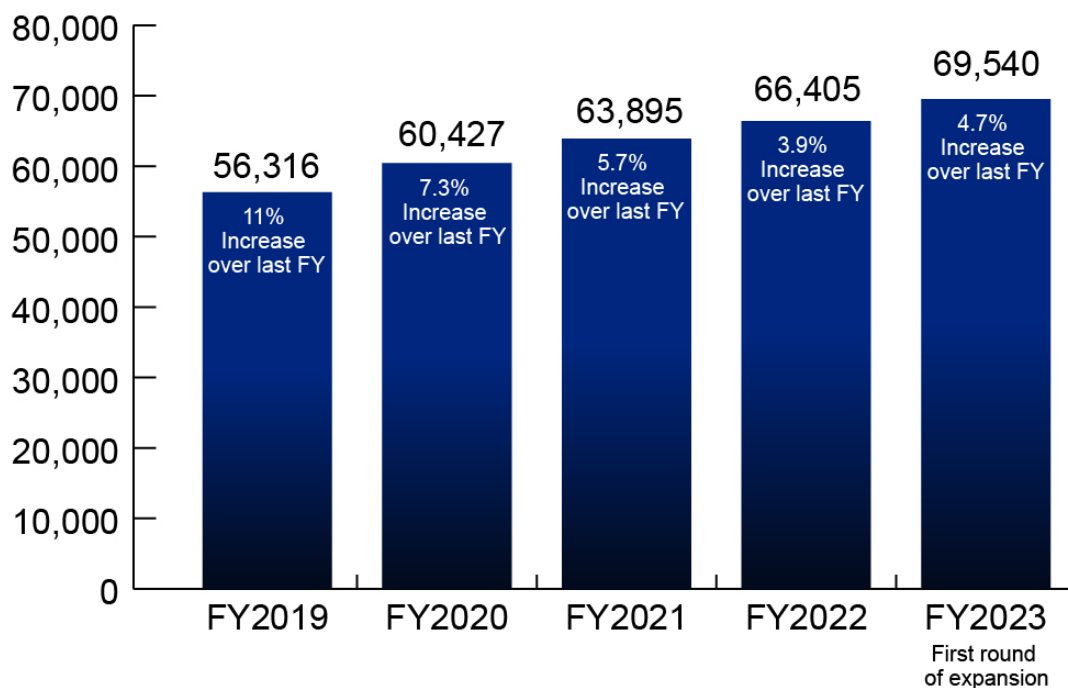


INTRODUCTION

Research is clear – high-quality preschool can change the educational trajectories of young children and influence their lifetime achievement and well-being.¹ Improvements in children’s kindergarten readiness lead to increased achievement and school success with such benefits as increased earnings that continue for a lifetime. New Jersey’s former Abbott preschool program is proven effective and regularly highlighted as a model for the nation.² For these reasons, Governor Phil Murphy has proposed expansion of full-day, high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-old children in the state.

Making universal access to high-quality preschool in New Jersey a reality requires bold vision. New Jersey’s bold vision is outlined in this *New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase I: The Foundation* which will be supplemented in a subsequent *New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase II: Implementation*. Producing high-quality preschool and realizing its benefits requires strong teachers, specialized facilities, partnerships with early childhood providers (including child care facilities), state capacity to administer and develop coherent policies, and adequate funding. Since Governor Murphy was first sworn into office, the Murphy Administration has increased funding for public preschool by over \$310 million, resulting in substantial growth in the number of districts offering state-funded preschool programs and increasing the number of children benefitting from participation in state-funded preschool by nearly 18,000.³ The Governor’s commitment to preschool expansion extends to support for New Jersey’s preschool infrastructure through \$150 million in federal funding allocated through the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) budget for early childhood and child care provider facilities. The Murphy Administration proposes to further expand preschool by building upon the standards set by New Jersey’s highly successful full-day Abbott Preschool Program.⁴ Key elements are highly qualified teachers, small classes, and a strong continuous improvement system that support children’s optimal learning and development.

Total state-funded preschool seats by year during Murphy Administration



RIGOROUS POLICIES, PROGRAM STANDARDS, AND PRACTICES

Public preschool in New Jersey is effective in part because the state has set and maintained rigorous policies, standards, and practices. The critical components for effective preschool listed below are characteristics of every successful preschool program that has operated at scale in the United States.⁵

NEW JERSEY MEETS ALL CRITICAL COMPONENTS FOR EFFECTIVE PRESCHOOL

- Adequate resources and administrative supports
 - Champions, especially the governor
 - Capable early childhood education (ECE) leadership in funding agency(ies)
 - Adequate infrastructure – data systems, facilities, staff preparation programs, coordination/governance systems across agencies.
- Skillful teachers paid at parity with comparable, certified professionals
- Supportive, knowledgeable district and program leaders
- High quantity
 - Class size of 15
 - Full school day for two years
- A coherent and integrated system of instruction and assessment
- Embedded supports for specialized populations (e.g., dual language learners and children with special needs)
- Personalized professional development system
- Continuous improvement process with data-driven decision making at every level

The current New Jersey Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines⁶ clearly articulate these rigorous standards but the preschool programs to which they apply are available to less than a third of the children in New Jersey. The benefits of providing preschool with these critical components provide compelling reasons for expansion.

New Jersey is already a national leader in early childhood education due to its strong standards and policies, and by expanding access to preschool while maintaining these policies, New Jersey will be home to the single most comprehensive and robust preschool expansion model in the country.⁷

- Most other states that offer universal access to preschool fall short on other critical components, particularly with how much education is offered. For example, Colorado (starting in 2023), Florida, and Vermont provide universal access but for only 10 hours per week. Colorado, Florida, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin only provide one year of preschool at age four.
- New Jersey is one of just three states (Vermont and Illinois are the others) that prioritize starting at age three and serve at least one in five three-year-old children. Washington, DC also prioritizes preschool at age three.
- Many other states refer to their programs as “universal” but cap funding at levels too low to serve everyone seeking to enroll.
- New Jersey’s mixed-delivery public preschool system is one of the most robust in the nation.⁸

- New Jersey is one of four states (others are Oklahoma, North Carolina, and West Virginia) that provide full funding to support a high-quality school-day preschool program.
- New Jersey has high standards for teachers and is just one of four states (with Hawaii, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island) that requires pay parity with K-12 for all teachers in state-funded preschool.
- New Jersey has the strongest class size limits at 15, followed by Colorado and Maine at 16.⁹
- New Jersey has strong evidence of long-term impact – only North Carolina¹⁰ and Alabama¹¹ have similar long-term evidence—and states that do not support high quality preschool fail to produce better long-term educational outcomes.¹²

STRATEGIC PLAN OBJECTIVE AND OVERVIEW

Successful expansion of high-quality preschool takes intentional planning in two phases – strategic foundational planning and strategic implementation planning. The objective of the *New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase I: The Foundation* is to establish a set of clear priorities to consider for reaching the goal of expanding high-quality preschool. More detailed and extensive research will be conducted to develop the second phase of this work, resulting in a detailed strategic implementation plan to execute the priorities set out in the strategic foundational plan. *The New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase II: Implementation* will be developed later in FY23.

Including school districts approved to expand preschool in September 2022 (FY23 Round 1), Governor Murphy has expanded access to high-quality preschool in 153 districts, funding nearly 70,000 seats for children in public preschool. The road to universal preschool (serving at least 70 percent of three- and four-year-olds) requires about 138,000 total seats for general education preschoolers in the 526 school districts serving elementary school children in the state.

The *New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase I: The Foundation* outlines considerations for reaching this goal in four key policy areas, described below:

FINANCING AND SCALING TO UNIVERSAL ACCESS: Considerations for enrollment targets and funding of the proposed expansion of preschool set the stage for the considerations provided in each of the following sections.

FACILITIES: Research-based considerations for minimum facilities standards for preschool classrooms and considerations for development of the capacity to meet preschool expansion goals.

WORKFORCE: What is known about the current early childhood workforce and capacity to meet the needs of a growing program with considerations for increasing the number of qualified preschool teachers and ensuring adequate and fair compensation for all teaching staff.

MIXED DELIVERY: Child care centers and Head Start working in partnership with public school districts are essential to secure the workforce and facilities needed to expand preschool throughout the state while ensuring the availability of child care beyond school hours. Considerations focus on strengthening this mixed delivery system that are critical to New Jersey's preschool success to date.

OPTIONS FOR APPROACHES TO STATE FINANCING OF UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL

A key policy decision for expansion of preschool in New Jersey is how the state will fund new and existing preschool seats. The options that follow explore the likely benefits and concerns regarding several approaches the state can take to fund expanded access to preschool and reach a level of coverage that could be considered universal.

STATE FUNDING OPTION 1: INCREASE ACCESS THROUGH FULLY STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL

Following the current Preschool Education Aid (PEA) model, the state could fully fund all operating costs for preschool and require that, within a reasonable timeframe, all districts accepting preschool funds serve at least 90 percent of their three- and four-year-old children in a full-day program. West Virginia provides universal pre-K that does not have an explicit or implicit local share. However, in West Virginia only half the cost is borne by the state with the other half paid for primarily with federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF) funds and Head Start funds; this is facilitated by the percentage of low-income families in West Virginia. Georgia's model is to fund a full-day universal preschool entirely from funding derived from state lottery revenue, but since the lottery-derived funding is less than \$5,000 per pupil, it is unlikely that this covers the actual cost of their preschool program. Additionally, Georgia increased class sizes from 20 to 22 seats because of funding inadequacy. See the box below for an illustration of how enrollment and expenditures might roll out if New Jersey opted to be the sole funder of universal preschool.

Likely Benefits

- A fully state-funded preschool program would eliminate local financial capacity as a barrier to provision of preschool.
- Districts already approved for preschool expansion funding applied with the understanding that all expanded seats would be fully state funded.

Concerns

- This is the most expensive option for the state.
- The state would pay the full cost for preschool in high wealth districts with substantial local financial capacity as well as in moderate and low wealth districts.
- This approach may create pressure to underfund the program and lower standards.



SAMPLE PLAN FOR PRESCHOOL EXPANSION ROLL-OUT: FULL STATE-FUNDING MODEL

The details below illustrate one example for how the state might reach universal preschool. Cost estimates are for universal coverage with all children served fully funded by the state (State Funding Option 1, above). This represents the maximum cost to state government, as cost to the state would be reduced if the state chooses a funding option that includes a local share and/or parent fees.

Calculations are based on the following data and assumptions:

Funding Data and Assumptions

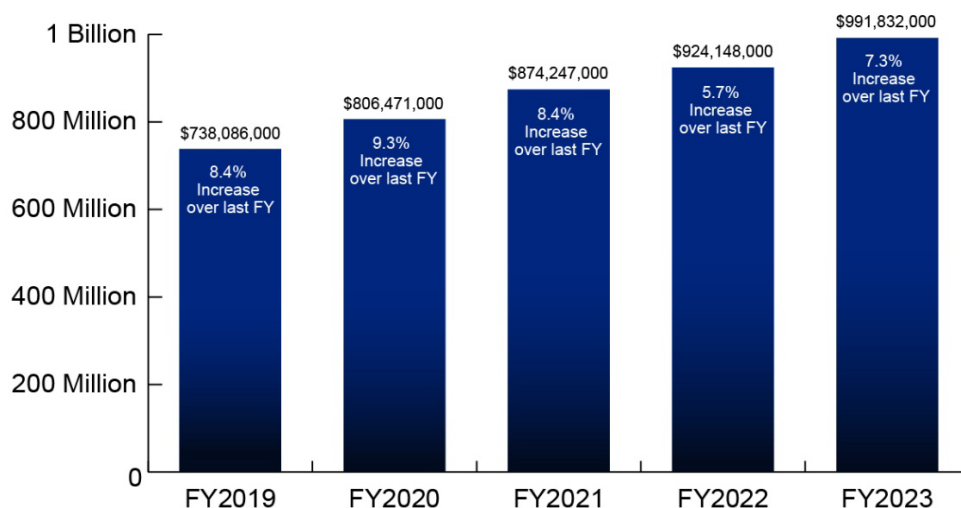
- FY22 Preschool Education Aid (PEA) is \$924,148,000.
- A reasonable per-child rate estimated at \$15,800.
- FY23 funding in the approved budget was \$991,832,000, an overall increase of \$68 million over FY22 preschool funding, including \$40 million to expand preschool into new districts.

Enrollment Data and Assumptions

- 210,000 three- and four-year-old children in New Jersey.
- FY23 PEA will support 62,774 full-day, high-quality preschool seats at \$15,800 per child.
- About 14,000 preschoolers with disabilities are served throughout the state.
- About 137,540 (65.5%) preschool-aged children are not supported through state preschool aid or special education aid.

Not including other costs to support implementation (e.g., facilities, scholarships, state capacity), the state will need approximately \$1.3 billion in additional funding to provide universal access to preschool. During the second phase of this strategic plan, a more precise estimate will be calculated based on the considerations detailed in Phase I.

Total state-funding for preschool by year during Murphy Administration



STATE FUNDING OPTION 2: FOLLOW THE REQUIREMENTS ALREADY LAID OUT IN THE SCHOOL FUNDING REFORM ACT (SFRA)

The SFRA¹³ legislated a plan for preschool expansion designating some districts as “universal” and some as “targeted”. Language in the SFRA defines universal preschool as reaching 90 percent of eligible three- and four-year-olds, but only for districts with a significant portion of low-income children. A modified, or targeted definition of access is used for all other districts. In targeted districts, only low-income children would receive state funding for preschool and all other children could either be funded locally or charged tuition. Districts applying to expand state-funded preschool are already permitted to charge tuition to certain parents, providing precedent for charging fees.¹⁴

Likely Benefits

- The cost to the state budget is less than a fully state-funded model, is already supported by legislation, and ensures access for low-income children.
- Most of the districts in the universal designation of SFRA are already PEA-funded.

Concerns

- District eligibility has been broader than the SFRA universal definition for most rounds of preschool expansion. As a result, a small group of districts classified as “targeted” under the SFRA already serve more children with full state funding than would be permitted under the SFRA.
- The SFRA classifies targeted and universal districts in part based on District Factor Groups (DFGs) that have not been updated since 2000 and may no longer accurately reflect variations in district wealth and needs.
- The state may be less likely to achieve universal coverage with this approach because, to adequately fund classrooms to meet state standards, local tuition costs would need to equal the preschool per pupil rate of the district. This is much higher than typical private preschool tuition costs and could result in fewer children receiving the benefits of the higher quality state preschool program. However, districts can partially subsidize costs and the marginal cost of additional children may be lower than the average cost.

STATE FUNDING OPTION 3: EXPAND AND FUND PRESCHOOL LIKE KINDERGARTEN

The state could support preschool expansion by funding preschool the same way it funds kindergarten. Districts would have the option of offering public preschool unless already required to do so (i.e., the former Abbott districts). Districts choosing to offer public preschool would receive state funding in the same manner as kindergarten, with a wealth-equalized state share of per-child costs. Districts that opt-in would be expected to provide access to all preschool children in their district. This approach was adopted by several states with universal preschool including Iowa, Maine, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. Other states with a required local share include Alabama, Colorado, and North Carolina.

Likely Benefits

- This option would lower costs to the state budget compared to full state funding or the SFRA model since many districts would contribute a local share for all children, not just those over income eligibility.
- The state could offer financial incentives beyond the “typical” state share (for example, funding for start-up costs) to encourage district participation.

Concerns

- This model may take longer to reach universal access as some districts may not opt in for many years as with the expansion of kindergarten. Pockets across the state might remain unserved (though in other states using this approach, such as Oklahoma and Wisconsin, 99 percent of districts participate).
- Over 120 non-Abbott districts currently receiving PEA funding applied to expand with the expectation that they would receive full funding even though the annual appropriation was not guaranteed.
- This option could impact property taxes in many districts and might initially require an exception to the 2 percent cap increase.

STATE FUNDING OPTION 4: EXPAND PRESCHOOL BY COMBINING THE SFRA AND KINDERGARTEN MODELS

The state could require and fully-fund preschool in districts with high concentrations of poverty (e.g., 40 percent, 20 percent or more children qualifying for free/reduced lunch). The state would fully fund all low-income children in districts with lower concentrations of poverty that opt in. Other districts could offer preschool to all children with the state providing a wealth-equalized state share of per-child costs.

Likely Benefits

- This option would also lower costs to the state budget compared to full state funding or the SFRA model.
- Most districts currently operating state-funded preschool would continue to receive full-funding.

Concerns

- Costs to the state budget would be higher than when there is a more limited local share, assuming enrollment is at least as high as in other options.
- This approach may take longer to reach universal access than options with a more limited local cost share, and a few districts may never opt in.
- This option could impact property taxes in some districts and might initially require an exception to the 2 percent cap increase.

OPTIONS FOR SCALING TO UNIVERSAL ACCESS

New Jersey has two options for scaling up to universal preschool access. The options have different implications for who is served and how quickly the program reaches universal coverage in the districts that offer preschool. For example, the current approach of adding districts willing to open even a very small number of classrooms produces a different pattern of expansion than prioritizing districts that plan to rapidly achieve universal coverage (which likely is easier to accomplish in districts that already offer preschool). The state could employ a mix of the two strategies to balance geographic expansion with saturation of high need communities that produces economies of scale and stronger child outcomes. The following descriptions explore these options:

SCALING OPTION 1: CONTINUING THE CURRENT APPROACH

For the past five years, the state has allowed new districts with more than 20 percent of children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) to apply for preschool funding as well as all districts that already receive state aid for preschool. In 2022, this was expanded to districts with more than 10 percent qualifying for FRPL. This approach prioritizes broad access across the state geographically but does not assure that districts provide universal access or that they prioritize enrolling the most disadvantaged children in their communities.

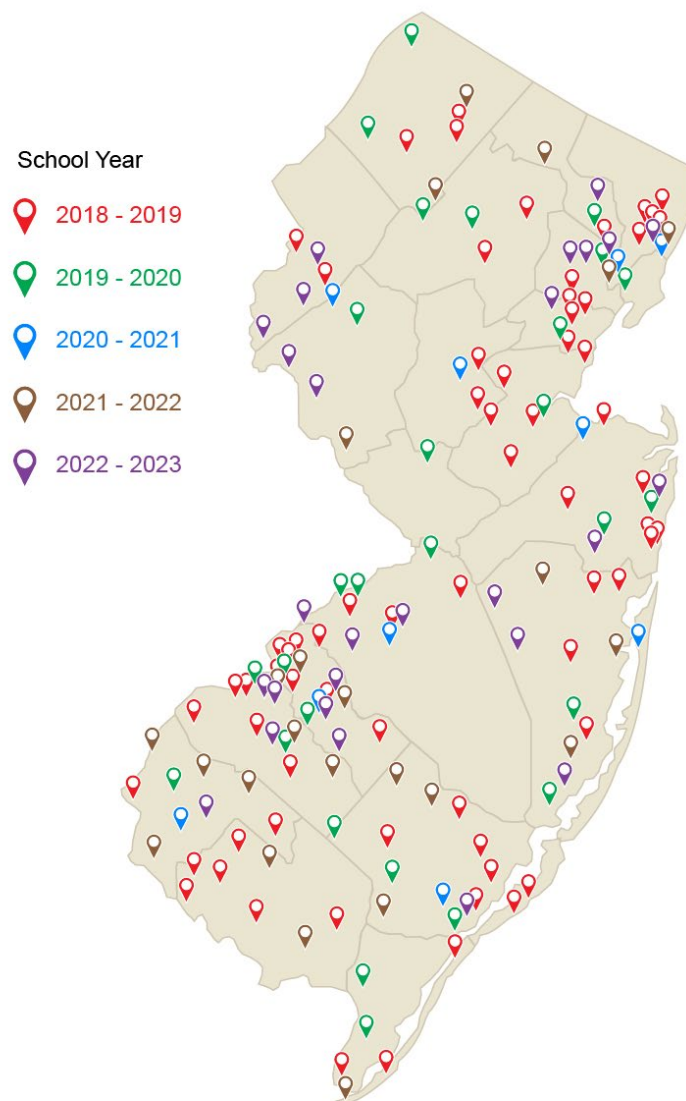
Likely Benefits

- Focusing on adding new districts each year provides more geographically diverse program access.
- Districts choose to apply when they are ready to implement preschool.
- Maximizing the number of eligible districts likely increases the take-up rate and speeds expansion.

Concerns

- Most of the newly expanded districts serve only a small percentage of their preschool children and do not have a firm deadline for universal access.
- There is no assurance that children with the greatest needs who would benefit most are enrolled.
- Efforts to recruit districts to apply increases costs.
- Universal coverage may be long delayed.

New PEA school districts by year during Murphy Administration



SCALING OPTION 2: PRIORITIZE DISTRICTS COMMITTED TO UNIVERSAL ACCESS

New Jersey could focus on reaching universal coverage by requiring that districts receiving preschool aid submit plans specifying a date to achieve universal coverage. This would likely focus expansion more within districts that already receive state aid for preschool but also would allow new districts to join if they are willing to commit to universal access. From a statewide perspective, this approach prioritizes universal coverage which assures that the most disadvantaged children will not be left out.

Likely Benefits

- Children with the greatest needs will be served in each community, improving equity and outcomes.
- When most children attend the program, peer effects and saturation increase long-term outcomes.¹⁵
- Programs operating at a larger scale are needed to adequately fund the full complement of district support and administrative staff essential for strong implementation, and economies of scale lower costs per child.

Concerns

- It may take longer for children in other parts of the state to receive state preschool.
- Districts unwilling to commit to universal preschool may delay offering any preschool.

Note: Currently, seven school districts do not offer full-day kindergarten and others offer it to only some of their students. During scaling, ensuring that all kindergarten students have access to full-day kindergarten will need to be taken into consideration.

OPTIONS FOR ESTIMATING ADEQUATE PRESCHOOL FUNDING LEVELS

Maintaining New Jersey's current high standard requires a substantial and sustained investment in direct services to children, district administration, teacher training, and facilities. It is necessary to periodically assess the adequacy of funding per child to support highly effective programs that will continue to produce the strong long-term outcomes the program produced in the past. The descriptions that follow explore options for assessing the adequacy of preschool per-child rates. Program size (economies of scale), labor markets, facilities and utilities costs, and needs of the student population can impact the cost to adequately fund preschool over time.

FUNDING LEVEL OPTION 1: USE A COST MODELING TOOL TO ESTIMATE PER-CHILD RATES

A cost modeling tool can be used to estimate the cost of implementing a high-quality preschool program with enrollment increases added each year. The modeling tool should provide detailed estimates of costs including such support services as classroom observations and program evaluation as well as classroom-associated costs and building and district level program administration. The tool should be adaptable to add more specifics as needed.

Likely Benefits

- The cost is low as this approach entails limited data collection and requires only staff and/or consultant time to conduct and review the estimation procedures and to evaluate the results.
- Cost estimates – current and future – can be produced within a few weeks or months.

Concerns

- When key information is unknown, modeling relies on assumptions that cannot be verified, potentially leading to less-accurate estimates.

- The pandemic, inflation, and labor market changes have affected early childhood programs in ways that increase uncertainty about current and future costs.
- Information is lacking on private provider costs compared to public schools, which makes it more difficult to accurately estimate contracted private provider costs per child.

FUNDING LEVEL OPTION 2: CONDUCT A STUDY OF CURRENT PROGRAM BUDGETS

More accurate information on appropriate program costs would be obtained by conducting a study of existing district and private provider budgets currently participating in the state preschool program. An analysis of these budgets would result in data to estimate the funding level necessary for districts and private providers to fully meet state standards. Subsequently, these estimates could be updated annually using a cost modeling tool and information on a few key cost drivers such as teacher and assistant salaries and benefits.

Likely Benefits

- Such a study will provide more accurate, up-to-date information on costs and how they vary by district and type of provider than is currently available for modeling.
- A cost study will instill greater confidence in the field that changes brought on by the pandemic and inflation are taken into account and that rates are accurate for all types of providers (including private and Head Start) and all regions of the state.
- Using existing budget data from current preschool program participants is less intensive, less costly, and quicker than conducting a statewide survey of costs (see Funding Level Option 3).

Concerns

- This approach is somewhat costlier and more time-consuming than relying on a cost modeling tool alone.
- Budgets may differ somewhat from actual costs, but differences are likely to be quite small on average.

FUNDING LEVEL OPTION 3: CONDUCT A COMPREHENSIVE, STATEWIDE COST STUDY

The most accurate cost information would be obtained by conducting a comprehensive, statewide cost study of districts, private providers, and Head Start agencies currently participating in the state preschool program. The most intensive version of this approach would obtain cost information directly through a survey of every participating program. In future years, estimates based on the survey could be updated based on periodic future surveys or projections based on information on a few key cost drivers. North Carolina recently used a preschool cost survey¹⁶ to provide estimates for that state's legislature to use in setting funding levels.

Likely Benefits

- A comprehensive cost study is the most accurate method for estimating the per-child rates necessary to adequately fund preschool and understand how adequate rates per child vary by district and type of provider.
- A cost study will instill greater confidence in the field that changes brought on by the pandemic are considered and that rates are fair across districts and provider types.

Concerns

- This approach is costlier and more time-consuming than other outlined approaches.
- The state will need to require or strongly encourage that districts and contracted providers fully participate in a cost survey.

- The survey requires time and effort from preschool program providers who may also need some guidance on how to complete the survey.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICIES THAT AFFECT FINANCING

In addition to the broad strategies discussed above, other more specific policies related to financing influence how quickly and successfully New Jersey can provide universal preschool throughout the state. The considerations that follow explore possible policy changes based on lessons learned from implementing New Jersey's existing preschool programs.

FUNDING POLICY CONSIDERATION 1: FACILITATE INCREASED PROGRAM ACCESS AND QUALITY IN THE REMAINING ECPA AND ELLI PROGRAMS

There are 23 school districts remaining in the former Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) program and Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI) receiving partial funding to serve just under 2,000 preschoolers. These programs, which are no longer in effect, differ considerably from New Jersey's expansion model. Despite eligibility for preschool expansion funding, these districts have not applied and instead continue to offer programs with less stringent standards (e.g., larger class sizes), more limited eligibility and duration. Most children served in ECPA/ELLI districts attend half-day programs. Only 10 serve any three-year-olds. None collaborate with private providers.

Likely Benefits

- More children would be served in high-quality, effective programs, increasing equity and improving outcomes for children.
- Preschool funding calculations would be streamlined under one system, eliminating the need to conduct separate calculations for a very small number of districts.
- There is little oversight of program quality in the remaining ECPA and ELLI districts, and it would be more efficient for the state to extend oversight and support if they operated under the same standards as other districts.

Concerns

- Some ECPA and ELLI districts may choose to offer no preschool program without adequate supports and reasonable timelines to meet the "new" program standards.

FUNDING POLICY CONSIDERATION 2: DETERMINING AND PAYING FOR DISTRICT-WIDE COSTS

The preschool per-child rates include funding for district-wide costs (including coaches, nurses, professional development, preschool intervention and referral, and program supervision), but it can be difficult for districts to determine how much state funding to set aside to support these costs. Preschool aid could be reconfigured to pay for district-wide and building level (including private provider) costs separately. This could account for economies of scale and other variations that affect district-wide and individual child costs differently.

Likely Benefits

- Separating district-wide costs would relieve districts from the burden of determining how much funding to pull from state per-child rates, reduce tensions between districts and providers, and assure adequate funding reaches the classroom level.

Concerns

- The state would need to obtain relevant information from districts and manage the rate determinations.

FUNDING POLICY CONSIDERATION 3: STATE PRESCHOOL FUNDING AND THE SCHOOL FUNDING FORMULA

Although preschool rates are referenced in the SFRA, Preschool Education Aid is calculated and managed separately from state aid provided through the school funding formula for K-12. This leaves preschool distinguished as a discretionary program that is disconnected from the state's primary means of assuring that education funding is fair and adequate. Preschool funding could instead be integrated into the school funding formula.

Likely Benefits

- Managing preschool funding through the school funding formula system would indicate that state preschool is viewed as a permanent and integral part of public education in New Jersey with stable funding.¹⁷
- This would provide a clear signal of the state's vision for preschool as part of a continuous preschool through grade 12 educational system.

Concerns

- Adjustments are likely to be needed as districts scale up their programs. Preschool budget amounts would need to be based on something like projected enrollment increases instead of five-year growth rates until the program reaches maturity.
- The funding formula may need provisions to account for how the mix of in-district, child care and Head Start settings affects districts' operating costs as payments to child care and Head Start typically cover facility costs not included in operating costs for children served in public school buildings.
- To prevent misallocation, the preschool funding amount could be directed to a restricted fund that prevents shifting preschool funds to other uses.

FUNDING POLICY CONSIDERATION 4: LEVERAGE AVAILABLE FEDERAL FUNDING TO SUPPORT UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL

Current preschool program costs are offset by federal dollars from special education and Medicare, federal food programs, Head Start, child care subsidy, and other sources. As the program expands, the state will continue to look globally across ECE funding streams to see where efficiencies may be made.

As originally proposed, the federal Build Back Better Act would have significantly offset the additional state funding needed to expand high-quality preschool. Estimates based on current state funding and full implementation of the original legislation suggest that New Jersey could have been eligible for \$1.3 billion in federal funding, ultimately supporting almost 60 percent of the total cost of providing universal preschool.¹⁸ Although no viable bills are currently proposed to provide additional federal funding for public preschool, New Jersey should remain vigilant in pursuing opportunities as they arise.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPROVING AND EXPANDING PRESCHOOL FACILITIES

Achieving universal preschool at New Jersey's current high standard will require a substantial investment in facilities including upgrades to existing child care facilities, conversion of other facilities for use as preschool facilities, and new construction. To reach a credible threshold of enrollment for universal preschool, New Jersey needs to increase preschool enrollment by approximately 5,000 more children per year, which requires 333 classrooms per year. We estimate that 70 percent of the children remaining to be enrolled (a figure consistent with experience to date) are in private providers. With a target enrollment increase of 5,000 per year, this would be 3,500 children in 175 private provider classrooms with a need for 58 additional classrooms to meet the requirement of 15 students per classroom. Another 100 classrooms would be required annually for children not already attending a private program. Of course, some existing classrooms may not be converted to use for public preschool. Taking this into account, a rough estimate of the annual space needs for universal preschool is 166 new classrooms and 166 existing private provider classrooms. The considerations that follow explore short- and long-term strategies to expand the availability of adequate preschool facilities within New Jersey's mixed delivery system.

FACILITIES CONSIDERATION 1: PRESCHOOL FACILITIES STANDARDS AND WAIVERS

The DOE developed preschool facilities standards based on the best available evidence now used for nearly two decades. These standards are consistent with recommendations from the Child Welfare League of America, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, and federal General Services Administration.¹⁹ They require more space per child than standards for most other states that are based on child care licensing standards. One way to balance the need for optimal facilities against the need to accelerate the pace of expansion to serve more children is to maintain standards but permit waivers for existing child care facilities. Such waivers could be permanent or time-limited depending on how far below standards a facility falls. For example, child care facilities that meet current Department of Children and Families (DCF) licensing standards differ much less from the DOE square foot requirements than those built under older DCF standards.

Likely Benefits

- Waivers for licensed child care facilities permit faster expansion of preschool to serve more children and equalize access to high-quality preschool, as they are available immediately and at a lower cost.
- Requiring plans with a fixed date for improvement or replacement of the facilities that do not meet current standards ensures that significant variations that impede quality are temporary.

Concerns

- The current minimum usable square footage requirements for DCF classrooms is just six percent lower than DOE standards if both are limited to 15 children per room. Although the smaller size of the child care classrooms may make some small difference, it may not be detectable and is unlikely to be large enough to justify delays in expansion to serve more children or the cost to replace them with new facilities.
- Child care classrooms that meet the older DCF standard even with 15 children provide 20 percent less space than the DOE preschool standard. Research is not precise enough to indicate how much this matters, but this seems like a noticeable difference for children and teachers.
- Waivers will allow more inequality in facilities quality but reduce inequality in whether children receive high-quality preschool at all.

FACILITIES CONSIDERATION 2: STANDARDS FOR NEW CHILD CARE FACILITIES

Even if all suitable, available facilities are utilized, some new facilities will likely be needed to ensure adequate capacity and quality. These could be constructed by raising DCF child care licensing standards for new facilities

serving children ages three and four so that there is one set of joint DOE-DCF standards. Such a policy change could be announced well in advance of its implementation to preclude adverse impacts on facilities planning and development.

Likely Benefits

- This will raise the quality of child care and preschool facilities to the benefit of the children served.
- Facilities standards alignment will support seamless integration of private providers into the state's universal preschool program.

Concerns

- Higher facilities standards for licensed child care could raise the cost of child care slightly.

FACILITIES CONSIDERATION 3: COUNTY-SPECIFIC FACILITIES PLANNING WITH STATE SUPPORT

The large number of small school districts in New Jersey makes planning preschool expansion to serve all children in a mixed delivery system complex and difficult for district administration. County-wide planning may facilitate the optimal use of Head Start and private provider agencies that serve multiple school district attendance areas, enhance shared services agreements across districts, and reduce demands on individual district administration. County-wide planning could be led and supported by DOE county office staff in partnership with county Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs). Districts could cooperate with interested private providers in developing detailed plans to serve all children in a county including maximizing use of existing facilities before developing new facilities. This work would require technical support to populate a database on facility supply and demand with district-specific information. Such support should augment existing capacity in the DOE county offices and the CCR&Rs. Support would include: (a) a list of existing facilities serving preschoolers, whether they meet or depart from DOE standards and their expected lifespan (including Temporary Classroom Units that may need replacement); and (b) estimates of the numbers of three- and four-year-olds enrolled currently and projected. The facilities list could be geocoded to provide a map of facilities availability to compare with the estimated and projected need.

Likely Benefits

- A county database would allow private providers to indicate their willingness to partner in providing preschool, describe the facilities capacity they have, and identify their needs for facility upgrades. Districts would not need to seek out this information on their own.
- A county database would facilitate shared services agreements and other cross-district collaborations (private providers that serve children in more than one district) to meet program requirements.
- Expansion will be faster, more equitable, and better implemented if districts have realistic facilities plans to accommodate all eligible children and these plans are based on capacity in neighboring districts that could easily serve their children.

Concerns

- There will be costs to support planning and the initial development and on-going maintenance of the county databases. Costs may be minimized if a central state office supports one person in each county office who works in conjunction with those already engaged in county level planning for child care.
- Local district authority must be respected while encouraging and supporting joint planning across districts.

FACILITIES CONSIDERATION 4: SUPPORT FOR ADEQUATE PRESCHOOL FACILITIES

State financial support for facilities improvements in public and private settings could be provided through a combination of one-time start-up funding, a set-aside of annual funding, and inclusion of facilities costs in rates paid per child enrolled. Some facilities investments could be targeted based on county-wide facilities assessments to ensure maximum use of existing district and child care facilities prior to new construction. Increasing the length of private provider contracts could facilitate private investments in facilities improvement and construction.

Likely Benefits

- Start-up grants could be used for renovation to upgrade to DOE standards. For example, Alabama allows school districts and private providers to apply for up to \$120,000 per classroom in start-up capital funding.
- As most private providers rent facilities, long-term contracts will increase private provider ability to acquire long-term leases for quality facilities and to persuade landlords to upgrade and maintain facilities to meet the specific needs of high-quality preschool.
- Allocating a specific portion of annual funding for facilities may prevent underinvestment in facilities and encourage proper maintenance.
- COVID-relief funding made available through the EDA to make improvements to child care facilities may help to support facilities development, especially if grantees are encouraged to meet DOE standards.

Concerns

- Capacity will be needed to review a constant stream of proposals for start-up funds.
- Specialized expertise will be required to support planning and efficient use of facilities' development which is complex, technical, and involves economic uncertainties and unique local circumstances.
- Restricting how funding is allocated between operating and facilities costs reduces local flexibility.

FACILITIES CONSIDERATION 5: ORGANIZATIONS TO ASSIST WITH FACILITIES DEVELOPMENT

In the FY23 budget, \$120 million in federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds is allocated to upgrade existing classrooms and build new preschool facilities to ensure New Jersey can continue to deliver high-quality preschool through expansion efforts. In addition, \$30 million more in ARP funds is allocated in the budget to the Economic Development Authority to support the improvement of child care provider facilities.

To supplement the above funding, the state could offer to assist with facilities development by private providers and public schools through one or more organizations. Private organizations such as the Early Learning Property Management²⁰ (ELPM) organization in Atlanta partnered with philanthropy to support facilities development by private providers. A state agency could be charged with providing similar facilities development services to public schools.

Likely Benefits

- A state organization could oversee or provide the following services: technical assistance on design and construction, management of development and construction, full or partial financing, the sale of publicly financed facilities to private providers, and management of facilities rented to private providers.
- State oversight of facilities improvements would facilitate full use of existing state funding streams eligible for private provider and/or public school use.

Concerns

- There could be a cost for staff to fulfill this new role.

INCREASING PRESCHOOL WORKFORCE CAPACITY

To achieve universal preschool at New Jersey's current high standard, we estimate that 5,000 new or upgraded classrooms will be required. The Abbott experience confirmed that the current teaching force in private provider classrooms is experienced and has interest in early childhood education as a profession. This valuable asset was critical to the rapid expansion and on-going success of the Abbott preschool program. However, using results from an extensive needs assessment conducted in 2009 to inform preschool expansion, an estimated 50 percent of the 3,000 – 4,000 current teachers in child care and Head Start centers will need to obtain a bachelor's degree to meet state preschool certification requirements.²¹ This is not easy to accomplish when working a full-time, 40-hour per week, 12-month job and generally making up to \$30,000 annually, typically without benefits. Most of the remaining teachers have a bachelor's degree but often without a P-3 teaching license and will need to enroll in an alternate route program. The considerations that follow explore ways to support current teachers in obtaining the degree and certification necessary to teach in state preschool classrooms.

WORKFORCE CONSIDERATION 1: PROVIDE SCHOLARSHIPS TO EXISTING CHILD CARE AND HEAD START TEACHERS TO OBTAIN CREDENTIALS WITHIN SIX YEARS

During scale-up, provide scholarship dollars to assist teachers in contracting private provider classrooms to become fully qualified. Scholarships could be provided in conjunction with existing state scholarship systems (e.g., Grow NJ Kids). Replicating the successful scholarship program offered under Abbott expansion, the state could allow contracting with private provider classrooms if the teachers are enrolled in a college teacher education program, including alternate route, and have a plan approved by an institution of higher education to complete the requirements for licensure within six years.

Likely Benefits

- Obtaining higher credentials will professionalize the current child care workforce and allow them to teach within the state preschool program.
- Preparing existing child care teachers will reduce the number of new teachers needed to achieve expansion goals.
- Child care centers and Head Start employ a more diverse workforce. Ensuring that the existing teachers stay in their jobs by supporting their educational attainment will maintain diversity.

Concerns

- The estimated cost of obtaining the credentials is about \$43,320 per teacher over the course of six years, including tuition, books, and testing fees. However, the State can take advantage of existing federal programs to support scholarships costs. Also, preschool per-child rates support salary parity for certified teachers in private provider locations. The cost of providing scholarships to uncertified teachers may be largely offset by the difference in their salaries while still working towards certification.
- Some teachers may choose not to obtain certification within a reasonable timeframe and would then need to be replaced as lead teachers. During Abbott expansion, these teachers often chose to become assistant teachers or move into infant/toddler classrooms.

WORKFORCE CONSIDERATION 2: INCENTIVIZE CREDENTIAL COMPLETION

Institute a salary structure for teachers working toward the teacher license that would provide regular salary increases as they meet milestones toward completion (e.g., 30 credits, 60 credits, 90 credits). For alternate route candidates, provide salaries at 80 percent of the district salary scale as soon as they enroll in the alternate route program with full salary parity as the incentive to complete the program on time.

Likely Benefits

- Salary increases will motivate teachers to complete their certification within a six-year timeframe, decrease teacher turnover and provide compensation for increased knowledge.

Concerns

- Graduated increases while teachers are earning certification will lower the amount of offset per-child funding that can be used to pay for scholarships.
- Adjusting private provider budgets to account for lower teacher salaries will complicate the budget approval process.

WORKFORCE CONSIDERATION 3: INCENTIVIZE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN COUNTY AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION (IHE) TO FACILITATE PRESCHOOL TEACHER CERTIFICATION

County and four-year colleges can establish partnerships to marshal preschool teachers through the coursework necessary to obtain P-3 teaching certification. County colleges and four-year colleges could establish joint courses for freshmen and sophomores in which students from both institutions are enrolled. In this model, partnering IHEs would develop articulated programs to ensure continuity in coursework and assist in the management of tuition costs for students.

Likely Benefits

- County colleges are typically more adept at facilitating recruitment of non-traditional students, providing coursework in ways that are accessible to working students, and personalized advisement and mentoring of teacher candidates.
- Four-year colleges and universities have well-developed course content for completing early childhood teacher licensure as well as relationships with providers and districts to facilitate practicum and student teaching placements.

Concerns

- IHEs would need new funding to establish partnerships, plan for additional enrollment and hire additional faculty to meet the anticipated need. This might include short-term grant funding of, for example, \$150,000 in the first year, and \$50,000 for two subsequent years for 17 teams of strategically placed county and four-year IHEs to recruit and mentor preschool teachers in all 21 counties.

WORKFORCE CONSIDERATION 4: INCREASE BILINGUAL EXPERTISE AND DEVELOP “GROW YOUR OWN” TEACHER RECRUITMENT MODELS

About 30 percent of young children in New Jersey are Hispanic²² and most of them speak Spanish at home. An additional 27 percent are Black or other minority.²³ However, only eight percent of K-12 teachers are Hispanic and nine percent are Black or other minority.²⁴

To recruit and retain a qualified Spanish/English preschool teacher workforce, the State could implement a cohort support model for current private provider teachers who are fluent in Spanish, provide funding to become fluent in English for those that need it, and allow extra time for completion of the degree.

To increase persons of color in the teacher pipeline, the State could provide grants to districts serving majority students of color to establish “Grow Your Own” teacher development projects in coordination with area community colleges by providing high school coursework equivalent to six credits of ECE coursework.

Likely Benefits

- Bilingualism confers multiple lifelong advantages including greater achievement in school. Increasing the number of qualified bilingual ECE teachers allows school districts and their partners to support bilingual acquisition for all preschool children.
- All children benefit from having diversity in the teacher workforce.²⁵

Concerns

- These considerations are targeted to specific teachers and districts. Other teachers, especially those who speak other non-English languages, and districts may object to being excluded.

WORKFORCE CONSIDERATION 5: ESTABLISH QUALIFICATIONS FOR ASSISTANT TEACHERS AS INSTRUCTIONAL ASSISTANTS

Research indicates that the professional preparation of preschool teacher assistants is associated with program quality. Like lead teachers, assistant teachers in New Jersey preschool classrooms should meet specific qualifications such as a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or equivalent, develop annual professional development plans with their supervisor or coach, be provided with that professional development, participate in all professional development offered to teachers, and receive commensurate compensation and benefits.

Likely Benefits

- Increasing expectations for teacher assistants will elevate program quality by allowing them to serve as co-teachers and instructional assistants in the classroom.

Concerns

- Support and systems will need to be developed and implemented.
- Current assistant teachers may not meet these qualifications.

WORKFORCE CONSIDERATION 6: EXPLORE COMPARABLE BENEFITS FOR TEACHERS IN PRIVATE PROVIDER SETTINGS

New Jersey Administrative Code requires that public preschool teachers in child care and Head Start settings receive compensation that is “comparable” to their peers in public school classrooms, but compensation is often interpreted to represent only teacher salaries. Benefits (health care, retirement, paid time off) are an important component of an employee’s overall compensation and the disparity between benefit packages for teachers in public and nonpublic settings contributes to teacher turnover in private provider settings.

Likely Benefits

- Ensuring that comparable compensation includes both salaries and benefits will improve recruitment and retention of qualified teachers, reinforcing quality across mixed delivery settings.

Concerns

- Per-child costs will likely need to be adjusted to support comparable benefits.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING AND EXPANDING MIXED DELIVERY PRESCHOOL

Achieving universal preschool at New Jersey’s current high standard will require maintaining and enhancing the current mixed delivery model, in which preschool children are served in a combination of public school classrooms

and private provider settings, specifically child care centers and Head Start programs. A mixed delivery system takes advantage of existing private provider facilities to meet the goal of universal access while remaining responsive to parental choice and enhancing the benefits of preschool by raising quality for the entire birth to third-grade continuum. Kindergarten readiness, third-grade literacy, and college and career preparation are more attainable if all programs serving children under the age of five are adequately funded to provide the critical components of effective care and education. The following considerations explore ways to reinforce and expand the state's current mixed delivery system for public preschool.

MIXED DELIVERY CONSIDERATION 1: ESTABLISH A TIMELINE FOR DISTRICTS TO COLLABORATE WITH ALL WILLING AND ABLE PRIVATE PROVIDERS

Collaboration with all willing and able private providers is mandated in the Abbott districts and is the reason for the program's rapid early expansion. It is unlikely that the state will achieve universal preschool access without the capacity of private providers. Additionally, child care centers and Head Start agencies also provide services to other children and families including children at younger ages (and sometimes school-age); if three- and four-year-olds leave these programs, the administrative and other overhead costs must be borne by the remaining children and families, which could raise the costs of infant-toddler care and could force some out of business, and reduce supply.

Likely Benefits

- A timeline for mixed delivery when districts are not reaching their universe will set up many districts to reach all children without the unnecessary expense and time it takes to build new district facilities.
- Approximately 70 percent of preschool-aged children outside the state preschool program are receiving services in private provider settings. A timeline for mixed delivery will ensure that the private providers already serving these children won't lose them to the free public program.
- Reinforcing the role of private providers in the care and education of young children supports these small businesses (which are often owned by minority women) and the individuals they employ (also often minority women).
- Collaboration with Head Start agencies offers a cost savings by leveraging the federal funding used to serve children in Head Start centers. It also leverages the additional services Head Start agencies are required to provide for low-income children and families.
- The early learning expertise in existing child care and Head Start programs can be valuable to school districts that typically have no experience with operating preschool classrooms.

Concerns

- There may be some efficiencies lost by serving children across multiple types of settings.
- Some districts may resist the expectation, but there is strong and successful precedent from the Abbott experience.

MIXED DELIVERY CONSIDERATION 2: IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES THAT MAKE COLLABORATION MORE ATTRACTIVE TO DISTRICTS AND PRIVATE PROVIDERS

Even within the context of a timeline for collaboration, the State can explore incentives that make collaboration a more attractive endeavor for districts and private providers. Private providers could be offered funding through a quality set-aside for non-contracted classes (i.e., other age groups, especially infants and toddlers) and wrap-around care.²⁶ The State could also build upon existing systems of shared services to assist districts and providers with the provision of such things as coaching, preschool intervention and referral, professional development, benefits, materials procurement, and accounting services (for private providers).²⁷

Likely Benefits

- Shared service agreements are an effective mechanism for providers and districts to pool resources to strengthen business and teaching practices. Especially in districts with a small universe of children, alliances would help create efficiencies in hiring preschool-related staff.
- Agreements would encourage the kinds of cross-district partnerships that result in the exchange of best practices and lessons learned.

Concerns

- State level facilitation may be needed to establish systems of shared services as the program expands across the state.

MIXED DELIVERY CONSIDERATION 3: IDENTIFY DISTRICTS AND PRIVATE PROVIDERS WITH STRONG COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES TO SERVE AS MENTORS TO OTHERS

The Abbott districts have almost 25 years of experience with mixed delivery. Some of these districts have particularly strong collaborative practices that can be documented and shared with districts that are newer to mixed delivery preschool. In fact, some other Abbott districts may benefit from this information as well.

Likely Benefits

- Instead of asking districts and private providers to figure out collaborative relationships on their own, the state can leverage examples of successful mixed delivery to give them a head start.
- Districts each tend to approach collaboration differently, which can cause confusion when private providers share experiences with each other, and especially when private providers work across several districts. Documenting best practices with the expectation that districts and providers implement them resolves inconsistencies across the state.

Concerns

- State time will be needed to investigate and document the best practices.

MIXED DELIVERY CONSIDERATION 4: STRENGTHEN COUNTY-WIDE SUPPORT TO ENSURE EARLY AND ON-GOING COLLABORATION WITH PRIVATE PROVIDERS

Within the county-wide structure outlined above, the DOE will have information on the availability and willingness of private providers to participate in the state preschool program and where providers can add to districts' capacity to serve children. This information will help the DOE to differentiate between situations where districts and providers are unwilling to collaborate versus situations where districts and providers are unable or unavailable to collaborate. The DOE can then engage with districts and providers to mitigate the issues preventing successful collaboration.

Likely Benefits

- Increased state monitoring and support for mixed delivery will signal the state's commitment to a mixed delivery system.
- Increasing the DOE's understanding of the issues preventing collaboration will lead to better guidance and policies to support mixed delivery in the long-term.

Concerns

- The State will need to build capacity, especially at the county level, to effectively engage with the large number of districts and providers to resolve issues inhibiting collaboration.

MIXED DELIVERY CONSIDERATION 5: ESTABLISH A PRESCHOOL SUBCOMMITTEE TO THE NEW JERSEY COUNCIL FOR YOUNG CHILDREN (NJCYC) TO IMPROVE DISTRICT AND PROVIDER COLLABORATIONS

Although New Jersey's mixed delivery system is one of the most robust in the country,²⁸ there are opportunities to improve the system. Communication between the state, school districts, and private providers can be improved to achieve more uniform implementation of program rules and standards across settings and to clarify guidance to facilitate successful expansion. A formalized subcommittee of the NJCYC focused specifically on preschool implementation could be used to strengthen the mixed delivery system. Membership should adequately represent preschool stakeholders, influential organizations and thought leaders in early learning who can provide informed recommendations.

Additionally, this committee could advise on facilities issues and develop recommendations to create incentives, minimize barriers, and reduce costs for facilities development. Preschool facilities development is complex, and we have found no examples of statewide systemic approaches to preschool facilities funding anywhere in the country.

Likely Benefits

- A subcommittee would reinforce the role of the NJCYC as a body responsible for advising the state on policy issues related to universal preschool.
- The scope of the NJCYC goes beyond preschool and can ensure that recommendations consider the entire birth-3rd grade continuum of care and education.
- The DOE can use feedback from the subcommittee to clarify and/or strengthen guidance to support collaboration.

Concerns

- The structure of the NJCYC would dictate that subcommittee recommendations go through the larger Council, and then to the DOE through the Interdepartmental Planning Group (IPG). The IPG consists of the administrators from each of the state's departments with oversight of programs and services for children from pregnancy to age eight, including the Head Start Collaboration Director. Especially during the initial years of expansion when implementation decisions may be needed quickly, the timing and frequency of NJCYC and IPG meetings may delay the time it takes for critical recommendations to reach the level of attention needed to facilitate successful collaboration.

MIXED DELIVERY CONSIDERATION 6: DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT INFANT AND TODDLER CARE

Expansion of state-funded preschool programs may have unintended adverse effects on programs serving infants and toddlers. Infant and toddler care is expensive, largely because of the lower adult-to-child supervision ratios required, so revenue from preschool classrooms, with higher ratios, are often used to offset these costs.²⁹ Public preschool does not allow funds to be used to off-set other costs, resulting in the full cost of infant and toddler care being covered by tuition rates that are difficult for many families to afford. Additionally, higher funding for public preschool classrooms provides an incentive to convert infant and toddler space into preschool space. Both are likely to result in a reduction of care for infants and toddlers.³⁰ The State could provide funding incentives to ensure the adequate and affordable provision of infant and toddler care even while public preschool expands. One possibility is a set-aside to improve quality in infant and toddler classrooms within collaborating private providers.

Likely Benefits

- Providing a safeguard for infant and toddler care will ensure that working families still have access to affordable care for young children.

- Raising the quality of infant and toddler care will have a positive impact on the trajectory of children before they even reach preschool.

Concerns

- Additional funding would be needed to ensure stability in the provision of infant and toddler care.

CONCLUSION: ACTION STEPS TOWARD IMPLEMENTATION

This *New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase I: The Foundation* provides broad considerations for achieving universal access to effective preschool education. Specific action steps are recommended to operationalize and enact this plan:

1. Hold information sessions with key stakeholder groups including those in public school, Head Start, private preschool programs, and higher education, as well as parent groups, advocates, and others.
2. Identify and map key needs and resources for expansion such as availability and quality of facilities, teachers, teaching assistants, administrators, and support in each county (ideally for each district) and aggregate these up to inform state level decisions.
3. Create an updated scaling plan and budget based on aggregated county reports. This will project over time the expected needs for funding and staffing—including at the state-level—to make high quality preschool education available to every child in New Jersey.

During this planning period, preschool expansion continues in districts throughout the state. The FY23 budget advances the Governor's goal of universal pre-K with an additional \$68 million for preschool. This includes \$40 million to create almost 3,000 more preschool seats in new districts.³¹

The Murphy Administration has proposed a bold plan to make New Jersey's public preschool program the most robust in the nation. When fully implemented statewide, no other state will match New Jersey in providing universal preschool access to children at the quality necessary to achieve lasting benefits.

ENDNOTES



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