

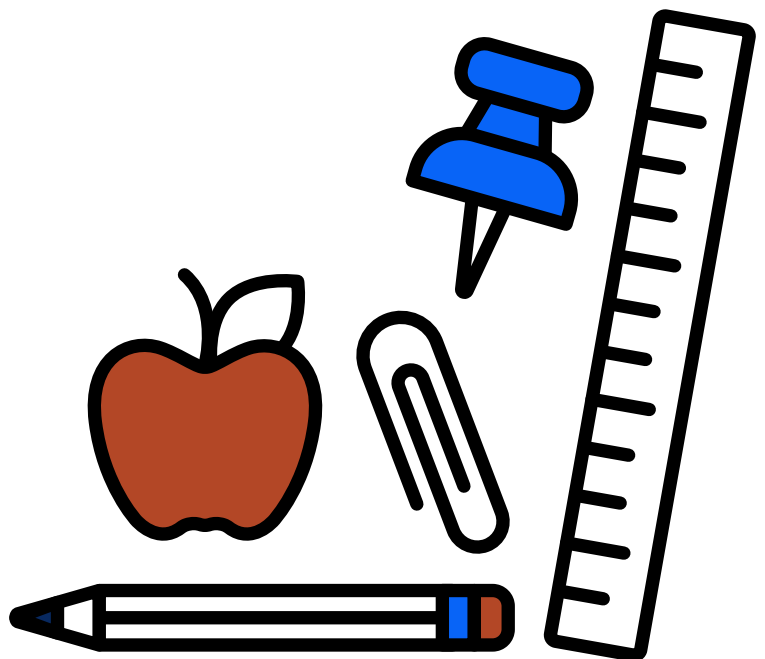


**The New Jersey Strategic Plan for
State-Supported Preschool Expansion
Phase II: Implementation**



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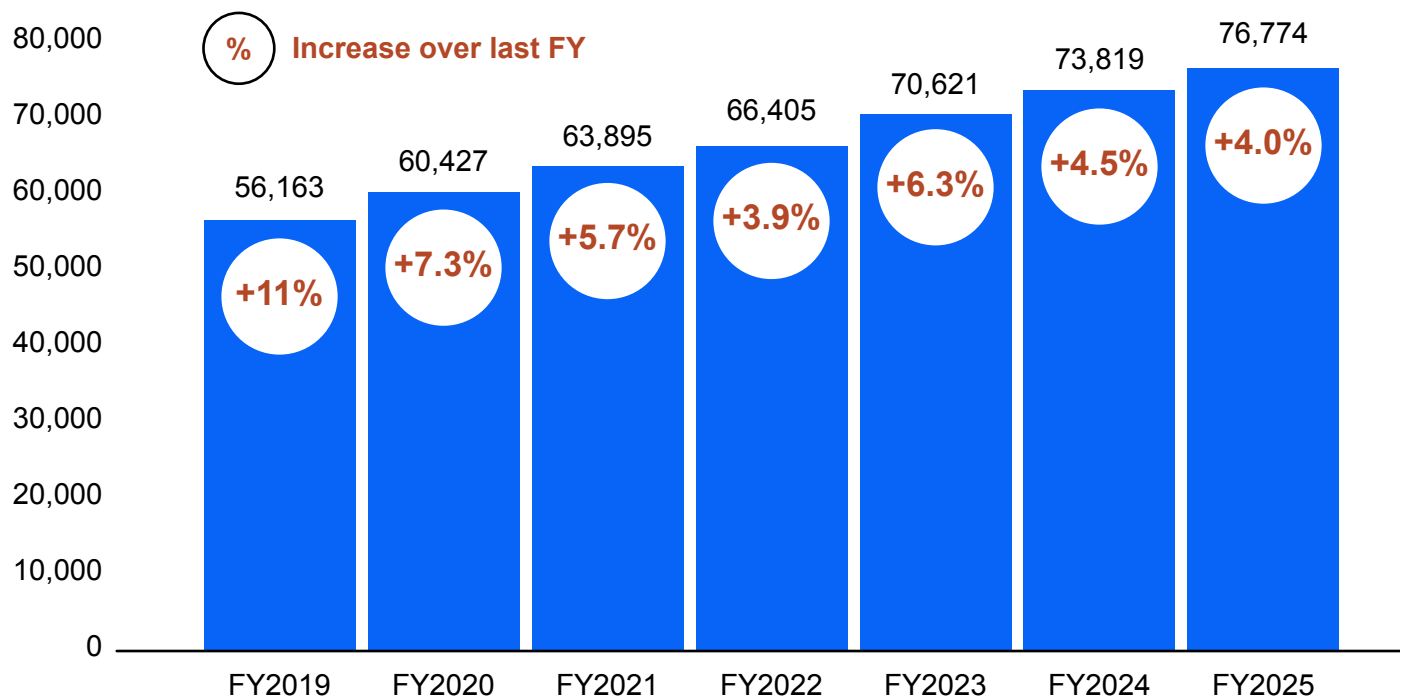
Introduction

The driving force behind Governor Murphy’s vision for universal access to high-quality preschool, laid out in the 2022 [New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase I: The Foundation \(Strategic Plan\)](#), bears repeating – high-quality preschool can change the educational trajectories of young children and influence their lifetime achievement and well-being. Since Governor Murphy was first sworn into office, the Murphy Administration has increased funding for public preschool by nearly \$500 million, resulting in 229 additional districts offering State-funded preschool programs and increasing the number of children benefitting from participation in State-funded preschool by over 23,000.

Meeting Governor Murphy’s long-term goal of providing universal access to high-quality preschool for all resident 3- and 4-year-olds requires bold action. *The New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase II: Implementation (Implementation Plan)* provides a road map to make New Jersey home to the single most comprehensive and robust preschool model in the country, providing no-cost, full-day preschool with a state-certified teacher, an aide, limited class sizes, and a curriculum aligned to state learning standards, all delivered through a mixed-delivery model that includes partnerships with licensed child care centers and Head Start.

Successful expansion of high-quality preschool takes intentional planning in two phases – strategic foundational planning and strategic implementation planning. The objective of the *Strategic Plan* was to establish a set of clear priorities to consider with the goal of expanding high-quality preschool. More detailed and extensive research was conducted to develop this second phase of work, resulting in this *Implementation Plan* to execute the priorities set out in the *Strategic Plan* and set future goals for universal preschool in New Jersey.

Total State-funded preschool seats by year during Murphy Administration



[Data table: Total State-funded Preschool Seats by Year](#)

Implementation Plan Objective and Overview

The *Implementation Plan* includes four broad sections:

1. Approach – The steps taken to develop the *Implementation Plan*, including how data were collected.
2. Context for Universal Preschool – A summary of the extensive data collected to understand the current status of preschool expansion in New Jersey, as well as, how far we have to go to reach universal access to high-quality preschool, and feedback from communities on the landscape of needs to realize this vision.
3. Areas for Action – A summary of the action steps the State will take over the course of the coming years to achieve universal access. Action steps are broken into the following five areas:
 - a. Principal Action Steps
 - b. Mixed-Delivery
 - c. Facilities
 - d. Workforce
 - e. Funding
4. Appendices – A series of supporting documents with data collected to inform the development of this *Implementation Plan*.

Approach



Data Collection

The quantitative data used to inform this report were collected from a variety of public sources, including U.S. Census data, New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) budget and enrollment documents, New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) licensing data, and information available through the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE).

Two original data collections were also used to inform the *Implementation Plan*: a survey of public school facilities for preschool was conducted in Spring 2023 and a survey of four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) was conducted in Summer 2023 to collect information on Preschool-Grade 3 (P-3) teacher preparation programs and early childhood education (ECE) faculty.

Qualitative data were also collected via a series of stakeholder engagement meetings and a series of county meetings. The data collected through these meetings are a valuable supplement to the quantitative data collected because they represent the concerns and ideas of individuals who are or will be implementing preschool programs in New Jersey.



Stakeholder Engagement

In October 2022, Governor Murphy released the *Strategic Plan*. This initial plan outlined critical policy considerations for reaching the goal of universal access to preschool in four key policy areas: Financing and Scaling to Universal Access; Facilities; Workforce; and Mixed-Delivery. A series of 14 stakeholder meetings was conducted to solicit feedback on the *Strategic Plan* and to inform the initial development of this *Implementation Plan*. Approximately 36 organizations and over 100 individuals provided feedback through virtual meetings with staff from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) on behalf of the New Jersey DOE. During the months of January-May 2023, more than 60 virtual meetings were held across all 21 counties. In each county, a group of school districts and private providers were convened, with context provided by the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Services (DECS), the DOE's County Offices of

Education, and representatives from the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&R). In most counties, the selected participants did not participate in the public preschool program and were asked to discuss some of the biggest barriers to participation. In counties with a high number of districts participating in public preschool, a mixture of participating and non-participating districts and private providers was convened. Across all 21 counties, 485 people participated in these meetings.

After an introduction to the critical components of New Jersey's preschool program, participants were asked to discuss challenges and opportunities facing preschool expansion in their county. In addition to general concerns about having enough funding to support the program and increased transportation costs, the areas of facilities, workforce, and mixed-delivery were identified as the biggest potential barriers to expansion. The groups were asked to discuss these barriers and to identify potential solutions.

Information gathered from the county meetings directly influenced the action steps in the *Implementation Plan*. For a summary of key points discussed in each county, see Appendix B.

Context for Universal Preschool

Data

Before presenting action steps to achieve universal preschool, it is necessary to understand the current status of public preschool and the factors that will impact capacity to expand statewide. This requires data on the following topics: the number of public and private entities in the state and the extent to which they already participate in State-funded preschool; the population of preschool-age children, including how many are already being served in public preschool and how many more do not have access; the impact of full-day preschool on districts still offering half-day kindergarten; existing and potential facilities to serve preschoolers; the extent to which there are qualified teachers to meet the demands of preschool expansion; and the availability of higher education coursework to expand the pipeline of qualified preschool teachers. This section summarizes the data collected to address these questions.

It is important to note, the context for universal access to high-quality educational preschool programs exists within a broader child care universe that will continue to provide additional services for children and families through private, religious, and home-based care opportunities. These options are valued for meeting the cultural or language needs of their communities, but will not be included in this report as they often do not meet the facilities, certification, or instructional requirements needed to meet the State's definition of high-quality. For more information about this designation, please see the [2022 Strategic Plan](#).

Population of Preschool-Age Children

Identifying the capacity currently dedicated to enrollment in State preschool is necessary to determine how much more capacity is needed to reach universal access to public preschool. Census data from 2022 estimates that there are over 190,000 preschool-age children in New Jersey. Therefore, based on current preschool seat data (see below), more than 90,000 additional seats would be needed to provide universal access, which is defined as reaching 90% of the estimated preschool population for 3- and 4-year olds. Some districts may exceed this goal while others may struggle to meet it, depending on demographics and unique circumstances.

- For the 2024-2025 school year, districts are projected to serve approximately 90,000 3- and 4-year-olds in State-funded preschool programs.
 - Approximately 77,000 general education preschoolers
 - Approximately 500 in half-day programs
 - Approximately 76,500 in full-day programs

- Approximately 13,000 preschoolers with disabilities
- Approximately 200 in half-day programs
- Approximately 12,800 in full-day programs
- For the 2024-2025 school year, children in State-funded preschool are served across mixed-delivery settings.
 - Approximately 60% in district classrooms
 - Approximately 10% in Head Start classrooms
 - Approximately 30% child care provider classrooms
- As the population begins to rebound after the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Census projections indicate that the preschool age population in New Jersey will increase by approximately 3.35% by 2030 and then remain relatively steady through 2040. To meet this increase, New Jersey would need approximately 100,000 seats (approximately 6,700 classrooms total).

Public Education Agencies

Planning for preschool expansion requires understanding the number of agencies serving public school children. The term “agencies” is used to encompass the many types of public entities serving children, including school districts, charter schools, special services districts, jointure commissions, and vocational/technical schools. Although not all these agencies currently serve elementary school-age children, there may be opportunities for all to contribute classroom space to serve preschoolers.

As of Fall 2024ⁱ, children are served across 671 public education agencies, including:

- 545 school districts (45 do not serve elementary school-age children).
- 84 charter schools (13 do not serve elementary school-age children).
- 8 Special Services School Districts.
- 9 Educational Services Commissions (1 does not serve elementary school-age children).
- 21 Vocational/Technical School Districts (none currently serve elementary school-age children).
- 3 Jointure Commission School Districts.
- Marie H. Katzenbach School for The Deaf.

Licensed Private Providers

Planning for preschool expansion also requires understanding the number of licensed private providers (child care and Head Start agencies) operating in the state, and the opportunities for partnership that advance the goal of universal preschool – while protecting critical access to infant and toddler care. For more on this issue, see Mixed-Delivery Action Step 1.

Based on DCF records from Spring 2023, there are approximately 2,978 licensed child care providers in New Jersey that serve preschool-aged children during the school day and their total licensed capacity is 278,186 children over two and a half. In addition to capacity, this group of providers offer other services that are helpful to working families:

- 2,432 (82%) providers are open for the full calendar year, which is helpful for families who need child care during the summer months.
- 269 (9%) provide transportation, making it more convenient for families to get their children to and from programs.
- 2,150 (72%) currently serve children with a child care subsidy, making it more affordable for low-income working families to access wrap-around care. This does not include providers who are willing to accept a subsidy but are not currently serving any children with one.

District/Provider Preschool Participation

Many school districts and private providers already participate in the State’s preschool program, but the majority do not. Those that participate can serve as models for neighboring districts.

- As of October 2024 — following the DOE’s 2024-2025 preschool expansion awards — 293 school districts participate in the State-funded high-quality preschool program:
 - 31 districts are former Abbott districts.
 - 262 districts have been approved to provide full-day preschool.
- Additionally, 10 districts are funded under either the State’s Early Childhood Program Aid (ECPA) or Early Launch to Learning Initiative (ELLI), but do not meet current high-quality program standards under the Preschool Education Aid program.
- Licensed private providers in 493 locations (400 child care and 93 Head Start) are currently contracting with a school district to provide State preschool.

Kindergarten in Public Schools

New Jersey’s public preschool program funds children for a full school day (at least 6 hours). This creates an issue in a small number of public school agencies where children are served in half-day kindergarten programs. These agencies often cite concerns related to funding and space as reasons for maintaining half-day kindergarten programs. Some also suggest that families in their community prefer a half-day program.

As of October 2023, 11 elementary-serving school districts did not offer free, full-day kindergarten. By comparing enrollment in first grade to enrollment in kindergarten in these districts — referred to as their kindergarten uptake rate — we can estimate whether a smaller percentage of families enroll children in kindergarten programs that only provide half-day. The statewide kindergarten uptake rate is approximately 97%.

County	District	Percent of District’s Kindergarteners Served in Half-Day Program	Kindergarten Uptake Rate (Kindergarten enrollment vs. 1st grade enrollment)
Burlington	Moorestown Township	100%	87%
Camden	Haddonfield	100%	71%
Middlesex	Metuchen	88%	65%
Middlesex	Monroe Township	93%	79%
Monmouth	Millstone Township	17%	66%
Monmouth	Upper Freehold Regional	9%	76%
Morris	School District of the Chathams	28%	77%
Somerset	Bridgewater-Raritan	94%	67%
Somerset	Hillsborough Township	83%	82%
Union	Cranford	100%	76%
Union	Westfield	89%	38%

Facilities

Additional space is needed to reach universal access to public preschool in New Jersey, but determining how much space is needed requires an examination of current and potential spaces used to serve children

in the State preschool program. Available data were collected about facilities in public school agencies and in licensed child care providers, however it is important to note that more data are needed to fully assess the need for new or renovated space.

The section that follows describes what is known so far about the extent to which existing spaces meet DOE requirements for public preschool. The State currently requires preschool classrooms to be on the 1st or 2nd floor of a building and have at least 950 square feet, including a bathroom and may include space for immovable furniture. Classrooms are eligible for waivers if they have at least 700 square feet of instructional space with a bathroom not counted in the 700 square feet or a bathroom within sight of the classroom door.

Preschool Space in Public Schools

In the spring of 2023, all public education agencies were asked to respond to a survey about current and potential space for public preschool — 570 of the 671 agencies responded to the survey.

The following bullets summarize key survey responses. Please note that these responses include preschool-serving districts that do not receive State preschool funds and are not subject to the State's preschool classroom facility requirements.

Additionally, please note that district responses included self-contained classrooms, serving only children with disabilities, as well as inclusive classrooms serving general education preschoolers alongside preschoolers with disabilities. The summary below combines these classrooms to show the overall capacity currently used for preschool among agencies that responded to the survey, however not all these classrooms meet State standards.

- Public school districts are currently serving preschoolers in approximately 7,600 classrooms that either meet the State's preschool standards or meet requisite requirements through a waiver.

Of the classrooms that do meet the State's preschool facilities standards, either with or without a waiver:

- Approximately 1,400 classrooms meet space requirements with or without a waiver, but do not meet bathroom requirements. These classrooms would only be viable as State preschool classrooms if enough space and funding were available to construct a bathroom either in the classroom or nearby.
- Approximately 900 classrooms do not meet space or bathroom requirements. These classrooms would only be viable as State preschool classrooms if enough space and funding were available to expand the classroom square footage and to construct a bathroom either in the classroom or nearby.
- Approximately 900 classrooms have adequate space but are located either in a basement or above the 2nd floor. These classrooms would not be viable as State preschool classrooms.

Agencies that responded to the survey also identified possible new spaces for preschool:

- Over 950 classrooms that meet State requirements with or without a waiver.
- Nearly 700 classrooms that meet the State's space requirements, but do not have a bathroom in the classroom or within sight of the classroom door. Again, these classrooms would only be viable with adequate space and funding to construct a bathroom in the classroom or nearby.
- Approximately 80 classrooms that do not meet State square footage requirements or requirements for a waiver. These classrooms would only be viable for State-funded preschool with adequate space and funding to expand.
- Approximately 800 classrooms in existing spaces within the community, but that require time and funding to secure.

Preschool Space in Child Care Providers

A Spring 2023 dataset on all licensed child care providers was mined to estimate the number of rooms meeting State square footage requirements. Information on bathrooms could not be linked to individual rooms, so not all these spaces may be appropriate for the State's PEA program. Also, some rooms may not meet State preschool requirements due to placement in a basement or above the 2nd floor of a building, but this information was not available. Some of the spaces are not currently used as classroom space (e.g., cafeterias, computer rooms, indoor gross motor space) but are still included in the analysis as potential space for preschool expansion.

Finally, the dataset of licensed child care providers does not specify how many of the spaces below are used to serve infants and toddlers. Access to high-quality infant and toddler care is equally as important as access to high-quality preschool programs, but the higher cost of serving infants and toddlers, coupled with the level of funding provided for public preschool, may result in providers sacrificing infant and toddler programs in favor of preschool. Coordination is critical to ensure that public preschool does not expand at the expense of infant and toddler care.

- Child care licensing data captures about 21,679 rooms in licensed child care providers settings. Of those:
 - 13,625 rooms are below 700 square feet. These rooms would only be viable as State preschool classrooms if funding were available to combine smaller spaces into classrooms that comply with DOE's current preschool classroom size requirements.
 - 5,027 rooms are between 700 and 949 square feet (eligible for a waiver from DOE).
 - 2,328 rooms are at or above 950 square feet (meeting DOE space requirements).
 - 699 rooms are without a square footage listed.
- 1,950 of the above licensed child care classrooms are contracted to serve children funded through the State preschool program.

Higher Education

Access to ECE higher education programming is a critical component for the States' ability to attract, train, and upskill the ECE workforce in preparation for preschool expansion. As of June 2023, there are 41 higher education institutions in the state offering education degree programming, including 17 two-year institutions, 10 public four-year institutions, and 14 private four-year institutions. Of the institutions offering education coursework, 28 offer programming in ECE, including 11 two-year institutions, eight (8) public four-year institutions, and nine (9) private four-year institutions. These findings suggest that students who want to pursue ECE coursework and degree programs are likely to have access to program offerings. (Note: IHEs included in this section are Title IV participating institutions as reported by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Additionally, private for-profit two- and four-year IHEs as well as private not-for profit two- and four-year Yeshiva and Theological Schools are not included in this data).

In Summer 2023, 20 four-year IHEs were asked to provide information about their P-3 teacher preparation program and their ECE faculty. Twelve IHEs responded to the survey. The IHEs that responded graduate a combined average of 294 students from P-3 preparation programs and have a total program capacity of 1,264 students. Respondents reported that 17 non-adjunct ECE faculty have been hired since 2018, but also that 20 non-adjunct ECE faculty members left during the same period of time. Across all institutions, an average of 55% of P-3 coursework is taught by adjunct faculty and/or part-time staff. Only six IHEs (Fairleigh Dickinson University, Monmouth University, New Jersey City University, Rutgers University New Brunswick, Saint Peter's University, and William Paterson University) offer any sort of P-3 coursework online, giving students the opportunity to attend from any location in the state.

Six IHEs offer infant/toddler specific coursework, but only one (New Jersey City University) leads to a credential such as the New Jersey Infant/Toddler Credential or the Infant/Toddler Child Development (CDA) credential.

Stakeholder Input

Beginning in October 2022, the DOE and NIEER conducted 14 stakeholder meetings and engaged with approximately 36 organizations, represented by over 100 individuals, to solicit feedback on the *New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion*. Organizations invited to give feedback included state agencies with oversight of early care and education programs, parent advocacy organizations, school district and child care provider membership organizations, Head Start organizations, charter school organizations, and New Jersey-based community groups. Response to the plan was overwhelmingly positive with expressed satisfaction with the plan's comprehensive representation of critical issues related to expansion. Over a three-month period, several common themes emerged among various stakeholder groups. Below is a summary of key findings by policy area.



Financing

Primary among concerns raised was the issue of equity, with stakeholders urging the State to ensure that New Jersey's lowest income school districts and children are prioritized for expansion. Groups advocated that there be transparency in recruitment and enrollment at the district level to make certain that the most vulnerable children are served. Disparities in funding structures district to district (e.g., differences in salary scales) raised concerns about un- (or under-) funded costs, especially for such things as transportation and staff benefits. A few specific groups urged that funding should go directly to private schools, child care and Head Start providers, rather than all funds being channeled through school districts.



Facilities

Limitations on availability of classrooms (public/private) that meet the DOE square footage requirements and the discrepancy between DOE and DCF licensing requirements, were among the leading issues raised with various stakeholder groups. School districts also discussed a concern that the plan doesn't address needed supports for maintenance and upgrades to school facilities. Individuals representing the interests of both school districts and child care providers expressed confusion about how DOE's square footage requirements are enforced and under what circumstances waivers are granted.



Workforce

Among the most critical issues raised, the scarcity of certified preschool teachers in the workforce rose to the top. Both school district and private provider groups told stories of the shortage of qualified teachers to staff their preschool classrooms and competition between programs to recruit and hire from the same small pool of candidates. Private providers (including Head Start) expressed concern that per pupil funding from districts may not be sufficient to pay for comparable salaries and benefits packages (health, retirement, etc.), making recruitment of viable teacher candidates even more challenging for that sector.



Mixed-Delivery

Among other concerns, two primary issues were raised by a variety of stakeholder groups: bolstering partnerships between school districts and all willing and able providers; and growing concern about the negative impact of preschool expansion on infant and toddler care. A common concern was that, with school districts drawing preschoolers away from the private sector, it will be difficult for providers to remain in business to serve the community. Stakeholders expressed support for an infant/toddler funding set-aside to cover provider costs and shore up programs. Stakeholders also voiced concerns that there are systemic issues that need to be addressed before further expansion can take place. Those issues include variations in how different districts

implement mixed-delivery (i.e., variations in funding allowances and requirements) and a need for clear guidance (and monitoring) of school districts to ensure rules are applied equitably from district to district.



Miscellaneous

Additional feedback falling outside of the above policy areas was also shared during the meetings. Two of the more pressing concerns included the difficulty for school districts to meet the short timeline for preschool expansion applications to be developed and submitted and potential regulatory issues that need to be addressed if changes are going to be made to align standards across state departments. A detailed summary of stakeholder feedback can be found in Appendix A.

Areas for Action and Areas for Further Deliberation by an Interagency Steering Committee

The Context for Universal Preschool section above illustrates that there is untapped capacity across settings in New Jersey. The action areas that follow are divided into five broad areas: Principal Action Steps, Mixed-Delivery, Workforce, Facilities, and Funding. Each details the specific steps New Jersey should take to most effectively reach the goal of expanding high-quality preschool throughout the state.

Beyond those priority actions, each of the five areas includes additional steps that have potential to further bolster high-quality preschool expansion goals but require further deliberation by policymakers to flesh out potential legal, operational, or fiscal logistics, and other considerations. To that end, it is recommended that an Interagency Universal Preschool Steering Committee be formed to review these additional potential steps. The Committee should include representatives of impacted state agencies, including, but not necessarily limited to, the New Jersey Department of Education, New Jersey Department of Children and Families, New Jersey Department of Human Services, New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority.

Principal Action Steps

Many action steps are required to achieve universal access to high-quality preschool, and although all are important, there are two that stand out as foundational to the others. They are provided in more detail in the Mixed-Delivery and Funding sections below, but are highlighted here to reinforce that, without these actions, the State will struggle to realize the goal of universal preschool.

Provide Assurance through Legislation that the State Is Committed to Permanently Funding Universal Preschool

School districts and private providers consistently express concerns about the long-term stability of preschool expansion efforts and are hesitant to join the program without greater assurance that local investments and commitments to parents will receive continued State support. Legislation will signal that New Jersey recognizes preschool as a critical component of a continuous system of education for children from preschool through grade 12. Legislation should codify key components of the Department of Education's preschool expansion program, and expand its reach by prioritizing applications representing a consortium of districts agreeing to serve the entire region represented by the consortium.

Require Districts to Demonstrate Due Diligence in Seeking Collaboration with All Willing and Able Private Providers

Universal access to high-quality preschool is not achievable without the expertise and physical capacity of licensed child care providers across the state. Across licensed child care providers, less than 11% of the estimated capacity for children over 2 ½ years old is currently being used to serve State-funded

preschoolers. There is enormous untapped potential for collaboration between school districts and private providers. Without a clear directive for collaboration, New Jersey is unlikely to achieve universal access to preschool.

Mixed-Delivery

New Jersey's high-quality preschool program is built on a mixed-delivery system where children are served in classrooms across a combination of public school buildings and private provider (i.e., licensed child care and Head Start) settings. The mixed-delivery system takes advantage of private providers' expertise in early childhood, as well as their physical capacity, to reach the goal of universal access, which will require as many as 6,362 additional classrooms, depending on districts' ability to efficiently use available spaces. Utilizing a mixed-delivery system also respects parental choice and raises program quality for the entire birth to third-grade continuum by providing adequate funding to private providers who are already caring for and educating the state's youngest learners. The following action steps strengthen and expand the State's current high-quality mixed-delivery system for State-funded preschool.

Mixed-Delivery Action Step 1

Require districts to demonstrate due diligence in seeking collaboration with all willing and able private providers

As of Fall 2024, State-funded preschool is projected to operate in 2,114 private provider classrooms, but a total of 7,355 private provider classrooms may meet DOE square footage requirements (about 5,000 of these classrooms would meet the requirements through a waiver). In recent years, few newly funded districts have opted to collaborate with private providers, despite encouragement from DOE. Instead, these districts are often serving only a small percentage of their preschool-aged population in the limited space available within school district buildings. In addition to limiting access to high-quality preschool, this practice will eventually supplant rather than supplement State preschool capacity and place financial burdens on private providers who may struggle financially if forced to serve only infants and toddlers. Seventy percent of preschool-aged children outside the State-funded preschool program currently attend private provider programs. Converting these classrooms from tuition-based programs to high-quality State-funded programs benefits not only the children who attend, but their families and the private providers themselves. Collaborating with private providers also minimizes the need for new construction and brings additional classrooms into the program more quickly. Before building or acquiring new space in public school buildings, the State should pursue additional opportunities to take advantage of space already available in private provider settings.

New Jersey Administrative Code requires districts to contract with every willing and able Head Start program but does not address non-Head Start private providers (N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-2.2(c)).



Action

Pass legislation requiring funded districts to demonstrate due diligence in providing preschool in collaboration with all willing and able private providers in their communities (within five miles and/or 20 minutes of driving time). Willing and able private providers refers to licensed child care centers or Head Start programs that are willing to comply with all DOE preschool rules and regulations and federal mandates.

Mixed-Delivery Action Step 2

Develop procedures for private providers who need to serve children from different districts in the same classroom

As access to full-day public preschool expands across the state, an increasing number of small districts with small preschool populations are participating in the program, and in some cases they cannot fill

multiple classrooms to capacity, leaving empty seats and less State funding to support classroom quality. Even in larger districts, sometimes the preschool universe is not an easy multiple of 15, leaving classrooms with unfilled seats. A few examples exist of districts using a send/receive relationship to combine preschoolers to fill classrooms, with one district assuming program oversight. However, there currently are no examples of private providers serving children from multiple districts in the same classroom. Logistical issues related to funding and program implementation make this challenging. For example, to serve children from multiple districts in one classroom, private providers would need those districts to agree on a common per child rate, curriculum and assessment tools, and also have a plan to provide coaching. However, consolidating the need for seats across districts has the potential to decrease the need for additional classrooms from 6,362 to 5,429.



Action

Develop guidance to streamline the process for private providers to serve children from multiple districts in the same classroom. Develop a model contract for these situations that includes an articulation agreement and outlines a plan for vertical alignment of the curriculum and assessment used, coaching, payment, transportation, and other relevant terms.

Mixed-Delivery Action Step 3

Develop resources to support districts and contracted private providers

It can be overwhelming for school districts and private providers that are new to State-funded preschool to become familiar with the program's requirements. There are many lengthy documents outlining standards and program requirements that are then supplemented with separate guidance documents. Groups of prospective districts and private providers may need additional support to understand the rules and regulations of the program.

During stakeholder engagement sessions for the *Strategic Plan*, and in county meetings to inform development of the *Implementation Plan*, many prospective districts and private providers expressed reservations about mixed-delivery, mostly due to uncertainty about what the relationship entails for both parties. Most commonly, they asked for help with the following questions:

- How do we find each other (i.e., which districts and private providers participate in the State preschool program and/or are willing to participate in the State preschool program)?
- How does district programmatic and fiscal oversight impact the day-to-day operations of private providers?
- How do districts and their contracted private providers negotiate a budget?
- Are there examples of districts and private providers who are doing this well?
- Is it possible to develop shared decision-making that improves the power dynamic between districts and providers?



Action

Develop a preschool implementation manual that compiles all State requirements and associated guidance documents and is organized by topic, which may include: funding, staffing requirements, district/private provider program administration, eligibility, recruitment and enrollment, family engagement, curriculum, child assessments, classroom assessments, and program evaluation. Develop associated resources, such as recorded webinars, that explain how to use the manual and answer basic questions about program requirements. Publish an annual Q&A document that builds from year to year and answers common questions from both districts and private providers.

Additional Issues for Deliberation by the Interagency Steering Committee

County-Based Early Childhood Roundtables

Successful expansion of public preschool would benefit from local planning and stakeholder input so that implementation addresses the unique needs of children and families in every county, while coordinating available classroom spaces across districts and providers for maximum efficiency. County-based roundtables are an effective way to convene a group of school district personnel (e.g., superintendents, principals, teachers, community and parent involvement specialists), private providers, parents, and county expert stakeholders (e.g., local health/social services agencies, doctors and dentists, municipal government officials, the business community, higher education) to discuss and advise on challenges and opportunities for preschool implementation across the county.

County-based ECE roundtables, facilitated jointly by the DOE County Office, Division of Early Childhood Services, and the county Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) could facilitate partnerships among districts and between districts and private providers to increase effectiveness and efficiency in the implementation of public preschool.

Support Contracted Child Care Centers to Maintain Access to Infant and Toddler Care

Infant and toddler care is a crucial part of a comprehensive, high-quality early childhood system. The small adult to child ratios required for infant and toddler care result in higher costs, which child care centers often offset by serving a combination of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Increased funding for State preschool may have the unintended consequence of incentivizing child care centers to convert existing infant and toddler spaces into more financially stable classrooms for preschoolers. As public preschool expands, it is important to ensure that families still have access to high-quality, educational opportunities for children under three.

Facilitate Extension of Contracts with Private Providers

The instability of single-year program contracts makes it difficult for private providers to run their organizations. Private providers looking to secure business loans are often turned down because their primary source of funding is not guaranteed from year to year. This can be especially stressful for private providers who must invest in facilities upgrades to meet the DOE facility requirements to participate. The State could explore methods to better facilitate extension of preschool program contracts with private providers who have demonstrated high-quality and remain in good standing with DCF. Include language in the contract template acknowledging that annual funding is subject to appropriation.

Facilities

Expanding preschool in New Jersey to every child whose family wishes to enroll will require substantial capital investments in new and existing facilities. Estimating an average take-up rate of 90 percent requires up to 6,362 additional classrooms between now and 2030, depending on the level of space utilization achieved across districts. The cost and financing arrangements required will depend on how many of these classrooms are in public schools and how many are in private providers (including Head Start), as private providers most often lease their facilities from others. Cost and financing arrangements will also depend on how many classrooms already exist and meet State standards, how many need renovations to meet State standards, and how many new classrooms are needed. Some school districts with declining K-12 enrollment may be able to convert K-12 classrooms for preschool. Perhaps just as many existing classrooms (some currently used for child care and K-12) also will require renovation and improvements and some commercial space might be converted to preschool classrooms from other uses through renovation. Many existing classrooms (including those already providing State preschool) were “grandfathered” in under older child care regulations and do not meet even current child care licensing standards, much less the more stringent DOE standards. Even with funding for renovations, some of these classrooms will never meet DOE standards. Finally, many children in State preschool currently are served in temporary classroom units (TCUs, or modular classrooms), some of which are now 30 years old and in need of replacement.

Facilities Action Step 1

Better align DOE and DCF standards for new child care facilities

Continuing to license new child care facilities to serve 3- and 4-year-olds in spaces that do not meet the DOE standards will exacerbate eligible facilities shortages and impede participation of licensed child care in State-funded preschool. Revisiting and improving alignment between child care licensing requirements and DOE preschool standards would alleviate this problem, so long as updated facilities requirements continue to meet DOE's high-quality standards for preschool.

Additionally, all children should have access to outdoor play and nature experiences to support programs in meeting the State's early learning standards, and although they are unlikely to make up more than a small percentage of classrooms, outdoor preschool programs can make an important contribution to preschool expansion.



Action

Convene DOE and DCF program administrators to explore meaningful changes to better align DOE and DCF square footage requirements for licensed child care facilities serving 3- and 4-year-olds to be consistent across agencies while maintaining high-quality preschool facilities. Develop jointly aligned regulations (facilities requirements and licensing standards) that also address outdoor spaces for play and nature-based learning including spaces to be used with typical classrooms and regulations for indoor and outdoor spaces to be used by nature-based or outdoor preschool programs.

Facilities Action Step 2

Further support public-private partnership to provide dedicated funding for new private provider preschool facilities

There are opportunities to obtain loans for facilities from the private sector and to establish public sector loan funds or for some combination of the two. Such initiatives can take a variety of forms. Many states have organizations dedicated to supporting child care facilities development through loans, but these differ greatly in their design from state to state, though all of them tend to be quite small. Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) are one approach to providing both technical assistance and loans to child care providers. The largest CDFI is LISC, founded by the Ford Foundation, and it operates nationally. Another approach is illustrated by Early Learning Property Management (ELPM) in Atlanta. ELPM partners with philanthropy to support facilities development for child care and State preschool providers in low-income communities. ELPM plans and develops facilities that it then leases to private providers at below-market rates. ELPM also awards grants to private providers for facilities improvements. Another approach is to work with commercial banks, as they have requirements for community reinvestment that could be satisfied by loans to child care providers. The proposed New Jersey public bank could have as one of its objectives supporting borrowing for preschool facilities construction. Finally, once it is capitalized, districts and private providers could be encouraged to apply for loan funding to support the construction of new early childhood education facilities through the New Jersey Social Impact Investment Fund.



Action

Convene an advisory group or implementation board chaired and staffed by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) to plan and develop the approach to funding new or renovated preschool facilities construction through private and/or public agencies. The advisory group could include representatives from both the State agencies and the private sector, including financial institutions and child care facilities development experts.

Additional Issues for Deliberation by the Interagency Steering Committee

Limited Use of TCUS for Preschool Expansion

The Department's high-quality preschool regulations provide that "[b]eginning in the 2027-2028 school year, a district board of education, contracted provider, or Head Start program shall not use temporary classroom units (TCUs) or other similar temporary facilities, as defined at N.J.A.C. 6A:26, Educational Facilities, for preschool classrooms without prior approval pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:5." N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-7.1(f). TCUs can provide valuable capacity while new classrooms are being built, and existing classrooms receive necessary renovations. However, they must meet the DOE preschool facility requirements and the Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) standard. Siting should take into account the need for appropriate outdoor spaces. The DOE could consider the use of new TCUs when no facilities are available through private providers and new, permanent in-district facilities would require long delays or no suitable sites are available. Approval of the use of new TCUs could include a requirement that districts have a plan for permanent replacement within 10 years.

Support For Equipping New Classrooms

State per child rates are designed to support the annual cost of program operation but are not designed to support the upfront costs needed to ensure that all preschool classrooms open with the materials and supplies necessary to support high-quality instruction. This creates perverse incentives to, for example, delay start until the second half of the year or reduce compensation for salary and benefits below parity levels with K-12 in order to fund start-up costs. One-time State-support grant opportunities would provide districts with the resources to outfit new classrooms with materials that may not be covered by existing facilities grants or other funding opportunities, such as adequate classroom furniture, technology, as well as preschool-appropriate playground equipment.

Private Provider Facilities Renovation and Improvement

Phase I of the EDA Child Care Facilities Improvement Program (not limited to those participating in State preschool) received more than 700 applications from child care centers that enroll nearly 30,000 preschoolers and is now closed for new applications. Since launching the \$140 million program, EDA has awarded grants of up to \$200,000 to more than 400 centers that enroll 17,460 preschoolers. A significant number of centers are using EDA's funds to renovate or upgrade their facilities to meet DOE standards and launch partnerships with their local school districts. The EDA anticipates that as a result of this program over 3,000 infant and toddler seats will be added to the New Jersey child care system at more than 200 centers funded by EDA, with work being done by more than 300 Registered Public Works Contractors paying prevailing wage, supporting those workers and families as well.

Data from the success of EDA's Child Care Facilities Improvement Program should be used to inform the distribution of any future funding available and ensure coordination with DOE's preschool program requirements.

Workforce

To achieve universal preschool at New Jersey's current high standard, we estimate that 7,330 new or upskilled teachers will be required. Data collection is underway to document the qualifications of the current private provider teacher workforce more accurately. However, using results from the 2019 National Survey of Early Childhood Education, we estimate that 52.3% of lead teachers not associated with a public-school address have less than a BA and that most of them do not have the P-3 teacher license required to teach in New Jersey's State-funded preschool. The action steps that follow describe plans to recruit more individuals into the teacher workforce, support for current teachers and assistant teachers in obtaining the degree and certification necessary to teach in State preschool classrooms, and initiatives to retain teachers in the workforce.

The ECE career pathway and accompanying job opportunities in New Jersey can be confusing and difficult to navigate. As the State continues to expand preschool, a standardized, easy to understand, and seamless ways to navigate ECE career pathways should be established that has clear entry points and educational achievements that are directly associated with ECE jobs and credentials. While the traditional ECE pathway, which includes earning a four-year degree from an accredited college/university and New Jersey P-3 credential, will likely remain the primary pipeline for the New Jersey ECE workforce, other pathways must be adopted to attract new teachers as well as to retain and re-skill the current ECE workforce.

New Jersey, like other states, has been struggling with teacher shortages at all grade levels which prompted Governor Murphy to create a Taskforce to “develop recommendations to address teacher and ESP (education support professional) shortages in school districts across the State”.ⁱⁱ In February 2023, the Taskforce released its initial set of recommendations aimed at improving teacher retention, recruitment, training, and State-level program funding.ⁱⁱⁱ

Workforce Action Step 1

Incentivize partnerships between two-year and four-year IHEs to facilitate preschool teacher certification

Aligned partnerships between two- and four-year institutions of higher education (IHEs) will provide efficient and effective pathways to preschool teacher certification for non-traditional students. Students in two-year IHEs should be able to seamlessly transfer to a four-year IHE after earning an associate degree (or equivalent). While 3+1 models are very popular, 2+2 transfer agreements, where students complete two years of education at community college followed by two years of education at a four-year institution, are a better fit for P-3 preparation. 2+2 transfer agreements will allow students to complete required in-classroom coursework at a four-year IHE and a semester of required work-based learning (i.e., student teaching).



Action

Encourage two-year and four-year IHE partners to set up joint dual admission agreements in which block transfers of the ECE associate degree are fully accepted by the four-year IHE.

Additional Issues for Deliberation by The Interagency Steering Committee

Expand preschool teacher pipeline and provide guidance on modifying salary structure to reflect achievement of educational milestones to incentivize credential completion

Allowing existing child care teachers to teach in the State preschool program while enrolled in a teacher education program, including alternate route, will reduce the number of new teachers needed to achieve expansion goals. Any such flexibility should ensure accountability that teacher candidates are making adequate progress toward certification and receive additional mentoring and supports to ensure they are able to meet their students' needs. A salary structure that provides regular salary increases will incentivize and support degree and certification attainment for lead teachers working toward certification. Salary increases will motivate teachers to complete certification within a six-year timeframe, decrease teacher turnover and provide compensation for increased knowledge.

To that end, the State could issue guidance on how child care centers can implement a graduated salary scale for private provider teachers working towards P-3 certification. This might include aligning salary increases with milestones, specifically at completion of CDA, 30 credits, 60 credits, 90 credits and full parity when a degree and certification are conferred.

Career pipeline for recruitment with High school Grow your own and pre-apprenticeship Models

Grow Your Own (GYO) and Pre-Apprenticeship models can be an effective way to attract high school students into the ECE workforce. If designed appropriately, these initiatives can also help alleviate the disconnect between the demographics of preschool children and teaching staff. The current workforce does not reflect the population of children served. Approximately 30% of children under the age of five are Hispanic and an additional 27% are Black or other minority.^{iv} However, only 8% of K-12 teachers are Hispanic, and 9% are Black or other minority.^v

In the preschool context, GYO models are typically grassroots partnerships between school districts and educator preparation providers where high school students earn credits – often credits that lead to an entry-level Child Development Associates (CDA) credential. Targeting high school juniors and seniors, candidates attend early childhood classes and are employed in local preschool programs to fulfill a practicum experience. Upon graduation and attainment of credentials, participants are invited to work in their local community as a teacher assistant while they obtain a teacher license.

Pre-apprenticeship programs prepare individuals to enter and succeed in registered apprenticeship programs.^{vi} Pre-apprentices partake in work-based learning (also referred to as on-the-job training) that provides opportunities to gain skills and fulfill credit-bearing coursework while also earning a wage. Similar to the GYO model, pre-apprentices begin training while still in high school and, in many programs, complete numerous community college credits during their program. Pre-apprenticeship training should align with the CDA credential.^{vii}

Federal Funding Opportunities to Expand the Career Pipeline by Developing ECE Apprenticeship Programs

The US Department of Labor (USDOL) and other federal agencies annually fund the development and implementation of new apprenticeship programs that aim to dismantle employment barriers and increase wages for traditionally underrepresented populations, including women, youth, individuals with disabilities, and people of color.

Well-designed ECE apprenticeship programs can recruit new teachers and support early career professionals in obtaining industry-driven, nationally recognized credentials. Apprentices receive incremental pay increases as they partake in work-based learning while participating in aligned, credit-bearing, in-classroom instruction. Apprenticeship training typically begins after high school graduation and puts students on the path to earning a two-year degree (associate degree or equivalent). Apprenticeship training is most effective when aligned with an associate degree that is transferable to a four-year college ECE program.

Continue or expand scholarship funding to support existing child care and Head Start teachers in obtaining credentials within Six years

The Abbott experience confirmed that the current teaching workforce in private provider classrooms is experienced and has an 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. Attaining this degree is not easy to accomplish when working a full-time, 40-hour per week, 12-month job and typically making no more than \$28,900 annually without benefits. Providing scholarships to existing teachers was critical to the successful expansion of preschool in the former Abbott districts. Replicating the successful scholarship program offered under Abbott expansion, takes advantage of the existing workforce by contracting with private provider classrooms while teachers are enrolled in a college teacher education program, including alternate route, and have a plan approved by an IHE to complete the requirements for P-3 licensure within six years.

The estimated annual average cost of obtaining a P-3 is about \$7,220 per teacher, including tuition, books, and testing (\$43,320 per teacher over a maximum of six years). A per teacher stipend of \$500 annually to cover miscellaneous costs such as child care and transportation to campus brings this estimate to \$45,320.

These estimates assume that many existing teachers will not take 6 years to complete the degree and certification.

Some current lead 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. The revised per pupil rates ensure that teacher assistant salaries are commensurate to current lead teacher salaries in child care.

Qualifications for Assistant Teachers as Instructional Assistants and Support For Degree Completion

Research indicates that the professional preparation of preschool teacher assistants is associated with program quality. Increasing expectations for teacher assistants will elevate program quality by allowing them to serve as instructional assistants in the classroom and improve the teacher workforce pipeline by starting them on the pathway to becoming fully qualified teachers. Instructional assistants with at least 30 college credits can serve as substitute teachers with commensurate pay when the teacher is absent and reduce the burden on schools to find substitutes, ensure consistency of teaching when the teacher is away and provide modest increases in pay.

Comparable Preparation Time and Work Schedules Across Settings

In order to retain teachers and ensure equitable working conditions across preschool settings teachers in private provider settings must have the same paid preparation time and work schedule as teachers in public schools. The DOE can consider revising preschool guidance documents to reinforce that preschool teachers in private provider locations are entitled to the same paid preparation time and work schedule as teachers in public school classrooms.

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. Comparable compensation must include both salaries and benefits to improve recruitment and retention of qualified teachers, reinforcing quality across mixed-delivery settings. Funding can be used to purchase health insurance coverage through GetCoveredNJ (New Jersey’s Health Insurance Marketplace) or to offset the cost of an individual’s inclusion on a spouse/partner health insurance plan.

Professional Development in Early Childhood Education for all Administrators who Supervise Preschool Teachers

One of the Critical components of effective preschool is supportive, knowledgeable district and program leaders. To ensure that teachers have appropriate and knowledgeable support and supervision, all leadership positions funded through Preschool Education Aid are required to have expertise in early childhood education. However, this requirement has not in recent years included center directors in partnering providers.

Preschool regulations could require that all current direct supervisors of preschool teaching staff in districts (typically building principals) and private provider settings (typically center directors) will have or acquire a minimum of one college course in early childhood education or an equivalent micro-credential similar to the early childhood module offered by the New Jersey Expedited Certification for Educational Leadership (NJEXCEL). Building administrators in current and newly funded sites could have up to two years to fulfill this requirement.

Funding

Expanding the State's high-quality preschool program requires clear guidance and expectations from the State to ensure that school districts and private providers understand how State preschool funding is calculated and intended to be used. State funding for State preschool is currently calculated based on three per child rates, which vary based on whether children are served in school district buildings, child care centers, or Head Start centers.

The three preschool per child rates each include funding for program-wide costs (i.e., coaches, nurses, professional development, preschool intervention and referral, and program supervision). School districts are instructed to use a portion of each per child rate to cover the program-wide costs that support all children and classrooms in the program. This approach to funding program-wide costs has led to confusion and frustration for school districts, who struggle to estimate how much funding to withhold, and private providers, who want more transparency in how these amounts are calculated.

Funding Action Step 1

Pilot a state/local cost-sharing approach to funding State preschool



Action

Revise State funding calculations to pilot a state/local cost-sharing approach to preschool funding for districts new to the State preschool program as of FY26.

Funding Action Step 2

Regularly evaluate preschool per child rates to ensure adequacy

Although the SFRA calls for annual cost of living increases to the base preschool per child rates, increases were not provided for most fiscal years prior to the Murphy Administration. To build on the progress the Murphy Administration has made increasing rates according to inflation, a regular schedule of preschool funding audits will ensure that State per child rates are sufficient for districts and contracted providers to meet State quality standards.



Action

Regularly evaluate the extent to which State per student rates support the cost of implementing high-quality preschool. Model the evaluation, to the maximum extent practical, on the DOE's process for periodically revising parameters of K-12 State aid under the School Funding Reform Act.

Funding Action Step 3

Provide assurance through legislation that the state is committed to permanently funding universal preschool

Currently preschool expansion is being conducted without the same kind of certainty as K-12 that funding will continue in the future. This reduces the willingness of school districts and private providers to participate in the program. It also reduces their willingness to incur debt to improve facilities and raises borrowing costs by increasing the uncertainty for lenders that funding from the State to repay loans will continue to be available. Outlining the State's plan through legislation would provide greater assurance to capital markets that the State will continue to fund the program in the future despite changes in the economic and political environment.



Action

Enact legislation addressing the State's plan for preschool expansion. Legislation should codify key components of the Department of Education's preschool expansion program — including requiring elementary-serving districts to offer full-day kindergarten, as a critical element of preschool expansion ensuring continuity of high-quality services through the early childhood years — and expand the program's reach by prioritizing applications representing a consortium of districts agreeing to serve the entire region represented by the consortium.

Additional Issues for Deliberation by the Interagency Steering Committee

Budget Guidance and Templates to Address District and Private Provider Needs

For school districts working with at least eight private providers, State funding is intended to support the cost of a district employee dedicated to working on budgets and budget issues with private providers (the preschool fiscal specialist). For smaller districts, this role generally falls to the business administrator. Most private providers are too small to employ an accountant, so the program director is typically in charge of managing the preschool program budget with the district. During conversations with districts and private providers across the state, they requested help to understand their roles and responsibilities in terms of how to work together to develop budgets and procedures for monitoring expenditures.

Budget guidance documents could be updated to include instructions for collaborative budget development and define roles and responsibilities for districts and private providers.

Transportation for Preschool

Outside of facilities and workforce, transportation was one of the most frequent and urgent issues voiced by school districts when asked about their concerns related to preschool expansion. School districts in their first year of preschool expansion are permitted to budget a portion of their Preschool Education Aid to support transportation costs for preschoolers. After the first year, preschoolers are incorporated into district transportation aid calculations and are only permitted to use Preschool Education Aid to support courtesy bussing for preschoolers. Although a statewide evaluation of transportation aid is beyond the scope of this plan, adequately supporting the cost of transporting a growing population of public preschoolers has large implications on districts' ability to meet expansion targets.

In conversations about transportation, school districts also voiced concerns about the appropriate length of bus routes for preschool-age children, logistics of transporting preschoolers to private provider locations, additional time and/or personnel to assist preschoolers with protective lap belts and/or car seats, and appropriate age ranges of other children on bus routes with preschool-age children.

Endnotes

- i Data are from the [NJDOE's 2023-2024 Fall Enrollment Report](https://www.nj.gov/education/doedata/enr/index.shtml). [nj.gov/education/doedata/enr/index.shtml](https://www.nj.gov/education/doedata/enr/index.shtml)
- ii Task force on Public School Staff Shortages in New Jersey. (2023). [Initial Recommendations from Members of the Task force on Public School Staff Shortages in New Jersey](https://www.state.nj.us/education/docs/TaskForceReport.pdf). <https://www.state.nj.us/education/docs/TaskForceReport.pdf>
- iii *Ibid.*
- iv *Ibid.*
- v New Jersey Department of Education. (2021). [2020-2021 Certificated Staff](https://www.nj.gov/education/doedata/cs/index.shtml). [nj.gov/education/doedata/cs/index.shtml](https://www.nj.gov/education/doedata/cs/index.shtml)
- vi Apprenticeship USA. (nd). [Explore Pre-Apprenticeship](https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/explore-pre-apprenticeship). United States Department of Labor. [apprenticeship.gov/employers/explore-pre-apprenticeship](https://www.apprenticeship.gov/employers/explore-pre-apprenticeship)
- vii Council for Professional Recognition (nd). [High School Pathways: Jumpstarting ECE Careers](https://cdacouncil.org/en/high-school-pathways/). cdacouncil.org/en/high-school-pathways/

Data Tables for Graphs

Data table: Total State-funded Preschool Seats by Year

Fiscal Year	Total Seats	Increase Over Last Fiscal Year
2019	56,316	11%
2020	60,427	7.3%
2021	63,895	5.7%
2022	66,405	3.9%
2023	70,621	6.3%
2024	73,819	4.5%
2025	76,774	4.0%

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Appendices

Appendix A — Stakeholder Engagement Report

Summary of Stakeholder Feedback on the New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion

Prepared by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) February 2023

Beginning in October 2022, the NIEER team, on behalf of the New Jersey DOE, conducted 14 stakeholder meetings and engaged with approximately 36 organizations, represented by over 100 individuals, to solicit feedback on the New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion. Response to the plan was overwhelmingly positive with expressed satisfaction with the plan's comprehensive representation of critical issues related to expansion. Over a three-month period, several common themes emerged among various stakeholder groups. Below is a summary of key findings by policy area.

Financing

Primary among concerns raised was the issue of equity, with stakeholders urging the state to ensure that New Jersey's lowest income school districts and children are prioritized for expansion. Groups advocated that there be transparency in recruitment and enrollment at the district level to make certain that the most vulnerable children are served. Disparities in funding structures district to district (e.g., differences in salary scales) raised concerns about un- (or under-) funded costs, especially for such things as transportation and staff benefits. A few specific groups urged that funding should go directly to private schools, child care and Head Start providers, rather than all funds being channeled through school districts.

Facilities

Limitations on availability of classrooms (public/private) that meet the DOE square footage requirements and the discrepancy between DOE and the Office of Licensing (DCF) requirements, were among the leading issues raised with various stakeholder groups. School districts also discussed a concern that the plan doesn't address needed supports for maintenance and upgrades to school facilities. Individuals representing the interests of both school districts and child care providers expressed confusion about how DOE's square footage requirements are enforced and under what circumstances waivers are granted.

Workforce

Among the most critical issues raised, the scarcity of certified preschool teachers in the workforce rose to the top. Both school district and private provider groups told stories of the shortage of qualified teachers to staff their preschool classrooms and competition between programs to recruit and hire from the same small pool of candidates. Private providers (including Head Start) indicated that per pupil funding from districts was not adequate to pay for comparable salaries and benefits packages (health, retirement, etc.), making recruitment of viable teacher candidates even more challenging for that sector.

Mixed-Delivery

Among other concerns, two primary issues were raised by a variety of stakeholder groups: that school districts should be required to contract with all willing and able providers; and growing concern about the negative impact of preschool expansion on infant and toddler care. A common concern was that, with school districts drawing preschoolers away from the private sector, it will be difficult for providers to remain in business to serve the community. There was expressed support for an infant/toddler funding set-aside to cover provider costs and shore up programs. Stakeholders also voiced concerns that there are systemic issues that need to be addressed before further expansion can take place. Those issues include variations in how different districts implement mixed-delivery (i.e., variations in funding allowances and requirements) and a need for clear guidance (and monitoring) of school districts to ensure rules are applied equitably from district to district.

Miscellaneous

Additional feedback falling outside of the above policy areas was also shared during the meetings. Two of the more pressing concerns included the difficulty for school districts to meet the short timeline for preschool expansion applications to be developed and submitted and potential regulatory issues that need to be addressed if changes are going to be made to align standards across state departments. A detailed summary of stakeholder feedback is below, followed by an account of each stakeholder session.

Strategic Plan Stakeholder Meeting Notes Compiled

Below is a full record of the comments made during the stakeholder sessions that are summarized above. Please note that these include all comments made even if only by a single person. Comments that were incorrect or were unrelated were not included.

Considerations for Funding

- Strengthen the plan to place emphasis on equity including ensuring that the lowest income children are prioritized during expansion efforts. There should be transparency about child recruitment and enrollment to ensure that the most vulnerable children are prioritized. (NJPSA, EE Stakeholders, Ed Orgs)
- One funding issue is differences in funding structures from district to district and districts being under-funded for costs of such things as salaries, benefits, and transportation. (Ed Orgs, NJPSA, Community Groups)
- With all the (expansion) money going to school districts, what they do with it should be better monitored by the state. (IPG)
- Separate out district-wide costs from per pupil allocation to make contracting with private providers/schools simpler. (Teach NJ)
- Consider a different model so that funding would go directly to 3rd party pre-K providers, rather than funneling money through school districts; this would incentivize providers to move into child care/pre-K “deserts”. (State Board member)
- A voucher system run through local CCRR is preferable so that parents can send children where they want. (NJCCA)

Considerations for Improving and Expanding Preschool Facilities

- The square footage requirement (for DOE-contracted programs) is a major issue for providers; DCF/OOL and DOE standards need to be aligned. Consider waivers for classrooms just below the minimum requirement. Consider adjusting the DOE facilities requirements to match DCF. (NJCYC, Community Groups, Teach NJ, Ed Orgs)
- Plan doesn’t address needed supports for improvements and maintenance of district facilities. School districts need money to expand facilities. (Ed Orgs, NJPSA)
- NJ Schools Development Authority (SDA) facilities money for school districts should be coordinated with NJ Economic Development Authority (EDA) funding for providers. We need to be cautious about adding new classrooms where they may not be needed if providers have space in the community. (IPG)
- Disparities between DOE’s and DCF’s regulations are a challenge that needs to be addressed. For example, DCF requires environmental testing, air quality testing and water tests that DOE doesn’t require of school districts. DOE does not currently allow these costs to be covered with preschool funding. (NJCCA)
- Environmental concerns remain a big issue, including in private providers and Charter schools, e.g., lead, water, asbestos, etc. (IPG)
- There should be start-up and annual capital funding for preschool facilities, including availability of funds for private providers and non-public schools. (Teach NJ)

- Grow NJ Kids and facilities - In current expansion districts, there are issues with (new) classrooms opening in temporary spaces (and then relocating) which makes Grow NJ Kids difficult to implement since self-assessment and ratings are site specific. (IPG)

Considerations for Increasing Preschool Workforce Capacity

- Workforce is the most critical issue; it was difficult to recruit/retain teachers before the pandemic but is worse now. There is a shortage of P-3 teachers in the pipeline and districts and providers are competing for the same few. (EE Stakeholders, NJHSA, CCRR)
- Pay equity is critically important; districts are not paying collaborative partners what they're paying in-district personnel. Providers need full compensation and parity (including salary, pension, health insurance, etc.); whatever districts are spending should be afforded to providers. (IPG, NJHSA, Community Groups)
- Requiring private child care providers and private schools to provide comparable benefits is a hardship for private schools especially if contracting with more than one school district with differing requirements. (Teach NJ)
- Make new teacher scholarships available for district paraprofessionals to become P-3 certified; many already have BA degrees and have been working in preschool classrooms. (NJPSA)
- Use the Abbott model for workforce development; "we know how to do this". (NJPSA)
- How do we address workforce across all systems? The PDG planning grant (housed in DCF) includes workforce; we need to provide supports to limit staff turnover and keep staff from leaving the field entirely after this investment in professional development. (IPG)
- Limitations on long-term substitutes for things like maternity leave need to be reconsidered; substitutes are limited to 20 days (or 40 with permission); otherwise, there is a need to hire a certified teacher which is very difficult for temporary leaves. (NJHSA)
- Teacher preparation plans must be prioritized; consider offering classes for Praxis Readiness (example at Programs for Parents); teacher candidates need support. The biggest roadblock for providers is the basic skills test. (CCRR, NJPSA)
- Given the current teacher shortage, has there been any consideration to lowering standards, e.g., to CDA requirement? (Ed Orgs)
- The workforce section should also consider information about promoting inclusion and inclusive processes. (Ed Orgs)
- The *Strategic Plan* workforce recommendations should be shared and aligned with the work of the Governor's new task force to address public school staffing shortages. (NJPSA)
- Consider utilization of paid internships for workforce development; student teachers must leave jobs to complete required classroom hours. (NJPSA)
- It's unfair to require long-time teachers working in child care centers to get BAs or be removed/demoted. (NJCCA)
- We need to create pathways to help teaching staff move forward in their career. (NJEA)
- We need to strengthen articulation agreements between 2- and 4-year colleges/universities. (NJEA)
- Scholarship funding for prospective teachers in both 2- and 4-year colleges/universities is a positive step. (NJEA)

Considerations for Strengthening and Expanding Mixed-Delivery Preschool

- Districts need to be mandated to collaborate because of the effects of public preschool on child care and infant and toddler programs; if child care centers and Head Start providers lose preschoolers, they can't afford to stay in business and there will be no care for anyone else. Consider proposed (Ruiz) legislation to mandate minimum. (IPG, NJHSA, Ed Orgs, Community Groups)

- Focus should be on incentivizing districts to collaborate. Explore the barriers to alleviate concerns and highlight model districts. (NJCYC, Ed Orgs, CCRR)
- There will need to be clearer guidelines developed (ahead of legislation passing) on how districts contract (with providers) going forward (e.g., 35% of classrooms added must be in provider settings). Among other issues, the current Ruiz bill does not explain whether children will have to be moved out of current public school classrooms or if the legislation applies to new classrooms only. (IPG, Ed Orgs)
- Systemic issues persist because of variations in how districts implement the mixed-delivery model (e.g., differences in funding allowances). These need to be addressed before we can get to full expansion. (EE Stakeholders, Community Groups)
- There is too much of a disconnect between DCF/OOL and DOE regulations. (EE Stakeholders, Community Groups)
- It will be important to include set-aside funds for infant/toddler programs; funding needs to be increased to afford at least a minimum wage for infant/toddler teachers. (NJHSA, NJCYC, Community Groups)
- What about a Birth to Five credential to help build up the infant/toddler field? (NJHSA)
- Messages about preschool mixed-delivery need to be taken to DOE county offices so that superintendents can develop a climate of collaboration. (EE Stakeholders)
- Lobbyists need to be engaged so that they understand the importance of supporting providers to stay in business. (EE Stakeholders)
- Head Start should be at the forefront of preschool expansion efforts since too many districts are choosing not to apply; Head Start programs provide additional services to children and families and should be the model. (NJHSA)
- If the plan takes another year to implement, more providers won't be in business. Districts make decisions every day that are counter what providers are trying to do. (NJHSA)
- Contracts with private providers need to include before/after school and summer care, otherwise programs won't be there when families need them. (CCRR)
- New Jersey should fully integrate license-exempt nonpublic schools – their classrooms, facilities, staff, and competitive pressures - into the NJ mixed-delivery model (and this plan) for universal Pre-K. (Teach NJ)
- Parents need to be educated about mixed-delivery as they may be hesitant to send their children to a provider location rather than a school district building. (NJCYC)
- Consider whether districts can share a program, e.g., one program serving multiple districts in the same classroom. (NJPSA)

General Comments

- The current timeline for expansion applications is an obstacle for new districts. The quick turn-around for application development and opening of new classes after funding is awarded is a major challenge. (Ed Orgs)
- There are potential regulatory issues if changes are going to be made to align standards across departments (DCF/DOE). We can't wait for the expansion plan to be finalized before moving on regulatory changes, construction codes, etc. (IPG)
- It's unclear in the *Strategic Plan* how the state proposes to go to "universal" and how that is defined. (Ed Orgs)
- How will capacity of staff be handled at the state-level, specifically for the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Services? (NJCYC)
- It will be difficult for non-subsidy providers to meet any (potential) new requirements since they don't benefit from additional funding and supports. (IPG)

- Child care licensing representatives should be at all planning meetings to be sure OOL's perspective is considered. (IPG)
- How will DCF be able to support and maintain program quality (through Grow NJ Kids) with so many new programs coming in? (IPG)
- Be sure legislators are aware and engaged in preschool expansion efforts; also engage with business leaders. (NJCYC)
- Highlight the success of preschool to benefit student learning outcomes. (NJCYC)
- We have limited data on preschool; consider a system that can track longitudinal data; this is a goal of NJ EASEL. (NJCYC)
- Build on existing efforts like the county councils for young children during implementation phase. (NJCYC)
- Involve parents in conversations about preschool expansion; consider ACNJ's parent council as an option for engaging a representative group of families in the work. (NJCYC)
- Consider how to engage family child care providers in this work. (NJCYC)
- What are the implications of half-day kindergarten on preschool expansion? Will need to consider facilities to expand kindergarten first. Mandate kindergarten before moving to universal pre-k. (Ed Orgs)
- Be sure that inclusion is emphasized at all levels when thinking about eligibility for preschool, especially for children transitioning out of early intervention. (Ed Orgs)
- Look carefully at county wide resources and demographics; small districts may not have necessary resources. (Ed Orgs)
- County-wide model is a good approach as organizations (like Catholic schools) serve children across a wider area; private schools should be included in county-level data bases. (Ed Orgs, Teach NJ)
- Any Grow NJ Kids requirement is a hardship for private, for-profit centers since so much training is required; accredited programs should be exempt from Grow NJ Kids. (NJCCA)

NJ Strategic Plan Stakeholder Meetings

Interdepartmental Planning Group (IPG), 10/18/22

NJ County Offices of Education, 10/19/22 and 10/28/22

NJ Council for Young Children (NJCYC), 10/20/22

NJ Head Start Association (NJHSA), 10/27/22

Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCRR), 10/28/22

NJ Education Organizations I, 11/2/22

NJ Education Organizations II, 11/3/22

NJ Early Education Stakeholders, 11/4/22

Early Education Funders, 11/15/22

NJ Community Groups, 11/16/22

Teach NJ Coalition, 11/28/22

New Jersey Principal and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), 12/7/22

NJ Child Care Association (NJCCA), 12/12/22

New Jersey Education Agency (NJEA), 1/25/23

Appendix B — Preschool Expansion in the Counties

Introduction

Meeting Governor Murphy’s long-term goal of providing universal access to high-quality preschool for all resident 3- and 4-year-olds requires significant expansion of programs throughout all 21 counties in New Jersey. Critical to that expansion is understanding the landscape, challenges, and opportunities that will work together to create a unique path for preschool expansion in each county. To this end, county-specific data were collected to describe what is known about the current status of public preschool in each county as well as the primary challenges and opportunities for expansion.

Quantitative data were collected from a variety of public sources, including US Census data, NJ Department of Education (DOE) budget and enrollment documents, NJ Department of Children and Families (DCF) licensing data, and information available through the NJ Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE). Qualitative data were also collected through a series of virtual meetings with administrators from school districts, Head Start agencies, and licensed child care providers in each county who agreed to discuss issues related to preschool expansion. Below is a summary of the key takeaways from each county, showing that classroom space and navigating mixed-delivery relationships emerged as concerns in almost every district. Included after the summaries is a table with data on each county.

Atlantic County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 72% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Atlantic County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 74% of 3- and 4-year-olds (3,933 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 72 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general and special education children). School districts and providers identified some potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure facilities. Districts and providers want to enhance their relationships but need help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children. Overall, the county is struggling to retain the current early childhood workforce and to attract new individuals to the field.

Bergen County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 22% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Bergen County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 18% of 3- and 4-year-olds (3,380 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 941 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers expressed their desire to expand preschool in Bergen County but reported that issues with space creates substantial barriers to that goal. While finding adequate facilities is challenging, they demonstrate a strong desire to find creative solutions, including construction to build additional facilities, as needed. Districts and providers also want help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children.

Burlington County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 69% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Burlington County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 44% of 3- and 4-year-olds (4,014 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 302 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). In Burlington County, preschool programs have expanded fairly quickly in recent years. There are several examples of successful school district/provider partnerships for delivery of preschool services, although districts and providers alike indicated a need for additional guidance on mixed-delivery.

Camden County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 67% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Camden County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 54% of 3- and 4-year-olds (6,353 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 396 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers identified some potential new classroom spaces to serve children, however the identified spaces are not enough to reach universal access to preschool. In addition to funding, dedicated planning for facilities expansion is needed to help Camden County plan for and implement universal preschool. Districts and providers will need help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children.

Cape May County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 61% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Cape May County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 70% of 3- and 4-year-olds (1,030 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, and about 28 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). Notably, there is a scarcity of child care centers with space meeting State preschool standards in Cape May County. In fact, none of the school districts in Cape May County that receive funding for State preschool contract with local child care or Head Start programs to serve the population. Many of the current classrooms used for preschool do not meet state requirements for preschool classrooms, and although school districts identified some potential new classroom spaces, significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure these spaces.

Cumberland County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 88% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Cumberland County. Most districts are already projecting to serve the estimated population of preschool age children in State-funded preschool classrooms, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). An estimated 6 additional classrooms are needed to provide universal access in all districts. In the former Abbott districts, there is concern about previously grandfathered space no longer being allowable for preschool use. Districts identified potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure these spaces. Districts and providers need help navigating a mixed-delivery approach since school districts feel they have the space to serve their 3- and 4-year-old population when expanding preschool to universal.

Essex County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 35% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Essex County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 67% of 3- and 4-year-olds (13,367 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 474 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and private preschool providers expressed the desire to work collaboratively to serve all the preschoolers of Essex County and want help developing and maintaining successful long-term collaborations. Districts identified some potential new spaces for preschool classrooms, but private providers are an under-utilized source of experience and capacity in the expansion of State preschool.

Gloucester County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 67% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Gloucester County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 52% of 3- and 4-year-olds (3,107 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 165 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including

both general education and special education children). School districts and providers expressed the desire to work collaboratively to strengthen the mixed-delivery system to serve the preschool-aged children in the community. They requested additional guidance from the state about how to develop and maintain these relationships. They also communicated a willingness to renovate existing structures to meet facilities code, or build new structures as needed, but significant funding would be required.

Hudson County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 56% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Hudson County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 64% of 3- and 4-year-olds (10,986 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 348 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). In Hudson County, specific facilities challenges were raised related to districts in dense urban areas. Districts and providers have employed creative solutions to address outdoor play space and to modify available classroom space, but additional solutions are needed.

Hunterdon County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 70% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Hunterdon County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 54% of 3- and 4-year-olds (1,145 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 62 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). Private providers are an untapped source of classroom space for public preschool, but the rural nature of Hunterdon County presents unique challenges related to the mixed-delivery model and associated transportation concerns. Recent cuts in state aid also present challenges for some affected districts. Finally, prospective State preschool teachers living and working in Hunterdon County do not have easy access to the higher education courses needed to obtain certification.

Mercer County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 25% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Mercer County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 36% of 3- and 4-year-olds (2,698 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 302 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). Three school districts are currently serving preschoolers in a State-funded program, one of them a former Abbott district that primarily serves children in private provider settings. With only a third of preschool-age children being served in State-funded programs, there is significant room in the county for continued growth.

Middlesex County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 52% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Middlesex County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 38% of 3- and 4-year-olds (6,554 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 639 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers identified some potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure these spaces. Districts and providers want help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children. Smaller districts in Middlesex County are eager for guidance and examples of how to connect with each other to share the administrative responsibility of operating the State preschool program. Middlesex County benefits from a long-term partnership between staff in the DOE's County Office and the Child Care Resource and Referral agency who already meet regularly to work on related issues.

Monmouth County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 46% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Monmouth County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 42% of 3- and 4-year-olds (4,902 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 444 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers identified some potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure these spaces. Districts and providers want help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children. Monmouth County benefits from an established partnership between staff in the DOE's County Office and the Child Care Resource and Referral agency who understand the landscape and are eager to assist. Smaller districts in Monmouth County are eager for help and guidance to connect with each other to share the administrative responsibility of operating the State preschool program.

Morris County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 19% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Morris County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 18% of 3- and 4-year-olds (1,747 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 485 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers demonstrated a strong desire to serve the remaining preschool students in the county but noted that significant funding and State guidance are needed to renovate spaces and build additional classrooms, as needed. Only a small number of private providers are currently contracting with districts to serve State-funded preschoolers, and districts and providers requested guidance for managing a successful mixed-delivery system.

Ocean County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 69% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Ocean County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 24% of 3- and 4-year-olds (4,540 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 823 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts identified some potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure these spaces. Private providers in Ocean County are underutilized in terms of the capacity and experience they can lend to preschool expansion efforts. Districts and providers in Ocean County expressed a need for technical assistance and scholarship funding to support teaching candidates to progress through the certification process.

Passaic County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 35% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Passaic County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 58% of 3- and 4-year-olds (6,773 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 269 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers demonstrated a strong desire to serve the remaining preschool students in the county but expressed that finding space for preschool classrooms is a significant barrier to preschool expansion. School districts report that they are out of space and private providers report that many of their classrooms don't meet the DOE's square footage requirements. Districts and providers want to find a way to move forward with expansion, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to do so.

Salem County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 92% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Salem County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 82% of 3- and 4-year-olds (1,109 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 18 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers identified some potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure these spaces. Districts and providers want help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children. The group also discussed the need to strengthen the pipeline of new teachers to the southern region of the state where there is a particular struggle to recruit and retain teaching staff.

Somerset County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 25% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Somerset County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 24% of 3- and 4-year-olds (1,562 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 295 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). Because Somerset County currently serves so few 3- and 4-year-old students, there is an incredible opportunity for expansion. School districts and providers expressed their desire to open more preschool classrooms through collaborations but were unsure about how to develop and maintain these arrangements.

Sussex County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 85% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Sussex County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 46% of 3- and 4-year-olds (1,173 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 87 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers identified some potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure these spaces. Districts and providers want help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children. Private providers in Sussex County are eager for help and guidance to connect with each other to share the administrative responsibility of operating the State preschool program.

Union County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 50% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Union County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 57% of 3- and 4-year-olds (7,562 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 335 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). School districts and providers identified a few potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure existing and building new spaces to meet universal preschool access goals. Districts and providers want help connecting with each other and understanding how to collaborate to serve children. Union County participants expressed that issues related to mixed-delivery and preschool expansion must be sorted out at the local, grassroots level.

Warren County Key Takeaways

As of the 2024-25 school year, 41% of districts serving elementary school-age children receive funding for State preschool in Warren County. Together, districts are currently projecting to serve 38% of 3- and 4-year-olds (771 children) in State-funded preschool classrooms, but up to 79 more classrooms are needed to reach universal access, defined as 90% of the full population of 3- and 4-year-olds (including both general education and special education children). With just over $\frac{1}{3}$ of children being served in State-funded preschool programs, there is considerable room for growth. School districts and providers identified some

potential new classroom spaces to serve children, but significant funding and State guidance are needed to help secure them. Smaller districts in Warren County discussed the need for collaboration between districts to maximize resources and share services. Private providers in Warren County are underutilized in terms of the capacity and experience they can lend to preschool expansion efforts.

Table 1. 2024-25 Funded Districts and Projected State Preschool Enrollment, by County

County	% of Districts with Elementary Schools Receiving State Preschool Funding	Projected 3- and 4-Year-Old Seats	% of 3- and 4-year-old Population Served with Projected Seats	Additional Classrooms Needed
Atlantic	72%	3,933	74%	72
Bergen	22%	3,380	18%	941
Burlington	69%	4,014	44%	302
Camden	67%	6,353	54%	396
Cape May	61%	1,030	70%	28
Cumberland	88%	3,331	100%	6
Essex	35%	13,367	67%	474
Gloucester	67%	3,107	52%	165
Hudson	56%	10,986	64%	348
Hunterdon	70%	1,145	54%	62
Mercer	25%	2,698	36%	302
Middlesex	52%	6,554	38%	639
Monmouth	46%	4,902	42%	444
Morris	19%	1,747	18%	485
Ocean	69%	4,540	24%	823
Passaic	35%	6,773	58%	269
Salem	92%	1,109	82%	18
Somerset	25%	1,562	24%	295
Sussex	85%	1,173	46%	87
Union	50%	7,562	57%	335
Warren	41%	771	38%	79

