

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Overview

The goal of the State is to provide adequate start-up funding to ensure that public preschool programs for children 4 years of age are offered by all school administrative units (SAUs) by the 2023-2024 school year to reach implementation of universal voluntary public preschool for children 4 years of age.

This report is in response to L.D. 1001, Part UUUU, 129th Maine State Legislature, and the requirement for the Department to develop recommendations, including recommended legislation, for the implementation of universal public preschool for children 4 years of age and report back to the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs by January 1, 2020. Recommendations must include at least:

- Standards for public preschool programs;
- Process for approval and certification of programs not operated by a SAU, including, but not limited to, a Head Start program or other program affiliated with the SAU; and
- Funding for public preschool programs including options to encourage implementation or expansion by SAUs.

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Call for Universal Public Pre-K in Maine

In the Spring of 2019, Governor Mills reinstated Maine’s Children’s Cabinet. The Maine Children’s Cabinet members are the Commissioners of five state agencies -- Department of Corrections, Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Labor, and Department of Public Safety – operating programs and policies for children. Maine’s Chief Justice is also invited and participates in select Children’s Cabinet meetings. The Cabinet is focused on aligning and strengthening our early care and education system and our system of care and prevention for at risk youth.

The Cabinet has identified two overarching goals:

- All Maine children enter kindergarten prepared to succeed.
- All Maine youth enter adulthood healthy, connected to the workforce and/or education.

Staff from the five state agencies represented on the Children’s Cabinet meet regularly to coordinate and integrate their work to strengthen Maine’s early childhood system across agencies. Staff spent the fall supporting the work of the current Preschool Development Grant, preparing an application for the renewal Preschool Development Grant and developing a plan to support the Children’s Cabinets work over the next three to five years that is aligned with the state’s PDG strategic plan.

While the plan has not yet been finalized by the Children’s Cabinet, one of its key strategies to prepare children to succeed in kindergarten will include expanding public pre-K to ensure that it is available to all 4-year-olds in Maine. The Children’s Cabinet is supportive of expanding Pre-K through a mixed delivery system that supports the entire birth through five system by encouraging partnerships between schools, Head Start programs and local Child Care providers.

Current State of Public Pre-K in Maine

Currently, of the 196 Maine school districts that could realistically offer public pre-K, 156 (79.5%) offer some form of public pre-K experience for 4-year-olds. While some school districts have capacity to serve all 4-year-olds in school systems, the vast majority currently serve only a portion of their 4-year-old population. During school year 2019/20, 6,300 4-year-olds are enrolled in public pre-k which represents approximately 48% of the State’s 4-year-olds. Currently, to receive subsidy for public pre-K, school districts must offer programming for a minimum of 10 hours a week. Public pre-k programs represent a mix of half and full day structures as noted in the following table.

Program hours/days by district

	5 days/week	4 days/week	3 days/week	2 days/week
Full Day (5+ hours)	38 (31%)	6 (5%)	3 (2%)	5 (4%)
Half Day (-5 hours)	36 (29%)	23 (19%)	2 (2%)	
Other (means they offer both half & full day options)	5 (4%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)

Of the 156 school districts offering public pre-K, 54 (34.6%) operate with a community partner:

- 3 are private preschool partners

- 1 is a mix of Head Start and private
- 50 are Head Start only partners

**Head Start Grantee and School District Partnerships
2019/20 School Year**

Head Start Grantees	District Partners
Aroostook County Action Program	RSU#29 (<i>Houlton</i>) RSU#50 (<i>Dyer Brook</i>) RSU#79/MSAD#1 (<i>Presque Isle</i>)
DownEast Community Partners	Calais Public Schools Deer Isle-Stonington Ellsworth Public Schools RSU#25 (<i>Bucksport</i>) RSU#24 (<i>Sullivan, Prospect Harbor, Trenton, Woodland</i>)
Community Concepts Inc.	SAD#9 (<i>Farmington and New Sharon</i>) SAD#17 (<i>Oxford, Norway, Paris, South Paris</i>) SAD# 44 (<i>Bethel</i>) SAD#72 (<i>Fryeburg</i>)
Kennebec Valley Community Action Program	Waterville Public Schools RSU#19 (<i>Hartland</i>) RSU#54 (<i>Canaan, Norridgewock, Skowhegan</i>) RSU#74 (<i>Solon, Anson</i>) MSAD#49 (<i>Albion, Clinton, Fairfield</i>)
Midcoast Maine Community Action	West Bath Public Schools RSU#1 (<i>Bath</i>) RSU#12 (<i>Whitefield, Somerville</i>) SAD#75 (<i>Topsham</i>)
The Opportunity Alliance	Portland Public Schools Westbrook Public Schools
Penquis Community Action Program	Brewer Public Schools East Millinocket Public Schools AOS#94 (<i>Dexter</i>) RSU#13 (<i>Rockland</i>) RSU#67 (<i>Lincoln</i>)
Promise Early Learning Center	Lewiston Public Schools RSU#73/Spruce Mountain School District (<i>Livermore</i>)
Southern Kennebec Child Development Corporation	RSU#12 (<i>Chelsea, Windsor</i>) Winthrop Public Schools Vassalboro Public Schools RSU#2 (<i>Monmouth</i>)
Waldo County Community Action Program	RSU#03/MSAD#03 (<i>Unity, Liberty, Brooks, Monroe</i>) RSU#20 (<i>Searsport</i>) RSU#22 (<i>Winterport</i>) RSU#71 (<i>Belfast</i>)
York County Community Action Program	Biddeford Public Schools Sanford Public Schools

Existing Language in 20-A Maine Revised Statutes Pertaining to Public Pre-K

Statutory provisions for public pre-K began in 1983 and have been enhanced over time, especially within the state funding formula whereby subsidy is provided to address start-up costs. Maine is one of only a few states that support public preschool through the state formula (more

details included below). State level funding for public pre-K in Maine has risen steadily since 2003 when \$650,000 was allocated to over \$19 million in 2018. Beginning in 2007, coordination with other child serving entities became a requirement for developing public preschool programs.

§4251. Intent

The intent of this subchapter is to encourage school administrative units to place an increased emphasis on instruction and curriculum for all children beginning at 4 years of age in public preschool programs to grade 2. This subchapter is not intended as a method of financing existing efforts but as a way of encouraging the development of new or expanded programs. [2015, c. 267, Pt. C, §1 (AMD).]

§4252. Program

The initiatives local units may elect to develop may include, but not be limited to, one or more of the following: [1983, c. 576, §1 (NEW).]

- 1. Class size.** Reduce the class size in all classrooms;
[2015, c. 267, Pt. C, §2 (AMD) .]
- 2. Teacher training.** Provide training programs for teachers in screening, educational diagnosis, program prescription or program development;
[1983, c. 576, §1 (NEW) .]
- 3. Screening.** Establish or expand preschool or early childhood screening programs and the development of individualized educational prescription based on the findings of the screening;
[1983, c. 576, §1 (NEW) .]
- 4. Programs for children 4 years of age and 5 years of age.** Encourage the development of public preschool programs or 2-year kindergartens in conformity with section 5201, subsection 2, paragraph C and other appropriate programs to address the needs of children 4 years of age and 5 years of age;
[2007, c. 141, §3 (AMD) .]
- 5. Multigrade classrooms.** Establish classroom units of more than one grade level;
[1989, c. 548, §4 (AMD) .]
- 6. Learning environment.** Develop a learning environment which would encourage each student to learn and progress at that student's own functional level;
[1989, c. 548, §4 (AMD) .]
- 7. Transition.** Facilitate the transition of children from preschool programs to public school programs;
[2015, c. 183, §1 (AMD) .]
- 8. Family outreach.** Provide family outreach and support programs designed to improve parent-school relations and parenting skills; and
[2015, c. 183, §1 (AMD) .]
- 9. Early childhood statewide assessments.** The use of early childhood statewide assessment tools pursuant to chapter 222 to inform instruction and to communicate effectively with parents. An early childhood statewide assessment must avoid inappropriate use of assessment information; specifically, the assessment may not result in labeling children, restricting kindergarten entry or predicting children's future academic and life success.

§4254. Funding

1. Allowable costs. Allowable costs are the cost of implementing approved plans; these costs may be added to the school unit's subsidizable costs under chapter 606-B.

[2005, c. 2, Pt. D, §17 (AMD); 2005, c. 2, Pt. D, §§72, 74 (AFF); 2005, c. 12, Pt. WW, §18 (AFF) .]

§4271. Start-up funding for public preschool programs

1. Start-up funding. To the extent the State provides adequate start-up funding, school administrative units may operate public preschool programs or provide for students to participate in such programs in accordance with the requirements of this Title. For the purposes of this subchapter, "start-up funding" means a one-time, start-up grant awarded to a qualified school administrative unit that submits an implementation plan that is approved by the department for the operation of a new or expanded public preschool program.

[2013, c. 581, §3 (NEW) .]

2. Allowable costs. Beginning with the 2015-2016 school year and for each subsequent school year, the State may provide start-up funding for the allowable costs to operate public preschool programs for children 4 years of age under this subchapter.

[2013, c. 581, §3 (NEW) .]

3. Grant funds. Beginning with the 2015-2016 school year and for each subsequent school year, the commissioner may provide start-up funding to qualified school administrative units to operate public preschool programs for children 4 years of age. Grants provided for allowable costs for approved public preschool programs must be provided from state, federal or private funds appropriated, allocated or authorized by the Legislature for that purpose.

[2017, c. 284, Pt. C, §5 (AMD) .]

3-A. Phase-in procedures for new or newly expanded public preschool programs. Beginning July 1, 2018, for new or newly expanded public preschool programs, the commissioner shall make a preliminary calculation of total allocation pursuant to section 15674 based on the following:

A. Estimated public preschool program student counts not to exceed the school unit's most recent kindergarten enrollment; [2017, c. 284, Pt. C, §6 (NEW).]

B. Estimated rates and weights based on statewide averages; and [2017, c. 284, Pt. C, §6 (NEW).]

C. The preliminary calculation of total allocation, which must be replaced with actual student data once students have been enrolled for the new school year. The new or newly expanded public preschool programs shall enroll new students no later than August 1st in a student information system maintained by the department. [2017, c. 284, Pt. C, §6 (NEW).]

[2017, c. 284, Pt. C, §6 (NEW) .]

4. Qualifications; rules. To qualify for a grant under this section, a school administrative unit must submit an implementation plan to the department for the operation of a new or expanded public preschool program. The qualifications established for implementation plans must contain standards and best practices for public preschool programs and must encourage a school administrative unit to demonstrate coordination with other early childhood programs in the community to maximize resources and provide comprehensive services to meet the needs of children 4 years of age in accordance with this subchapter and rules adopted by the commissioner. In awarding grants under this section, the commissioner shall give priority to a qualified school administrative unit that has a greater percentage of economically disadvantaged students as determined pursuant to section 15675, subsection 2 than other qualified school administrative units under this subsection and in accordance with the following order of preference:

A. The first preference must be to award grant funds to a qualified school administrative unit that does not operate a public preschool program and that submits a plan for the development and operation of a new public preschool program; and [2013, c. 581, §3 (NEW).]

B. The 2nd preference must be to award grant funds to a qualified school administrative unit that operates a public preschool program and that submits a plan for the development and operation of an expanded public preschool program. [2013, c. 581, §3 (NEW).]

The commissioner shall adopt rules that establish criteria for the approval of implementation plans and for the awarding of start-up funds for the allowable costs of operating public preschool programs. Rules adopted pursuant to this subsection are routine technical rules as defined in Title 5, chapter 375, subchapter 2-A.

[2013, c. 581, §3 (NEW) .]

5. Application for federal public preschool funds. The department may apply for assistance from the Federal Government for the development of public preschool programs for children 4 years of age on behalf of school administrative units in the State. The department shall administer any federal funds received for the benefit of public preschool programs in the State. As the designated state agency authorized to administer federal funds, the department shall develop a state plan and application for funding public preschool programs and shall disburse federal funds as authorized and required by applicable federal law. Beginning in fiscal year 2015-16, the department shall provide any federal funds received to qualified school administrative units as part of the start-up funding provided for the development and operation of public preschool programs under this section. If federal funds are used as part of the start-up funds to operate new or expanded public preschool programs, the students enrolled in these programs must be considered subsidizable pupils for purposes of state subsidy calculations pursuant to chapter 606-B.

[2013, c. 581, §3 (NEW) .]

§4502. School approval requirements

9. Public preschool programs for children 4 years of age. To the extent the State provides adequate start-up funding for a public preschool program for children 4 years of age, a school administrative unit that does not have a public preschool program for children 4 years of age may develop a public preschool program implementation plan for children 4 years of age for submission to and approval by the department. Evaluation and approval of the proposal must include consideration of at least the following factors:

A. Demonstrated coordination with other early childhood programs in the community to maximize resources; [2007, c. 141, §11 (NEW).]

B. Consideration of the extended child care needs of working parents; and [2007, c. 141, §11 (NEW).]

C. Provision of public notice regarding the proposal to the community being served, including the extent to which public notice has been disseminated broadly to other early childhood programs in the community. [2007, c. 141, §11 (NEW).]

Beginning with the 2015-2016 school year, the commissioner may provide start-up funding as set forth in section 4271 to school administrative units to implement or expand public preschool programs for children 4 years of age as required under this subsection.

[2013, c. 581, §5 (AMD) .]

Student Eligibility

§5201(2) (C) A person who will be at least 4 years of age on October 15th of the school year may enroll in a public preschool program prior to kindergarten if it is offered. [2007, c. 141, §12 (AMD).]

Standards that Inform Public Pre-K Program Approval and Student Learning

[Chapter 124: Basic Approval Standards: Public Preschool Programs](#)

The Maine Department of Education converted original recommendations for public preschool programs into regulations which were finally adopted December 28, 2014. The GENERAL OBJECTIVES of the rule are as follows:

- 1.01 This rule establishes the substantive school approval standards pertaining to school administrative units which operate a public preschool program. Its intent is to provide a framework for planning and growth with local flexibility as influenced by local conditions. This rule establishes procedures for comprehensive reviews of school administrative units which operate a public preschool program by which the Commissioner will determine compliance with applicable standards and methods of enforcement for ensuring compliance.
- 1.02 School administrative units may operate a public preschool program or provide for children to participate in such programs in accordance with 20-A §4271 and shall meet all school approval requirements of Title 20-A, *Maine Revised Statutes* (20-A MRSA), other statutes, and rules applicable to the operation of public preschool programs, and the requirements of this rule.

Section 12.02 of Chapter 124 outlines requirements for public pre-k programs offered in partnership with a community agency.

- 12.02 Schools offering a public preschool program in partnership with a community agency must submit a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), signed by all involved parties, on a yearly basis. The elements of the MOU shall, at a minimum, include:
 - A. Roles and responsibilities of each of the partners;
 - B. A budget, including the amount of resources that each partner will provide for the implementation of the plan;
 - C. Describe the organizational capacity and the existing infrastructure of the SAU and the partners to deliver a high-quality program;
 - D. The methods and processes for making different types of decisions (e.g., policy, operational);

- E. How the partners will coordinate, but not supplant, the delivery of the public preschool program with existing services for preschool –aged children including, if applicable, programs and services supported through Title I of ESEA, the *Head Start Act*, and Child Care Development Block Grant;
- F. How the partners will coordinate with Child Development Services (under Part B, Section 619 of IDEA) regional site to ensure access for CDS for conducting its statutory obligations under IDEA and Maine law /regulations; and
- G. A description of the responsibilities and process of sharing child records that meets Section 16 of this chapter.

[Maine’s Early Learning and Development Standards \(MELDS\)](#)

Maine’s Early Learning and Development Standards (MELDS) adopted in March 2015 replaces the State of Maine Early Childhood Learning Guidelines (MELG), 2005, and serves as a guide for all early childhood educators’ efforts to improve professional practice and programs for young children from the age of three until kindergarten entrance.

MELDS outline the following guiding principles and essential practices:

1. All children are born learners and the quality of the environments in which children spend time affects what and how they learn.
2. Nurturing relationships are essential to promote healthy social emotional development.
3. Families are children’s first teachers and essential partners in education.
4. Children learn through play and active experiences that cross all areas of development.
5. Development and learning are rooted in culture and supported by family.
6. High quality learning experiences are related to skilled, knowledgeable, and responsive early childhood educators.
7. Personalized learning for diverse learners involves providing multiple approaches to learning for each child within inclusive settings.
8. Intentional planning for young children involves integrating formative assessment that guides meaningful curriculum and child outcomes.
9. A collaborative approach across early care and education systems supports a continuum of learning from birth through age eight and into adulthood.

Existing Statutory Provisions related to Funding

Essential Programs and Services – Evolution of the Funding Process

The Maine Department of Education has evolved the funding of the public preschool programs since 1983. Initial programs received grants to begin programs. In 2003 the EPS statute was revised to provide targeted funds for preschool to grade 2. Beginning in 2005 allowable costs of public preschool programs could be added to the school’s subsidizable costs under the EPS formula. At that time the SAUs received subsidy 2 years after the program had been in place. The subsidy changed later to a year after the initial operating year of the preschool program.

Today the SAUs estimate the new program counts and receive start-up funding as the program begins. By October 30 of each year, SAUs provide an estimated count of children in new or expanded programs to the Department to determine the amount of start up funds to be budgeted.

§15675 Specialized student populations' additional weights

3. Public preschool program to grade 2 students. If a school administrative unit is eligible to receive targeted funds for its public preschool to grade 2 program under section 15681, then for each public preschool program to grade 2 student the unit receives an additional weight of .10.

A. For purposes of the additional weight under this subsection, the count of public preschool program to grade 2 students is calculated based on the number of resident pupils in the most recent calendar year. Beginning with funding for the 2015-2016 school year, the pupil count for students 4 years of age and students 5 years of age attending public preschool programs must be based on the most recent October 1st count prior to the allocation year. [2013, c. 581, §8 (AMD).]

B. Only school administrative units with public preschool to grade 2 programs approved by the department are eligible for funds pursuant to this subsection or other comparable index. [2007, c. 141, §15 (AMD).]

C. Funds provided pursuant to this subsection may be expended only on behalf of public preschool program to grade 2 students. [2007, c. 141, §15 (AMD).]

[2013, c. 581, §8 (AMD) .]

§15681 Targeted funds

4. Public preschool program to grade 2 funds. For targeted public preschool program to grade 2 funds, the commissioner shall calculate the amount that may be made available to eligible school administrative units as follows.

A. For fiscal year 2005-06, the amount equals the product of the per-pupil guarantee calculated pursuant to section 15676 multiplied by the additional weight calculated pursuant to section 15675, subsection 3. [2003, c. 504, Pt. A, §6 (NEW).]

B. For fiscal year 2006-07 and each subsequent year, the commissioner shall recalculate the amount by using the amount calculated under paragraph A as a base and appropriate trends in the Consumer Price Index or other comparable index. [2003, c. 504, Pt. A, §6 (NEW).]

[2007, c. 141, §17 (AMD) .]

§15688-A Enhancing student performance and opportunity

4. New or expanded public preschool programs for children 4 years of age. Beginning in fiscal year 2015-16 and for each subsequent fiscal year, the commissioner may expend and disburse one-time, start-up funds to provide grants for expanded access to public preschool programs for children 4 years of age pursuant to chapter 203, subchapter 3. The amounts of the grant funding provided to qualified school administrative units pursuant to chapter 203, subchapter 3 are limited to the amounts appropriated, allocated or authorized by the Legislature for the operation of public preschool programs. Any balance of funds appropriated, allocated or authorized by the Legislature remaining at the end of a fiscal year do not lapse and are carried forward to the next fiscal year to carry out the purposes of chapter 203, subchapter 3.

[2013, c. 581, §10 (NEW) .]

Positions in Maine DOE that Support Public Pre-K

Responsibilities for administration of public pre-K programming resides in the Early Learning Team the Maine Department of Education. The Early Childhood Specialist dedicates a portion of time to this work in addition to the services of a full time Early Childhood Monitor. The Head Start Collaboration Director (90% federal funding) contributes time to Head Start partnership associated with public pre-Ks. The Early Learning Team Coordinator provides oversight for public pre-k programming and support for policy decision making. The Maine DOE's School Finance and Data Teams contribute staffing to funding and data collection efforts.

Actions to Inform Expansion to Universal Pre-K

Staff from the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Children's Cabinet are working together to support the development of a plan to reach universal public pre-K for 4-year-olds in Maine. Expanding public pre-K provides tremendous opportunities to prepare young children to succeed in Kindergarten and to support families with young children. "Estimates of the return on investment for high quality early education programs for low-income children range from \$4 to \$17 for every \$1 spent, depending on the program. In many cases, these early childhood investments produce greater returns than most other economic development projects. What we are finally starting to understand is that we need to invest earlier in children's lives to ensure that every child gets the right start in life." (Dana F. Connors, President, Maine State Chamber of Commerce, Investing in Maine's Youngest Children, Maine Policy Review, Volume 18, Number 1, p.28). DOE, DHHS and the Children's Cabinet are committed to expanding public pre-K in a manner that provides quality programming to all 4-year-olds, recognizes the needs of parents, and supports the entire birth through five early care and education system in Maine.

Between March of 2019-December 2019, these agencies have taken a number of steps to develop an informed and comprehensive plan to expand public pre-K in Maine, including:

- With funding from the Preschool Development Grant, a committee of DOE and DHHS staff worked with a consultant to conduct an assessment of the needs and strengths of early care and education quality and access for Maine's vulnerable children ages birth-5 and their families. The assessment identified a number of needs and challenges within the current public pre-K system as well as barriers to expansion. A working group met in July and August to synthesize these needs and begin to identify solutions to these challenges. For example, a lack of transportation for public pre-K was identified as a barrier to enrollment and a cause for a high rate of absenteeism among enrolled 4-year-olds. Findings from this assessment are detailed below and will inform the plan for expanding public pre-K moving forward.
- In the Summer of 2019, data from the Maine DOE's Preschool Expansion Grant (PEG) were released. During 2018-19, 465 preschool age students were served through this grant in 13 school system sites across Maine. The PEG was specifically designed to target economically disadvantaged children through additional grant funding to support

high-quality programming to preschool students as well as support for building better transitions to Kindergarten. A number of the sites operated in partnership with Head Starts. Classrooms in the PEG were found to score in the mid to high ranges on indicators of classroom organization, instructional and emotional support. Additionally, 75% of students who began the year in high risk moved to some or low risk while 73% of students who began at some risk moved to low risk by the end of the school year. Lessons learned from the PEG will be applied to pre-k expansion efforts.

- Members of the Children’s Cabinet Staff participated in the Aspen Institute Early Childhood and Health Forum in August 2019 with four other states. Through interactive peer mentoring the states examined the steps taken to create a comprehensive early care and education system that targets children before they reach school age with a two-generation approach with the ideal of supporting success of young children by supporting their families. The team considered how to expand quality home visiting, improve the quality of child care and early childhood programs, align systems across agencies, maximize state and federal funds, and direct early funds toward children and families who need it the most.
- This past fall, staff from DOE and the Children’s Cabinet attended a two-day convening of State Leaders to Identify Common Barriers and Craft Effective Solutions to Expanding Preschool hosted by the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, a project of the National Institute for Early Education Research. In this meeting, staff had the opportunity to learn about the challenges and successes of other states’ efforts to expand public preschool. Maine is not alone in facing challenges to expanding publicly funded preschool programming. According to the most recent data from NIERR, just one third of four-year olds were enrolled in public preschool during the 2017-2018 school year. Maine ranked 12th in access to public preschool for four-year olds. Maine is one of nine states that funds public preschool programs through their funding formula. Many states are looking to partnerships with Head Start and child care providers to expand public preschool programming. West Virginia, which provides public preschool to almost 70 percent of their 4-year-olds with funding through its school formula, was held up as a model for expansion and partnerships. Districts in each county are required to have collaborative agreements with community partners (i.e. Head Start agencies and child care providers). Because of this requirement, the collaboration rate for programs is 82% (66% with Head Start and 14% with licensed child care). A number of other states had requirements for partnerships with community partners.
- DOE staff hosted three in-depth discussions with school, Head Start and child care administrators to discuss the benefits and challenges of public pre-K partnerships. In this discussion, school administrators spoke freely about the challenges related to starting new programs. All participants talked about how the partnerships supported the expansion of public pre-K in their communities. Some of the Head Start partnerships shared the following:
 - One Public School partner was able to re-establish transportation in response to the feedback Head Start received from families in the community.

- Another Public School/Head Start Partnership shared how they collaborate to share resources in order to meet and follow chapter 124, State Licensing Requirements and Federal Head Start Standards.
- One Head Start/Public School Partnership shared strategies for collaboration, including establishing a common vision, clear expectations, ongoing communication and respect for what they each bring to the table.

For more information about these conversations, see section. on Findings below regarding benefits and challenges.

- DOE staff received and analyzed the results of specific questions in a survey of school administrators about public pre-K conducted by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute. This analysis provided useful data and information from school administrators about the barriers for expanding public pre-K and pre-K partnerships.
- DHHS, DOE and the Children’s Cabinet staff worked jointly to apply for the renewal of the Preschool Development Grant. Although unsuccessful in obtaining the renewal grant, planning for it resulted in a thoughtful road-map for expanding public pre-K over the next several years, including provision of funding to support start-up costs for new pre-K programs, encouraging the formation of public pre-K partnerships to expand slots and to increase the capacity of schools to provide full day, full week care to improve quality and meet the needs of families.

Findings

Identified Barriers to and Suggestions for Achieving Universal Pre-K

Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment

In late 2018, Maine was awarded the Preschool Development Grant, B-5 which allowed the State to conduct a needs assessment of the State’s early childhood mixed delivery system during 2019. Specific concerns related to public pre-K were identified through the process.

Throughout the needs assessment process, the mismatch between working families’ need for full-time care (5 full days a week) and the preponderance of part-time public pre-K options was noted. This current reality requires many families to pair part-time child care with a public pre-K experience which creates multiple transitions for 4-year olds during a typical day. The value of public pre-K as a part of the mixed-delivery system necessary to support high-quality child care is underscored in Maine’s 10-year Economic Development Strategy (2019)—without this strong system, not only are families unable to access affordable, high-quality childcare, but employers are unable to attract a strong and vital workforce. An additional barrier for families is the lack of public transportation available for many part-day pre-K program opportunities.

In addition to these identified concerns, another barrier that was frequently raised is the difference in salaries between staff of public pre-K and community preschool/child care programs. Child care salaries lag significantly behind public school teachers and community programs report losing staff to public pre-K programs, which has further exacerbated the shortage of child care staff and programming across the state. This concern has also been noted in Maine’s Economic Development Strategy (2019) in which one of the recommended actions is to address the disparity in salaries between child care teachers and public pre-K teachers through

wage supplements. In addition, public pre-K teachers have higher qualification standards, causing the child care programs to lose their most qualified staff. As a result, some child care programs have had to close classrooms and with the loss of qualified staff, some programs struggle to hold onto their national accreditation.

Another theme that became apparent through the needs assessment is the limited understanding of early childhood by school leadership related to young children's development, appropriate expectations, curriculum, and assessment, as this does not always align with the school's current focus in K-3. When SAUs add pre-K, appropriate guidance and expertise for developing quality programs that meet the needs of 4-year-olds is critical.

Finally, the needs assessment also showed that supporting children with high needs and their families has become a common occurrence in early care and education programs across the state. Children with behavioral health concerns and special needs are particularly affected by this situation. Not all schools have the ability to offer family supports. However, schools who partner with Head Start, have Family Service Advocates who focus on building relationships with families, providing support to families and children and assisting children's transition into Kindergarten.

As a result of the needs assessment analysis, several strategies for addressing the identified needs were suggested:

- Connect schools to Early Care and Education resources, such as the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network.
- Provide tool kits and clear guidance to schools providing pre-K.
- Revise Chapter 124 to increase required weekly hours (e.g. full days, more days per week), to emphasize quality programming, and to incentivize partnering with community programs.
- Provide training directly to principals and other leadership around 4-year old development, curriculum, and programming.
- Increase programming to full-day to meet the needs of working families.
- Decrease the number of daily transitions 4-year-olds experience by partnering with community programs or providing wrap around services at the same location as the Pre-K program.
- Provide onsite support from specialists/clinicians to Pre-K teachers to address children's behavioral needs.
- Provide more supports for transitions into K and across levels.

Conversations about Community Partnerships

In December 2019, Maine Department of Education and Children's Cabinet staff held three separate conversations with local staff, including teachers, coordinators and administrators, from 11 public Pre-K partnerships between schools, Head Start agencies and private preschool providers. These conversations provided useful insight about the benefits and challenges of forming local partnerships to provide public pre-K to 4-year olds.

Maine has a history of strong successful partnerships, particularly between public schools and Head Start programs. Between 2015 and 2019, a federal Preschool Expansion Grant supported the expansion of Pre-K partnerships by providing funding to cover stipends for teachers and

administrators from both entities to complete the work needed for the partnership, to hire a full or part-time district coordinator position, and/or to help with start-up costs for local schools. The December 2019 conversations captured the benefits and the challenges that partners have experienced. Although the partnership models varied in different regions of the state, the common thread through all of them was to ensure that all children enrolled in public preschool had access to high quality curriculum, assessment, comprehensive services and family engagement opportunities. The evaluation demonstrated the success of the models and Maine has been nationally recognized for these partnerships.

Partnerships in Maine and across the country have proven to be an important strategy for expanding public pre-K to: 1.) support existing quality programming for young children through the blending and braiding of capacity and funding; 2.) ensure that more programs are able to provide full day, full week care to meet the needs of working parents; and, 3.) support the expansion of pre-K in communities where schools do not have the capacity to start new programs.

The feedback from the partnership discussions in December 2019 included the following:

- **Benefits to Partnering:**

- For partnerships housed in local schools, greater connection of families (particularly Head Start families) to school earlier, often improving the transition into kindergarten,
- Greater opportunity to share expertise across partners. Head start, child care teachers and pre-K teachers can benefit from participating in shared and aligned professional development opportunities and increased communication with one another. Program administrators can also share learnings and expertise. Stronger relationships between community partners and school administrators are a benefit and a key to making partnerships work. Coordinators often play a large role in supporting communication and relationships to make partnerships work.
- Expansion from part-day to full day programming is more often possible in partnerships where resources and capacity are shared. Head Start programs in most cases already run for a full day and in some cases have wrap around child care programming. Private child care programs provide seamless care to students throughout the day. These programs are often better able to meet the needs of working families.
- Increase in the number of available slots for public pre-K in communities.
- Greater opportunity for pre-K population served to mirror demographics of typical school population.
- Greater availability of transportation (which improves attendance) and facilities (such as larger, updated classroom spaces, ADA compliant schools, larger age-appropriate playgrounds, and child-size furniture).
- In some partnerships, increased provision of comprehensive services for the entire family (for example, Head Start provides comprehensive services for all participants, including home-visits, assistance finding jobs/housing, intake and referral support, medical and dental homes, before and after school care, etc.).

- Opportunity for shared professional development opportunities and expertise is expanded.
- Partnerships can result in guaranteed income for some child care partners that in turn can offset the cost of care for parents.
- Partnerships can result in greater cost savings for families (e.g. full day care vs. part day).
- **Challenges to Partnering:**
 - Need for clarity around the standards for different early childhood education programming (Chapter 124, Head Start, child care licensing).
 - Confusion about the necessary requirements for private partners to “qualify” to participate in public pre-K.
 - In some cases, the lack of flexibility and communication among administrators/directors to work together to make partnerships work for all involved parties make partnerships extremely difficult to operate.
 - Limited knowledge of early childhood among some SAU administrators.
 - Turn-over rates and workforce issues for certified teachers and staff.
 - Inconsistent funding and pay parity among public school, head start and child care teachers as well as support staff.
 - Need for SAUs to understand and embrace the Head Start model.
 - Current subsidy model discourages full-day programming and incentivizes SAUs to run half-day programs.
 - Coordination of SAU programming across various partnership may need additional staff (e.g. Pre-K Coordinator).

MEPRI Survey of Superintendents

Several themes collected through the PDG Needs Assessment and the conceptual conversations were echoed in results from a survey of Superintendents conducted by the Maine Education and Policy Research Institute in November 2019. Of the 84 AOS units or SAUs that responded to the public pre-K survey, approximately 88% of the districts already operate public pre-K programs, either on their own or in partnership. SAUs already in partnership indicated that the benefits of partnerships include cost sharing/savings, maximizing resources, opportunity to provide comprehensive services, and provision of space not available at the school.

For SAUs without pre-K programs or who are unable to serve the full population of children that would take advantage of programming, the most prevalent challenges identified include:

- lack of space,
- inability to meet the space requirements of Chapter 124 without renovations,
- start-up costs,
- difficulty hiring and/or retaining qualified staff,
- need of parents to have full day or extended day care, and
- concerns about long term costs to the school system (including being low-receiver SAUs that would receive little or no state subsidy).

A portion of the SAUs expressed interest in forming community partnerships to provide pre-k programming, but indicated that transportation, aligning programming requirements, meeting regulations in Chapter 124, and availability of community partners have all been factors that have presented barriers. Those respondents that have formed partnerships indicated that the relationship has generally been positive but has required compromise to address differing expectations and regulations. A number of SAUs indicated they do not have opportunities to partner because there are no partners in their communities and/or partners are located too far from the school/community. Overall, SAUs agree that children who attend pre-K experiences have better academic performance, have better social interactions, and have fewer behavioral issues in Kindergarten.

Capacity at Department of Education

Finally, the current staffing for public pre-K at the Department of Education is not sufficient to support expansion to universal capacity. The Early Childhood Specialist has responsibilities beyond only pre-K programming and the Early Childhood Monitor is only able to monitor a small portion of the existing programs during the course of a year (approximately 15-20%). The goal is to monitor all newly established programs in their first year along with all existing programs on a 3-year rotation. To reach the goal for monitoring, ensure capacity for provision of professional learning for pre-K teachers, promote public pre-K expansion and support for partnership formation, additional staffing is needed. Further, data and funding analysis support beyond what the current DOE staff is able to provide is necessary to inform funding and policy decision making moving forward.

Recommendations

By Fall of 2020, the Department of Education will most likely serve 50% of 4-year-olds through public Pre-K programs. Approximately 36% of these children will be served in full day programs (4 or 5 days/week) while 48% will be served in half-day programs (4 or 5 days/week).

While public Pre-K offerings have grown steadily over the past 16 years, it is clear from the needs assessments conducted to date that a variety of barriers prevent school systems from starting and/or expanding programming to serve more students. To reach the desired goal of universal voluntary Pre-K being available for Maine's 4-year-olds, school systems will need financial and human resources to address those barriers, which include challenges such as adequate space, learning environments that meet program standards, necessary equipment and materials, and transportation.

Additionally, some decisions the Department will need to make as it moves forward relate to the desired dosing of Pre-K that will be supported. Not all public Pre-K programs operate full day programs at least 4 days per week. Many programs offer half-day sessions or full day sessions that meet only a couple days per week. Programs that are less than full day/full week may work for some families, but most working parents require full day programming or opportunity for children to easily access child care following a half day program. Expansion efforts should work to encourage school systems to develop high-quality (meeting Chapter 124 standards), full day (5+ hours per day) programming opportunities that minimize the number of transitions young children need to make throughout the week and throughout the day.

To address the barriers described above, the Department will need to encourage more school systems to form partnerships with child care providers and Head Start (where available) and will need to consider both one-time grants and adjustments to the funding formula to support start-up costs and salaries for the increased number of educators needed to support the 2 adults (1 teacher/1 ed tech) to 16 students ratio appropriate for Pre-K.

In preparation for expansion efforts, the DOE's Early Learning team has developed a work plan that includes the following steps, many of which are already underway:

- Develop 4-year Pre-K Expansion Timeline
- Continue to collect and analyze findings from needs assessments, evaluations, and conceptual conversations related to pre-K expansion
- Explore and identify components in public pre-K partnership models that result in strong outcomes for children and families
- Develop guidance for public Pre-K development, expansion and partnership formation
- Host orientation sessions for schools/communities interested in starting or expanding Pre-K programs
- If additional funding is available,
 - Develop an RFP for start-up and expansion of public Pre-K programs
 - Award, support, and monitor Pre-K grant implementation
- Provide coaching support for public Pre-K programs
- Explore refinements to the Pre-K funding formula, Chapter 124 and Maine's Early Learning and Development Guidelines to increase pre-k dosing and programming quality
- Track public Pre-K expansion efforts with specific attention to achieving the following goals:
 1. Increasing the number of Pre-K students served in through partnerships with Head Starts; child cares, and/or special purpose providers.
 2. Aligning the population of Pre-K students served to mirror the demographics of students in the school system (e.g. students with special needs, English learners, etc.).
 3. Increasing the hours of pre-K programming available to children by expanding from half-day to full day programming and/or by increasing the number of full days offered per week through partnerships with community providers.
 4. Increasing the quality of the pre-K experience for children through strategies such as:
 - a. Hiring pre-K coordinators to support pre-K partnerships and program implementation;
 - b. Adopting evidence-based curricula aligned to Maine's Early Learning and Development Standards and providing coaching in the use of the curriculum;
 - c. Adopting research-based, whole child assessment systems and providing coaching in the administration, interpretation and application of data;
 - d. Enhancing learning environments (indoor and outdoor) with developmentally and age appropriate equipment and materials;
 - e. Providing transportation;
 - f. Increasing family engagement in pre-K programming, including cultural competence and inclusive practices; and/or
 - g. Providing professional learning related to early childhood education to teachers and administrators.

Specific recommendations for achieving the goal of universal voluntary Pre-K in Maine include the following:

- Through the established EPS formula, appropriate \$4.1 million in funding for the additional 379 student slots planned for by districts in the 2020-21 school year.

The total FY 2021 PK allocation on the ED 279 is \$54,663,092 – this is based on the October 1, 2019 actual count for existing programs and additional estimated students for new and expanded programs. These two data points equal 6,400 pupils.

The FY 2020 PK allocation on the ED 279 is \$50,086,341 – this is based on the October 1, 2018 actual pupil count of 6106.

The request for funds represents the state and local share of the allocation increase so as to lessen the redistribution impact to SAUs without new/expanded programs.

- Appropriate the \$1 million proposed by the Governor in the supplemental budget to be spent on one-time grants to enable SAUs to address geographic, socioeconomic and other barriers to establishing and expanding public preschool programming, particularly through partnerships, during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. Grants will support SAUs to address barriers by engaging in community organization and strategic planning, utilizing consultants or legal assistance in developing partnerships, or for problem-solving other unique challenges facing Maine’s diverse communities as they work to provide equitable access to high quality pre-k programs.
- Additional consideration should be given to appropriating funding to:
 - Add additional staff to the Maine DOE to provide coaching, technical assistance, and monitoring support to public pre-K programming (specifically seeking an additional early childhood specialist and an additional preschool monitor position).
 - Support training in Maine’s Pre-K for ME curriculum.
 - Support professional learning in early childhood education for administrators
 - Add a part-time financial analyst position in the Maine DOE for oversight of pre-k funding.

The funding in the supplemental budget for SFY 2021 will support the Department of Education to take important steps to continue expansion of public pre-K. With the proposed grant funding, DOE staff will be able to take a more pro-active approach in expanding public pre-K. Over the next several years, additional funds will be needed to reach universal public pre-K for Maine’s 4-year olds. Along with funding in the EPS formula for new pre-k slots, DOE staff expects a need for additional grant funding to support schools in building community partnerships and to overcome barriers to expanding pre-K programming. DOE staff will provide updates to the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs on the implementation of this plan, including findings from this work and information about what will be needed to keep the state on track to reach universal pre-K.

References

Preschool Expansion Grant Evaluation Report

Contact:

Lee Ann Larsen
Early Learning Team Coordinator
624-6628
LeeAnn.Larsen@Maine.gov

Participants in the development of this report:

- Lee Ann Larsen, Jaci Holmes, Nicole Madore, and Nena Cunningham from the Department of Education
- Ana Hicks, staff to the Children’s Cabinet
- Over 75 early childhood educators and members of education associations participated in Preschool Development Grant (PDG) summits and workgroups working on the Needs Assessment
- Lee Ann Larsen and Ana Hicks participated in a national meeting in Washington, DC with all the other states with states with Preschool Development Grants reviewing benefits and challenges in moving to universal public preschool.
- The Department convened three forums in December 2019 on Public Preschool Partnerships.