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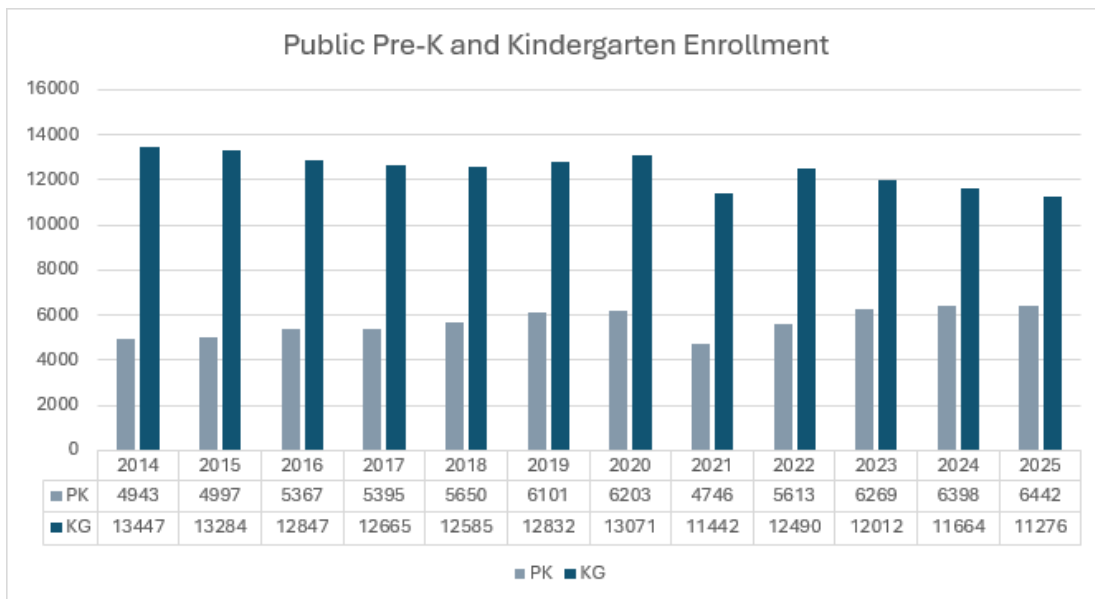
Source of Report: LD 1799 – Public Law 2023, Chapter 477

Topic: Initiative, Incentives and Progress to Expand Public Preschool Programs – Annual Report

Context

Public Law 2023, Chapter 477 (LD 1799) requires the Maine Department of Education (DOE) to provide an annual update on the DOE's initiatives, incentives, and progress to expand public preschool programs.

Public Pre-K in Maine has been voluntarily offered by school administrative units (SAUs) for eligible 4-year-olds since 1983. Beginning in 2003, public Pre-K funding was incorporated into Maine's school funding formula. Over the 42-year period, Pre-K programs have expanded throughout Maine with approximately 92% of Maine's SAUs approved to offer public Pre-K as of the 2024-25 school year. Despite a dip in enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2021-2022, Maine has seen a steady increase in Pre-K enrollment (see graph below). Using Kindergarten enrollment as a proxy, Maine is serving 57% of eligible 4-year-olds during the 2024-25 school year. It is important to note that it is optional for parents/caregivers to enroll their 4-year-olds in public Pre-K, as Title 20-A §5001-A states that compulsory attendance in school begins at age 6.



Currently, 48% of SAUs offering public Pre-K are able to serve all eligible 4-year-olds in their catchment areas, but the remaining 52% are able to serve just a portion. A variety of barriers prevent SAUs from offering or reaching universal capacity for the provision of public Pre-K, including space and funding as well as including both startup costs and ongoing implementation costs. Additionally, enrollment of 4-year-olds is often impacted by a number of factors, including whether the SAU offers part day/part week or full day/full week programming, the availability of transportation, and the feasibility of acquiring wrap-around care. The number of public Pre-K hours offered by SAUs varies greatly, from the minimum of 10 hours per week to as much as 30 hours a week. These hours are offered in a variety of dosage models (e.g., half-day/full week, full-day/part week, full day/full week, etc.). Families may not be able to coordinate wrap-around care with public Pre-K hours of operation, especially if transportation is not provided.

SAUs are encouraged to offer full-day, full-week programming whenever feasible, to consider partnerships with community providers as strategies for increasing the number of 4-year-olds they can enroll, and to minimize the challenges of transportation and multiple transitions for young children throughout the school day. As of the 2024-25 school year, 55% of SAUs offer at least 25 hours of public Pre-K each week (the proxy for full-day, full-week programming) and 26% of SAUs operate Pre-K programming in partnership with a community partner such as Head Start and community-based child care programs.

The only statutory eligibility requirement for a student to attend public Pre-K is that they be at least four years old on or before October 15th of the current school year. When SAUs are unable to offer public Pre-K universally to their catchment area, an enrollment strategy is developed, often using a lottery system and/or considerations for maximizing services for vulnerable populations, such as students who are economically disadvantaged, have identified disabilities, and/or are multilingual learners (MLs). While determination of enrollment strategies happens at the SAU level, the Maine DOE strongly encourages SAUs to develop strategies that result in a population of Pre-K students that mirrors the K-12 demographics of the school system. The state level demographics for school year 2024-25 are captured below.

Economically Disadvantaged	Eligible for Special Education	White	Non-White
48%	10%	83%	17%

2024-25 School Year Public Pre-K Demographics

In 2015, Rule Chapter 124: Basic Approval Standards: Public Preschool Programs was adopted and all SAUs operating public Pre-K programs have been required to align with these standards since 2017. Chapter 124 standards are designed to foster high-quality programming, and include standards for class size, staffing credentials, curriculum and assessment, facilities, transportation, and community partnerships. Per Rule Chapter 124, SAUs must maintain a 1:8 teacher-student ratio in public Pre-K classrooms. Additionally, Chapter 124 sets an expectation

that all SAUs that offer public Pre-K have a Memorandum of Understanding in place with Child Development Services to guide the identification of children with disabilities as well as provision of special education services. Beginning in school year 2024-25, some SAUs have assumed the responsibility for provision of special education services for 3-5 year olds, including provision of free and appropriate public education. Memorandums of Understanding are also required when SAUs provide public Pre-K in partnership with community providers. Maine's Pre-K program standards, as established in Chapter 124, meet 9 out of 10 of the benchmarks for high-quality Pre-K programming established by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), missing only the benchmark associated with the provision of state level instructional coaching for public Pre-K educators.

Maine DOE's Early Learning Team provides oversight for public Pre-K implementation, including approval of SAU applications to launch and expand programs and the provision of ongoing technical assistance to support continuous improvement of program implementation that aligns with the standards set in Chapter 124. The Early Learning Team also requests that Maine SAUs annually respond to a short survey to provide updates on the status of their provision of public Pre-K, including their programming hours and partnerships (if applicable). Data from this survey informs the Early Learning Team of the various options available to families throughout Maine. The Early Learning Team's efforts have also been formed by the Preschool Development Initial B-5 Grant Needs Assessment and studies conducted by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute.

Actions

Expansion of public Pre-K has been supported by state funding allocated through Maine's School Funding Formula as well as by several federally funded grants. Technical assistance support has also been provided by Maine DOE's Early Learning Team to promote expansion efforts. Funding and technical assistance strategies are described below.

Funding

Beginning in 2003, state funding for public Pre-K was added to the school funding formula. Originally, schools had to show two years of enrollment of Pre-K students before they could receive funding through the formula, but this was changed beginning in 2015-16 school year and now SAUs are able to provide estimates of Pre-K enrollment the fall prior to when they plan to start or expand programming so that state funding can be accessed immediately. In 2015, the Maine DOE received a federal [Preschool Expansion Grant](#) to expand high-quality programming in Maine. Over the next four years the DOE worked to support thirteen SAUs with implementation of their public Pre-K programs. To date, those schools have maintained or continued to expand their programs.

In 2021, the Maine DOE received \$10 million dollars through the [Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan](#) to continue public Pre-K expansions in school years 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25. To date this funding has supported 29 SAUs: 28 of the 29 have used the grant funds to support full day/full week programming and 10 of the 29 have operated in partnership with community providers. A 4th and final round of Pre-K Expansion Grants through the MJRP funding was offered in the fall

of 2024 and will support 3 SAUs to start public Pre-K programming in the 2025-26 school year, one of which will include a partnership.

Round	# of SAUs	# in Partnership	Amount of Funding
1	10	2	\$2,422,743.89
2	15	7	\$4,778,514.07
3	4	1	\$928,080.45
4	3	1	\$840,000.00
Totals	32	11	\$8,969.338.41

Summary of MJRP Pre-K Expansion Grants 2022-2026

In 2022, the DOE received another three-year federal grant, the Preschool Development B-5 Renewal Grant, a portion of which is currently supporting a pilot of Pre-K expansion in two SAUs through community partnerships with child care providers. Additional pilot opportunities are being planned to advance partnerships in the 2025-26 school year. This same grant is providing 3 years of funding for a Pre-K Partnership Specialist position on the Maine DOE's Early Learning Team that is supporting design and implementation of the partnership pilots, providing consultation for any SAU interested in exploring partnerships to expand public Pre-K offerings, and assisting with the coordination of a Pre-K Advisory Team, which is advising on the design of the partnership pilots and is studying aspects of expanding public Pre-K in order to advance recommendations related to financing, partnership expansion, credentialing and governance to support continued progress toward universal access to public Pre-K programming for all interested and eligible 4-year-olds in Maine.

In the Spring of 2024, \$550,000 in American Rescue Plan funds were awarded to 11 SAUs (\$50,000 each) to promote expansion of public Pre-K efforts in the 2024-25 school year. Many SAUs used these funds to support adaptive equipment necessary for instruction of preschool students with identified special needs.

Finally, the Maine DOE is participating in a cost modeling study being conducted by the Office of Child and Family Services through support from the Center for Early Learning Funding Equity (CELFE). This study will help inform the DOE's recommendations for adjustments to the school funding formula and for advancing partnerships with community providers, a key strategy for ensuring Maine has a strong mixed-delivery approach to early care and education.

Technical Assistance

Over the past several years, the DOE's Early Learning Team has provided ongoing technical assistance to support start up and continuous improvement of public Pre-K programming, including site visits and ongoing consultation. Additionally, the team has developed a [Public Preschool Guidebook](#) to support program development, published an open-source instructional program, [Pre-K for ME](#), to provide a high-quality, lower-cost instructional program aligned to Maine's Early Learning and Development standards, and developed a [Public Pre-K Assessment Tool](#) to support continuous improvement efforts. The team also provides monthly office hours and a variety of professional learning in response to identified implementation needs, including a professional learning community focused on supporting challenging student behaviors. Finally, the team has collaborated with the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC) and Maine Roads to Quality to develop and implement a professional learning series for administrators, *Leading Early Learning*, designed to build leadership skills for early education, Pre-K to Grade 3. This series is in its fourth year and serves 20-25 administrators each year.

Commission to Study Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education

During the fall of 2023, Maine DOE's Director of Early Learning served on the Commission to Study Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education. A key goal of the Commission was to advance a set of recommendations which will lead to universal access to public Pre-K for all of Maine's eligible 4-year-olds by the 2026-27 school year. The Commission's report included several recommendations the Maine DOE began to address during the 2023-24 school year. Each of these recommendations is listed below with an update on work to date:

- Exploring implications of potentially adjusting the school funding formula to better align with the required student/teacher ratio requirements and to incentivize full day/full week programming as well as opportunities for securing additional funding sources to support necessary infrastructure investments associated with startup.
 - **Update:** The Maine DOE has been working with the Center for Early Learning Funding Equity to explore the implications of adjustments to Maine's school funding formula to better address public Pre-K ratio requirements. Additional work will occur to consider fiscal impacts of incentivizing full day/full week programming as well as opportunities for braiding and blending funding across funding streams such as Head Start and the Child Care Block Grant.
- Examining, through the work of the Pre-K Advisory Team, opportunities for aligning credentials earned through Maine Roads to Quality with credentials earned through the Department of Education to expand pathways for providing public Pre-K.
 - **Update:** During the 2023-24 school year, the Pre-K Advisory Team explored issues related to credentialing. Examination of alternative credentials for staff employed by licensed community-based providers occurred. The partnership pilot being planned for the 2025-26 school year will offer an opportunity to test an alternative credential.

- Developing recommendations for facilitating outreach and coordination between SAUs and community-based providers to increase public preschool partnerships.
 - **Update:** This has been a priority topic for the Maine DOE and Pre-K Advisory Team, especially with the shift in FAPE responsibilities for 3–5 year-olds occurring over the next 4 years. Initial recommendations are included below, but the DOE anticipates there will need to be more focused work in this area in the coming year.

Conclusion and Next Steps

To continue advancing toward the goal of reaching universal availability of public Pre-K for Maine’s eligible 4-year-olds, next steps include:

1. Continuing to utilize the DOE’s Public Pre-K annual survey of SAUs to collect data to document the status of public Pre-K, to update the status of partnerships and dosing schedules, to identify barriers to reaching universality, and to identify anticipated supports that will be needed. The Maine DOE will also continue working with SAUs that have not started public pre-k and/or are not yet enrolling universally to encourage start up and expansion efforts.
2. Continuing to leverage the expertise and ongoing work of the Pre-K Advisory Team established as part of Maine’s Preschool Development B-5 Renewal Grant to study and regularly report on its findings and recommendations related to the following areas:

A. Funding Considerations and Strategies

- Develop understanding of the true cost of public Pre-K by utilizing the findings from the Center for Early Learning Funding Equity’s (CELFE) cost modeling study to inform long term funding efforts.
- Examine the financial impact of adjusting the Essential Programs and Services formula to:
 - Reflect required Pre-K staffing ratios
 - Reflect part day/part week vs. full day/full week programming options
- Research revenue and grant funding sources to support start up/infrastructure costs, such as space, equipment, and transportation as well as ongoing programming costs.
- Explore alternate funding structures for supporting public Pre-K, including their pros and cons, such as grants directly to community providers and use of regional hubs.
- Develop recommendations about which strategies will be most effective for reaching universality while also increasing the dosage of public Pre-K programs, improving program quality, meeting the needs of families, and preserving a robust mixed-delivery system.

B. Credentialing

- Finalize recommendations for aligning the credentials and training earned through the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network with Maine DOE early childhood education endorsements.
- Explore strategies for implementing the recommendations, including potential funding sources that can be leveraged to support attainment of credentials necessary for teaching public pre-k (e.g., coursework, apprenticeships, etc.).

C. Partnerships

- Engage in pilots of public Pre-K partnerships with community providers to identify the opportunities and barriers for expanding public Pre-K through the mixed-delivery system.
- Research and recommend strategies for expanding partnerships, including community relationship building, governance structures, and incentives.
- Develop and promote professional learning and technical assistance support to strengthen school administrative unit and licensed community-based provider understanding of the early care and education mixed-delivery system in Maine, its importance to Maine's economic stability, the interconnectedness of each part of the system, and ways in which partnerships between SAUs and licensed community-based providers can lead to achieving universal public Pre-K while also ensuring a robust mixed-delivery system.
- Explore opportunities for establishing regional service hubs to promote formation of and to provide administrative oversight for public Pre-K partnerships between SAUs and licensed community-based providers, including the potential of utilizing the regional Child Development Service offices for these purposes.

D. Governance/program standards

- Study current rules governing public Pre-K programming to identify strengths and barriers to expanding programming, particularly with regard to promoting community partnerships.
- Recommend modifications to program standards that will maintain high-quality while leveraging the mixed delivery system.
- In recognition of the shift of FAPE responsibilities to SAUs by 2028, explore the implications of adding rules within Chapter 124 for SAUs offering public Pre-K programming for 3-year-olds in their catchment areas.

3. Increasing capacity of the Maine DOE to support universal public Pre-K implementation efforts by making the Pre-K Partnership Specialist position (PDG grant funded) a permanent position on the Early Learning Team to support achievement of universal Pre-K through a mixed-delivery approach.

References

Maine Department of Education (MDOE)

- Report on Public Preschool Programs for Children 4 years of Age (2020) (<https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/3930>)
- General MDOE resources (<https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/earlychildhood/publicpreschool>)
- Pre-K Expansion and Preschool Development Grants (<https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/earlychildhood/grants>)

Commission to Study Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education

- Public Law 2023, Chapter 477 (LD 1799): An Act to Expand Maine's High-quality Early Learning and Care for Children by Increasing Public Preschool Opportunities in Communities (<https://legislature.maine.gov/backend/App/services/getDocument.aspx?documentId=103744>)
- Final Report: Commission to Study Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education (<https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/10727>)

Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) Reports

- School-Community Partnerships in Maine (2021) (<https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/wpsites.maine.edu/dist/e/97/files/2021/05/MEPRI-report-School-Community-Partnerships-final-052421.pdf>)
- Public Preschool Programs in Maine: Program Design, Capacity and Expansion Challenges (2020) (https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/wpsites.maine.edu/dist/e/97/files/2020/02/Public_Preschool_Programs_in_Maine_Program_Design_Capacity_and_Expansion_Challenges_R.pdf)

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