



Strengthening the Pre-K Investment

Next Steps to a
Winning Beginning
for Every Child in
New York State

Winning Beginning  **NY**



Fast facts on Pre-K in New York

4-year-olds served, 2008-09	100,208
Estimated participation in 2009-10	109,031
Total 4-year-old population in NY**	240,000
Participating districts	450
% of children served in CBO's	54%
Total UPK funding*	\$414.1 million

*2009-2010 school year ** Rounded to the nearest thousand
Source: State Education Department



The State's Universal Prekindergarten initiative represented a bold departure from previous early childhood policies, calling for universal access and new funding. It's time to build on this success.

In 1997, New York State lawmakers passed the Universal Prekindergarten legislation (UPK), a bold new approach to early childhood education. Enacted as part of a school reform package, the new Pre-K services were free and open to all four-year-olds. By law, they were offered in both schools and community programs – to give families maximum choice. Today, the state invests \$414 million annually in Pre-K and more than 100,000 children are enrolled.

In addition to calling for universal access, the landmark legislation called for comprehensive supports to foster social, emotional and physical development along with language and literacy. It also allowed educators to combine Pre-K funding with other funding streams, such as Head Start, child care and preschool special education.

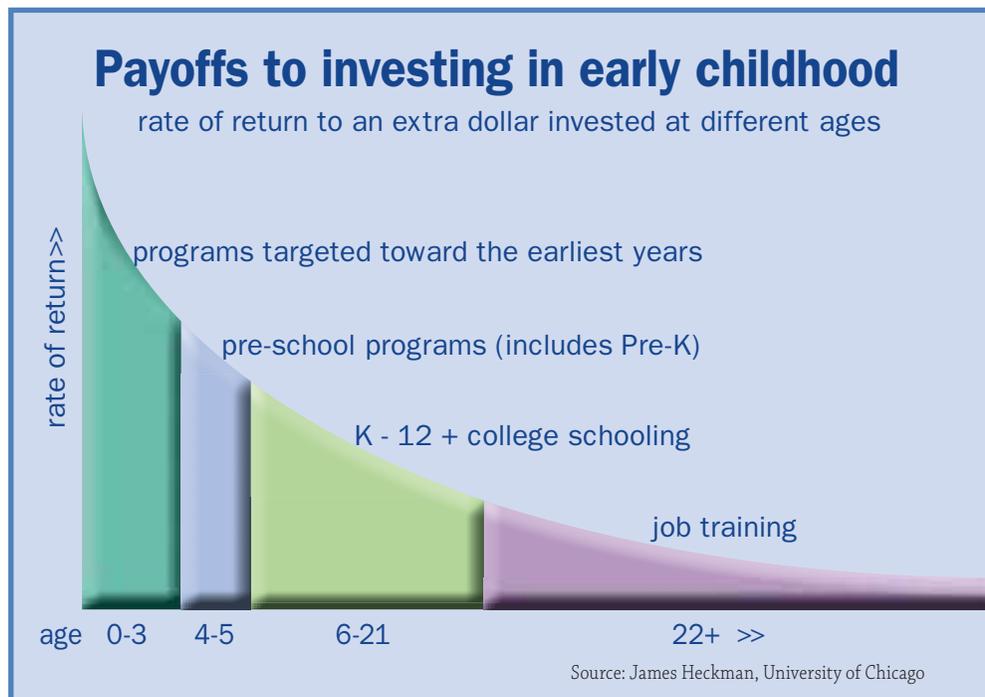
Finally, UPK legislation required public schools and community-based early childhood programs to collaborate in the design and launch of Pre-K programs and ensure the new services were aligned with the K-12 system. The new effort was a key step in creating a continuum of services starting in the prenatal months and continuing through third grade.

The Board of Regents has since formally proposed a birth-to-third-grade strategy, based on research that shows the early years are critical in preparing children for success in school and beyond. This strategy is also crucial to improving early elementary education, which has been largely neglected in recent school reform efforts.

In the last 12 years, New York's Pre-K effort has produced exciting results. Most importantly, school districts around the state report gains in language, reading and social skills. Districts with broader assessment measures also show gains in emotional adjustment and self-regulation, math and numeracy, and physical and mental health. In addition,

the state's progress toward universal service has meant that more at-risk children participate than under previous, targeted Pre-K efforts. Today, 450 districts of the state's 677 districts – about two out of three – participate in the Pre-K initiative.

The Board of Regents has long championed the expansion of Pre-K services as part of the state's public education system. This is a logical goal given the significant achievements during the first 12 years of UPK. The Legislature has dramatically increased Pre-K funding and expanded the number of children served since 2007. But in 2009, state officials froze funding, stalled further expansion and have failed to heed recommendations to improve Pre-K implementation. In 2009, state officials cited the state's fiscal challenges for their inaction despite the fact that research shows the state can save money and improve children's school readiness by reforming the Pre-K legislation.



Critical challenges

New York State's Pre-K initiative still hasn't met its original goals of universal access, comprehensive service and the effective blending of funds. Despite its initial success, there are serious problems that threaten its effectiveness.

> Funding and financing issues

Currently, Pre-K funding levels are too low, leaving more than 120,000 children without access to public preschool programs. In addition, per-pupil funding levels are not based on the actual costs of high-quality programming. The shortfall in funding makes it hard for programs to attract and retain qualified teachers or to provide the comprehensive services envisioned in the legislation. Classes in community settings, which lack the infrastructure of the public schools, are especially hard hit by insufficient funding. The lack of transportation aid strains budgets further.

> Lack of full-day funding

The state's part-day approach to Pre-K represents another critical challenge, hindering its educational effectiveness and potential for expansion. Not only do many working parents seek full-day programs, research shows that such programs are more likely than part-day programs to close the achievement gap between higher- and lower-income children.

> Few three-year-olds served

The exclusion of most three-year-olds from New York's Pre-K initiative limits its potential to improve educational outcomes. The Board of Regents has called for Pre-K services for three-year-olds based on studies showing two years of early education to be more effective than one in preparing children for school. The proposal has a precedent in the state's earlier Targeted Pre-K program, a school-based initiative for low-income three- and four-year-olds.

> Insufficient investment in workforce

Unlike many other states, New York has yet to invest in workforce and professional development to ensure all Pre-K students have highly-qualified teachers. The state must do more to support teachers who seek and earn credentials in early childhood education. There are few scholarships or loan forgiveness programs, and

it is difficult to transfer credits between two-year and four-year institutions. The state must also do more to assure that comparably-credentialed teachers receive comparable compensation, regardless of whether they work in public schools or community settings.

> No uniform student or program assessments

State regulations require districts to assess and report on children's progress in Pre-K, but there are still no common assessment tools. This means that a child's progress may be measured differently depending on where the child attends Pre-K and whether that Pre-K classroom is inside a school or community-based center.

School districts also lack uniform strategies for assessing program quality. The state is currently developing a quality rating and improvement system called QUALITYstarsNY, which is being field-tested in 13 communities. There is still much work to do in rolling out the system statewide, but it is a promising tool for improving the quality of services and providing an easily understandable barometer of individual program quality that can be used by parents and policy makers.

> Lack of resource coordination

State officials have not established a process for resolving issues that arise when programs or communities seek to integrate funding streams that have competing regulatory frameworks and missions. The inability to effectively coordinate funding streams has hurt community-based preschool programs in particular, reducing choices for families and limiting the effectiveness of the state's Pre-K investment. The lack of guidance also leads to inefficient use of resources and capacity as well as disruptions in children's learning and development. In addition, the state has no data infrastructure for collecting unduplicated information about students served by the Pre-K initiative.

> Other challenges

A number of additional challenges must be addressed in revisions to the Pre-K legislation. These include the lack of support for English Language Learners, the missing investment for baby and toddler services, the failure to plan for construction or renovation of Pre-K facilities and the lack of professional development for early childhood educators.



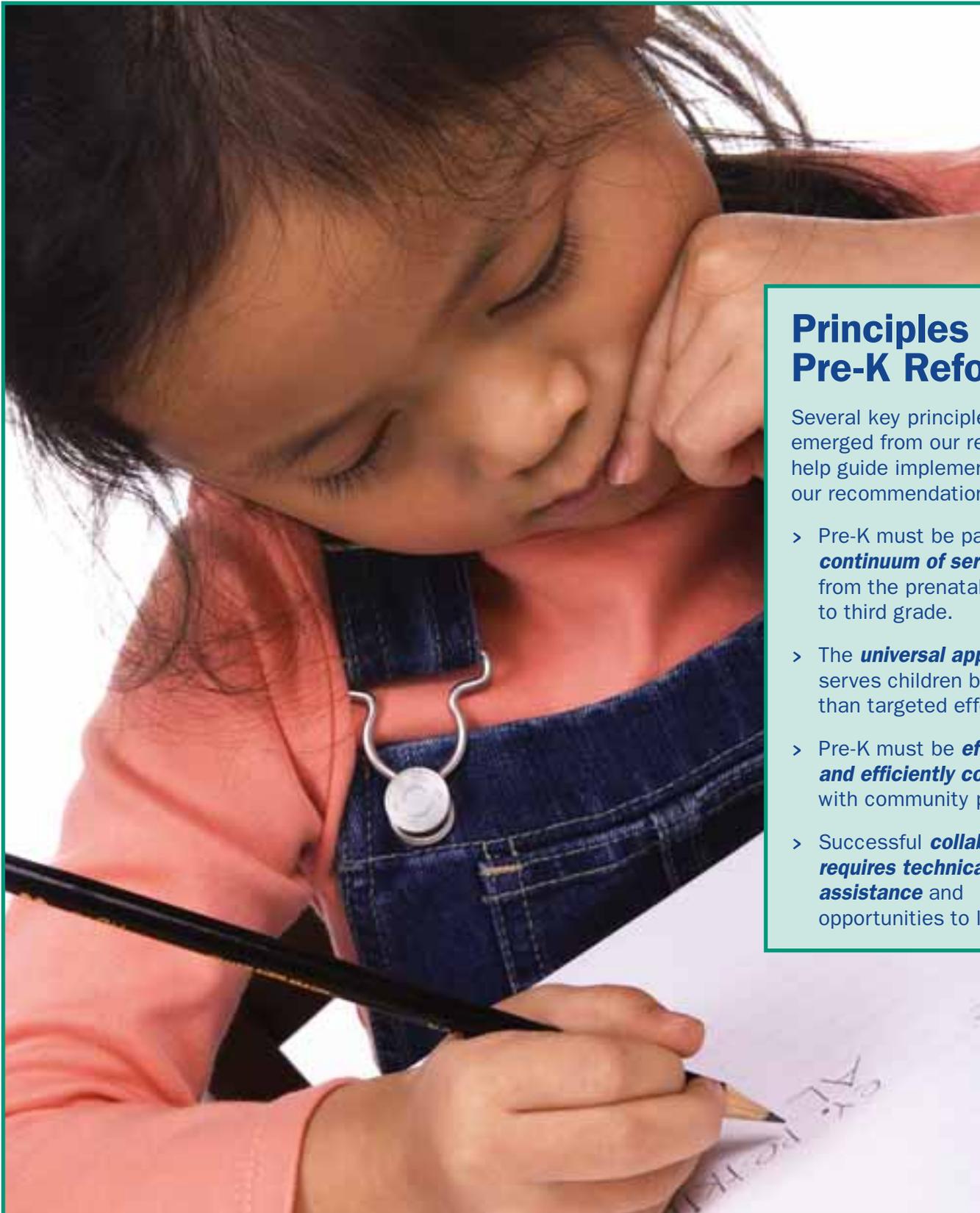


Pre-K = Building Block for Early Childhood System

The Pre-K law creates an essential cornerstone for building an effective, statewide system of early care and learning.

- > Universal access
- > Free
- > Investment in both public schools and community programs
- > Integration of Pre-K with other early childhood services
- > Standards support cognitive, social, emotional and physical development
- > Aligned with K-12 education





Principles for Pre-K Reform

Several key principles emerged from our research to help guide implementation of our recommendations.

- > Pre-K must be part of a **continuum of services** from the prenatal months to third grade.
- > The **universal approach** serves children better than targeted efforts.
- > Pre-K must be **effectively and efficiently coordinated** with community programs
- > Successful **collaboration requires technical assistance** and opportunities to learn.

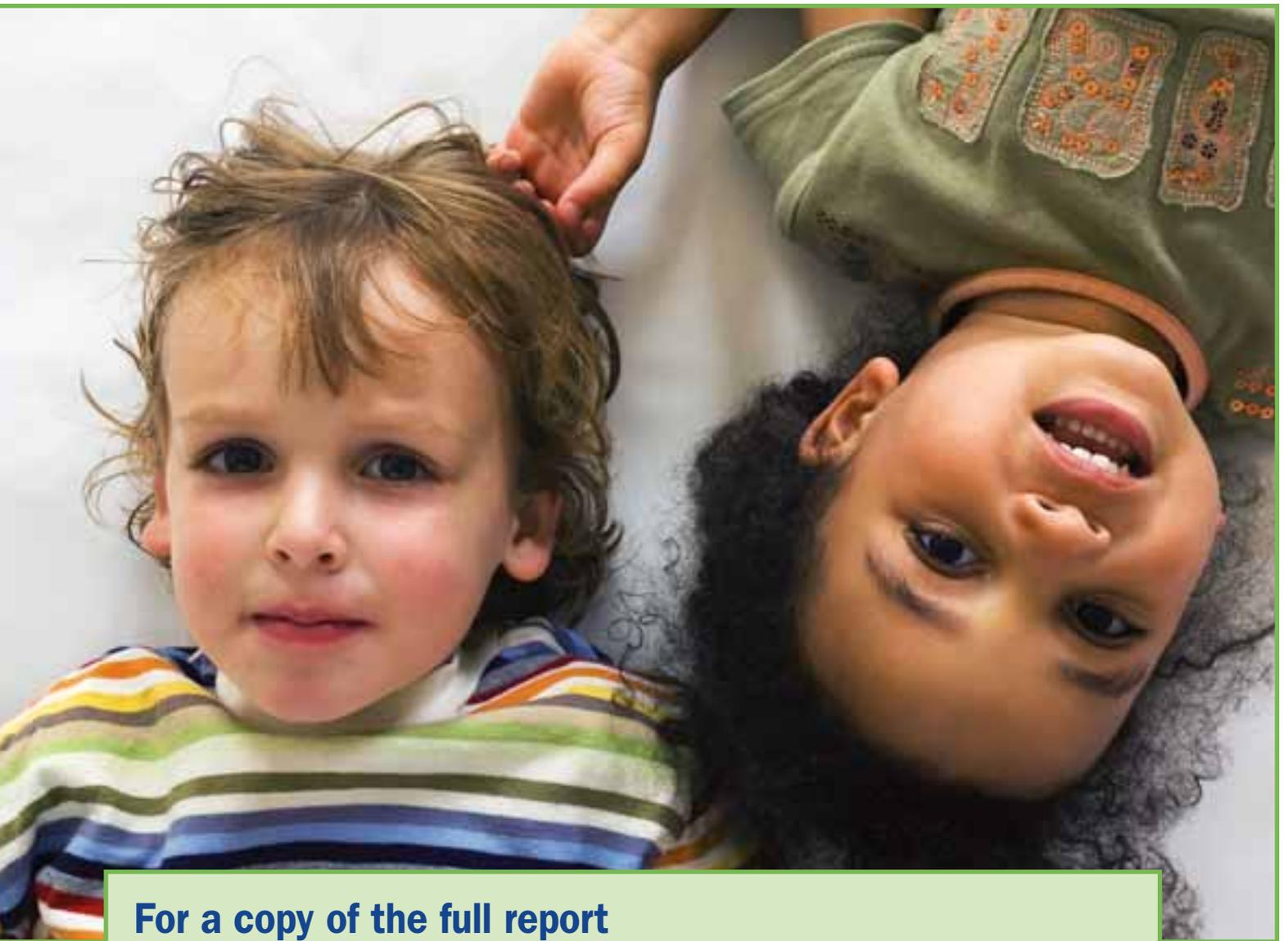


Building an Early Childhood System

Strengthening the Pre-K Investment

1. The Governor and the Board of Regents should **create an Office of Early Care and Learning** to develop a comprehensive and accessible system of services for children from the prenatal months to third grade.
2. New York State should **create a robust early learning data system** linked with the K-12 system.
3. The Legislature, with support from the State Education Department (SED), should **revise the UPK financing statute so that Pre-K funding is sustainable and predictable**, allows all districts to participate and ensures high-quality services that are accessible to all children.
 - › Ensure that full-day Pre-K options are funded.
 - › Expand eligibility for Pre-K services to three-year-olds.
 - › Include Pre-K students in transportation aid formulas.
 - › Allow charter schools to add Pre-K services.
4. The Legislature should **enact legislation to implement QUALITYstarsNY** as the state's quality measure for all early childhood programs.
5. The Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) should **develop a five-year plan to prepare an early childhood workforce** with appropriate compensation, credentials and field experience.
6. SED should develop recommendations to **create a uniform approach to student assessment** in all early childhood settings.
7. State officials should **strengthen the mixed delivery system** for early care and learning.
 - › Require communities to submit an annual plan for the delivery of early care and learning services to the proposed Office of Early Care and Learning.
 - › Eliminate state and federal regulations that limit effective blending of funds.
 - › Encourage use of federal Title I funding for early education and home visiting.
8. SED and the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) should **strengthen support for English Language Learners** in all early childhood settings.
9. The ECAC should develop **recommendations for building new facilities and improving existing ones** to ensure every child has access to a high-quality early learning environment.
10. SED and OCFS should **strengthen collaboration between public schools and community partners**.
 - › Create new professional development opportunities to deepen the knowledge of early learning among the K-12 community.
 - › Create a statewide technical assistance center on collaboration.
 - › Create a team of collaboration coordinators and establish incentives to promote more effective collaborations.
11. The Legislature should **enact legislation to create an infant-toddler set-aside** in Pre-K funding to improve quality and expand access to services for babies and toddlers.





For a copy of the full report

“Strengthening the Pre-K Investment: Next Steps to a Winning Beginning for Every Child in New York State,” visit www.winningbeginningny.org.

The Winning Beginning NY team has worked for over a decade to see that New York State fulfills the promise of Universal Pre-K to prepare every child for success in school and beyond.

This report was prepared by the Center for Children’s Initiatives (CCI) and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy (SCAA) on behalf of the coalition. The recommendations are based on interviews with state and local officials, educators, researchers and service providers. For more information on the recommendations, contact Betty Holcomb, CCI Policy Director at bholcomb@centerforchildrensinitiatives.org.

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