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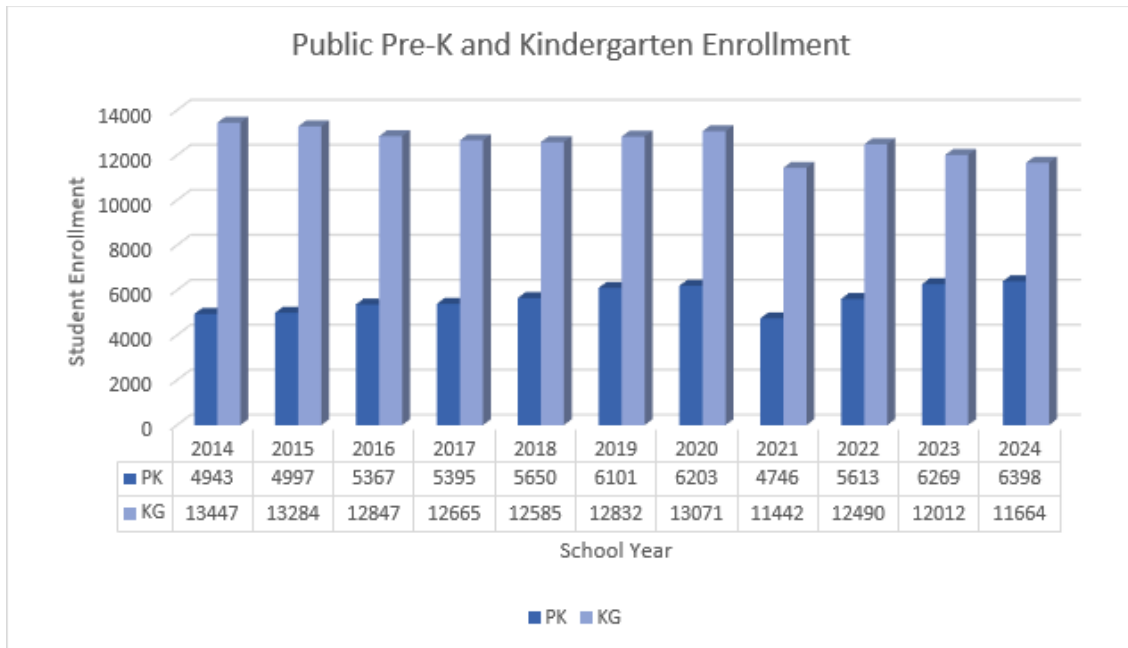
Source of Report: LD 1799 – Public Law Chapter 477

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

Context

With the passage of the 131st Legislature’s LD 1799, or Public Law 2023 Chapter 477, the Maine Department of Education (DOE) is required 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 these 40 years, Pre-K programs have expanded throughout Maine with approximately 85% of Maine’s SAUs offering some level of public Pre-K during the 2022-23 school year. Despite a dip in enrollment between 2021-2022, Maine has seen a steady increase in Pre-K enrollment (see graph below). Using Kindergarten enrollment as a proxy and preliminary enrollment data, Maine is currently serving 55% of eligible 4-year-olds during the 2023-24 school year.



When offered by an SAU, it remains optional for parents or caregivers to enroll their 4-year-olds in public Pre-K. While 51% of SAUs offering public Pre-K can serve all eligible 4-year-olds in

their catchment areas, the rest can serve only a portion. Numerous barriers prevent SAUs from offering or reaching universal capacity for the provision of public Pre-K. Primary barriers include space and funding, including startup costs and ongoing implementation costs. Enrollment of 4-year-olds is also significantly impacted by whether the SAU offers part-day/part-week or full-day/full-week programming and by the availability of transportation.

Pre-K hours offered by SAUs vary greatly, from a minimum of 10 hours per week to as much as 30 hours per week. These hours vary by dosage models, including half-day/full-week, full-day/part-week, or full-day/full-week. 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 minimize the challenges of transportation and multiple transitions for young children throughout the school day and to partner with community providers as a strategy for increasing the number of 4-year-olds they can enroll. As of the 2023-24 school year, approximately 30% of SAUs operate Pre-K programming in partnership with a community partner such as Head Start or area childcare facilities.

The only 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 or enrollment considerations for serving vulnerable populations, such as economically disadvantaged students, those with identified disabilities, and/or multi-lingual learners. While the 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 the 2022-23 school year are captured below.

Economically Disadvantaged	Eligible for Special Education	White	Non-White
40%	15%	86%	14%

2022-23 School Year Public Pre-K Demographics

In 2015, [Rule Chapter 124: Basic Approval Standards: Public Preschool Programs](#) was adopted and all SAUs have been expected to operate public Pre-K programs that 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. Memorandums of Understanding are also required when SAUs provide public Pre-K in partnership with community providers.

Maine DOE’s Early Learning Team provides oversight for public Pre-K implementation, including approval of SAU applications to start and expand programs and 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 informed 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

In 2003, state funding for public Pre-K was added to the school funding formula. Beginning in 2015, SAUs can provide estimates of Pre-K enrollment in the fall prior to beginning or expanding Pre-K programming so that state funding can be accessed immediately. Also in 2015, the 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 the implementation of their public Pre-K programs. All of 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 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. To date, this funding has supported over thirty SAUs, 28 of which have used the grant funds to support full-day/full-week programming and 13 of which have operated in partnership with community providers.

Round	# of SAUs	# of Students	# in Partnership	Amount of Funding
1	10	319	2	\$2,422,743.89
2	16	533	10	\$3,795,845.53
3	5	103	1	\$835,580.45
Totals	31	931	13	\$7,054,169.87

Summary of MJRP Pre-K Expansion Grants

In 2022, the DOE received another three-year federal grant, the Preschool Development B-5 Renewal Grant, a portion of which will support a pilot of Pre-K expansion through community partnerships. This grant is also providing funding for a Pre-K Partnership Specialist position, providing support for the design and implementation of the 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.

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 to inform the DOE's recommendations for adjustments to the school funding formula and for advancing partnerships with community providers.

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 (MELDS), and developed a Public Pre-K Self-Assessment Tool to support continuous improvement efforts.

The Team also provides monthly office hours and 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 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 third year and serves approximately 25 administrators each year.

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 is 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 includes several recommendations for which the Maine DOE will be responsible for helping to advance in the coming year, namely:

- Exploring implications of 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.
- 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.
- Developing recommendations for facilitating outreach and coordination between SAUs and community-based providers to increase public preschool partnerships.

Recommendations

To continue advancing toward the goal of reaching universal availability of public Pre-K for Maine's eligible 4-year-olds, the Maine DOE recommends the following:

Recommendation #1: Utilize the DOE's Public Pre-K annual survey of SAUs to collect data to document the status of public Pre-K, to update partnerships and dosing schedules, to identify barriers to reaching universality, and to identify anticipated supports that will be needed. Upon receiving the survey results, the DOE will identify which SAUs have not begun offering public pre-k and which are not yet able to offer public Pre-K to all eligible 4-year-olds in their catchment areas. The Early Learning Team will then work with the identified SAUs to encourage start up and expansion efforts.

Recommendation #2: Continue to develop capacity of the DOE to share data-supported visualizations documenting public pre-k implementation via its website.

Recommendation #3: 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 an understanding of the true cost of public pre-k (part-day and full-day) 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.
- Consider the need for additional funding to support start up and infrastructure costs, such as space, equipment, and transportation.
- Consider incentives to promote partnerships with community providers and community relationship building.
- Explore revenue sources for funding public pre-k, including state and federal resources.
- Explore alternate funding structures for supporting public pre-k, including their pros and cons, such as grants directly to community providers and the use of regional hubs.
- Develop recommendations about which strategies will be most effective for reaching universality while also increasing the dosage (or number of hours per week) of public pre-k programs, improving program quality, meeting the needs of families, and preserving a robust mixed-delivery system.

B. Credentialing

- Develop a plan for aligning the credentials and training earned through the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network with Maine DOE early childhood education certificates.
- Recommend strategies for implementing the plan, including potential funding sources that can be leveraged.

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.

D. Governance/program standards

- Study current rules governing public pre-k programming to identify strengths and barriers to expanding programming, particularly regarding promoting community partnerships.
- Recommend modifications to program standards that will maintain high-quality while leveraging the mixed delivery system.

Recommendation #4: Assess the capacity of the Maine DOE to support universal public pre-k implementation efforts and develop recommendations for addressing identified staffing/resource needs.

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>)

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_Prgram_Design_Capacity_and_Expansion_Challenges R.pdf](https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/wpsites.maine.edu/dist/e/97/files/2020/02/Public_Preschool_Programs_in_Maine_Prgram_Design_Capacity_and_Expansion_Challenges_R.pdf))

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