



Universal Pre-Kindergarten

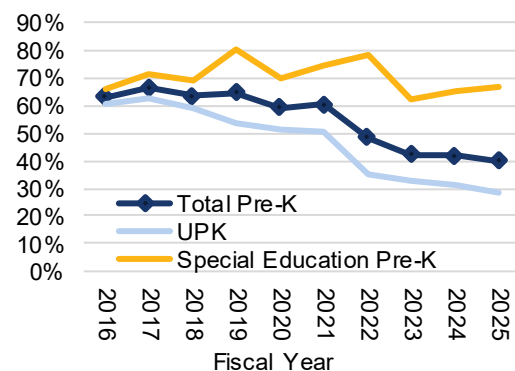
In 1997, New York became just the second state in the nation to enact a program intended to offer free, publicly-funded pre-kindergarten — often referred to as Pre-K — to all four-year-olds. However, due to the piecemeal nature of the program's expansion the program does not currently provide a seat for every four-year-old in New York.¹ State support for Pre-K in New York City amounts to \$1.1 billion annually and is the third-largest stream of State funding the City receives.

New York City receives two main types of Pre-K aid. The first, Universal Pre-K (UPK) aid, is formula-based and dates back to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, a lawsuit which alleged that New York State was not providing a sound basic education for all students as mandated by the State Constitution. However, this 2007 formula, which is based on either half the district's per-pupil Foundation Aid allocation or another calculation that accounts for the district's relative wealth, has since been supplemented with grants supporting Pre-K expansion. In 2014 the State allocated an additional \$300 million in UPK expansion aid annually to the City, which converted nearly all of its half-day seats to full-day, and rapidly expanded its capacity; in FY 2013, the City only operated about 19,500 Pre-K seats, but it served more than 66,500 four-year-olds by FY 2015 (not including special education seats at non-DOE facilities). Because the formula, outside of expansion funds, has historically been frozen year-over-year (until the SFY 2027 budget), district allocations often remain flat from year to year: the City's annual Pre-K formula allocation has been \$551 million since FY 2020. The second main type of Pre-K support the City receives is Pre-K special education aid, which has also been stable at around \$544 million annually since FY 2021. This aid cannot be used to fund early childhood education voucher programs.

Impact

While State Pre-K aid has essentially remained flat over the years, the City's total spending on Pre-K has increased significantly in the past decade (supported by City funds). In FY 2017 (well after its Pre-K expansion), the City spent a little over \$1.5 billion on Pre-K services, with over \$1 billion provided by the State. However, by FY 2025 the City's total Pre-K spending was over \$2.7 billion, with about \$1.1 billion supported by State aid. Thus, the share of the City's Pre-K spending that is supported by State funds has fallen from a high of 66.3 percent in FY 2017 to under 40 percent in

FIGURE 1
Share of NYC Pre-K Spending Supported
by State Pre-K Grants



Sources: NYS Division of Budget; NYC Office of Management and Budget; OSC analysis

FY 2025 (see Figure 1); notably, State support shares for Pre-K general education and special education have diverged.

Overall, New York City's various Pre-K programs serve approximately 67,000 children annually. In FY 2025, there were 67,119 Pre-K students in New York City:

- About 26,000 four-year-olds attended full-day programs at Department of Education (DOE) facilities;
- About 30,000 attended community-based organizations which contract with DOE to provide Pre-K services (known as New York City Early Education Centers, or NYCEECs);
- Nearly 9,000 children attended contracted special education Pre-K services in non-DOE facilities that year (the City served less than 1,000 additional special education Pre-K students in its own District 75 special education facilities but also provides less-intensive special education Pre-K programming across all districts).

¹ The State's Enacted FY 2027 Budget requires all school districts, by the 2028-29 school year, to provide seats to any four-year-old whose parents enroll them in district UPK programming.