In 1966, the New York state Legislature created and began funding the Experimental Prekindergarten program (EPK), a half-day preschool program similar to Head Start. This program serves 4-year-olds living in one of 97 districts that were selected to be phased in as the program was implemented. Priority is given to children from economically disadvantaged families, including families eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, TANF, food stamps, or one of several additional federal programs supporting low-income families. EPK seeks to provide comprehensive services such as social services, nutritional information and family involvement opportunities. All programs are operated by public schools, and teachers are required to have a Master’s degree (unless they had a Bachelor’s degree prior to 1978). Teachers must also have certification in Nursery–Grade 6 or, if certified after February 2004, Birth–Grade 2. State funding for EPK peaked at $54 million in fiscal year 1995, but the program has experienced flat or reduced funding in subsequent years. Effective with the 2003–2004 budget, the EPK initiative has been renamed the Targeted Prekindergarten Program. For the corresponding program year, $50.2 million was appropriated to support a projected enrollment of 1,336 3-year-olds and 12,482 4-year-olds.

A second state-funded prekindergarten initiative—the Universal Prekindergarten program (UPK)—was established in 1997 with the goal of making prekindergarten accessible to all 4-year-olds in New York state. School districts were to give priority to economically disadvantaged children during the initial stages of implementation and then gradually increase access so that by 2002 the program would be available to all 4-year-olds whose families wanted to participate. However, planned program expansion has not occurred, as in recent years UPK state funding has been level. To date, the program reaches only about one-quarter of the state’s 4-year-olds, primarily serving children from low-income families.

UPK funds flow through public schools, although at least 10 percent of funds must go to subcontracts with Head Start, private child care providers, or other community-based organizations. In practice, more than half of UPK funds are subcontracted to these agencies. All public school teachers in the UPK program must meet the same degree and certification requirements that apply to teachers in the EPK program. As of September 2004, teachers in community-based UPK programs will be required to have these same credentials as well.

During the 2003–2004 year, the state appropriated $204.7 million for UPK, with a projected enrollment of 13,363 3-year-olds and 12,482 4-year-olds.

Although most states have a single state-financed prekindergarten initiative, New York makes significant contributions to prekindergarten through two separate initiatives—EPK and UPK. As a result, in the first two pages of this profile we present summary information reflecting the state’s overall commitment to prekindergarten. Enrollment and state spending for both the EPK and UPK initiatives are taken into account. Next, we present specific details about each initiative in the state. The third page of this profile focuses exclusively on the UPK program, while the final page focuses exclusively on the EPK program.