NIEER

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH | 2026 POLICY BRIEF

State pre-K enrollment pre- and post-pandemic

Rachel Fidel, Allison Friedman-Krauss, W. Steven Barnett

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Summary

The proportion of 4-year-olds enrolled in state-funded pre-K programs doubled between 2002 and 2010. However, pre-K enrollment growth slowed by the late 2010s; simultaneously, enrollment in public kindergarten to third grade (K-3) began to decline in many states. Enrollment in both state pre-K and public K-3 fell during the COVID-19 pandemic. State pre-K enrollment has surpassed pre-pandemic levels nationally but this varies greatly by state, while public K-3 enrollment remains below pre-pandemic levels nationally. However, stagnation in state pre-K growth and decline in public K-3 enrollment may not be entirely attributable to the pandemic, as 2024-2025 enrollment rates are very close to where they would be if pre-pandemic trends had continued. Expanding access to state pre-K is one approach states can take to encourage families to enroll and persist in the public school system, and to combat budget shortfalls related to declining K-12 enrollment.

ABOUT NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

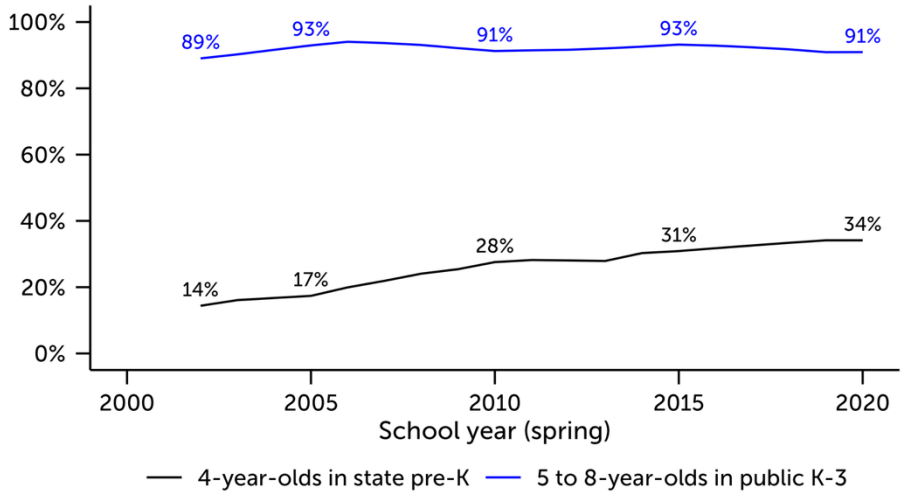
Suggested citation:

Fidel, R., Friedman-Krauss, A., & Barnett, W. S. (2026). *State pre-K enrollment pre- and post-pandemic* [Policy brief]. National Institute for Early Education Research.

What did enrollment look like pre-pandemic?

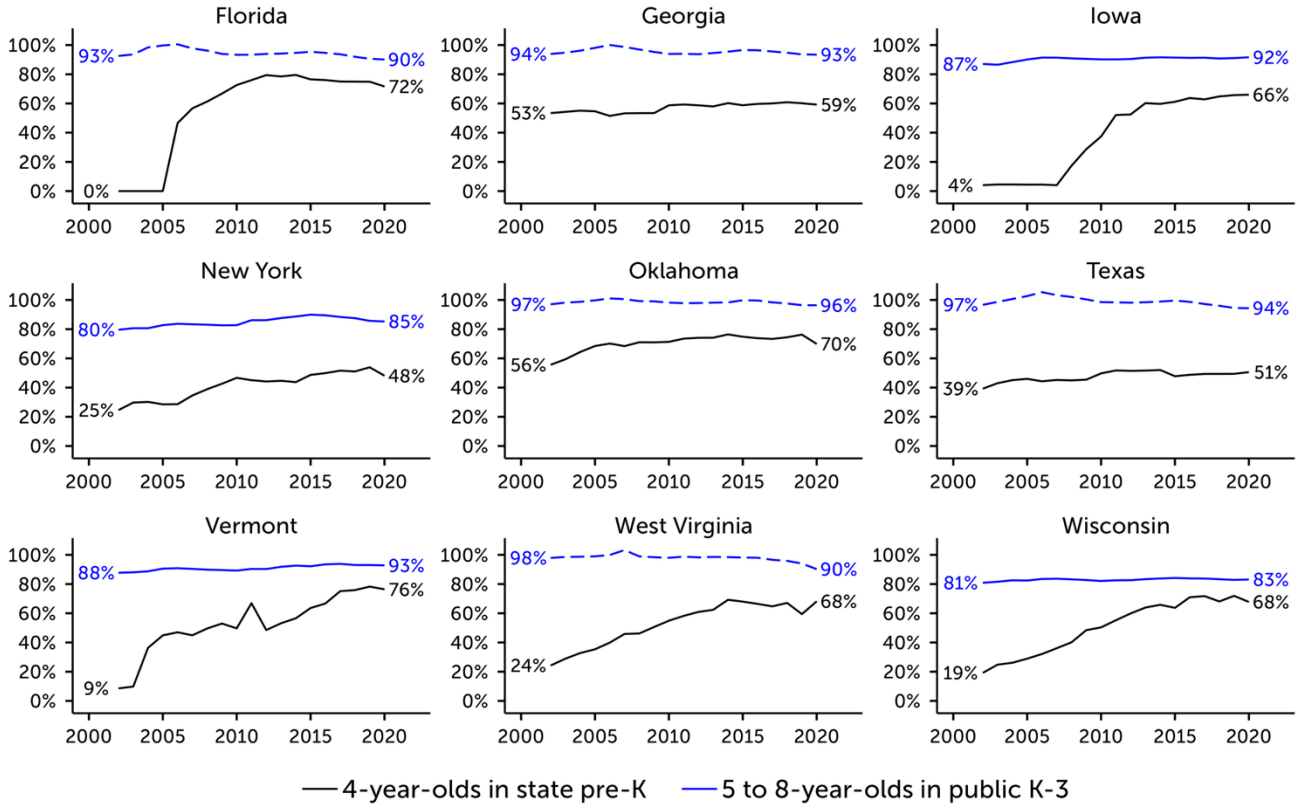
The proportion of 4-year-olds enrolled in state pre-K was increasing nationally, though at a slower rate in the 2010s than the 2000s. By comparison, public school enrollment was relatively stable for K-3.

Figure 1. Children enrolled in state pre-K and public K-3 nationally, 2001-02 to 2019-20



However, national averages obscure state-level heterogeneity. Among states with the highest pre-K enrollment pre-pandemic, several experienced declines in public K-3 enrollment, indicated by dashed lines.

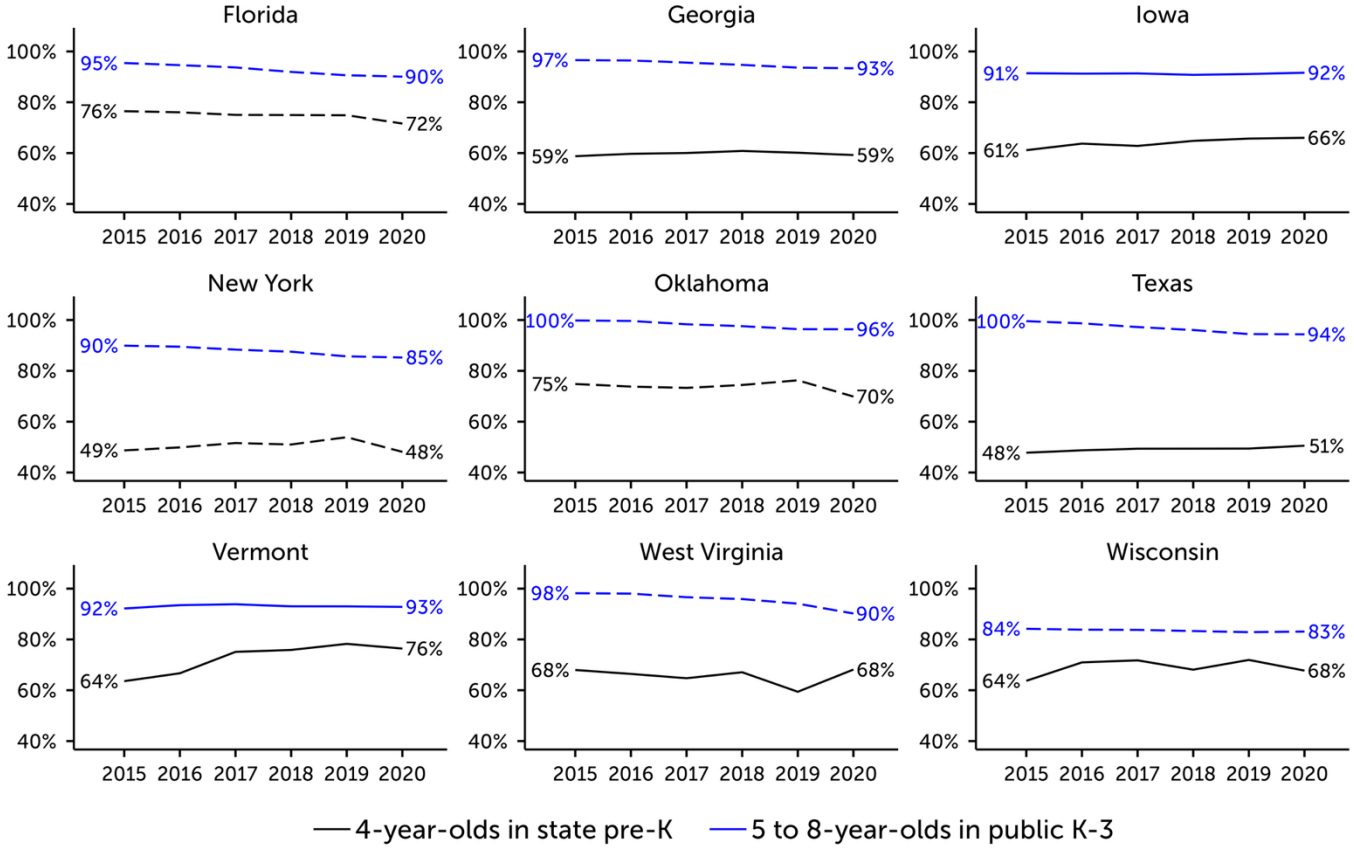
Figure 2. Children enrolled in state pre-K and K-3 in states with high pre-K enrollment, 2001-02 to 2019-20



Note: Dashed lines indicate that enrollment was lower in 2019-20 than in 2001-02.

K-3 enrollment declines were especially concentrated in the five years immediately before the pandemic, during which state pre-K enrollment rates also declined by four to five percentage points in Florida and Oklahoma, two states with some of the highest pre-K enrollment rates in the country.

Figure 3. Children enrolled in state pre-K and K-3 in states with high pre-K enrollment, 2014-15 to 2019-20

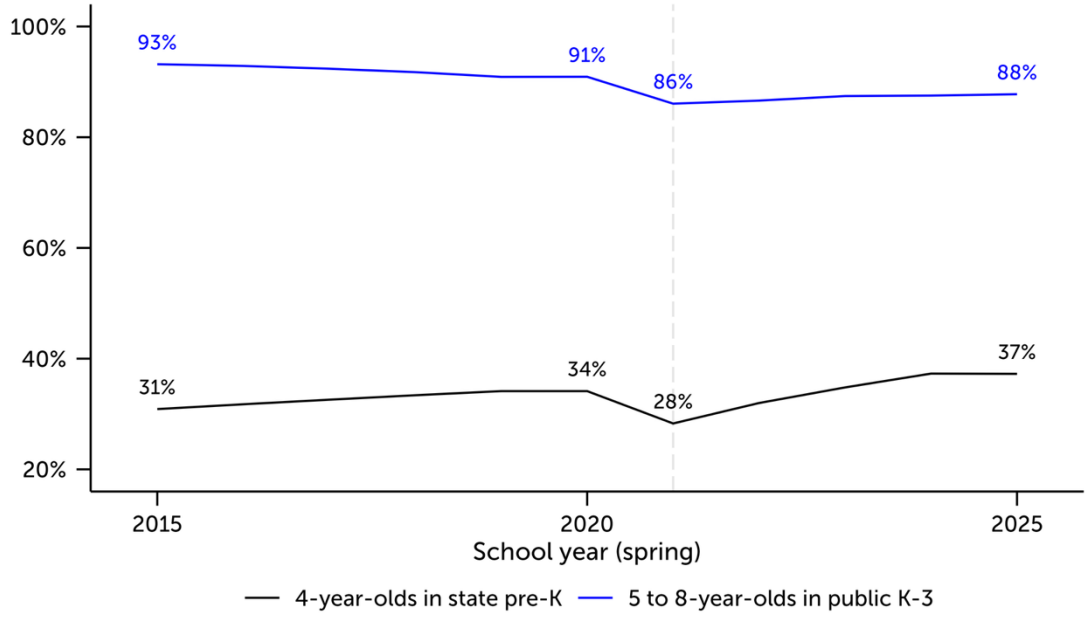


Note: Dashed lines indicate that enrollment was lower in 2019-20 than in 2014-15.

How has enrollment changed since the pandemic?

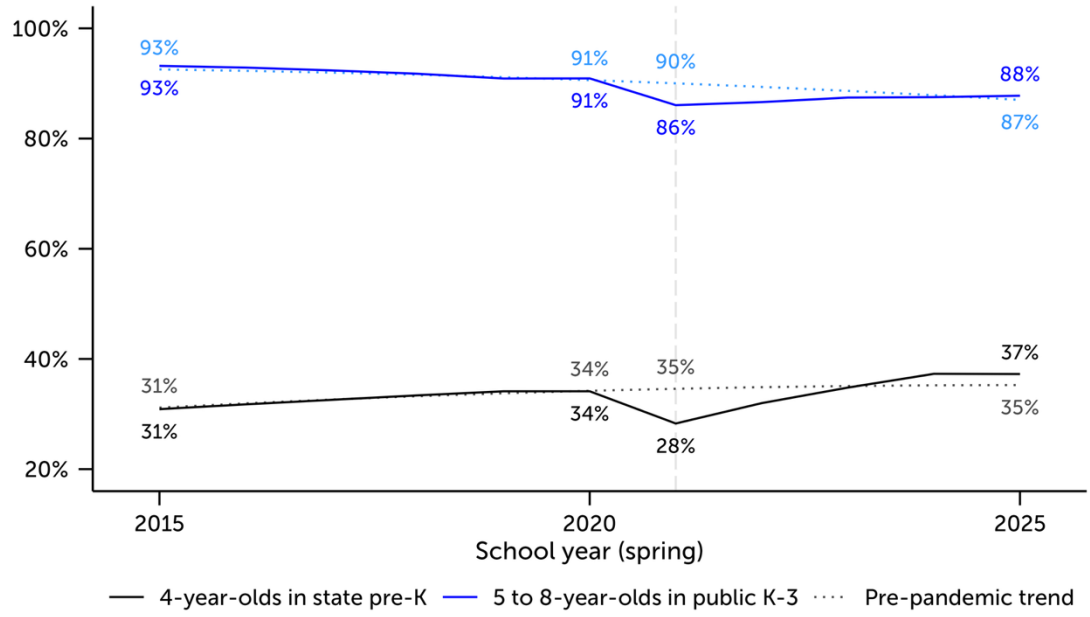
Nationally, enrollment in state pre-K and public K-3 declined by five to six percentage points from 2019-20 to 2020-21. Pre-K enrollment has generally recovered, with higher enrollment in 2024-25 than in 2019-20. While K-3 enrollment was higher in 2024-25 than in 2020-21 (indicated by vertical line), it remains below 2019-20.

Figure 4. Children enrolled in state pre-K and public K-3 nationally, 2014-15 to 2024-25



However, declines and stagnation may not be entirely attributable to the pandemic given that K-3 enrollment had been trending downward and pre-K enrollment growth had slowed pre-pandemic. A case can be made that both K-3 and pre-K enrollments returned to the prior trend, as indicated by the dashed lines in Figure 5.

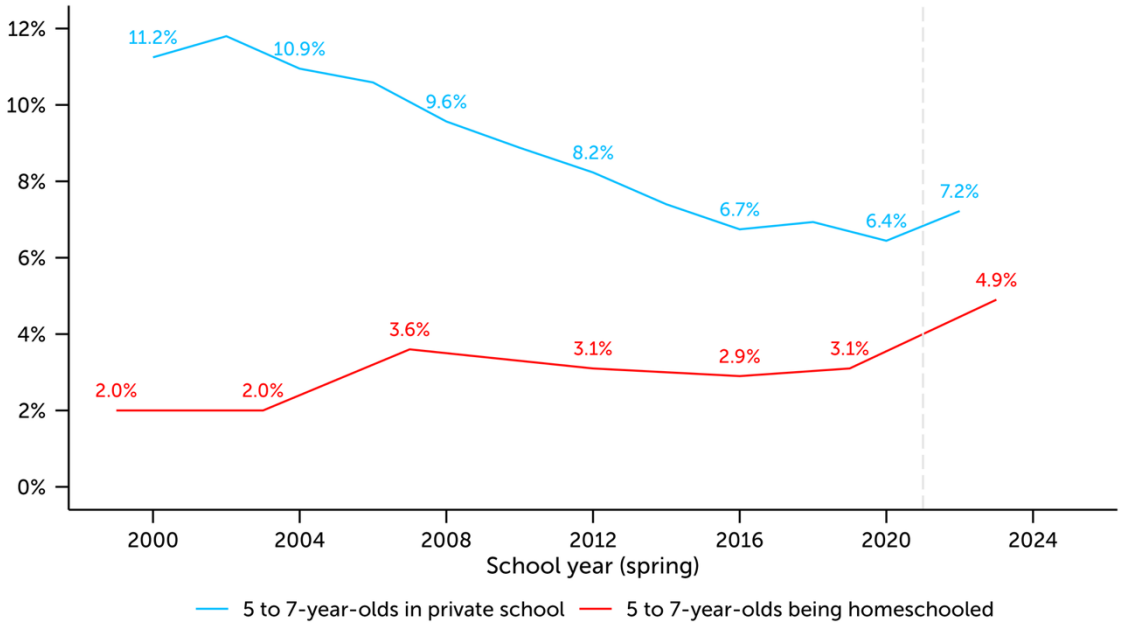
Figure 5. National state pre-K and public K-3 enrollment, compared to pre-pandemic trends



Note: Dotted lines are quadratic trendlines based on enrollment from 2001-02 to 2019-20 (see Methodology for further details).

Nationally, homeschooling increased more than private schooling, but public enrollment declines appear to have been greater than the combined increases in homeschooling and private schooling. However, homeschooling numbers are likely to be underestimates as data on homeschooling is limited given that 12 states do not require that homeschooling be reported, nine only require initial notification but not annual reporting, and others either do not collect or do not publicly report complete data.[1, 2, 3]

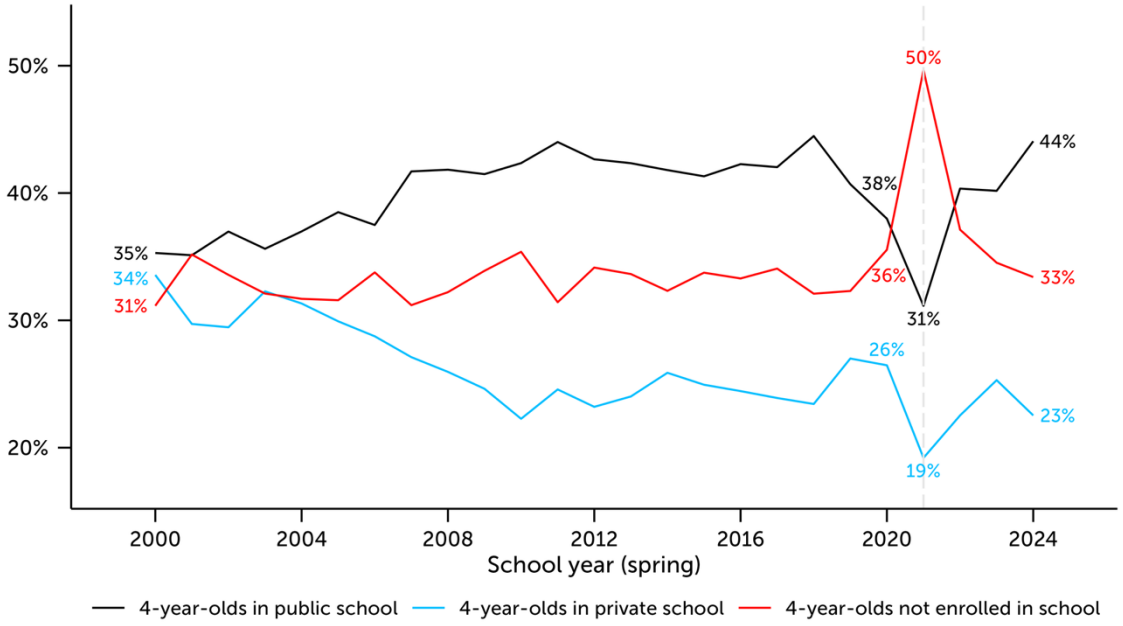
Figure 6. Children enrolled in private K-2 or homeschooling, 1998-99 to 2023-24



Note: We use 5 to 7-year-olds because the National Center for Education Statistics has published the national homeschooling rate for grades K-2 from the 2023 National Household Education Survey but has not yet released the complete disaggregated dataset.

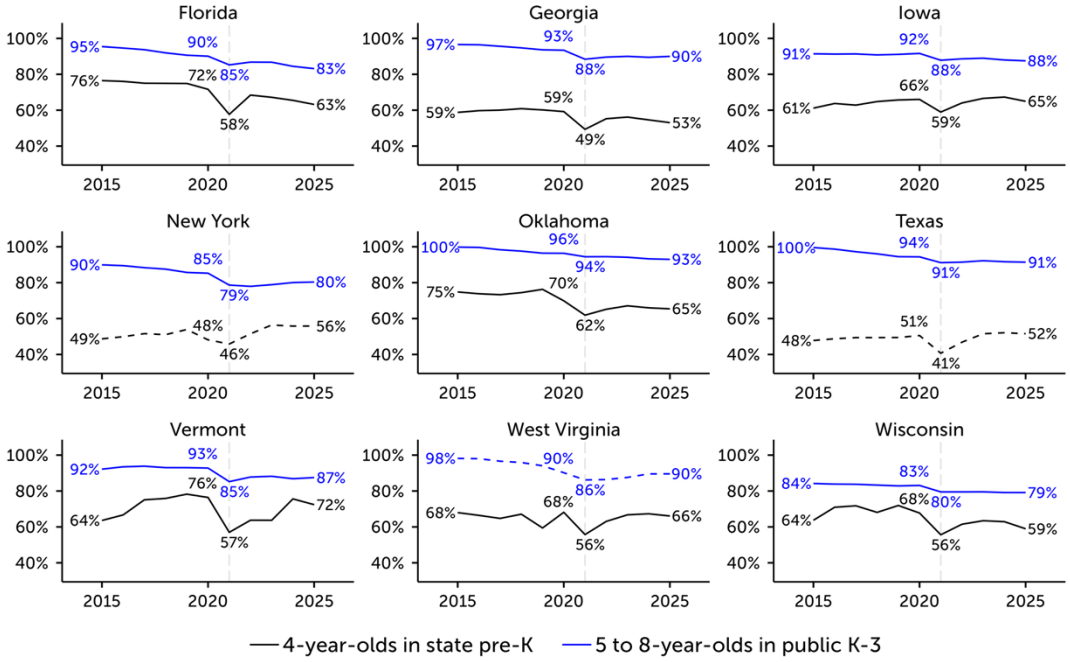
Many 4-year-olds were homeschooled or held out of school in 2020-21, not moved from public to private school, but this trend was short-lived.

Figure 7. 4-year-olds in public school, private school, or not enrolled in school, 1999-00 to 2023-24



There has been marked variation in enrollment recovery: of the nine states with the highest pre-K enrollment pre-pandemic, only two (New York and Texas) have returned to or exceeded 2019-20 pre-K enrollment rates, and just one (West Virginia) has returned to its 2019-20 K-3 enrollment rate.

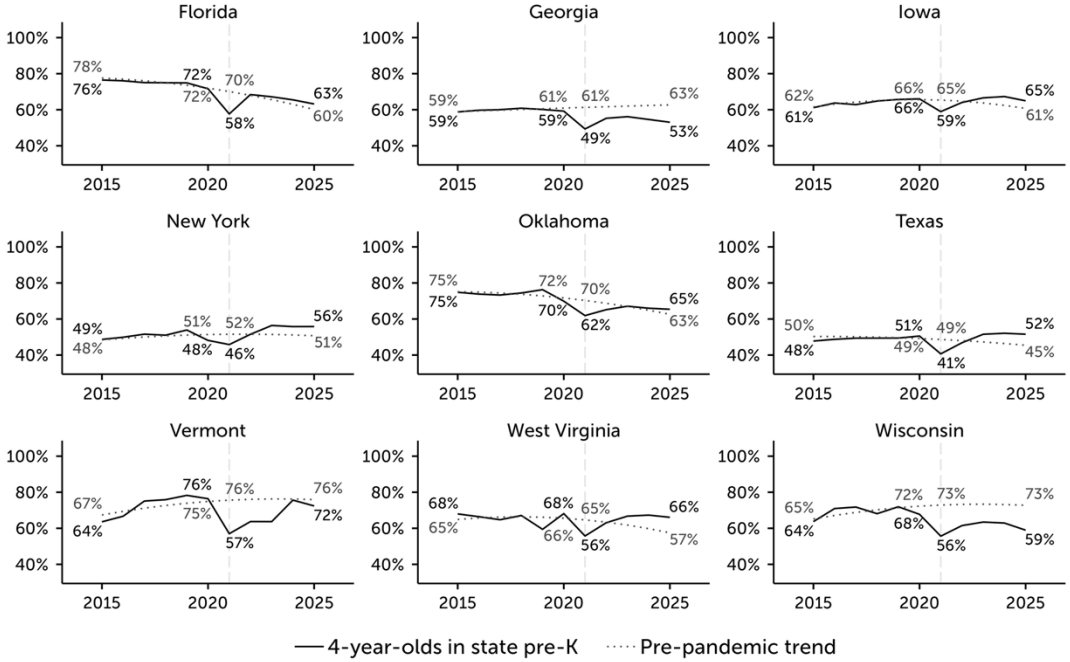
Figure 8. Children enrolled in public pre-K and K-3 in states with high pre-K enrollment, 2014-15 to 2024-25



Note: Dashed lines indicate that a state has returned to or exceeded 2019-20 enrollment.

Some states (e.g., Florida, West Virginia) had a smaller enrollment decline than their pre-pandemic trajectories would have predicted while others (e.g., Wisconsin) were on upward trajectories that have slowed or halted.

Figure 9. State pre-K enrollment in states with high pre-K enrollment, compared to pre-pandemic trends



Note: Dotted lines are quadratic trendlines based on enrollment from 2001-02 to 2019-20 (see Methodology for further details).

Implications

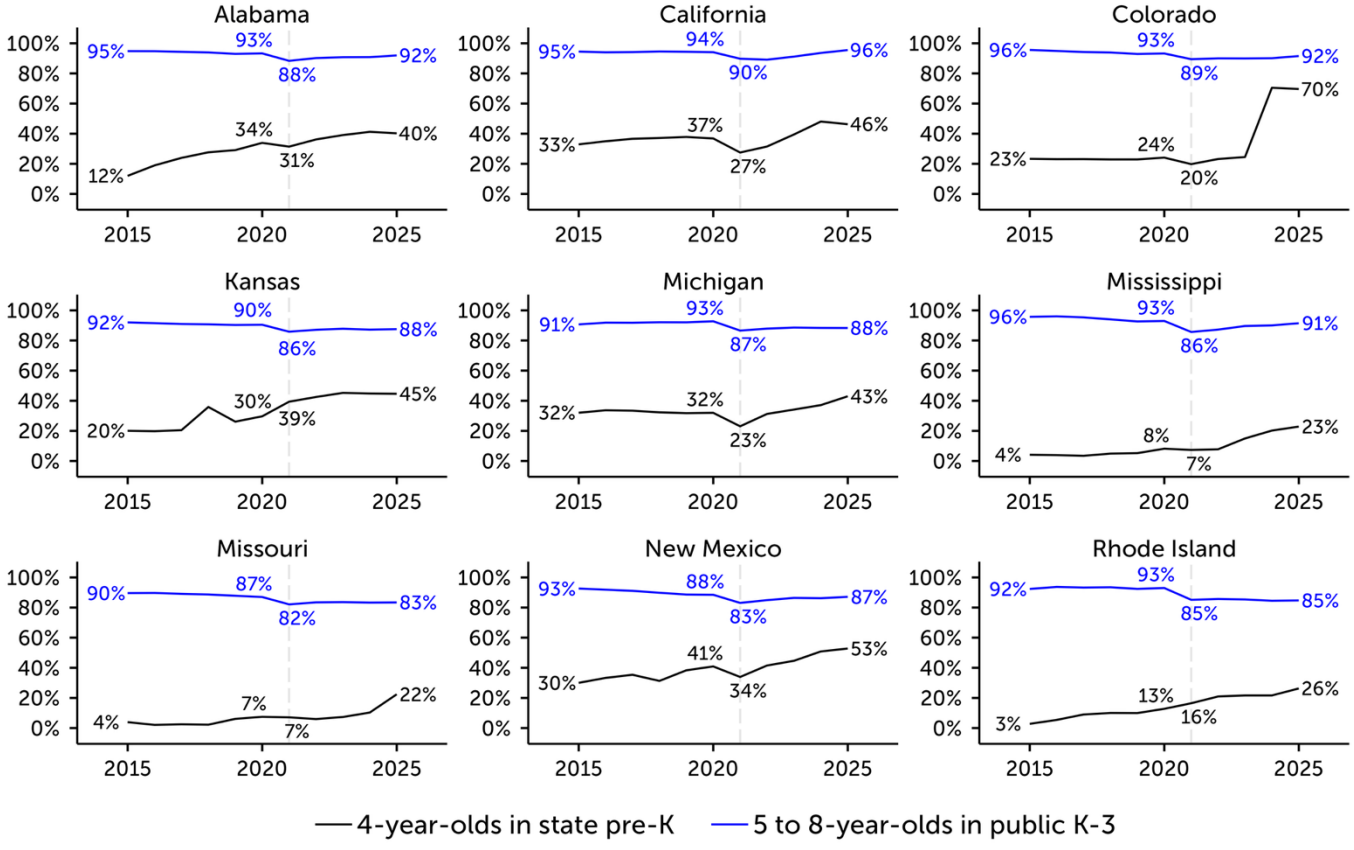
Many families who left public schools during the pandemic have maintained their schooling arrangements,[4] leaving older grades below pre-pandemic enrollment levels, while younger grades recover as new families enter the public school system.

Investing in state pre-K may encourage long-term enrollment recovery.[5] For states dealing with declining or unstable K-12 enrollment, expanding state pre-K can support stable funding and encourage families to stay in the public school system – as seen in places like Boston,[6] Tulsa,[7] and Washington D.C.[8]

> *If you can get families into a public pre-K program, they're likely to maintain continuity through to the public school student.*
>
> –Thomas Dee, Stanford University [4]

Several states have even expanded their pre-K programs in recent years, and most have seen K-3 enrollment return to within two percentage points of pre-pandemic levels:

Figure 10. Children enrolled in state pre-K and public K-3 in states expanding pre-K, 2014-15 to 2024-25



Methodology

Data on state pre-K enrollment rates came from the National Institute for Early Education Research[9] and data on public K-3 enrollment were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD).[10] To estimate the proportion of 5 to 8-year-olds in public K-3, enrollment numbers were divided by the Census Bureau's estimates of state or national population by single year of age, as compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT Data Center.[11, 12] Both data sources are based on fall (October) enrollment, while the year on the x-axis refers to the spring of a particular school year. For example, enrollment data points shown for 2020 are from October 2019. Enrollment trends were estimated by regressing pre-K enrollment on school year using pre-pandemic data only, then using those models to predict post-pandemic enrollment. We used 2001-02 through 2019-20 data for all states except Florida and Iowa. Both states had rapid, large-scale expansions between 2006 and 2010 then relatively flat enrollment between 2010 and 2020, so we used 2010-11 through 2019-20 data to more accurately model both states' long-term enrollment trajectories. We used quadratic models to account for nonlinear time trends.

Private school enrollment data were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics' biannual Private School Universe Survey (PSS),[13] and enrollment was divided by the national population of 5 to 7-year-olds to estimate the proportion of children in grades K-2 enrolled in private school. Homeschooling enrollment estimates were obtained from the Parent and Family Involvement in Education (PFI) section of the National Center for Education Statistics' nationally representative National Household Education Survey (NHES),[14, 15] which was conducted in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2012, 2019, and 2023. We used 5 to 7-year-olds for the plot of private and homeschool enrollment because the National Center for Education Statistics has published the national homeschooling rate for grades K-2 from the most recent National Household Education Survey data collection in 2023 but has not yet released the complete disaggregated dataset. The PFI section of the NHES does not collect data on pre-K enrollment, and the CCD and PSS do not include children enrolled in pre-K outside of school-based settings, providing an incomplete picture of pre-K enrollment. Therefore, additional data on 4-year-olds' schooling arrangements were obtained from the Current Population Survey's October Education Supplement.[16] Each of these datasets also report enrollment counts based on fall enrollment. Therefore, because the plots use the spring of each school year, data points shown for year *X* reflect enrollment measured in October of year *X–1*.

References

[1] Home School Legal Defense Association. (2025). *Homeschool laws by state.* https://hslda.org/legal

[2] Huseman, J. (2015). Homeschooling regulations by state. *ProPublica*. https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/homeschool

[3] Watson, A. R. (2023). Homeschool hub. *The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy Homeschool Hub*. https://education.jhu.edu/edpolicy/policy-research-initiatives/homeschool-hub/

[4] Lieberman, M. (2024, June 27). What's going on with public school enrollment? All the big questions, answered. *Education Week*, *43*(30). https://www.edweek.org/leadership/whats-going-on-with-public-school-enrollment-all-the-big-questions-answered/2024/06#

[5] Friedman-Krauss, A., & Barnett, S. (2024). Opportunities and challenges for preschool expansion. *State Education Standard*, *24*(2). https://www.nasbe.org/opportunities-and-challenges-for-preschool-expansion/

[6] Weiland, C., Wu, T., Unterman, R., Shapiro, A., Lightner, S., Staines, T., & Taylor, A. (2025). *Impacts of oversubscribed Boston pre-K programs through middle school* (EdWorkingPaper No. 25–1194). https://doi.org/10.26300/4N08-S025

[7] Gormley, W. T., Jr., Phillips, D., & Anderson, S. (2018). The effects of Tulsa's pre-K program on middle school student performance. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *37*(1), 63–87. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22023

[8] Braga, B., Doromal, J. B., Greenberg, E. H., Monarrez, T., Restrepo, L., & Lamb, R. (2026). The effects of public pre-K for 3-year-olds on early elementary public school enrollment: Evidence from the DC centralized lottery. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (Advance online publication). https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737261422707

[9] National Institute for Early Education Research (2026). *Preconfigured NIEER data sets.* https://nieer.org/data-explorer

[10] National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). *Common Core of Data*. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/

[11] US Census Bureau. (2026). *Annual estimates of the resident population for the United States, regions, states, District of Columbia and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2025* (NST-EST2025-POP; Vintage 2025) [Dataset]. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-total.html

[12] Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2024). *Child population by age group statistics* [Dataset]. KIDS COUNT Data Center. https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/101-child-population-by-age-group

[13] National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Private School Universe Survey (PSS) data and documentation.* https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/pssdata.asp

[14] Hudson, L., Kaatz, T., Battle, D., Hall, L. J., Bahr, S., Eyster, S., & McNamara, M. (2023). *2019 homeschooling and full-time virtual education rates* (NCES 2023-101). National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2023/2023101.pdf

[15] Sempeles, E., & Cui, J. (2024). *Parent and family involvement in education: 2023* (NCES 2024-113). National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2024113

[16] Flood, S., King, M., Rodgers, R., Ruggles, S., Warren, J. R., Warren, D., Chen, A., Cooper, G., Richards, S., Schouweiler, M., & Westberry, M. (2024). *IPUMS, Current Population Survey: Version 12.0* (Version 12.0) [Dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. https://doi.org/10.18128/D030.V12.0