

Universal Pre-K: 5 FAQs

July 15, 2021

Question 1. Why does the United States need Universal Pre-K (UPK)?

High quality preschool has been shown to benefit children from all backgrounds, though it has larger benefits for children in low-income homes. Yet, the United States is not even close to ensuring that all children attend pre-k. Less than 5 million of the nation's roughly 8 million 3- and 4-year-olds attend any preschool, most of their programs are not high quality, and 45% are part-day¹. The situation is worse for 3- and 4-year-olds in poverty as more than half do not attend any program, even though Head Start and other targeted programs have been around for more than 50 years.² The best way to guarantee that all children in poverty and every other child whose family finds it difficult to pay for high quality preschool can access such programs is through UPK.

Question 2. Will UPK be compulsory, forcing children into government programs and limiting choice?

No. In all 44 states and the District of Columbia that fund pre-K participation is entirely voluntary.³ Few states even make kindergarten compulsory. Every state but one allows for state-funded pre-K to be delivered by a mixed public-private delivery system. Only DC and Vermont could be said to offer UPK beginning at age 3, but 5 others offer UPK at age 4. In all 7, some families choose not to participate.⁴

Question 3. How much will UPK cost?

NIEER estimates that the national average cost of full-day, high quality pre-K that pays teachers salaries equivalent to K-12 is about \$12,500 per child per year.⁵ To serve 70% of all 3- and 4-year-olds at this level would cost about \$70 billion annually. This is more than a \$50 billion increase over current public funding. Limiting additional public funding to those under 200 percent of the federal poverty level, would lower annual cost by about \$10 billion. Of course, quality programs cannot be created overnight, program expansion will take time, perhaps 10-20 years to fully provide high quality UPK across the entire nation. That means cost would climb gradually toward these estimated levels over time. Finally, if some parents preferred part-day programs the cost would be less but this percentage is likely to be small. Less than 20% of kindergarten is part-day.⁶

Question 4. How many new teachers will UPK require, and can they be recruited?

To enroll 70 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds, the USA needs 40,000 to 50,000 new classrooms with at least one teacher per classroom (and an assistant).⁷ Over 10 years, this would be no more than 5,000 new teachers per year. A larger problem is that about half the teachers of the 5 million children currently enrolled need some additional education to complete a BA degree with specialized training in early childhood, about 125,000 teachers.⁸ Given adequate supports, current teachers could increase their qualifications and receive the higher pay and benefits they deserve. This would be transformative not just for ECE quality but for the lives of the workforce themselves, and New Jersey has demonstrated this can be done within five years.⁹ These numbers are modest relative to the total preschool teacher pool. More than 540,000 preschool teachers (some serving children under age 3) and 22,000 preschool special education teachers were employed in 2019.¹⁰ Many other preschool teachers have left the field because of the low pay and benefits, and they constitute a reserve pool of teachers that could be attracted back by better pay and working conditions.¹¹

Question 5. Will UPK conflict with Head Start and private child care?

No. State-funded pre-K already partners with Head Start and private child care providers to serve approximately 40 percent of its enrollment.¹² This is one reason why state and locally funded pre-K serves more than 2 million 3- and 4-year-olds today, twice the number funded by Head Start and the child care subsidy program combined.

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- ¹U.S. Census. (2021). School Enrollment in the United States: October 2019 - Detailed Tables. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/school-enrollment/2019-cps.html>
- Barnett, W.S., & Jung, K. (2021). Seven Impacts of the Pandemic on Young Children and their Parents: Initial Findings from NIEER's December 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/NIEER_Seven_Impacts_of_the_Pandemic_on_Young_Children_and_their_Parents.pdf
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2018). Digest of Educational Statistics. Table 202.60. Percentage distribution of quality rating of child care arrangements of children at about 4 years of age, by type of arrangement and selected child and family characteristics: 2005-06. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_202.60.asp
- ² U.S. Census. (2021). School Enrollment in the United States: October 2019 - Detailed Tables. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/school-enrollment/2019-cps.html>
- ³ Friedman-Krauss, A., et al. (2020). *The state of preschool 2019*. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TOC_and_Full_Appendices_2019.pdf
- ⁴ Friedman-Krauss, A., et al. (2021). *The State of Preschool 2020*. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/YB2020_Full_Report.pdf
- ⁵ Friedman-Krauss, A., et al. (2021). *The State of Preschool 2020*. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/YB2020_Full_Report.pdf
- ⁶ U.S. Census. (2021). School Enrollment in the United States: October 2019 - Detailed Tables. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/school-enrollment/2019-cps.html>
- ⁷ Author's calculations. Depending on the estimates used, reaching 70% requires serving another 800,000 to 1 million children. With c 20 children per classroom this is 40,000 to 50,000 new classrooms and teachers. To reach 90% would another 120,000- 140,000 classrooms and teachers; or, 12,000-14,000 new teachers per year if over 10 years, 6,000-7,000 new teachers per year over 20 years.
- ⁸ NIEER calculations from National Survey of Early Care and Education 2019 Preliminary Data.
- ⁹ Lobman, C., Ryan, S., & McLaughlin, J. (2005). Reconstructing teacher education to prepare qualified preschool teachers: Lessons from New Jersey. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 7(2), n2. Other effective models can be found in Zinsler, K. M., Main, C., Torres, L., & Connor, K. (2019). Patching the pathway and widening the pipeline: Models for developing a diverse early childhood workforce in Chicago. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 63(3-4), 459-471.
- ¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2021). *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Preschool Teachers. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/preschool-teachers.htm>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2021). *Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2019*. 25-2051 Special Education Teachers, Preschool. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from <https://www.bls.gov/oes/2019/may/oes252051.htm#nat>
- ¹¹ See, for example, Presley, J. B., Klostermann, B. K., & White, B. R. (2006). Pipelines and pools: Meeting the demand for early childhood teachers in Illinois (IERC 2006-3). Edwardsville, IL: Illinois Education Research Council.
- ¹² State and local preschool programs including special education serve about 2.08 million children ages 3 and 4. Head Start enrollment is about 560,000 ages 3 and 4. CCDF serves about 392,000 ages 3 and 4.
- Friedman-Krauss, A., et al. (2021). *The State of Preschool 2020*. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER. Retrieved July 15, 2021 from https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/YB2020_Full_Report.pdf

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.

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