

Tennessee's Pre-Kindergarten Program

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This policy history outlines the origins and development of state-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-K) in Tennessee. (See Exhibit 1.) Information on program eligibility, funding sources, and new federal grants is also provided.

The push for state-funded pre-K in Tennessee began in earnest in the early 1990s. Action in both the legislative and executive branches of government produced early childhood policies, proposals for state funding of early childhood education programs, and related rules and regulations.

Exhibit 1: Origins and Development of state-funded pre-kindergarten in Tennessee

1963	Legislation passed permitting school systems to use federal or local funds for pre-kindergarten programs.¹
1990	Resolution passed directing the State Board of Education and Department of Education to convene a task force “for the purpose of developing and proposing a state plan for establishment of a comprehensive system of [state-funded] early childhood and parent education programs for at-risk children and their parents.”² The task force developed Tennessee’s policy for early childhood education and parent involvement in 1991. This policy outlined the principles and requirements of a quality early childhood program with comprehensive, family-focused services. ³
1992	The earliest versions of the bill that became the Education Improvement Act of 1992 (EIA) mentioned pre-kindergarten.⁴ The State Board of Education’s Master Plan for Tennessee’s schools supported the allocation of state funds to provide additional early childhood education and parent involvement programs for at-risk, four-year-old children and their families beginning in FY 1992. The McWherter administration’s initial 1992-93 budget included funds consistent with the Master Plan; however, the administration dropped this allocation to accommodate the revenue shortfall and lack of new revenue sources. ⁵
1995	The State Board of Education adopted the Tennessee Early Childhood Education Plan. Including rules for programs serving at-risk three- and four-year-olds, this plan sought to enable local communities to assist families in preparing children for school success and to effectively coordinate community-based support services. ⁶
1996	Legislation passed permitting early childhood pilot programs for economically disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds.⁷ Governor Sundquist proposed a phase-in of universal pre-kindergarten, beginning with the most economically disadvantaged children. ⁸ The initial State Board plan called for \$3.8 million to fund 10 pilot centers to serve 600 at-risk three- and four-year-olds. ⁹ Ultimately, the state allocated about \$3 million in 1998. ¹⁰
2003	Legislation passed expanding early childhood pilot program eligibility. Previously, three- and four-year-olds living below the poverty level qualified for the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Pilot Project; this legislation expanded program eligibility to include three- and four-year-olds meeting free and reduced price lunch income requirements. ¹¹
2005	The Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Act passed. This legislation increased Tennessee’s financial investment in early childhood education from \$10 million to \$35 million. In addition, both the number of classrooms and number of students served tripled following this legislation. ¹²

measures. By the 2007-08 program year, approximately 18,000 children participated in the program, compared to 3,000 in the years when only the pilots were operational. State funding through the general fund for pre-K classes rose from \$10 million in 2004-05 to \$80 million in 2009-10.²² In 2008, Tennessee was ranked 13th in the nation in state spending for pre-K programs, and 17th when state, local, federal, and other sources of expenditures were considered.²³

Although Tennessee's pre-K program has experienced considerable growth over the last five years, the average percentage of four-year-olds served is lower than the national average and lower than most other southern states. (See Exhibit 3).

The number of students served has remained essentially flat since the 2007-08 program year, the last year for which expansion funding was available. For fiscal year 2008-09, the program received \$3 million in increased appropriations to cover inflationary costs. Initially, Governor Bredesen's 2009-10 budget proposed an additional \$25 million for the program, which was reduced following a significant revenue shortfall.²⁴

Exhibit 4 summarizes selected statistics for Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program.

Federal early childhood education initiatives

According to state officials, local school districts will have the option of expanding and improving pre-K programs with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds.²⁵ ARRA made an additional \$400 million available to states under Part B Preschool Grants of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for early special education services (covering children ages three to five). As of April 1, 2009, states could receive 50 percent of this \$400 million allocation without submitting a new application. The remaining 50 percent is to be awarded by September 30, 2009, contingent on approval of states' recordkeeping and reporting submissions.²⁶

President Obama's federal budget proposal also includes substantial measures to improve and increase access to early education opportunities. Specifically, the FY 2010 budget proposes two new early learning education programs:²⁷

- § *The Early Learning Challenge Fund* (\$300 million): This program would provide grants for the development of state plans and statewide infrastructure of integrated early learning supports and services for children from birth through age five to raise the quality of state-funded early learning programs and improve children's readiness to learn upon school entry.
- § *Title I Early Childhood Grants* (\$500 million): This program is to provide matching grants to Title I local education agencies that are using ARRA funds to expand existing pre-K programs or implement new early-childhood education programs for low-income students.²⁸

Summary

This policy history outlines the origins and development of state-funded pre-kindergarten in Tennessee. Created by 1996 legislation, the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Pilot Project served economically disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds. Passage of the 2005 Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Act resulted in a significant expansion of funding for and enrollment in state-funded pre-K in Tennessee. This policy history also highlights several federal early childhood education initiatives that serve as another source of funding for Tennessee's pre-K program.

Endnotes

- ¹ Comptroller of the Treasury and the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Why pre-k?*, March 2001, p. 6, <http://www.comptroller1.state.tn.us/repository/RE/prekinder.pdf> (accessed March 11, 2009).
- ² House Joint Resolution 736 (1990).
- ³ State Board of Education, "Tennessee Early Childhood Education Plan," draft proposed Dec. 8, 1994, approved in 1995, p. 1.
- ⁴ *Why pre-k?*, p. 6.
- ⁵ State Board of Education, "Report on Actions by the General Assembly Regarding the Education Improvement Act of 1991," May 30, 1991, p. 2; State Board of Education and Tennessee Department of Education, "Policy for Early Childhood Education and Parent Involvement in Tennessee," Nov. 15, 1991, p. 3.
- ⁶ "Tennessee Early Childhood Education Plan," approved in 1995, p. i.
- ⁷ Public Chapter 954 (1996).
- ⁸ *Why pre-k?*, p. 7.
- ⁹ Tennessee State Board of Education, "Master Plan for Tennessee Schools Action Plan," Dec. 8, 1994 Draft, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ Bobbi Lussier, Executive Director, Office of Early Learning, Tennessee Department of Education, "Re: Questions regarding Tennessee's Pre-Kindergarten program," e-mail to the author, June 8, 2009.
- ¹¹ Public Chapter 110 (2003).
- ¹² Bobbi Lussier, e-mail to the author, June 8, 2009.
- ¹³ Public Chapter 954 (1996).
- ¹⁴ *Why pre-k?*, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ Bobbi Lussier, e-mail to the author, June 8, 2009.
- ¹⁶ Regina Riley, *Pre-K Teachers' Employment Rights and Benefits*, Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Education Accountability, March 2009, p. 2, <http://www.comptroller1.state.tn.us/Repository/RE/Pre-kTeachers2008.pdf> (accessed April 3, 2009); Bobbi Lussier, e-mail to the author, June 8, 2009.
- ¹⁷ Bobbi Lussier, e-mail to the author, June 8, 2009.
- ¹⁸ Tennessee Alliance for Early Education, *Voluntary Pre-K in Tennessee: Understanding the Collaboration Model*, March 2008, p. 1, <http://www.prekfortn.com/> (accessed Aug. 28, 2008); Strategic Resource Group, *Assessing the Effectiveness of Tennessee's Pre-Kindergarten Program: Second Interim Report*, Aug. 18, 2008, p. 59, <http://www.comptroller1.state.tn.us/Repository/RE/prekeval08.pdf> (accessed March 6, 2009).
- ¹⁹ Community-Pre-K Advisory Councils (C-PACs) establish criteria for identifying children who need pre-K intervention but do not qualify under the state definition of at-risk. Examples of eligibility criteria established by C-PACs include: children of teen parent(s) or active duty military parent(s) and children in the care of grandparents or other family members. CPACs then develop guidelines for prioritizing enrollment of children who meet one or more of the eligibility criteria. Enrollment guidelines and eligibility criteria vary among LEAs.
- ²⁰ Public Chapter 312 (2005); Tennessee Alliance for Early Education, *Voluntary Pre-K in Tennessee: Understanding the Collaboration Model*, p. 4.
- ²¹ Tennessee Alliance for Early Education, *Voluntary Pre-K in Tennessee: Understanding the Collaboration Model*, p. 3.
- ²² Bobbi Lussier, e-mail to the author, June 8, 2009; Bobbi Lussier, Executive Director, Office of Early Learning, Tennessee Department of Education, "Re: Additional questions on Tennessee's Pre-Kindergarten program," e-mail to author, June 9, 2009.
- ²³ National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool 2008*, p. 130, <http://www.nieer.org>, accessed May 26, 2009).
- ²⁴ Public Chapter 1203 (2008), Section 58, Item 3, <http://state.tn.us/sos/acts/105/pub/pc1203.pdf>.
- ²⁵ Tennessee Department of Education, "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)," March 26, 2009, Part 4, http://www.tennessee.gov/education/doc/ARRA_TN_Ed_Overview.ppt (accessed Aug. 4, 2009.)
- ²⁶ U.S. Department of Education, "Guidance Funds for Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Made Available Under The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009," revised April 13, 2009, pp. 7-8, <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/guidance/idea-b.pdf> (accessed Aug. 7, 2009).
- ²⁷ Federal Funds Information for States, "President's FY 2010 Budget: Change That May Happen," Budget Brief 09-06, May 15, 2009, p. 1.
- ²⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Federal Funds: Education for the Disadvantaged," pp. 359-360.



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