

# **Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program Report on Program Operations Fiscal Year 2023-2024**

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Pennsylvania  
**Department of Education**

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## **Introduction**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) supports two high-quality early childhood education programs that provide instruction to preschool children and families who may otherwise lack access and opportunity for high quality early learning, while preparing them for kindergarten entry: Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. State law requires the PDE to provide the General Assembly with an annual report detailing the operations of both Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance programs.

## **Pennsylvania PreK-Counts Program**

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts supports high-quality pre-kindergarten education for children ages three through entry into kindergarten for families earning up to 300 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines. In 2023-24, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts funding made it possible for 25,053 children to enroll at 991 provider locations statewide.

Grants are awarded to approved providers on a per slot basis. Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts reimbursement rates for 2023-24 were \$10,000 per full day slot and \$5,000 per half day slot. The 2023-24 enacted state budget allocated \$302,284,000 for the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program. PDE was able to utilize \$2,478,002 in carry-over funding from prior fiscal years to provide a total amount of \$304,762,002 to the program. The total allocation for 2023-24 was \$304,322,685 (see Appendix A for distribution details).

## **Pennsylvania's Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program**

Head Start is a federal program that supports child development and comprehensive family services from pregnancy to age five through services focused on early learning, health, and family well-being. In addition to educational programming, Head Start offers health/nutrition services, social service support, and a strong parent/family involvement component. Eligible preschool children are those who live in families earning up to 100 percent of the federal poverty level, and those who are identified as foster children or experiencing homelessness.

Pennsylvania's Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program provides Head Start preschool programs with state funding to enroll additional children and/or expand full day and full year service opportunities. In 2023-24, the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program supported 7,069 Pennsylvania children in 222 Head Start locations statewide.

The 2023-24 enacted state budget allocated \$88,178,000 for the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. The total allocation used was \$88,175,472 (see Appendix B for distribution details). The per slot reimbursement rate is set annually as part of the contracting process with approved providers.

## Impact of the Pandemic

During the 2023-24 program year, Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Programs were expected to return to full, in-person instruction and to maintain full enrollment; however, providers were allowed continued flexibility in instructional design. Additional details can be found in Appendices C, D, and E.

## Providing High-Quality Services to Young Children and Families

All children should begin school ready to learn and succeed. Research indicates what is widely known—all children can tap into their innate potential to learn when they receive high-quality instruction that takes into consideration phases of brain development. Early childhood education is a proven strategy that ensures a child’s readiness for school success.

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Programs meet or exceed most quality standards recommended by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

**Table 1: Comparison of Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Programs Standards to NIEER Standards and Benchmarks**

NIEER Quality Standard	NIEER Benchmark	Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Standards	Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program Standards
Early Learning Standards	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Curriculum Supports	Approval process and supports	Approval process	Approval process
Teacher degree	Bachelor’s degree	Bachelor’s degree + ECE Certification	Half of lead teachers must have a bachelor’s degree
Teacher specialized training	Specializing in Pre-K	ECE certification	Specializing in child development
Assistant teacher degree	Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or equivalent	CDA or equivalent	CDA (at hire or completed 2 years from date of hire)

NIEER Quality Standard	NIEER Benchmark	Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Standards	Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program Standards
Staff professional development	At least 15 hours a year; individual professional development plans; coaching	Meet requirements of Act 48 (180 hours over five years)	At least 15 hours a year; coaching
Maximum class size	20 or less	20 or less	17 or less if majority or all are 3-year-olds  20 or less if majority or all are 4-5 year-olds
Staff-child ratio	1 staff per 10 children (1:10)	1 teacher and 1 aide per 20 children (1:10)	1 teacher and 1 teaching assistant per 17-20 children
Screening & referral	Vision, hearing, health, and referral	Vision, hearing, health, and referral	Vision, hearing, health, and referral
Continuous quality improvement system	Structured classroom observations; data used for program improvement	Structured classroom observations; data used for program improvement	Structured classroom observations; data used for program improvement

## **Assessments Used to Measure Academic Performance**

In Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program classrooms, teachers are required to assess the progress of students. Teachers are most qualified to perform the assessment since they observe children in authentic environments and are familiar with each child's development and learning expectations.

The goal of early childhood assessment in Pennsylvania is to:

- Adapt instruction to meet individualized student and group needs;
- Understand the status of children across a broad range of cognitive and non-cognitive domains;
- Track achievement and developmental gains over time; and
- Inform policy by providing student outcomes in classrooms and across the state.

Program guidelines emphasize that providers should not use child outcome data to determine placement in a program, class, or special education, or to deny or exclude access to services for those children who are age and income eligible.

All providers report child outcomes within an approved on-line assessment system. Providers select from the following approved on-line child assessment tools to report child outcomes:

- Assessment Technology Incorporated: Galileo®
- Cognitive ToyBox, Inc.
- Desired Results Developmental Profile
- Experience Early Learning, home of Mother Goose Time
- Frog Street AIM Observational Assessment
- HighScope: COR Advantage
- LifeCubby: The Vine Assessment™
- My IGDIs™: Profile of Preschool Learning and Development Readiness (ProLADR)
- NIEER/Early Learning Scale
- Pearson: THE WORK SAMPLING SYSTEM®
- Pearson: THE WORK SAMPLING SYSTEM® for Head Start
- Teaching Strategies LLC: Teaching Strategies GOLD®

## **Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts**

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts provides high-quality pre-kindergarten education for children from families whose income is below 300 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines. An eligible child is defined as a child who is at least 3 years of age but is younger than kindergarten entry and lives in a family that meets the income requirements (\$90,000 for family of four in 2023-24). In 2023-24, 277 lead agencies at 991 locations served 25,053 children through Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts.

### **Pre-K Counts Application Process**

PDE competitively awards grants based on the amount of funding allocated by the General Assembly. Grants are awarded for one year, with an established number of subsequent years of continuation grants contingent upon available funding. The grant application and guidelines are publicly posted at [PA Pre-K Counts How To Apply - The Pennsylvania Key \(pakeys.org\)](https://www.pakeys.org). Applicants apply through the eGrants system. FY 2023-2024 was the beginning of a new 5-year grant cycle; therefore, a full, competitive Request for Applications (RFA) was conducted. See Appendices F and G for additional details.

### **Eligible Pre-K Counts Providers**

The following entities may operate Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classrooms:

- School districts;
- Licensed nursery schools;
- Head Start grantees; and
- Child Care Centers and Group Child Care Homes that maintain a STAR 3 or STAR 4 rating under the Keystone STARS Program (Pennsylvania's Quality Rating and Improvement System).

An eligible provider may apply for a grant alone or in combination with other eligible providers as a joint applicant, in which case the entity that applies shall be the lead agency in the partnership.

### **2023-24 Pre-K Counts Grant Awards**

PDE awards Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program grants to approved providers on a per-slot basis. Full-day slots require a minimum of five hours per day of instructional services for at least 180 days per year. Half-day slots require a minimum of 2.5 hours per day of instructional activities for at least 180 days per year. As part of the 2023-24 budget process, the General Assembly set the reimbursement rate at \$10,000 per full-day slot and \$5,000 for each half-day slot.

In 2023-24, PDE awarded a total of \$299,800,000 to approved Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts providers.



## **Allowable Uses of Pre-K Counts Funds**

Providers may use grant funds for costs associated with providing program services to eligible students enrolled in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts and are issued a [Fiscal Supplement](#) to assist in developing program budgets. Funds may not be used for local administrative or indirect costs. See Appendix C for more information on program guidance.

## **Approved Pre-K Counts Providers and Enrollments**

The list of 2023-24 approved Pre-K Counts program providers can be found in Appendix A.

## **Pre-K Counts Enrollment Goals**

Per program guidance and to maintain consistency with federal Head Start requirements, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts providers are expected to maintain at least 90% enrollment throughout the year. Head Start programs are one of the eligible provider types for Pre-K Counts funding, aligning guidance and practice to Head Start Performance Standards helps to support grantees who may be providing Head Start and Pre-K Counts services to families in the Commonwealth. Children are considered enrolled when an intake meeting between the parent or legal guardian and the Pre-K Counts provider has been completed, the necessary information has been gathered, and the child has been identified as a candidate for a Pre-K Counts slot. When a child withdraws from the program, providers have 20 instructional days to fill the vacant slot. Maintaining waiting lists at the provider level assists in filling vacant slots as quickly as possible.

Grantees are required to report enrollment in Pennsylvania's Enterprise to Link Information for Children Across Networks (PELICAN), the Department's early learning data system. In FY 2023-2024 additional enrollment reporting requirements were added to section 1517-D of the Public School Code. Program policy related to these changes can be found in Appendix H.

## **Pennsylvania Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program**

Head Start is a federal program that supports child development and comprehensive family services from pregnancy to age five through services focused on early learning, health, and family well-being. In addition to educational programming, Head Start offers health/nutrition services, social service support, and a strong parent/family involvement component. Eligible preschool children are those who live in families earning up to 100 percent of the federal poverty level, and those who are identified as foster children or experiencing homelessness.

Pennsylvania's Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program provides Head Start preschool programs with state funding to enroll additional children and/or expand full day and full year service opportunities. In 2023-24, the Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program supported 7,069 Pennsylvania children in 222 Head Start locations statewide.

Providers that are approved for Pennsylvania's Head Start Supplemental Assistance funding are existing federal Head Start grantees and must follow the federally approved program models, which includes both classroom and home visiting experiences. Each provider determines the model that best meets the needs of their local community.

### **2023-24 Head Start Supplemental Assistance Grant Awards**

In 2023-24, PDE awarded a total of \$87,518,472. Information about the 2023-24 award process is found in the following appendices:

- Appendix I contains the 2023-24 Head Start Supplemental Assistance continuation grant application; and
- Appendix B includes information on the approved providers.

### **Allowable Uses of Head Start Supplemental Assistance Funds**

Providers are permitted to use grant funds for costs associated with providing program services to eligible students enrolled in the Head Start Supplemental Assistance program and are provided a [Fiscal Supplement](#) to assist in developing program budgets.

### **Approved Head Start Supplemental Assistance Providers and Enrollments**

See Appendix B for the list of 2023-24 approved Head Start Supplemental Assistance program providers.

### **Head Start Supplemental Assistance Enrollment Goals**

Per state law, Head Start Supplemental Assistance providers are expected to maintain at least 90% enrollment throughout the year. Per federal Head Start regulations, providers have 30 days to fill slot vacancies. At the beginning of each year, a program must develop and maintain a wait list to assist with filling vacant slots as soon as possible. Grantees report their enrollments in PELICAN.