



PRE-K OUR WAY

Prepared for school, ready for success.

State Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee

Budget Public Testimony

March 16 and 23, 2021

FY2022

Testimony in Support of Pre-K Expansion Funding

Sam Crane

Pre-K Our Way

Thanks to you, New Jersey established – and now, maintains – pre-k expansion as a statewide priority!

There's been pre-k expansion funding in every recent state budget, beginning with the final budget of the Christie Administration and continuing through every budget of the Murphy Administration – and in both the original and revised budgets presented for FY2021.

Because of that support, our state has expanded pre-k for working families and now reaches into more than 150 school districts – 156, to be exact. Again, thank you!

Historically, New Jersey has one of the best, most successful, high-quality public preschool programs in the country. Just four years ago, it was available to only 35 communities: the 31 court ordered Abbott Districts plus 4 more districts that were added through a one-time expansion in 2001.

Until four years ago, however, the law – and the stated goal and promise of expanding pre-k to more districts – was not met because it was never funded.

In the past four years, there's been much progress. Why? Because the Governor – and you, the Legislature – made pre-k expansion a high priority. *However, many more eligible school districts still wait.* In fact, there are more than 110 eligible districts waiting. They are located in rural, suburban and urban communities, and span our state from east to west and north to south. Only one county – Monmouth, has funded all of the eligible school districts located within its borders.

For example, there were nearly 40 eligible – and ready – school districts that attended the NJ Department of Education's November technical assistance briefing regarding pre-k expansion, but there was budget funding for only 10 school districts. Even in a COVID-environment of mostly remote and hybrid schooling, school districts understood the importance of being able to provide state-funded, full-day pre-k to the families – and 3- and 4- year-olds – in their communities. The interest of these school districts was and

PRE-K OUR WAY

Prepared for school, ready for success.

remains a clear indication that demand among eligible districts is growing as the working families in more than 110 school districts are still waiting.

Our collective statewide experience with Covid-19 created historic challenges. It is important for the Legislature to look ahead at what is needed to meet the state's continued priority and goal of expanding NJ's high-quality, state-funded, full-day pre-k to our state's 3- and 4- year-olds. It is important for *their* future, and the future of our state.

Pre-K Our Way supports the pre-k expansion funding as proposed in the FY2022 state budget. The Legislature's continued commitment to funding pre-k expansion – including funding for approximately 30 new districts, would continue substantial pre-k expansion in our state.

As we stated only a few months ago in our September 2020 testimony for the revised FY2021 state budget, **New Jersey is close to achieving statewide pre-k expansion, the first major education reform and improvement in decades.** The proposed FY2022 budget under current review would continue that record of pre-k expansion – and continue to recognize pre-k expansion as a priority for now, and for our future. As former Governor Tom Kean has said: "There are a few priority reforms we need to make to improve education in our state. One of our highest priorities should be the availability of quality pre-k programs for all of our children. These programs offer our best hope for future success in school and life."

As we continue progress toward a post-Covid-19 New Jersey, let's maintain pre-k expansion as a statewide priority. **Continue substantial pre-k expansion in the coming year for New Jersey, and especially for its working families.** The FY2022 proposed budget would fund pre-k expansion in approximately 30 of the more than 110 school districts where these working families are still waiting for New Jersey's state-funded full-day, high-quality pre-k.

Thank you.

Pre-K Our Way (www.prekourway.org) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization started in early 2015 to provide a strategic effort to have pre-k expansion as a NJ priority. The organization is a statewide advocacy effort led by former governors Kean and Florio and funded by almost 10 different philanthropic organizations. From inception, Pre-K Our Way has had a single focus: expansion of New Jersey's existing high-quality, state-funded, full-day pre-k program.