



PRE-K OUR WAY

Prepared for school, ready for success.

State Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee

Budget Public Testimony

August 28 – September 11, 2020

REVISED FY2021

Testimony in Support of Pre-K Expansion Funding

Sam Crane

Pre-K Our Way

Congratulations! New Jersey has made pre-k expansion a statewide priority! Our state is close to achieving pre-k expansion: the first major education reform and improvement in decades. The governor's revised proposed state budget *continues* pre-k expansion funding and provides for new districts. **Let's maintain that momentum!**

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 three 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 three years, there's been much progress. Pre-k expansion funding accelerated in the first two budgets of the Murphy Administration. Why? Because the Governor – and you, the legislature – made pre-k expansion a high priority. Because of your leadership, today there are a total of nearly 150 school districts – across every county – with state-funded, full-day pre-k. *However, many more still wait.*

For example, there were 15 eligible – and ready – school districts that applied for expansion funding last year but there was insufficient funding. Their interest was a clear indication that demand among eligible districts is growing. The Governor's originally proposed budget message, delivered in February of this year, included funding for approximately 30 new districts.

Our collective experience with Covid-19 created historic challenges. In June, the Governor and Legislature funded new spaces for 3- and 4-year-olds in school districts with pre-approved plans to expand existing state-funded pre-k through September 30. Now, Governor Murphy's proposed budget would provide funding for those spaces through June 2021 – with \$10 million for new expansion districts. *NJ's pre-k remains a priority – thanks!*

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As you consider the Revised FY2021 Governor’s Budget, 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 believes that the revised state budget should fund pre-k expansion as proposed in the August 25 revised budget. The Senate’s continued commitment to funding pre-k expansion – including funding for new districts, would demonstrate sustained momentum toward enabling more of New Jersey’s 3- and 4-year-olds to have *their* access to state-funded, full-day pre-k.

As the 2020-2021 school year begins throughout New Jersey, there are approximately 125 eligible pre-k expansion districts yet to be funded. Every county – and virtually every Legislative District – has districts eligible today for pre-k expansion. The proposed budget would help to reduce that number by approximately 10-12 districts.

As we stated in March 2020, **New Jersey is close to achieving statewide pre-k expansion, the first major education reform and improvement in decades.** The proposed budget under review would continue that record of pre-k expansion – and continue to recognize it 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.”

In closing, the remaining months of this most unexpected 2020 are in sight. Funding for pre-k expansion in existing districts – and \$10 million for new ones – would maintain momentum not only for our state, but for New Jersey’s working families.

When we turn the calendar into 2021, let’s set a post-Covid-19 goal for the *following* school year: having more than 200 districts funded to provide NJ’s pre-k. Funding the 9-month proposed budget is an important step in achieving that goal for New Jersey’s 3- and 4-year-olds – and their working families.

Let’s maintain New Jersey’s momentum for pre-k expansion!

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.