

The Free Pre-K Era Toolkit

Where Your State Stands

Three numbers for every state, from the 2025 State Preschool Yearbook.
Find your row before you read anything else in this toolkit.

STATE	4s ENROLLED	$ / CHILD	QUALITY
Alabama	40%	$7,651	10
Alaska	11%	$7,150	2.3
Arizona	2%	$8,723	3
Arkansas	33%	$6,278	8
California	46%	$14,907	4.1
Colorado	70%	$5,817	2
Connecticut	16%	$10,464	5.1
Delaware	9%	$12,052	9
District of Columbia	94%	$27,354	4
Florida	63%	$2,946	5
Georgia	53%	$7,630	10
Hawaii	7%	$8,109	10*
Idaho	0%	None	None
Illinois	35%	$6,641	8
Indiana	7%	$601	2
Iowa	65%	$3,885	6
Kansas	45%	$4,815	6
Kentucky	26%	$5,080	8
Louisiana	35%	$5,584	8.8
Maine	47%	$6,363	9
Maryland	38%	$7,933	7
Massachusetts	30%	$3,046	5.2
Michigan	43%	$13,604	10*
Minnesota	18%	$6,283	5.2
Mississippi	23%	$4,832	10
Missouri	22%	$3,095	5.1

STATE	4s ENROLLED	$ / CHILD	QUALITY
Montana	0%	None	None
Nebraska	34%	$2,008	6
Nevada	10%	$9,226	7
New Hampshire	0%	None	None
New Jersey	35%	$18,848	9
New Mexico	53%	$13,761	9
New York	56%	$6,719	7*
North Carolina	21%	$6,254	9*
North Dakota	11%	$6,510	5
Ohio	13%	$5,110	5
Oklahoma	65%	$5,749	9
Oregon	17%	$17,072	7.7
Pennsylvania	26%	$8,474	6.6*
Rhode Island	26%	$9,858	10
South Carolina	45%	$3,947	7
South Dakota	0%	None	None
Tennessee	20%	$4,886	9
Texas	52%	$4,395	2
Utah	2%	$3,917	6
Vermont	72%	$9,591	7
Virginia	22%	$6,120	5
Washington	19%	$13,484	8.0
West Virginia	66%	$8,810	9
Wisconsin	59%	$3,882	1
Wyoming	0%	None	None

Six states fund no preschool program that meets the Yearbook's definition: Idaho, Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota and Wyoming. Indiana does fund a program, but it carries a parent work or education requirement, so the Yearbook does not count it.

* Policy meets the benchmark, but at least one benchmark is not fully implemented. Virginia reflects the Virginia Preschool Initiative only; its Mixed-Delivery and CCSP programs are counted separately.

This table covers state-funded preschool only. Several states also fund younger children, on separate programs.

National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool 2025. Figures are for the 2024 to 2025 school year.

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The Three Questions That Decide It

No national dataset will tell you whether your state's money can reach a private Montessori school. That answer sits in one public document: your state's pre-K funding notice. Three questions in it decide everything that follows.

01 Who is eligible to deliver it?

Find the eligible applicant list. If licensed private centers are named on it, partnering is open to you. If the list is districts and charter schools only, it is not, and your real choice is compete or build elsewhere.

02 How long is the funded day?

A half day of three or four hours leaves the working-parent problem with you, and leaves room for your own fee-paying program around it. A full day of seven hours does not. This single number decides whether a funded seat sits inside your day or replaces it.

03 What does it pay per child?

Compare it with your own tuition for the same child. The gap, multiplied by the number of seats you would take, is what partnering costs you or earns you every year. Page 5 does that arithmetic with your numbers.

Where to find it

Search for your state's pre-K notice of funding opportunity, request for applications, or provider handbook for the coming fiscal year. It is published, and it is free.

Then ask the same three again

Several states now fund children under three, on a separate program with separate rules. The answers there are usually different.

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Worked Example: New Mexico

One state, the same three questions, answered from its published funding notice. This is what a finished answer looks like.

01 Who is eligible?

School districts and state charter schools. Licensed centers and licensed home-based providers. Tribal early childhood programs. Head Start. Bureau of Indian Education schools. Licensed private providers are named on the list, so a Montessori school in New Mexico can hold state seats.

02 How long is the funded day?

Half Day, about 3 to 4 hours. Full Day, about 6.5 to 7 hours. Full Day Plus, about 6.5 to 8 hours. Three lengths, so the school chooses how much of its day the state buys.

03 What does it pay per child, per year?

PROGRAM OPTION	PER 4-YEAR-OLD	PER 3-YEAR-OLD
Half Day	$5,460	$6,494
Full Day	$10,920	$12,988
Full Day Plus	$15,055	$16,556

The same rates apply to community-based and school-based providers. That parity is the thing to check in your own state.

There is a second stream

New Mexico also funds children from birth, where the rate rises with your FOCUS star rating. The order is fixed: eligible threes and fours go into NM PreK first, then Child Care Assistance covers the rest of the day and the younger rooms.

New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department, FY27 NM PreK notice of funding opportunity.

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Your Funded-Seat Ceiling

The risk is not that funded four-year-olds leave your building. It is that fewer of them come back for a paid kindergarten year, and the third year is the one that does the work. This finds how many funded seats you can take before that bites.

PART ONE: YOUR CYCLE TODAY

A Four-year-olds in your primary program now

B The smallest kindergarten year you can run and still have a working cycle

PART TWO: YOUR TWO CONVERSION RATES

C Of your fee-paying fours, the share who continue into your kindergarten year, as a decimal. 80 percent is 0.8

D Of fours in a funded seat, the share you expect to continue into your paid kindergarten year. Assume it is lower than C

PART THREE: YOUR CEILING

E Your ceiling on funded seats. A times C, minus B, divided by C minus D

PART FOUR: THE MONEY

F Your own annual tuition for a four-year-old

G Your state's rate per four-year-old, for the day length you would run

H Difference per seat. G minus F

I At your ceiling. H times E

Match the day. A half-day rate set against full-day tuition is not a real comparison. If C and D are the same, funded seats do not change your cycle. If E is zero or below, any funded seat costs you the third year.

Worked example

Ten fours, a floor of 6, paid conversion 0.8, funded conversion 0.5. Ten times 0.8 is 8, minus 6 is 2. Divided by 0.3 gives a ceiling of 6 funded seats. Take a seventh and next year's kindergarten falls to 5.9, below the floor.

If your ceiling is low

Grow where free pre-K does not reach: up into elementary, or down into the youngest rooms. Children who start young rarely leave before they age up, so the bottom of the cycle protects the top.

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The Next Ninety Days

The same plan works whichever of the three choices you make.

DAYS 1 TO 30

Engage early.

Find your state's funding notice and answer the three questions on page 3. Align your hours and licensing with the reimbursable day. Model your tuition against the actual rate, not an assumed one.

DAYS 31 TO 60

Protect the cycle.

Run page 5 and write your ceiling down where your admissions team can see it. Recruit ahead of demand. Decide whether you grow up into elementary or down into the youngest rooms.

DAYS 61 TO 90

Talk to families.

Say plainly what is covered and what is not. Celebrate the savings honestly. Then say what your program does that a funded seat does not.

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