

Pennsylvania

Background

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts

Pennsylvania funds a variety of early childhood programs and categorical grants, such as the Ready to Learn Grant, a block grant that districts and charters can use to fund preschool and a range of other early childhood and early elementary programs. Pre-K Counts, however, is the primary state-funded pre-K initiative.

Pre-K Counts supports half- or full-day pre-K for at-risk children in the two years prior to kindergarten entry. The primary eligibility criterion is income: Families that earn less than 300 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible.¹ Current funding levels allow the program to serve only a fraction of eligible children. Providers are required to develop additional selection criteria, determined locally, to help prioritize enrollment to serve the highest-need children.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) administers Pre-K Counts as a competitive grant program. School districts, licensed nursery schools, Head Start grantees, and child care centers or group child care homes rated at one of the highest two levels of the state's KeystoneSTARS quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) are eligible Pre-K Counts providers.² Charter schools can only offer pre-K through an affiliated program.³

Charter schools in Pennsylvania

The state permits start-up and conversion charter schools. Local school boards and the Pennsylvania Department of Education serve as authorizers, with the latter exclusively responsible for virtual charter schools. Brick-and-mortar schools must be authorized by the local school board. An applicant denied by a local school board may appeal to a state appeals board.⁴

Process for Accessing Pre-K Funds

Eligible providers apply to offer the Pre-K Counts program through a competitive grant process administered by PDE. Grants last for five years but must be renewed annually.⁵ New applicants can access Pre-K Counts funding only during the competitive first year of a funding cycle, or when new funding is added to the program.⁶ Providers cannot become grantees outside of this process, although existing grantees can subcontract with other providers to offer Pre-K Counts services at any time.



TOTAL SCORE

5/50

Pennsylvania's climate for charter schools to offer pre-K is **not hospitable**

- There are state statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K.
- Compared to K–12 funding levels, low pre-K program funding makes offering pre-K less attractive to charters.
- The size of the pre-K program limits charter access to funding.
- The funding, application, or approval process creates a barrier to charter access.
- + Automatic enrollment from charter pre-K to kindergarten is not prohibited in legislation or practice.



Pre-K Counts funding is awarded to the applicants that receive the highest scores on PDE's application rubric. Existing providers in good standing receive additional points in the rubric. Despite this advantage, new providers sometimes compete successfully for funding over existing providers.

Barriers

Are there any statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K?

Yes. Pennsylvania's charter school legislation neither permits nor prevents charter schools from offering pre-K. The Pre-K Counts legislation does not list charters as an eligible provider type; thus, the state has determined that charter schools cannot apply for Pre-K Counts funding. The entity operating a charter school may obtain Pre-K Counts funding as another type of eligible provider, such as a federal Head Start provider, licensed child care provider, or licensed nursery school. To do so, the charter school must create an affiliated pre-K program that meets additional facility and programmatic requirements applicable to licensed child care providers or licensed nursery schools.

Very few charter schools in Pennsylvania offer pre-K, and those that do so obtain funding through one-off arrangements with their authorizing district, not through formal funding mechanisms in state law or policy.

Is the funding level of the state pre-K program a barrier to charter access?

Yes. Low pre-K program funding, compared to K-12 funding levels, makes pre-K less attractive to charters. Charter schools that offer half-day Pre-K Counts services through an affiliated program receive 31 percent of the per-pupil funding amount that charters receive to serve full-day K-12 students. Charter schools that operate full-day affiliated programs receive 63 percent of the per-pupil amount for K-12 students.

Is the size of the state pre-K program a barrier to charter access?

Yes. The size of the program is a barrier to charters accessing state pre-K funds. The program only serves 5 percent of all four-year-olds in the state.

Is the application, approval, and/or funding process a barrier to charter access?

Yes. The funding process is a barrier to charter access. The Pre-K Counts grant process awards additional points to current grantees, which may put new providers at a disadvantage in applying for funding.

Is automatic enrollment from pre-K to kindergarten prohibited in legislation or practice?

No. State legislation does not explicitly allow charters to grant enrollment preference to their pre-K students, but it is permitted in certain charter schools that have arrangements with their districts.

Are there any other barriers to charter access?

Yes. Some Pennsylvania charter schools are also unable to access per-pupil funds for kindergarten. Pennsylvania does not require school districts to fund kindergarten, and charter schools located in districts that do not offer kindergarten are not entitled to per-pupil funds for kindergarteners.

Recommendations

Few Pennsylvania charter schools will be able to access pre-K funding as long as Pre-K Counts remains funded at the current levels. Pennsylvania could, however, take the following steps to allow Pennsylvania charter schools to access Pre-K Counts funds on an equitable basis with other providers in the state:

- Revise the Pre-K Counts legislation to include charter schools as an eligible provider.
- Release guidance allowing charter schools to compete for Pre-K Counts funding.
- Enact explicit policies to permit charter schools that receive public funding for pre-K to grant an enrollment preference to pre-K students served with public funds.



	Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts	Charter schools in Pennsylvania
Year Created	Launched in 2007	Charter law enacted in 1997
Children in state	299,884 three- and four-year-olds in Pennsylvania ⁷	2,346,444 school-age children in Pennsylvania ⁸
Children served	11,391 children served 3 percent of three-year-olds 5 percent of four-year-olds	130,842 students enrolled in charters 5.6 percent of school-age population 176 charters
Charter schools	Five charter schools in Pennsylvania offer pre-K or four-year-old kindergarten. ⁹ No charter schools offer Pre-K Counts.	111 charter schools in Pennsylvania offer elementary programs. ¹⁰
Funding	Pre-K Counts grantees receive \$7,260–\$7,860 (full day) or \$3,630–\$3,910 (half day). ¹¹	Charter schools receive \$12,495 per pupil to serve K–12. ¹²

Endnotes

1 Pennsylvania Department of Education, “Pre-K Counts,” 2015, http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pre_k_counts/8742.

2 Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality, “Early Childhood Programs,” April 13, 2015, http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Programs_PreK_Apply.

3 An affiliated pre-K program is one that a charter school operates through a separate, but affiliated, entity or organization.

4 “National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), “Measuring Up: Pennsylvania,” <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/PA/>.

5 Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality, “Early Childhood Programs.”

6 “Pre-K Counts Application Guidance,” 9; provided by representative of Office of Child Development and Early Learning in December 2014.

7 State population data calculated using ACS 2012 five-year estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey,” www.census.gov/acs.

8 Ibid., all children in households, three to seventeen years old.

9 Pennsylvania Department of Education, “Charter School Annual Reports and Enrollment Data,” http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/annual_reports_and_enrollment_data/7357.

10 Center for Education Reform, “Find a Charter School,” https://www.edreform.com/in-the-states/know-your-choices/find-a-charter-school/?filter%5Bname%5D=&filter%5Bcity%5D=&filter%5Bstate%5D=PA&filter%5Bgrade%5D=&filter%5Bgrades_categories%5D=&filter%5Bspecialty%5D=.

11 “Pre-K Counts Application Guidance,” 7. No charter schools receive this funding. Charter schools that offer pre-K and K–4 use different funding sources.

12 Jay F. May et al., “Charter School Funding: Inequality Expands,” Pennsylvania section (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, School Choice Demonstration Project, April 2014), <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/charter-funding-inequity-expands-pa.pdf>.