

Tennessee

Background

Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (VPK)

Tennessee has provided state funds for pre-K programs since the 1990s, but the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) program has been the primary funding source for pre-K since 2005. Tennessee's VPK program offers full-day pre-K to three- and four-year-olds. Districts that receive pre-K funds must enroll students based on order of priority:

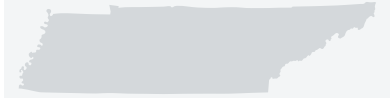
- Tier 1: Economically disadvantaged students.
- Tier 2: Students with disabilities, who are in state custody, who experienced abuse or neglect, or who are English language learners.
- Tier 3: All other students.

Tier 3 students may only enroll if there are remaining slots after all Tier 1 and Tier 2 students are served.¹ Currently, only about 30 percent of Tier 1 students are served, though this ranges dramatically by district and region.²

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) distributes VPK funding to counties on a formula basis. Districts that receive funding may contract with private child care agencies, Head Start agencies, institutions of higher education, or public housing authorities to provide services. Districts may also contract with any other community-based or private providers that have lead teachers licensed in early childhood education and that receive three-star ratings on Tennessee's Star Quality program.³ Charter schools can offer VPK if they contract with a district that receives funding.

Charter schools in Tennessee

Tennessee charter law allows start-up and conversion charter schools. Local school boards, Tennessee's Achievement School District (ASD), and the state board of education may serve as authorizers in Tennessee. Currently, only three local school districts—Hamilton County, Shelby County, and Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools—authorize charter schools. The Achievement School District authorizes charter schools statewide in areas with chronically low-performing schools.⁴



TOTAL SCORE

33/50

Tennessee's climate for charter schools to offer pre-K is **somewhat hospitable**

- + There are no 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 does not limit 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.



Process for Accessing Pre-K Funds

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) allocated VPK funding to districts through a competitive grant application process in school years 2006–2008, when new funds were available. Funding was awarded based on need and distributed across regions of the state. Since there has been no new funding since the 2007–2008 school year, classroom allocations per districts have remained unchanged since that time. Charter schools can only receive pre-K funding if their authorizer decides to allocate funding to them.

The TDOE awards VPK funding on a per-classroom, rather than per-pupil, basis. All participating school districts receive between \$75,000 and \$110,000 per classroom, depending on the district's education funding formula.

Barriers

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

+ **No.** Tennessee charter school legislation does not explicitly permit charter schools to offer pre-K, and the VPK legislation does not explicitly list charter schools as potential subcontractors. The TDOE does, however, allow school districts to subcontract with charter schools to offer VPK.

Currently, the ASD is the only Tennessee school district in which charter schools offer pre-K. Nine ASD charter schools currently offer pre-K, though all of them subcontract with Porter-Leath, a community provider, to do so. The ASD received funding for some VPK classrooms directly from the state and received funding for additional classrooms when it assumed control of low-performing schools that had previously received VPK funds from the Shelby County School District.

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. Although VPK is a full school-day program, charter schools that offer VPK receive between 30 percent and 50 percent of the per-pupil funding amount that they receive to serve K–12 students.

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

+ **No.** The size of the program is not a barrier to charters accessing state pre-K funds. The program serves more than 20 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. Charter schools can only access VPK funding through the school district in which they are located, or through the ASD if it is their authorizer. This has proven a barrier to charter schools offering pre-K, because districts other than ASD have chosen not to make pre-K funding available to charter schools.

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

+ **No.** According to the state charter school legislation, charter schools can grant enrollment preference to children from other charter schools with whom the charter school has an articulation agreement or to children from a pre-K program operated by the charter school sponsor.

Recommendations

To address this barrier, Tennessee should:

- Require districts that receive VPK funding and authorize charter schools to include charter schools on an equitable basis when allocating pre-K slots to schools and community-based providers in the district.
- Require districts to consider new charter petitions that include pre-K.
- Revise the charter school legislation to explicitly permit charter schools to offer pre-K.



	Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (VPK)	Charter schools in Tennessee
Year created	Launched in 2005 ⁵	Charter law enacted in 2002 ⁶
Children in state	165,835 three- and four-year-olds ⁷	1,249,826 school-age children ⁸
Children served	18,621 children served 1 percent of three-year-olds 21 percent of four-year-olds ⁹	15,533 students served 1.2 percent of school-age children 71 charter schools ¹⁰
Charter offerings in state	At least nine charter schools offer pre-K through VPK.	Twenty-six charter schools offer elementary programs.
Funding	VPK providers receive between \$75,000 and \$110,000 per class of twenty students (between \$3,750 and \$5,500 per pupil).	Charter schools receive \$10,635 per pupil to serve K–12 students. ¹¹

Endnotes

1 Tennessee Department of Education, “Pre-K Information for Parents,” June 6, 2014, http://www.tn.gov/education/early_learning/pre-k_parents.shtml.

2 Interview with charter school operator.

3 Tennessee Department of Human Services, “Child Care – Report Card and Star Quality Program,” <http://www.tennessee.gov/humanserv/adfam/ccrcsq.html>.

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

5 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013: State Preschool Yearbook” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2013.pdf>.

6 NAPCS, “Measuring Up: Tennessee.”

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 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013.”

10 NAPCS, “Measuring Up: Tennessee.”

11 Larry Maloney et al., “Charter School Funding: Inequality Expands,” Tennessee 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-inequality-expands-tn.pdf>