

Texas Pre-K Enrollment Exceeds U.S. Rate

By Stephanie Gullo

Texas since 1985 has required public school districts to offer half-day prekindergarten to 4-year-olds who meet certain criteria—and schools may extend enrollment to 3-year-olds. Children are eligible if they qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, available to those from homes with household incomes that are at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Other students gain entrance because they are not proficient in English.

During the 2016–17 school year, 49.4 percent of Texas 4-year-olds were enrolled in state-backed pre-K programs, compared with 32.7 percent nationally (*Chart 1*). A total of 8.5 percent of Texas 4-year-olds participated in the federal pre-K program, Head Start, versus 8.9 percent for the U.S.

Texas' high enrollment rates reflect its disproportionate number of children of immigrants whose first language is not English. About 40 percent of Texas pre-K students are English learners.

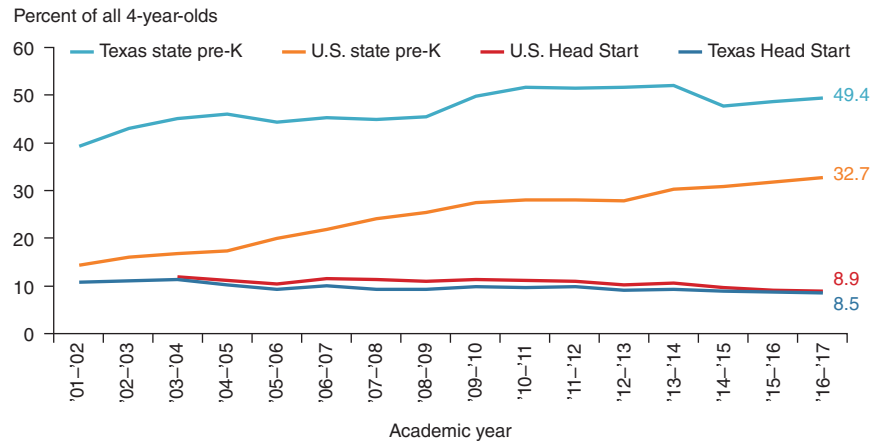
Getting Up to Speed

Pre-K is important because in the years before children start kindergarten, skill discrepancies emerge that can have lifelong consequences. At age 5, less than half of children from low-income households are prepared to start school, compared with three-quarters of children from high-income households.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds start kindergarten with significantly fewer skills in math and reading. They may have difficulty with self-control, leading to behavioral problems. The preparedness gap is troubling because studies have shown that skills at kindergarten entry are a strong predictor of academic achievement and adult earnings.

Local, state and federal governments as well as private entities fund and operate pre-K programs. Texas state government spending was \$3,846 per child

CHART 1 Texas State Pre-K Enrollment Outpaces Nation



NOTE: Four-year-olds enrolled in both Head Start and state pre-K are included in both categories (an estimated 1.2 percent of all 4-year-olds in the U.S. are in both programs).

SOURCE: National Institute for Early Education Research.

enrolled in pre-K in 2017–18, down slightly from the prior year and well below the more than \$5,000 average state spending per enrollee across the country. Texas reduced pre-K funding 11.6 percent, to \$803.5 million, in 2018. The drop was largely due to elimination of the High Quality Prekindergarten Grant, which awarded funds to school districts to improve pre-K programs.

Supporters say early childhood education programs such as pre-K can mitigate inequities by providing aid to disadvantaged children. Long-term studies of high-quality early learning programs for disadvantaged children have found that the benefits of participation include higher fifth-grade test scores, increased IQs as adults and a greater likelihood of high school graduation.

Other benefits are lifelong, such as improved adult health, decreased body mass index readings and lower rates of depression and substance abuse that all may help lead to increased earnings and lower rates of incarceration.¹ Low- and middle-income parents who cannot afford child care benefit as well, recording higher employment rates.

Widespread Availability

Many school districts across Texas offer expanded pre-K. While the state funds only half-day programs, 72 percent of districts offer full-day programs for at least some students—54 percent of students are in full-day programs.

Virtually all pre-K students in Dallas, Fort Worth and San Antonio are in full-day programs, while more than 80 percent of Austin and Houston students are in them.² Additionally, some districts offer pre-K to students who do not meet state eligibility requirements. Austin and Houston enroll hundreds of students outside the state's criteria but charge tuition, while Fort Worth offers its program free to all children, regardless of family income.

Notes

¹ For more information, see "The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects," Brookings Institution, 2017, www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf.

² "Texas Public Education Resource Report," Texas Education Agency, 2016–17, www.texaseducationinfo.org/Home/Topic/Prekindergarten%20Programs?br=PK-12.