

Alabama First Class Pre-K¹

Background

Administered by the Office of School Readiness in the Department of Early Childhood Education, Alabama's pre-K program provides preschool funding for four-year-olds through a mixed delivery system. In the 2016-17 school year, about 25 percent of Alabama's four-year-olds were enrolled in pre-K classrooms.²

How is the pre-K program financed?

Alabama's pre-K program is funded by the state Education Trust Fund and a federal Preschool Development Grant. Public and private schools, Head Start programs, child care centers, and other organizations are eligible to apply for funds via a supplemental grant program.³

What is the current status of state efforts toward compensation improvement for pre-K teachers?

Salary: An explicit salary parity policy was introduced in Alabama during the 2015-2016 school year.⁴ The policy originally addressed starting salary across settings, and more recently, ongoing increases in salary over time have been introduced. Pre-K teachers receive raises on a different schedule than K-12 teachers (annual rather than every three years). The levels are set so that parity is met at a 10-year benchmark (thus, a pre-K teacher would earn the same salary at the end of 10 years as she would if she were working in K-12). In addition, supplemental funds for pre-K teachers with master's degrees were introduced and are being fully implemented during the 2017-2018 school year.

Benefits: Alabama's policy does not specify parity in benefits. Funds are included for pre-K teacher benefits, but what is provided depends on the individual grantee.

Payment for Professional Responsibilities: All teachers are required to have an hour of daily planning time and are paid for seven days of non-contact time per year. This schedule is equivalent to that of the K-12 system.

What was the rationale for taking forward the issue of pay parity?

In recognition that teacher efficacy is the key to quality, explicit attention to teacher pay has been part of Alabama's pre-K program from its inception in 2000-2001. Pay scales have been specified in classroom grant agreements, and there has been funding for incremental increases in pre-K teacher salaries since 2007. The recent push beyond compensation improvement toward compensation parity was driven by a desire to retain trained pre-K teachers in the face of an immediate concern that pay disparities between community-based centers and school settings was driving turnover and instability in community-based settings.

1 All information in this profile comes from interview data, unless otherwise specified. Personal communication with Jeana Ross, Jan Hume, Tracye Strichik, Trellis Smith, and Laura Baker, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, December 2016 (Follow-up: August 2017).

2 Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. (2017). *First Class Pre-K Growth*. Montgomery, AL: Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Retrieved from <http://children.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/07/First-Class-Pre-K-Growth.pdf>.

3 Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. (2017).

4 Barnett, W.S., Weisenfeld, G.G., Brown, K., Squires, J., & Horowitz, M. (2016). *Implementing 15 Essential Elements for High Quality: A State and Local Policy Scan*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research

What was the approach/strategy for moving toward parity?

Alabama administrators have taken an incremental approach toward moving pre-K teacher compensation to be more in line with that of K-12 teachers, beginning with starting salary. Initial budget calculations were performed to determine the cost of raising starting salaries for all pre-K teachers across settings to be in line with starting kindergarten teacher salaries. State administrators submitted a request to the legislature for an increase in the budget and were successful in getting not only an increase for the original estimate, but also an additional increase, since the legislature approved a pay raise for K-12 teachers during the same session.

The plan did not originally include a means to provide pre-K teachers with raises over time, but later, calculations were made to provide funds for step-raise increases similar, but not equivalent to, the process for K-12 teachers.⁵

What has been helpful in moving these efforts along?

Wider support for the pre-K program has been crucial in building toward better compensation for pre-K teachers in Alabama. For example, in 2011, the Alabama School Readiness Alliance formed a statewide Pre-K Task Force representing a wide array of stakeholders, including several members of the business community. By 2015, the taskforce had outlined a vision for increased investment in pre-K over a 10-year period, with an emphasis on providing high-quality services.⁶ The focus on quality has been supported by the use of evidence, particularly child-level data evaluating academic outcomes⁷ as well as high ratings in NIEER's pre-K quality benchmark assessments.⁸

What positive outcomes have been seen as a result of the push toward parity?

State administrators expect these salary increases to have several benefits, including the retention and motivation of good teachers, increased professionalism of pre-K, and more high-quality teachers attracted to early childhood jobs. An unexpected benefit that has already been observed is an increased interest on the part of kindergarten teachers in working in pre-kindergarten classrooms. The intention is also to monitor the effects of reform over time in terms of teacher turnover and child outcomes.

What has been challenging about these efforts?

Technical implementation — budgeting, database building — has been a difficult process, according to state administrators. They also note that there has been opposition from within the early childhood field: community-based providers that have pre-K classrooms in the same building as Head Start or child care classrooms raise concerns about disparities not just between pre-K and K-3 teachers, but between pre-K and other early educators.

5 The public school model calls for bumps at three-year intervals, which grow successively smaller. The pre-K model is designed with annual increments to be equivalent over a 10-year period so that at the end of 10 years, a pre-K teacher would make what she would have made had she been in the public school.

6 Alabama School Readiness Alliance Pre-K Task Force. (2015). *Recommendations for the Expansion of First Class Pre-K in Alabama*. Montgomery, AL: Alabama School Readiness Alliance. Retrieved from http://www.alabamaschoolreadiness.org/uploadedFiles/File/ASRA_Legislative_FullRecs2015_WebREV3.pdf.

7 See, for example, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. (2016). *School Readiness and Growth among Students in First Class Pre-K. First Class Pre-K Issue Brief No. 3*. Montgomery, AL: Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Retrieved from http://children.alabama.gov/uploadedFiles/File/First_Class_PreK_Gold_Performance.pdf.

8 Barnett, W.S., Friedman-Krauss, A.H., Weisenfeld, G.G., Horowitz, M., Kasmin, R., & Squires, J.H. (2017). *The State of Preschool 2016: State Preschool Yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.