

West Virginia Universal Pre-K¹

Background

Local school boards have been allowed to fund preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds in West Virginia since 1983, but in 2002, legislation was passed which required universal access to pre-K for all four-year-olds by 2012.² Targeted access for some three-year-olds is also available, and as of 2015-16, 66 percent of four-year-olds and 11 percent of three-year-olds in the state were enrolled in public pre-K.

How is the pre-K program financed?

Funding for West Virginia Universal Pre-K is part of the State School Aid Funding Formula, which means that as enrollment increases, funding to implement pre-K programs also increases.³ Public schools receive pre-K funding to deliver services directly or partner with Head Start and other early care and education centers. There are requirements in place to ensure mixed delivery, and in 2016, 81 percent of classrooms were provided in collaboration with community partner organizations,⁴ up from 75 percent in 2014-15.⁵ Head Start programs form the majority of the community partnerships.

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

Salary: There is no state-level policy requirement, but school districts require salary parity for pre-K teachers in public school settings.⁶ State guidelines recommend that county decision-makers support community-based programs to increase compensation, with appropriate funding;⁷ however, local school districts, in collaboration with community partners, are ultimately responsible for establishing salary agreements.

Benefits and Payment for Professional Responsibilities: As with salaries, decisions about benefits and payment for professional responsibilities ultimately reside with local school districts, in collaboration with community partners. However, private settings are less likely to be able to afford benefit packages similar to those in public schools. There has been a push by the state to work with localities on establishing equivalent working hours for pre-K teachers across settings, including paid planning time.

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

There is a recognition on the part of local decision-making committees that teachers make the most important contribution to a high-quality pre-K service.

¹ All information in this profile comes from interview data, unless otherwise specified. Personal communication with W. Clayton Burch, West Virginia Department of Education, April 2017 (Follow-up: August 2017).

² Office of Early Learning. (2015). *West Virginia's Journey: An Ongoing Commitment to High-Quality Early Learning Opportunities for All Children — History, Studies, Current Projects, and Looking Forward*. Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Early Learning. Retrieved from <https://wvde.state.wv.us/oel/static/docs/west-virginia-ec-history-2015.pdf>.

³ Office of Early Learning. (2016). *Early Learning Annual Report*. Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Early Learning. Retrieved from <http://static.k12.wv.us/oel/docs/spotlight/2016-early-learning-annual-report.pdf>.

⁴ Office of Early Learning. (2016).

⁵ Office of Early Learning. (2015).

⁶ National Institute for Early Education Research. (2016). *Appendix A: State Survey Data 2014-2015*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Retrieved from http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2015_YB_Appendix_A.pdf.

⁷ See, for example, Office of School Readiness. (2012). *West Virginia Universal Pre-K Partnerships — Collaborating with Community Programs: Funding, Contracts and Budgets*. Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education and Department of Health & Human Resources. Retrieved from https://wvde.state.wv.us/oel/docs/WV_Pre-K_Partnerships_Collaborating_with_Community_Partnerships_2012.pdf.

What was the approach/strategy for moving toward parity?

West Virginia has taken an incremental approach to the issue of pay parity, starting with moving toward equivalent working hours (same work day and week, including time for planning, using the public school district as the standard), then moving to improve teacher education levels and, more recently, salaries. The state strategy has been to provide model information to localities and to work with them to move forward on the issue. This type of strategy — where the state's role is largely to provide guidance — is, in part, due to a strong emphasis on localism within the public education system, but also to a collaborative decision-making structure in the pre-K program, whereby a representative from child care, Head Start, and a school district in each county must each sign off on collaborative agreements.

State representatives are currently in conversation with the local school districts about tackling pay disparities. To help advance pay as part of teacher quality, the state agency is starting by providing a model of what should be occurring at the local level with the budgeting for pre-K.⁸ They have developed and circulated an Excel template for the counties to use that shows the categories to fund and support high-quality pre-K. However, this model does not suggest target salary levels.

Some school districts are moving toward pay parity by increasing funding for private settings to increase their pre-K teachers' salaries, while others are directly placing district employees in the private settings to teach in their pre-K classrooms. Note that these actions are in at least some instances at the behest of the private center.

What has been helpful in moving these efforts along?

An effort to increase pre-K teacher qualifications, including the development of a new certificate for early childhood, has been helpful for demonstrating that pre-K teachers, regardless of setting, are certified. The state representatives implied that this push for higher qualifications was part of the reason that there has been more movement on pay parity in recent years.

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

The focus on pay parity in West Virginia is relatively new, but an emphasis on quality assessment has been a key component of the pre-K system⁹ and has the potential to allow for a greater understanding of the link between higher compensation levels and program quality over time.

What has been challenging about these efforts?

Similar to other states, representatives for West Virginia noted that a key challenge is that community-based organizations are resistant to raising pay for some of their teachers but not others.

⁸ West Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). *Universal Pre-K: County Collaborative Team Resources*. Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://wvde.state.wv.us/oel/county-resources.php>.

⁹ See West Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.)