

Prekindergarten and Early Childhood Categorical Fund

Update Pre-K Implementation & Expansion Guidelines

H-8163 (McNamara) & S-3147 (Gallo)

Update Early Childhood Categorical Fund

H-7680 (Donovan) & S-3077 (Gallo)



Right from the
Start

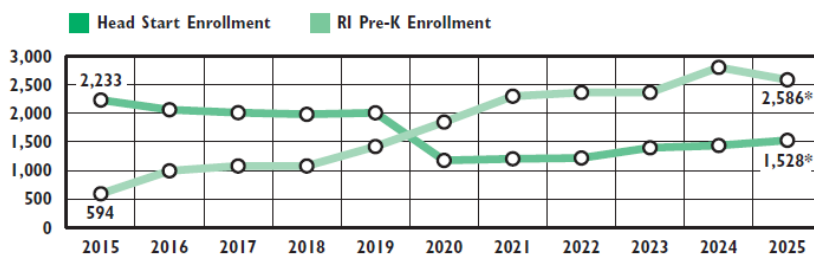
Decades of research have shown that high-quality preschool programs for children ages three and four help children gain academic and social-emotional skills prior to school entry and can produce positive outcomes that last well into the school years, including reduced need for special education services and improved high school graduation rates. **In Rhode Island, there are two overlapping and connected program models delivering free, high-quality early education to eligible preschoolers – Head Start (which is primarily federally funded) and RI Pre-K (which is primarily state funded).**

Launched in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, **Head Start provides high-quality early education, health, and nutrition services for preschool children ages three and four from low-income families.** Head Start has high-quality national performance standards and works to improve the well-being of the entire family. Rhode Island is one of at least 15 states that invests resources in Head Start so programs can serve more children, offer more competitive teacher salaries, and help programs meet their federally required 20% funding match.

In 2009, Rhode Island launched a state-funded and managed high-quality, free preschool program now known as RI Pre-K. The program meets all 10 national quality standards and is operated through a diverse delivery system with 36% of classrooms operated by Head Start agencies, 40% by child care centers, and 24% by public schools. Children are selected to participate via a state-managed lottery that prioritizes children from low-income families but also includes higher income families to have mixed income classrooms matching local community demographics.

As of the 2025-2026 school year, approximately 26% of low-income children and 17% of all children ages three and four were enrolled in either Head Start or RI Pre-K (or both through braided funding). As RI Pre-K has expanded, Head Start access has fallen. Due to differences in funding and model requirements, RI Pre-K generally offers better teacher wages than Head Start, and both programs struggle to compete with public schools to attract and retain qualified staff.

Head Start and RI Pre-K Enrollment, 2015-2025



Sources: Head Start program reports to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2015–2025. RI Pre-K enrollment, Rhode Island Department of Education, 2015–2025. *Starting in 2019, RI Pre-K and Head Start began braiding funding to enable eligible children to be dually enrolled in both RI Pre-K and Head Start. The number of children enrolled in both programs was 140 in 2019, 176 in 2020, 253 in 2021, 294 in 2022, 285 in 2023, 353 in 2024 and 358 in 2025.

Rhode Island Prekindergarten Education Act Update (McNamara/Gallo)

- Establishes guidelines for implementation and expansion of voluntary publicly funded prekindergarten for children ages three and four.
- Recognizes the federally-funded Head Start model as a critical part of the state's public prekindergarten system
- Sets a goal to expand prekindergarten access as funds are available through both the state-managed RI Pre-K model and the federally managed Head Start model so that at least 70% of all three- and four-year-olds could enroll in either program.
- Requires that RI Pre-K continue to meet high-quality, research-based standards and be delivered through a mixed delivery system including Head Start, child care, and public schools.

Early Childhood Categorical Fund Update (Donovan/Gallo)

- Updates the Early Childhood Categorical Fund in the school funding formula law to clarify that funds can be used to support both the state-managed RI Pre-K program and the federally managed Head Start program.
- Requires the Rhode Island Department of Education work with the Rhode Island Department of Human Services child care office and Head Start collaboration office to allocate funds to provide voluntary, free, high-quality prekindergarten to children ages three and four – to support sustainability and expansion of both the RI Pre-K and the Head Start program models.

