

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Signs Legislation to Expand Access to Early Childhood Education

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Legislation Puts New Jersey on Track to Universal Preschool and Full-Day Kindergarten

PLAINFIELD – Governor Phil Murphy today signed three bills to bolster early childhood education in New Jersey, building on a multi-year, administration-wide effort to expand access to free, high-quality preschool and full-day kindergarten programs. Together, these bills will help ensure children in New Jersey can enjoy a strong foundation upon which to build their educational careers.

Since the beginning of his Administration, Governor Murphy has made it a priority to set New Jersey firmly on course to universal, free preschool in all school districts. Over the past seven years, funding for public preschool has increased by nearly \$600 million, with New Jersey currently spending \$1.2 billion to stand up and sustain programs in communities across the state. Since year one of the Administration, 229 districts have been added to State-funded preschool programs; meaning now, over half of New Jersey's elementary-serving school districts offer free, high-quality preschool, whether through strong mixed-delivery partnerships with childcare providers or in elementary schools.

"With today's bill signing, we are moving forward in making free, universal preschool and free, full-day kindergarten a reality in every corner of our state. We know that access to high-quality early education programs is critical for our children and that it can set the tone for the rest of their academic careers. It is in these settings that our children begin to foster literacy skills and engage in social and emotional development, both of which can positively impact their lives," **said Governor Murphy**. "Expanding access to high-quality early childhood education has been the cornerstone of my Administration's approach to setting our children on a path to lifelong success. We have already seen remarkable success in bringing State-funded preschool to hundreds of New Jersey communities, and today's action will ensure this trajectory continues so that New Jersey remains the best place in the nation to raise a family."

"Today's bill signing cements New Jersey's national leadership in providing exceptional preschool education," **said Department of Education Commissioner Kevin Dehmer**. "By prioritizing access for low-income students, fostering collaboration with community partners, and ensuring all students have access to full-day kindergarten, these bills codify the Administration's longstanding efforts to expand preschool access and strengthen our state's commitment to early childhood education. This step marks an important milestone in

advancing New Jersey's dedication to families and the long-term success of our youngest learners."

"Quality childcare is a critical tool for working families," said **Department of Children and Families Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer**. "These new laws prioritize the interests of children and their families by securing the state's vital child care provider network, while expanding access and options for pre-K services now, and into the future."

"Every child deserves a strong start, and these bills reflect New Jersey's commitment to making high-quality early education more accessible, transparent, and equitable. By centralizing information on preschool opportunities, we are strengthening the foundation of the early childhood system. A robust mixed-delivery system that includes public schools, child care centers, and community-based providers is essential to meeting the diverse needs of families," said **Department of Human Services Commissioner Sarah Adelman**. "Human Services is ready to play a role in building a more coordinated, inclusive early childhood system that works for families, providers, and communities across the state."

The first bill – [S3910/A5717 \(https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2024/S4000/3910_R1.PDF\)](https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2024/S4000/3910_R1.PDF) – codifies New Jersey's preschool funding formula into statute. It also modifies various statutes governing early childhood education to help build and sustain universal access to high-quality, State-funded preschool programs.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Requiring the DOE to provide annual preschool expansion grants;
- Codifying and revising the requirements for preschool education aid;
- Establishing a three-year Preschool Cost-Sharing Pilot Program;
- Establishing a Universal Preschool Implementation Steering Committee, which will be composed of representatives of various State agencies and the New Jersey Legislature;
- Requiring the DOE, the Department of Children and Families (DCF), and the Department of Human Services (DHS) to maintain and annually update certain information regarding preschool and child care providers on their respective websites;
- Requiring the DOE, the DCF, and the DHS to annually submit a report to the Legislature on the status of preschool education in the state and the efficacy of the mixed-delivery method of preschool education; and
- Requiring State agencies to publish guidance on a variety of topics related to expanding access to high-quality preschool education in areas of greatest need.

The bill also sets the State firmly on course to provide free, full-day kindergarten for all New Jersey families by 2030 by requiring each elementary-serving school district in the state to establish a full-day kindergarten program no later than the beginning of the 2029-2030 school year. Attendance at the kindergarten program will be free. School districts not providing full-day kindergarten by the effective date of the bill may satisfy this requirement by entering into a send-receive relationship with an adjacent school district.

Sponsors of the legislation include Senators Teresa Ruiz and Shirley Turner, along with Assemblymembers Andrea Katz and Sterley Stanley.

"Every student in New Jersey deserves a fair start, and every family deserves the peace of mind that comes with knowing their child has access to quality care and early education," said **Assembly Speaker Craig J.**

Coughlin. “These bills move us closer to making universal preschool and full-day kindergarten a reality in every corner of our state. By giving districts the tools and flexibility they need to meet families where they are, we’re delivering the kind of early learning opportunities that will set our students up for success.”

“A child’s earliest years are when curiosity blooms and the foundation for lifelong learning is built. But today, with child care costs soaring to the level of college tuition, too many families are being forced to choose between their child’s potential and their household budget. Expanding access to affordable preschool and kindergarten isn’t just good policy — it’s a smart investment in our state’s future,” **said Majority Leader M. Teresa Ruiz.** “The ‘New Jersey Universal Preschool and Kindergarten Act’ is a major step forward, setting clear standards, increasing state support, and ensuring that more children have the chance to start strong. By prioritizing early learning, we’re giving working families the tools they need to thrive and unlocking the full potential of the next generation.”

“With the New Jersey Universal Preschool and Kindergarten Act now enacted, the State is taking a firm stand that access to early education is a right, not a privilege,” **said Senator Shirley Turner.** “This law is a powerful step toward equity, ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, starts school with the strong foundation they need to succeed. We are no longer waiting to close opportunity gaps. We are preventing them from the start. This is how we begin to build a fairer and stronger New Jersey.”

“Pre-K is one of the best things we can offer — it gives kids a head start on learning important skills and gives families access to quality, free child care,” **said Assemblywoman Andrea Katz.** “As a mom, I know how much this matters for families like mine. With this investment, New Jersey is reaffirming its commitment to giving every child the opportunity to reach their full potential.”

“New Jersey’s children deserve free, top-tier preschools that lay a strong academic foundation and set them up for future success, especially for economically disadvantaged children and multilingual learners,” **said Assemblyman Sterley Stanley.** “I am grateful for today’s bill signing because this legislation will give our children the advantage of early learning, stronger communication and social skills that will result in meaningful connections.”

The second bill – [S4476/A5780 \(https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2024/S4500/4476_11.PDF\)](https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2024/S4500/4476_11.PDF) – permits the awarding of contracts for certain preschool education services by resolution of a board of education and extends the maximum contract length for preschools to three years.

Sponsors of S4476/A5780 include Senators Teresa Ruiz and Vin Gopal, along with Assemblymembers Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Linda Carter, and Carmen Theresa Morales.

“Reducing red tape and extending contract terms for private preschool providers will empower more childcare centers to grow their operations and reach more families,” **said Senator Vin Gopal.** “These changes will strengthen our mixed-delivery early education system and help ensure more children across New Jersey have access to high-quality preschool.”

“Preschool education is one of the best investments we can make, but only if districts have the tools to deliver it,” **said Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee.** “This bill cuts unnecessary red tape and lets school boards work directly with trusted providers to reach more children,

more quickly. It's about equity, access, and making sure no child is left behind before they even start kindergarten."

"Through this legislation, we're making it easier for school districts to provide high-quality preschool options to families," **said Assemblywoman Linda Carter**. "By streamlining the contracting process and allowing longer agreements, we're helping schools meet the growing demand, reducing administrative delays, and supporting children in their earliest years."

"As an educator, I've seen firsthand how important stability and strong partnerships are in keeping classrooms fully staffed and running smoothly," **said Assemblywoman Carmen Theresa Morales**. "It's a commonsense change that not only supports long-term planning for school districts but also prioritizes better outcomes for our state's youngest minds."

The third bill – [A5908/S4695 \(https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2024/A6000/5908_I1.PDF\)](https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2024/A6000/5908_I1.PDF) – amends the Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations Act to revise various language provisions concerning Preschool Education Aid to align that language with legislation (S3910/A5717) that modifies the allocation of Preschool Education Aid.

Sponsors of A5908/S4695 include Assemblywoman Eliana Pintor Marin and Senator Teresa Ruiz.

"Expanding access to high-quality preschool is an important step toward equity for working families," **said Assemblywoman Eliana Pintor Marin**. "As childcare costs continue to rise, this bill helps make sure families across New Jersey can find affordable early education. It's about building a system that supports parents and prepares every child for success."

"Expanding access to high-quality early childhood education is one of the most powerful investments we can make in our children's future. I fully support the signing of Bills S3910/A5717 and S4476/A5780, which represent a historic step forward in ensuring that every child in New Jersey has access to the strong educational foundation they deserve," **said Silvia Pereira, AFT New Jersey's Executive Vice President for PreK-12**. "By codifying funding for pre-K, mandating full-day kindergarten, and streamlining the delivery of preschool services, this legislation affirms our collective commitment to equity, opportunity, and lifelong learning."

"The New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA) applauds the passage of a landmark legislative package that marks a pivotal moment for early childhood education in New Jersey. This is a strategic and comprehensive victory for our children, our families, and our communities," **said Dr. Richard Bozza, Executive Director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators**.

"Allowing school districts and community childcare providers to enter into three-year contracts provides much-needed stability for community providers," **said Winifred Smith-Jenkins, Director of Early Childhood Policy and Advocacy at Advocates for Children of New Jersey**. "ACNJ appreciates the support of Governor Murphy and the New Jersey Legislature in advancing this important step toward a stronger mixed-delivery preschool system."

"We believe that high-quality pre-school education is one of the best investments in long-term student success. The two bills being signed today bring us ever closer to realizing that goal," **said Elizabeth "Betsy" Ginsburg, Executive Director, Garden State Coalition of Schools**.

"The right to a free and appropriate public education in this country is among the greatest assets to the children of today and the adults of tomorrow. Our students' opportunities and ultimate success are much brighter when access to that education begins as early as possible," **said Karen A. Bingert, Executive Director, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.** "The New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association commends Senator Ruiz, Assemblywoman Katz, the many legislative co-sponsors of these bills, and Governor Murphy in signing them into law so that our youngest learners' rights to pre-K and kindergarten are forever protected, districts are supported, and partnerships in early childhood education are promoted in our state."

"Our association is thrilled to back this unprecedented legislation that demonstrates New Jersey's long-term commitment to expanding access to early child education. It's the right thing to do for the youngest children in New Jersey's public schools. Beyond their preschool and kindergarten years, this investment in programs and facilities will establish a firm foundation for ongoing success in school and careers. We also are aware that school districts will need solid financial support to continue providing high-quality early childhood programs and look forward to working with all stakeholders to give them the resources they will require," **said Dr. Timothy J. Purnell, NJSBA Executive Director and CEO.** "In particular, we would like to thank Governor Murphy, Majority Leader Ruiz, Assemblywoman Katz, Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson, Speaker Coughlin, Senate President Scutari and Commissioner Dehmer for their leadership and collaboration on this critical issue."

"Access to full-day kindergarten and diverse early education options are a game-changer for families — it lays a strong foundation for academic success, boosts social and emotional development, and gives every child a fair start. The evidence is clear: when we invest in our youngest learners, we invest in a brighter future for all New Jerseyans," **said Colleen Eskow, Chief Policy Officer, NJ Children's Foundation.**

"New Jersey continues to be a leader in public pre-k delivery through the passage of these essential bills. We thank the Governor and the Legislature for encouraging mixed delivery pre-k and prioritizing greater access for families across the state," **said Nazbi Chowdhury, Government Relations Representative for KinderCare Learning Companies.**

"S3910/A5717 and S4476/A5780 acknowledge the key role of community-based providers in the State's preschool program and will help facilitate mixed delivery partnerships that will expand preschool options for New Jersey families," **said Elsa Jacobsen, Director of State Government Relations for the Early Care & Education Consortium.** "We look forward to working with the Administration and the Legislature to continue to build on the progress that has been made to advance these partnerships in the weeks and months ahead."

"The New Jersey Association of School Business Officials (NJASBO) applauds the Governor for signing into law two critical pieces of legislation that will significantly enhance early childhood education in our state. The codification of preschool funding helps to ensure that our youngest learners have access to high quality early education services. Additionally, the legislation provides much-needed flexibility and stability for our preschool programs," **said Susan Young, Executive Director, New Jersey Association of School Business Officials.** "We believe that these measures will have a lasting positive impact on the educational outcomes of children across New Jersey."

"Investing in high-quality public preschool is good for New Jersey's children, families, and economy," **said Dr. W. Steven Barnett, Founder and Senior Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research.** "New

Jersey has one of the strongest preschool programs in the country, with strong evidence that it produces the results promised by decades of research on high-quality early education—improved education outcomes, increased productivity and career success, and better health. This legislation helps ensure that New Jersey's education system continues to be the best in the nation and our economy will reap the benefits."

"Learning Ally is proud to support S3910/A5717 and S4476/A5780. Expanding access to high-quality early education, ensuring equitable learning opportunities from an early age, and providing the consistency and foundation needed for long-term academic and personal success will empower students across the state. At Learning Ally, we are committed to supporting students in Pre-K and beyond through our human-read audiobooks that help students of all abilities build confidence, engage in learning, and achieve their full potential," **said Learning Ally in a statement.**

"JerseyCAN welcomes the passage of S3910/A5717 and S4476/A5780, regarding the long-term viability of pre-K, and Kindergarten. As we prepare for a new school year, we recall the sobering reality that in the past, our state's Kindergarten curriculum warranted significant improvement in order for students to receive the best evidence-based literacy instruction from day one. With new improvements in kindergarten literacy instruction set to be implemented in the 2025-2026 school year Kindergarten will be more impactful than ever before. By securing long-term funding for pre-K, mandating full-day kindergarten by 2030, and empowering school boards to expand preschool services, New Jersey is advancing JerseyCAN's central goal - access to a high quality education for every child," **said Paula White, Executive Director of JerseyCAN.**

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