

# North Carolina

## Background

### North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program (NC Pre-K)

The North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) program was initially launched in 2001 as the More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program. In July of 2011, the General Assembly transferred the program from the Department of Public Instruction to the Department of Human Resources and renamed it the NC Pre-Kindergarten Program, though it retained all the same program requirements. NC Pre-K is a full-day pre-K program for eligible four-year-olds. The program enrolls children based on two priority levels:

- Priority 1: Students from families with income levels at or below 75 percent of the state median income or whose parent is on active military duty or was injured or killed while on active duty.
- Priority 2: Students who do not meet the income requirement but who have limited English proficiency, a developmental need, or a chronic health condition.
- Providers may enroll up to 20 percent Priority 2 students in a program and are encouraged to serve children who have received no prior early education services.<sup>1</sup>

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services's Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) administers NC Pre-K as a competitive grant program.<sup>2</sup> Public schools, childcare centers, and Head Start centers can apply for NC Pre-K funding, while charter schools cannot. Charter schools can only access NC Pre-K funding if they offer an affiliated pre-K program.<sup>3</sup>

### Charter schools in North Carolina

North Carolina permits start-up and conversion charter schools. Prospective charter schools must be approved by both the North Carolina Charter School Advisory Board and the North Carolina State Board of Education.<sup>4</sup> The North Carolina Department of Education carries out authorizer responsibilities.

## Process for Accessing Pre-K Funds

In 2014, the legislature established a standard decision-making process to award pre-K classroom slots. Until school year 2014–15, all new and existing providers were required to apply for funding annually. Since the passage of the new legislation, providers that maintain compliance with program and fiscal standards may continue to be funded through multiyear



TOTAL SCORE

5/50

North Carolina's climate for charter schools to offer pre-K is **not hospitable**

- There are state statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K.
- Compared to K–12 funding levels, low pre-K program funding makes offering pre-K less attractive to charters.
- + The size of the pre-K program does not limit charter access to funding.
- The funding, application, or approval process creates a barrier to charter access.
- Automatic enrollment from charter pre-K to kindergarten is prohibited in legislation or practice.




contracts. Existing providers that have not met program compliance standards must reapply for funding annually. New providers may also apply annually.

NC Pre-K funding flows from the state to one of ninety-one intermediaries that serve as local contract administrators. These include local Smart Start agencies, local education agencies, and other nonprofit agencies. Each county is also required to create a local NC Pre-K advisory committee. The local advisory committee then appoints a subcommittee of early education stakeholders who are not program operators and who do not have a financial stake in which programs are awarded funding. Together, these two committees advertise the funding opportunity and select NC Pre-K sites.

Existing providers that have maintained compliance with program requirements and childcare rules are given preference.<sup>5</sup> To be considered for funding, providers must maintain a four- or five-star license through the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).<sup>6</sup>


## Barriers

### Are there any statutory or regulatory barriers to charter schools accessing state funding for pre-K?


 **Yes.** Neither the state charter school legislation nor the NC Pre-K legislation explicitly allow or prohibit charter schools to offer pre-K. Documents prepared by North Carolina Public Schools<sup>7</sup> and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction<sup>8</sup> assert that publicly funded charter schools may only offer grades K–12.

At least five charter schools in North Carolina offer affiliated pre-K programs.


### Is the funding level of the state pre-K program a barrier to charter access?

 **Yes.** Low pre-K program funding, compared to K–12 funding levels, makes pre-K less attractive to charters. Charter schools that operate affiliated NC Pre-K programs are required to offer a full-day program but receive only 61 percent of the per-pupil amount that charters receive to serve K–12 students.


### Is the size of the state pre-K program a barrier to charter access?

 **No.** The size of the program is not a barrier to charters accessing state pre-K funds. The program serves more than 21 percent of all four-year-olds in the state.

### Is the application, approval, and/or funding process a barrier to charter access?

 **Yes.** The approval process is a barrier to charter access. Existing providers are given funding preference, which limits opportunities for new providers, including charter schools that are interested in operating affiliated pre-K programs.

### Is automatic enrollment from pre-K to kindergarten prohibited in legislation or practice?

 **Yes.** Charter schools cannot directly enroll students participating in an affiliated pre-K program into their kindergarten program.<sup>9</sup>

## Recommendations

To address these barriers, the state should:

- Revise the charter school legislation to explicitly allow charter schools to serve pre-K students, while clarifying that this does not entitle charter schools to receive state K–12 funds for pre-K.
- Increase NC Pre-K funding to cover the cost of delivering a high-quality program.
- Release guidance that explicitly allows charter schools to apply for NC Pre-K funding.
- Allow charter schools that have an affiliation with a pre-K program receiving NC Pre-K Funds to give an enrollment preference to children enrolled in the affiliated NC Pre-K program, subject to the conditions articulated in federal charter school program guidance.<sup>10</sup>



	North Carolina Pre-K (NC Pre-K)	Charter schools in North Carolina
Year created	Created in 2001 <sup>11</sup>	Charter law enacted in 1996 <sup>12</sup>
Children in state	255,982 three- and four-year-olds in North Carolina <sup>13</sup>	1,898,754 school-age children in North Carolina <sup>14</sup>
Children served	26,617 children served 0 percent of three-year-olds 21 percent of four-year-olds <sup>15</sup>	58,933 students served 3.1 percent of school-age population 127 charter schools <sup>16</sup>
Charters offering pre-K	At least five charter schools in North Carolina offer pre-K through affiliated organizations; the state does not track data on the number of charter schools with affiliated pre-K programs. <sup>17</sup>	119 charter schools in North Carolina offer elementary school programs. <sup>18</sup>
Funding	Providers receive \$5,067 per pupil to offer NC Pre-K.	Charter schools receive \$8,277 per pupil to serve K–12 students. <sup>19</sup>

## Endnotes

1 “NC Pre-Kindergarten Program Requirements and Guidance,” [http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/pdf\\_forms/NCPre-K\\_Program\\_Requirements\\_Guidance\\_2014-2015.pdf](http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/pdf_forms/NCPre-K_Program_Requirements_Guidance_2014-2015.pdf).

2 “North Carolina,” National Institute for Early Education Research, [http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/North%20Carolina\\_2013.pdf](http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/North%20Carolina_2013.pdf).

3 An affiliated pre-K program is one that a charter school operates through a separate, but affiliated, entity or organization.

4 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), “Measuring Up: North Carolina,” <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/NC/>.

5 “NC Pre-K Site Application,” North Carolina Prekindergarten Program, February 14, 2015, [http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/word\\_forms/NCPre-K\\_Site\\_Application.doc](http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/word_forms/NCPre-K_Site_Application.doc).

6 “NC Pre-K Standardized Site Selection Process,” North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services: Division of Child Development and Early Education, February 2015, [http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/pdf\\_forms/NCPre-K\\_AdditionalFAQSiteSelectionProcess.pdf](http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/pdf_forms/NCPre-K_AdditionalFAQSiteSelectionProcess.pdf).

7 “Frequently Asked Questions for Charter School Parents,” Public Schools of North Carolina, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/charterschools/faq/faqparents.pdf>.

8 “Enrollment and Lottery Guidance,” Public Schools of North Carolina, January 14, 2014, <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/charterschools/faq/enrollment-lottery.pdf>.

9 “Frequently Asked Questions for Charter School Parents,” Public Schools of North Carolina, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/charterschools/faq/faqparents.pdf>.

10 Federal charter school program guidance allows charter schools to automatically admit certain categories of applicants: students who are enrolled at the school at the time of conversion; students who are living in the attendance area of a converted school at the time of conversion; siblings of students who are admitted to or attending the school; children of a school’s founders, teachers, or staff; and children of employees in a work-site charter school.

11 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013: State Preschool Yearbook” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2013.pdf>.

12 NAPCS, “Measuring Up: North Carolina.”

13 State population data calculated using ACS 2012 five-year estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey,” [www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs).

14 Ibid., all children in households, three to seventeen years old.

15 Interview with North Carolina Department of Public Instruction representative.

16 NAPCS, “Measuring Up: North Carolina.”

17 At least five offer pre-K, but they are private affiliates: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/charterschools/schools/>.

18 “Office of Charter Schools,” North Carolina State Board of Education, January 2015, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/charterschools/schools/>.

19 Megan Batdorff et al., “Charter School Funding: Inequality Expands,” Washington, D.C. section (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform, School Choice Demonstration Project, April 2014), <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/charter-funding-inequity-expands-dc.pdf>.