

COVID-Inspired Policy Adaptations in State Pre-K Programs

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October 2022

Introduction

State preschool enrollment substantially declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 298,000 fewer children served in 2020-21 than 2019-20. But even for the 1.3 million children who did attend state-funded preschool in 2020-21, in many states preschool program policies looked very different before and after the COVID-19 pandemic began. This data snapshot explores state preschool policy adaptations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as reported by states in the 2021 State of Preschool Yearbook.

Program Delivery

The 2020-21 school year ended in much the same way it began, with most programs serving children in a combination of remote, hybrid and in-person settings. By the start of the 2021-22 school year, most programs and children had returned to in-person learning. However, almost every state acknowledged that COVID-19 outbreaks caused periodic closures in 2021-22 and/or a temporary return to remote instruction, and that these decisions could only be made at the local level.

**2020-21
School Year**

- 46 of 64 programs ended the year with a mix of remote, hybrid and in-person learning.

**2021-22
School Year**

- 39 of 64 programs started the year with all classrooms physically open.

Ultimately, most states gave programs flexibility to make program delivery decisions based on local outbreaks. For example, in 2020-21, at least 15 programs had a provision in place permitting individual providers to reduce their number of programming days due to COVID-19 outbreaks, necessary professional development, or increased cleaning protocols, and 31 programs allowed modifications to the required operating schedule (e.g., number of hours per day).

Health and Developmental Screening and Referrals

In 2020-21, states granted flexibility for the timelines under which health (e.g., vision and hearing) and

developmental screenings must occur and, in many cases, allowed virtual or off-site screenings. However, by 2021-22, all but five state programs returned to pre-pandemic screening policies. Louisiana LA4, Louisiana NSECD, and New Mexico continued to permit flexible timelines for screening. New Mexico also continued to permit off-site or remote screening, as did Rhode Island. In Washington ECEAP, individuals contracted to conduct screenings could request to deviate from state policy in situations deemed unsafe due to COVID-19.

Preschool Child Assessments

By 2020-21, 28 programs that allowed COVID-related changes to preschool child assessment policies returned to pre-COVID protocols, but many still allowed flexibility due to the prevalence of virtual instruction. Specifically, 14 programs allowed virtual assessments, and at least seven allowed either fewer assessment check points or fewer assessment items. Illinois relaxed child assessment policies to require assessments only of children attending state preschool in person.

All but six programs returned to pre-COVID preschool child assessment policies for the 2020-21 school year. Those with remaining modifications were Alabama, California State Preschool Program, Georgia, Minnesota Head Start and VPK, and Virginia. Alabama continued to allow virtual assessments with fewer check points and encouraged teachers to work with families to collect documentation. The California State Preschool Program developed a shortened version of its required assessment, focusing solely on the measures teachers could collect virtually, if needed.

Lead Teacher Qualifications

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some states relaxed lead teacher qualifications requirements. Lead teacher degree and credential requirements were waived for lead preschool teachers in Georgia and for lead teachers in nonpublic providers in Washington, DC. Kansas extended the number of days that a substitute teacher could remain in a placement. Massachusetts modified the definition of long-term substitutes and continued to allow teachers to teach up to 50% of their time outside of their licensed area in the state's Chapter 70 program. Maine relaxed the PRAXIS requirements and issued emergency certification and reciprocal professional certification. In 2020-21, Nebraska relaxed its lead preschool teacher qualifications requirements for school districts unable to find properly certificated teachers. Prospective teachers were still required to have credits in early childhood education but were allowed up to four years to obtain an early childhood teaching certificate..

Hiring and Retaining Lead Teachers

States developed new bonuses, pay increases and other incentives to recruit and retain state preschool teaching staff. Arizona, California CSPP, Delaware, Massachusetts UPK, New Mexico, and Oregon Preschool Promise provided incentives to recruit preschool teachers during the 2020-21 school year. Arizona and Delaware provided supplemental payments to preschool providers and allowed the use of funding in recruitment efforts. Along with these programs, Georgia, Maryland, and North Carolina provided funding to help retain state preschool teachers. During the 2020-21 school year, lead and assistant teachers in Georgia preschool programs received a \$1,000 supplement, and nonpublic preschool providers in New Mexico received a \$200 per child increase, with a requirement to use 30% of awarded funds for staff bonuses or pay increases.



**LEAD AND ASSISTANT
TEACHERS IN GEORGIA
PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS
RECEIVED A \$1,000 PAY
SUPPLEMENT IN 2020-21.**


Professional Development

Minimum policies for professional development and coaching/mentoring remained largely unchanged across state preschool programs, but delivery methods continued to be impacted by the pandemic. At least 17 programs allowed for virtual adaptations to professional development and 12 specifically allowed virtual coaching/mentoring.

Combatting Learning Loss

Concerns about learning loss for preschoolers impacted by the pandemic led some states to take direct action. South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia altered eligibility requirements for preschool to grant an extra year of preschool eligibility to those eligible for kindergarten in 2021-22, and Kentucky allowed parents of any child in preschool-grade 12 to request an extra year at their current grade level.


Other states increased summer learning opportunities to address potential learning loss. Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Oregon, and South Carolina all established summer programs for incoming or continuing preschoolers. Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota Head Start, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Washington and West Virginia offered summer programs for incoming kindergarteners. Minnesota's Voluntary Pre-K program allowed individual program providers to apply to use federal funds to expand or enhance existing summer preschool programs.



11 STATES CREATED OR EXPANDED SUMMER PROGRAMS TO COMBAT PRESCHOOL LEARNING LOSS DURING THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19 Relief Funding

At least five federal COVID relief packages (ARP, CARES, CRRSA, ESSER, and GEERS) provided states with revenue to address education-related impacts of the pandemic, and states had latitude to use funding from these sources to support early childhood education. While states provided significant funding to school districts to alleviate from these sources, only 28 programs specifically earmarked COVID relief funding for state-funded preschool. Many other states acknowledged that state preschool programs were eligible for federal relief funding but left school districts or other local entities to decide whether to designate funding specifically for preschool programming.



FEWER THAN HALF OF STATE PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS SPECIFICALLY EARMARKED COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDING TO SUPPORT PRESCHOOL

Among the 28 programs that specifically reported using state and/or federal relief funding for state preschool, 20 were able report the amount spent for at least one funding source, which totaled about \$786 million (including \$750 in federal funding; \$32 million in state funding, and \$4 million in philanthropic funding). Only four programs reported an allocation of additional state funding for COVID-relief: California State Preschool provided an additional \$11.6 million, Maryland an additional \$20 million, and Kentucky just under \$100,000. Additional state funding was allocated for the Minnesota Head Start program, but the exact amount was not reported. Washington was the only state program to report an influx of philanthropic funding

(\$3.9 million), which was used to support summer programs. Since not all states could report dedicated funding amounts for some or all COVID-relief funding streams, these figures do not represent total relief funding dedicated to public preschool.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic led to changes in state-funded preschool program policies as it has in public K-12 education. States are continuing to adapt to an environment that may include COVID-19 for the foreseeable future and in which some changes may be retained even after COVID-related concerns recede. The extent to which COVID-inspired program changes persist and become the norm remains to be seen, as does their impact on program quality and outcomes for children.

Acknowledgments

Funding for data collection and the development, production, and dissemination of the Yearbook publication, was provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation. Additional support for the State of Preschool report is provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The author is solely responsible for this content.

About NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

Suggested Citation

Garver, K. (2022). COVID-Inspired Policy Adaptations in State Pre-K Programs [Data Snapshot]. National Institute for Early Education Research.