



LEGISLATIVE REPORT

PREKINDERGARTEN PUPIL WEIGHTS

Report to the Vermont General Assembly

December 21, 2023

Submitted by

**Heather A. Bouchey, Ph.D., Interim Secretary of Education
Vermont Agency of Education**

LEADERSHIP

SUPPORT

OVERSIGHT

Executive Summary

Pursuant to [Act 76 of 2023](#), this report addresses work done by the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) and the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC) to determine the costs associated with educating prekindergarten (PreK) students compared to their kindergarten peers for a full school day. The state weights students based on a range characteristics as part of calculating the per-student cost of education. The goal of this report was to propose an empirically derived weight for PreK children along with draft legislative language and an implementation plan.

Despite our best efforts, the AOE faced challenges in collecting detailed cost data for specific grade levels. The Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA) lacks detail for kindergarten, making it challenging to isolate PreK costs, and complicates an accurate assessment. In addition, the diversity of PreK program providers and funding models, coupled with the absence of standardized reporting methods, further make it difficult to fully understand PreK education costs.

To estimate cost projections, the AOE consulted with the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and reviewed the recent RAND Corporation report submitted to the General Assembly. NIEER estimated the cost of high-quality PreK education in Vermont at \$13,626 per student. This estimate considered factors such as staff salaries, facilities, and administrative expenses. The RAND Corporation's study highlighted the varying costs of care based on program settings.

To improve estimates, AOE suggests revisiting the Pupil Weighting Factors Report (2019) to include PreK children. Despite the identified challenges in deriving a certain weight value at present, the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC) members unanimously support an ADM weight for PreK students not less than 1.0. This decision aligns with the findings in the RAND report.

This report emphasizes the need for further exploration and standardization of data collection methods. The PEIC believes this would allow for a better understanding of what the true cost of PreK education is and would in turn help in making well-informed policy recommendations.

Legislation

This report is submitted pursuant to [Act 76 of 2023, Section 2 \(b\)](#) which tasks the Agency of Education (AOE) to work with the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC) to analyze whether the cost of educating a PreK student is the same as educating a kindergarten student in the context of a full school day.

Background

This report aligns with the ongoing work of the Prekindergarten Education Implementation Committee (PEIC). The group was created per [Act 76, Section 2](#) to assist the AOE in improving and expanding accessible, affordable and high-quality PreK education for children on a full-day basis on or before July 1, 2026.

The legislation directed the AOE to make recommendations regarding an “average daily membership” or ADM “weight” for a PreK child. Additionally, the AOE was to include draft legislative language to support the recommended PreK pupil weight and implementation plan.

Limiting Factors

The Agency of Education collects data from school districts as required by law and regulation. As such, AOE does not currently collect cost data at a level detailed enough to isolate the costs of educating kindergarten students or any other k-12 grade level. The Uniform Chart of Accounts (UCOA) collects data at the school level per federal requirements, but it does not collect data at the specific grade level. Instead, grade levels are grouped into the broader categories of elementary and secondary, grades K-6 and 7-12, respectively.

The UCOA does have a prekindergarten level, so costs identified as prekindergarten can be isolated. However, depending on the reporting entity, prekindergarten costs may be spread over a wide spectrum of cost centers other than direct instruction, such as administration, business office, legal services, debt service, etc. Whereas entities not reporting prekindergarten costs in a uniform methodology creates problems, reporting prekindergarten costs over various cost centers also makes it difficult to ascertain the actual cost of educating a prekindergarten student.

An additional complicating factor in determining the cost of educating a prekindergarten student is that prekindergarten programs may be provided at either an approved private provider or in a public-school setting, both at public cost to the resident school district. Some school districts choose to offer more prek hours than the mandated publicly funded 10 hours per week (typically within public-school-operated prekindergarten programs), but still pay only the statewide rate of 10 hours per week to private providers. This statewide Prekindergarten tuition rate for the 23/24 school year is \$3,764.00 to cover 10 hours per week, for 35 weeks during the academic year. This statewide rate would likely skew an overall prekindergarten cost when combined with

the public-school prekindergarten costs. Additionally, AOE does not currently collect information on how the school districts determine their prekindergarten costs for in-house programs.

Cost Projections

In October 2023, Janet McLaughlin, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Children and Families, along with Meg Porcella, Director, Student Support Services, consulted with Karin Garver and Lori Connors-Tadros from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), exploring ways to use alternative data sources to help determine the cost of a full-day PreK student.

NIEER provided an estimate in November 2023 that the cost of providing high-quality PreK education in Vermont is \$13,626 per student; this is for 6 hours/day and 180 days/year, at NIEER quality standards, and with all teaching staff with similar credentials to and paid on par with public school educators. This includes:

- Teaching Staff Salaries & Benefits: \$9,745
- Non-Teaching Staff Salaries & Benefits: \$864
- Staff Professional Learning & Support: \$25
- Child Assessments and Screening: \$378
- Child Transportation: \$279
- Facilities Costs: \$1,106
- Education Supplies and Equipment: \$377
- Office Supplies and Equipment: \$244
- State-Level Administration: \$608

This does not include costs for construction or fit-up (including dedicated playgrounds), special education, or school/district-level administration including resources to manage partnerships with community-based Universal Prekindergarten programs. This point is noteworthy given regulations and best practices for staff-child ratios might require creating additional classroom space. NIEER also suggested variables that will affect the cost of educating a PreK student such as quality of the program, the program setting, and geographic accessibility. Another resource considered was the Joint Fiscal Office's 2023 [Vermont Early Care and Education Financing Study](#) by the RAND Corporation, which estimated a per-child cost at similar quality standards to the NIEER estimate. According to the RAND Report, the annual per child full-time cost of year-round care by setting for four-year-olds in 2022 ranges from \$17,957 in a large center to \$22,622 in a small center.

According to the AOE's [2024 Per Pupil Spending report](#), schools that operate PreK or Kindergarten report an equalized per-pupil spending range of \$15,905 to \$28,775. The limitation of this information is that it is an average of all equalized pupil spending. Children in PreK programs are not technically equivalent to kindergarten students, based on requirements that affect staffing ratios, teacher qualifications, and location of the program.

Implementation Plan

Before updating legislative language, the Agency of Education recommends updating the [Pupil Weighting Factors Report \(2019\)](#). Due to the diversity of approaches to prekindergarten programming around the state there are still questions that need to be considered before deciding on an implementation plan. These include:

- Will the 1.0 ADM only be available for public-school based programs serving 4-year-olds in full-school-day, school-year programs?
- What about schools that are offering prekindergarten at full-time hours to 3-year-olds?
- What about schools that offer more than the current minimum of 10 hours but less than full-school-day, full-school year?
- Will school districts be able to contract for full-school-day, full-school year programs? If so, what should the Universal Prekindergarten rate be? Could it accommodate different “dosages” (i.e., hours of program service)?

Because of these factors, it is too soon to provide legislative language to update 16 V.S.A. 4001(1)(C).

Conclusion

The members of the PEIC are unanimous in their belief that the ADM weight for a PreK student should not be less than 1.0 and will most likely be more. All available data sources bear this out. The ongoing work of the PEIC and the AOE, in conjunction with further research and analysis, will contribute to a more informed and comprehensive understanding of the costs associated with prekindergarten education. As the state moves forward, it is imperative to address these challenges collaboratively, ensuring that any legislative updates are well-informed, equitable, and conducive to the overarching goal of increasing equitable access to prekindergarten education in Vermont.