

Expanding preschool opportunities

Research has proven the benefits of high-quality preschool programs for young children. These include entering kindergarten more prepared with less chance of being placed in special education and a lower risk of grade retention. Longer-term benefits include higher graduation rates, higher median income, less dependence on government services and more.

Communities have mobilized to expand preschool opportunities through various funding sources, here are some examples.

TEMPE PRE - A city-funded approach

One of the longest-running high-quality preschool programs in Arizona is [Tempe PRE](#). It began in 2017 as a two-year pilot program to serve 3- and 4-year-old children whose families were at or below 200% of poverty level in the city of Tempe. The city council initiated the program based on research showing high poverty rates with low attendance in preschool programs.

That same study showed two-thirds of the city's kindergarteners scored lower than expected in reading and language. To ensure more children arrived at kindergarten prepared for success, Tempe invested \$6 million over two years to provide high-quality preschool to 475 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families. In 2023, the city council approved \$1.5 million as permanent funding.

In year three, the program opened to more families on a sliding fee tuition scale, but the majority of the seats remain tuition-free. Today, Tempe PRE serves approximately 200 children at 7 neighborhood schools in the Tempe Elementary School District, according to its website.

The Tempe PRE model offers:

- Low student-to-adult ratio (9:1), with 18 students per classroom.
- Early childhood education certified teachers.
- Use of the child-centered, play-based HighScope preschool curriculum.
- Teaching strategies that identify and address challenges throughout the year, improving kindergarten readiness.
- Before- and after-school hours at select schools.



Tempe PRE officials partnered with First Things First’s successful quality improvement initiative, Quality First. Through support from the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, the city enrolled all Tempe PRE classrooms in Quality First, where they receive coaching, assessment and other support to continuously improve the quality of care. To further support improved outcomes for young children, the city also provides expanded professional development opportunities to teachers and staff in Tempe PRE classrooms. In addition, students’ families are enrolled in the Triple P parenting program and children receive extended care after school and during the summer.

Key findings from the pilot program evaluation report concluded that the Tempe PRE program prepares children for kindergarten. Compared to kindergarteners from low-income families who did not attend Tempe PRE, children who attended Tempe PRE:

- Entered kindergarten meeting or exceeding developmental expectations significantly more often in the areas of social-emotional, language, cognitive and literacy development.
- Were significantly more likely to perform above or well-above benchmarks for literacy at kindergarten entry.
- Caregivers credited the program for getting their child ready for kindergarten academically as well as socially.

PEEPS - A cross-sector approach led by Pima County

The Pima Early Education Program Scholarships ([PEEPS](#)) provide funding for local school districts and preschool providers to offer scholarships to qualifying preschoolers. For the 2023-2024 school year, PEEPS served more than 1,900 children ages 3 to 5.

In 2021, the Pima County Board of Supervisors allocated \$30.2 million from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to fund the program. Participating school districts, the city of Tucson and the towns of Marana and Oro Valley also contribute to funding, making it a community-wide, collaborative effort.

After ARPA funds expired in 2024, the county’s contribution to the program continues through a portion of the secondary property tax that funds the library district. This funding source for early learning is permitted through a 2021 state law. Through this, the county expects to be able to budget around \$10 million per year for the next three years. Pima County serves as an example of leveraging this source of funding that other counties could replicate.



A portion of the PEEPS money funds scholarships for eligible families to enroll their child in programs that participate in Quality First, which is a quality improvement program of First Things First.

One of the largest supporters of quality early programs in Pima County is the Preschool Promise. This is a coalition of educators, business leaders, community organizations, parents and concerned citizens who support the goal of making high-quality preschool available for all Pima County children.

ELEVATE PRE-K - A public-private partnership pilot program

In northern Arizona, talks about universal preschool blossomed in 2016 with a group called LAUNCH Flagstaff. The idea that all children deserve equitable access to high-quality early education turned into a three-year pilot program called [Elevate Pre-K](#), which provides free, full-day, quality preschool to 36 children.

It started with 36 children in Flagstaff in the first and second years. In the third year, a classroom in Page was added, with 18 children being served in Flagstaff and 18 in Page.

The program targets 4-year-old children living in households with income between 101% to 350% of the federal poverty level, who are not currently enrolled in preschool. It is in its third and final year of the three-year pilot. The collective impact group is searching for funding sources to continue the classrooms beyond its third year.

It is currently funded through 11 grants from a combination of partners (see below). Along with private foundation grants from partners, the City of Flagstaff and Coconino County used federal pandemic relief funding to support the program. The Helios Foundation is paying for the ongoing program evaluation, which will continue to follow the children into elementary school.

Funding and Implementation Partners

