

Georgia

Background

Georgia Pre-K

Georgia Pre-K is a universal, full-day pre-K program open to all four-year-olds in the state.¹ In 1995, Georgia became the first state to guarantee pre-K for all four-year-olds in the state. The Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) administers Georgia Pre-K as a competitive grant program. Child care centers, local school systems, and other public institutions (e.g., universities, military bases) are eligible to apply.² Due to limitations in the state charter school law, charter schools can only offer pre-K through an affiliated pre-K program.³

Because this is a universal program, there are no eligibility requirements for children other than age. Due to declines in revenue, however, the program does not fund sufficient slots to cover all interested families. As a result, providers need to develop a policy for how they will enroll preschoolers if the program is full.

Charter schools in Georgia

Georgia allows start-up and conversion charter schools. The majority of charter schools in Georgia are authorized by a local education agency or the state education agency. The new State Charter Schools Commission (SCSC) is an alternative charter authorizing body.⁴

Process for Accessing Pre-K Funds

Charter schools and other providers interested in becoming Georgia Pre-K providers participate in the annual competitive grant application cycle. DECAL awards pre-K grant funding based on the quality of the application and the need in the service area, which DECAL evaluates by measuring the rate of saturation—i.e., how many pre-K slots there are compared with the number of eligible students—in the county where the program is located. New providers are only awarded funding after continuation classes (pre-K classes in good standing) are funded.⁵ A program is in good standing if it is fully enrolled and meets compliance requirements.

Existing providers annually apply for renewal and are often automatically awarded slots based on funding availability, identified regional need, and program compliance in the previous year. Any provider reporting fewer than nineteen students on the final roster of the previous year is not automatically awarded funding.⁶



TOTAL SCORE

11/50

Georgia'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 not prohibited in legislation or practice.



Barriers

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

 **Yes.** Georgia’s charter law does not mention pre-K, and the pre-K law does not mention charter schools. DECAL, which administers the pre-K program, interprets the law to mean that charter schools can apply for state pre-K funding. The charter schools office at the Georgia Department of Education, however, interprets the law to mean that charters cannot be approved to offer pre-K. As a result, charters can offer affiliated programs but cannot serve preschoolers directly. At least nine charter schools in Georgia offer pre-K in this way.

Is the per-pupil 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. Per-pupil funding for pre-K is low, even for a half-day program. Charter schools that offer half-day pre-K through an affiliated program receive between 29 percent and 43 percent of the per-pupil funding amount that charters receive to serve full-day K–12 students.

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

 **No.** The size of the pre-K program does not limit charter access to funding. The program serves nearly 60 percent of four-year-olds in the state.

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

 **Yes.** The application and approval processes are barriers to charter access to state pre-K funding. Georgia does not fund enough pre-K slots to serve all eligible students. As a result, the state will only approve new pre-K providers if it identifies unmet need in a community rather than approving all providers that meet quality standards and allowing parent choice to determine enrollment.

Further, the existing funding process is biased against new providers. Existing providers receive priority over new providers and continue to receive funding as long as they meet compliance requirements.

Finally, Georgia charter schools must apply to DECAL for pre-K slots completely separate from their application to a charter authorizer for initial approval or grade expansion. In general,

charter authorizers play no role in monitoring the quality of pre-K classrooms operated by charter schools and are not consulted in DECAL’s decisions about whether or not to award pre-K slots to charter schools. Separating pre-K oversight and charter authorizing roles in Georgia has several negative consequences, including:

- Encouraging charter schools—and other providers in Georgia—to think about pre-K as a separate “program” from their K–12 offerings.
- Not requiring authorizers to hold charter schools accountable for the performance of their pre-K programs.
- Not taking authorizers’ judgments of schools’ K–12 academic, operational, or fiscal performance into account when making DECAL funding decisions.
- Requiring charter schools that wish to serve pre-K to apply through two separate processes—one to be approved as a charter, and one to offer pre-K—with different timelines and requirements and requiring them to submit reports to and receive monitoring from two different oversight agencies. This imposes an additional compliance burden on charter schools that serve preschoolers.

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

 **No.** According to Georgia code, children who matriculate from a pre-K program at a charter school receive enrollment preference if they want to attend kindergarten at that charter school.⁷ This enrollment preference was only recently incorporated into the law, however, and few charter schools in the state take advantage of it.

Recommendations

To address the barriers to charter access to state pre-K funding, Georgia should explicitly allow, in either legislation or agency guidance, that charter schools are eligible to access state funding for pre-K. Georgia should also shift responsibility for overseeing charter pre-K programs from DECAL to authorizers. Charter schools that wish to serve preschoolers should obtain approval from their authorizer. DECAL should then award charter schools the number of slots approved by their authorizer, but reduce funding if the school fails to meet its authorized preschool enrollment.

If the state is concerned about the number of pre-K slots that authorizers might approve, it could impose an annual cap on the number proportionate to the percentage of all Georgia kindergarteners enrolled in schools approved by the authorizer in the prior academic year. Authorizers that lack capacity to



oversee pre-K programs could delegate or subcontract oversight of charter pre-K programs to DECAL.

If Georgia fails to shift oversight of charter pre-K programs from DECAL to authorizers, the following recommendations could improve DECAL’s process to make it more equitable to charter schools and other new providers:

- Extend the duration of Georgia Pre-K grants. DECAL could continue to monitor program quality over the duration of the grant without requiring programs to reapply annually. This would increase stability and reduce the burden of annual applications for charters and other providers.
- Re-compete existing slots at the end of the grant period, and allow both new and existing providers to compete on an equitable basis, based on student need, program quality, and track record of improving student outcomes. Open the competition to new providers whether or not total appropriations for the program increase.
- Give additional points in the Georgia Pre-K grant process to charter schools whose applications indicate their authorizer supports their applications.

	Georgia Pre-K	Charter schools in Georgia
Year created	Launched in 1995 ⁸	Charter law enacted in 1994 ⁹
Children in state	283,452 three- and four-year-olds in Georgia ¹⁰	2,077,067 school-age children in Georgia ¹¹
Children served	81,683 children served 0 percent of three-year-olds 58 percent of four-year-olds ¹²	69,392 students served 3.3 percent of school-age population 110 charter schools ¹³
Charters offering pre-K	Nine charter schools in Georgia offer pre-K. ¹⁴	Sixty-one charter schools in Georgia offer elementary programs. ¹⁵
Funding	Providers receive between \$2,481 and \$3,654 per pupil to offer Georgia Pre-K. ¹⁶	Charter schools receive \$8,472 per pupil to serve K–12 students. ¹⁷



Endnotes

- 1 Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), “About Georgia’s Pre-K Program,” <http://decals.ga.gov/Prek/ProgramsOffered.aspx>.
- 2 DECAL, “Becoming A Georgia’s Pre-K Program Provider,” <http://decals.ga.gov/BftS/StartingAGeorgiaPrekProgram.aspx?source=green>.
- 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: Georgia,” <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/GA/>.
- 5 Georgia’s Pre-K Program 2014–2015 Application Package, June 2014, provided by DECAL.
- 6 DECAL, “2014–2015 School Year Pre-K Providers’ Operating Guidelines,” July 2014, <http://decals.ga.gov/documents/attachments/Guidelines.pdf>.
- 7 Georgia Code, O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2066, 2010, “Admission, Enrollment, and Withdrawal of Students,” <http://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2010/title-20/chapter-2/article-31/20-2-2066>.
- 8 Georgia Pre-K was a targeted pilot in 1992 and became universal in 1995. See 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>.
- 9 NAPCS, “Measuring Up: Georgia.”
- 10 State population data calculated using ACS 2012 five-year estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey,” www.census.gov/acs.
- 11 Ibid., all children in households, three to seventeen years old.
- 12 W. Steven Barnett et al., “The State of Preschool 2013.”
- 13 NAPCS, “Measuring Up: Georgia.”
- 14 At least nine charters offer pre-K, including: Lake Oconee Academy (<http://www.lakeoconeeacademy.org>); Pataula Charter Academy (<http://www.pataula.net>); and Drew Charter School (<http://www.drewcharterschool.org/pd/crdcs1/preview/index.html>).
- 15 Center for Education Reform, search page, https://www.edreform.com/in-the-states/know-your-choices/find-a-charter-school/?filter%5Bname%5D=&filter%5Bcity%5D=&filter%5Bstate%5D=GA&filter%5Bgrade%5D=&filter%5Bgrades_categories%5D=&filter%5Bspecialty%5D=.
- 16 DECAL, “2014–2015 School Year Pre-K Providers’ Operating Guidelines,” <http://decals.ga.gov/documents/attachments/Guidelines.pdf>.
- 17 Meagan Batdorff et al., “Charter School Funding: Inequality Expands,” Georgia 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-inequality-expands-ga.pdf>.