

Funding Universal Pre-Kindergarten Education

Goal

Support high quality pre-kindergarten education by ensuring high needs districts that were early adopters of universal pre-kindergarten receive state funding at levels that keep up with inflation and rising costs.

Solution

Index universal pre-kindergarten funding to the K-12 Foundation Aid per-pupil amount for all enrolled students.

Why It Works

The funding a district receives for universal pre-kindergarten will automatically change in line with changes to the Foundation Aid per-pupil amount. This will allow districts to keep up with inflation and rising costs and preserve quality early childhood education.



Universal Pre-Kindergarten in Rochester

Universal Pre-Kindergarten has been a consistent bright spot in the Rochester City School District.

The program began in 1998 and now serves nearly 3,000 students from across Rochester each year.

The Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program is a successful partnership between the Rochester City School District (RCSD) and 21 community-based organizations (CBOs). Despite sustained challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021-22 Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership (RECAP) evaluation found RCSD's UPK program maintained its high scores for program quality and continues to support the resilience, growth, and development of students as they prepare for kindergarten.¹

It is hard to overstate the value a program like this, free for families and open to all three- and four-year-olds, can have in a city like Rochester with one of the highest rates of child poverty in the nation.

The negative impact of poverty on rates of kindergarten readiness, as well as long-term educational attainment and social mobility, is well-documented.² Access to high-quality early learning can often serve to prevent or reverse poverty's damaging effects on children. Examples of how children benefit from quality pre-kindergarten education include:³

- Stronger early literacy, mathematics and social skills
- Lower likelihood of being retained a grade in elementary school
- Higher rates of high school completion and college attendance

Studies that tracked pre-kindergarten benefits through adulthood found a return on investment up to \$17 for every \$1 spent on prekindergarten.³

The elements which have contributed to the consistent high quality of RCSD's UPK program, including RECAP's yearly evaluations and other program supports, are threatened by the current state-level preschool funding structure. Without reforms to the **flat funding model**, RCSD and districts like it will continue to face immense challenges in trying to keep up with rising costs. To correct this, The Children's Agenda recommends **indexing** state-funded UPK allocations to the K-12 Foundation Aid per-pupil amount for all preschool students in higher needs districts like Rochester. This way, the funding a district receives for UPK will automatically change in line with changes to the Foundation Aid per-pupil amount, regardless of the district's ability to enroll more students.

¹ Duprey, E. B. et al. (2022). *Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Project 2021-2022 Twenty-fifth Annual Report*. Rochester: Children's Institute. https://www.childrensinstitute.net/sites/default/files/documents/2021-2022_RECAP-Annual-Report_FINAL3.pdf

² Roos, L. L., Wall-Wiler, E., Boram Lee, J. (2019). Poverty and early childhood outcomes. *Pediatrics*, 143 (6): <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/143/6/e20183426/76812/Poverty-and-Early-Childhood-Outcomes?autologincheck=redirected>

³ Meloy, B., Gardner, M. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). *Untangling the evidence on preschool effectiveness: Insights for policymakers*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/untangling-evidence-preschool-effectiveness-report>

State-Funded UPK

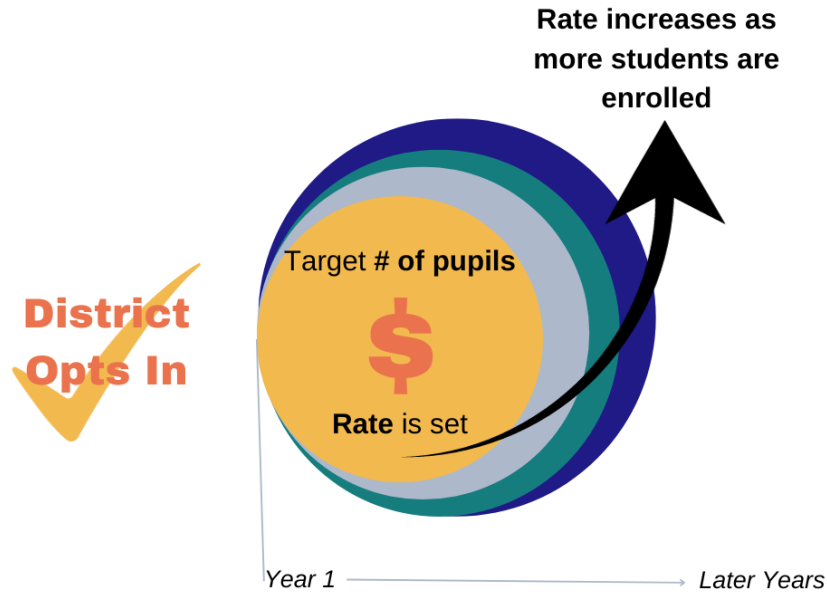
For districts that are already serving nearly all eligible families, funding levels are essentially frozen and do not keep up with yearly inflation or rising costs.

When a school district opts into the state-funded UPK program, a per-pupil amount is set at either half the district's K-12 Foundation Aid amount or \$5400, whichever is larger.⁴ This initial amount may be adjusted based on several measures of student need and community wealth. **A target number of pupils is also set**, which can be combined with the per-pupil amount to calculate a district's maximum allocation. Going forward, a district's per-pupil rate for the original target number of students is frozen at the amount from the year they opted into the program.

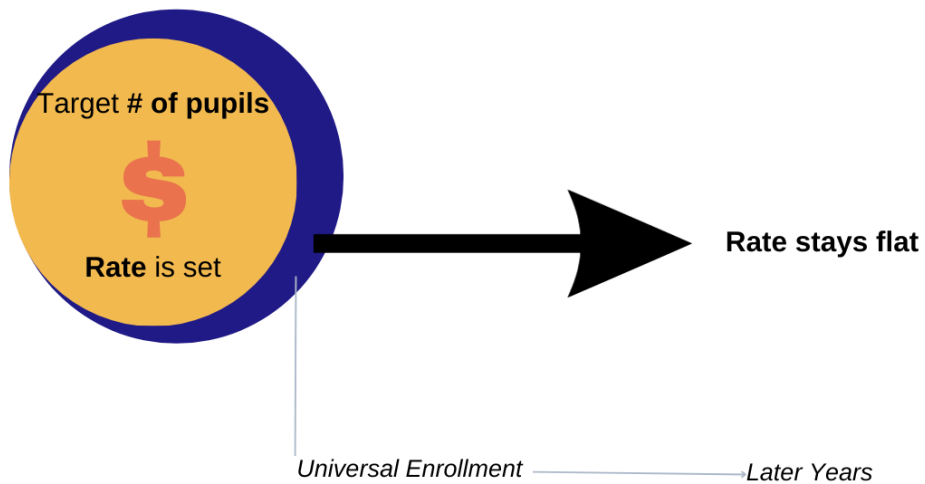
While potential UPK funding increases each year with the Foundation Aid formula, **districts are only able to access the higher rates when they add additional pupils and classrooms, and only for those newly added students.** If a district has a growing UPK program, they can expect their average per-pupil rate (a combination of the frozen and higher rates) to increase slightly each year as they expand, partially accounting for inflation and rising costs. **For a district like RCSD, that is already serving nearly all eligible families, yearly inflation and rising costs erode the frozen funding, leading to spending cuts and decreased quality over time.**

⁴ See <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/EDN/3602-E>

Districts with Growing UPK Enrollment



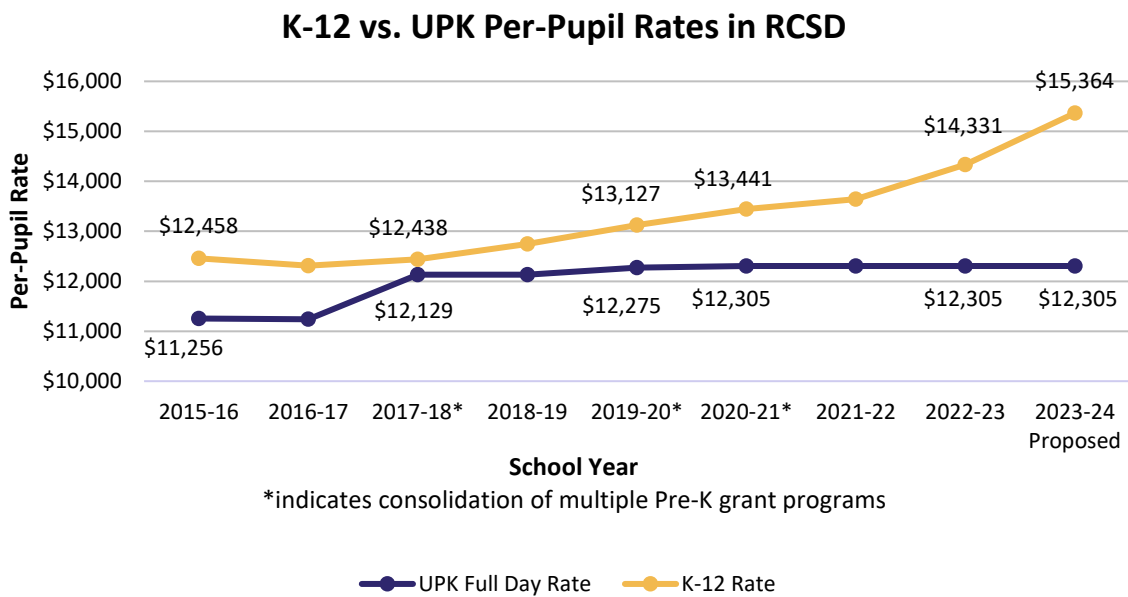
Districts That Have Reached Universal Enrollment



Impact of Flat Funding on UPK in Rochester

The per-pupil amount RCSD receives for UPK has not increased in several years.

Unlike state K-12 school funding and child care market rates that include mechanisms for increases over time, the UPK per-pupil amount has not increased in several years for RCSD. In the 2022-23 school year, the K-12 per-pupil Foundation Aid rate was \$14,331, over \$2,000 higher than the stagnant \$12,305 Rochester receives per UPK student.⁵ District leaders have stated **that because of flat funding, RCSD UPK programs are likely to further struggle with staff retention and affording the investments necessary to maintain high quality.**



The budget for the Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership (RECAP)⁶ was cut by a third during the 2020-21 school year as another consequence of limited funds, and it has not been restored. **Cutting RECAP’s budget led to the removal of CLASS observations⁷ as part of RECAP’s model, which had served as an important professional development resource and measure of teacher/child interactions.** Data collection is crucial to continuous improvement, and the loss of this tool in the context of high turnover and less experienced teachers may negatively impact staff development and children’s success and growth.

⁵ Data collected from Enacted School Aid Runs and a June 2022 presentation to the RCSD Board of Education

⁶ RECAP is a collaboration between the Rochester City School District and [Children’s Institute](#), and receives funding through the RCSD school budget.

⁷ Teachstone (2023). *Classroom Assessment Scoring System*. <https://teachstone.com/class/>

To better understand the impact of flat funding on RCSD's UPK program, The Children's Agenda surveyed all 21 CBO providers (52% response rate) that contract with the district and enroll approximately 40% of the city's 3- and 4-year-old students. Program directors provided information on a number of topics, including the years of experience of their staff, the average pay and benefits their teachers and assistant teachers receive, as well as teacher turnover and unfilled vacancies for next school year.

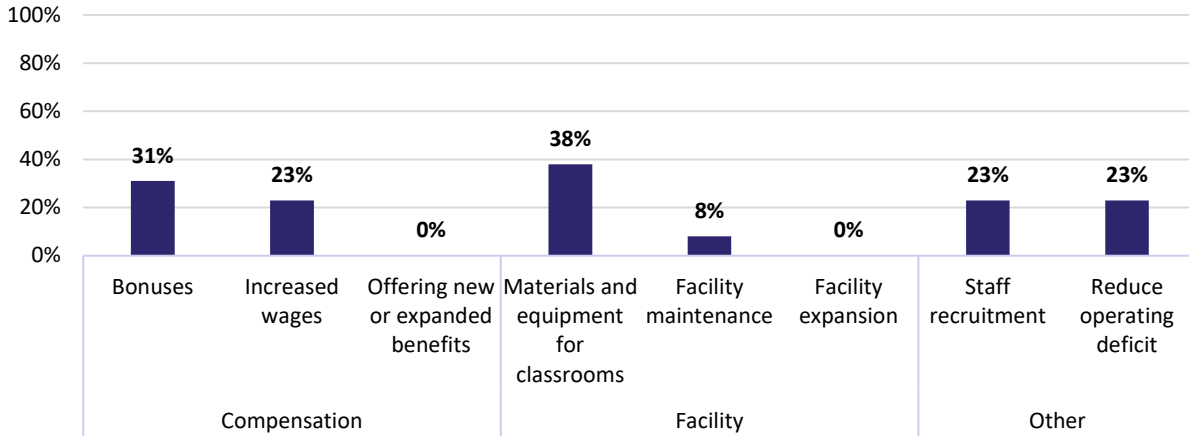
- **A majority of both teachers (60%) and assistant teachers (69%) at the surveyed programs have 1-5 years of experience.** Only 19% of teachers and 8% of assistant teachers have more than 10 years of experience.
- **79% of programs indicated they experienced staff turnover for the prior school year or have unfilled positions for the upcoming school year, with 57% of programs experiencing both.** Explanations for this instability included staff going to RCSD or charter schools for higher pay or better benefits, staff mental health concerns, teacher burnout, challenging work environment, and increasing needs for students. Low wages were most commonly cited as contributing to turnover and unfilled positions.
- **There is a wide range of starting salaries** for teachers (\$15-32/hour, median \$25/hour) and assistant teachers (\$14-20/hour, median \$16/hour).⁸
- **All programs provide at least some benefits**, including paid holidays (93%), paid sick leave and vacation time (79%), medical and dental insurance partially paid by the program (71%), a retirement savings plan (71%), paid family leave (57%), and education assistance (36%).
- **When asked how often staff receive raises, 21% of programs responded with "rarely or never."** As one respondent explained:

"Staff won't return if the pay scale isn't adjusted, and the increasing behavior needs of the children addressed more proactively. Many have left the field entirely. They need to feel their efforts are also a personal gain and they do not."

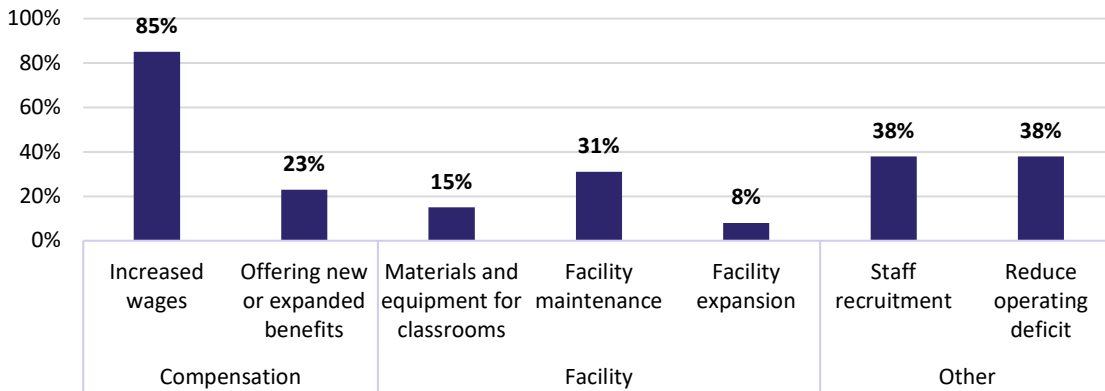
Through their contracts with RCSD, CBOs receive only a portion of the per-pupil funding allocated to the district from New York State, with the remaining amount being used to support the central administration of the UPK program. In an effort to assist with higher student needs and teacher turnover, RCSD used a portion of its administrative funds to increase the per-pupil amounts that CBOs receive by \$1,000 per student for the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. **While this is unlikely to be a sustainable solution for the district without changes to the flat-funding model, it did have a positive impact on programs and gave insight into what a permanent funding increase may be used for.**

⁸ In 2021-22, the salary range for RCSD's full-time classroom teachers (all grades) with 1-5 years of experience was \$21-30/hour with a median of \$25/hour. See <https://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pmf/>

How CBOs Used Increased Per-Pupil Funding



How CBOs May Use a Sustained Funding Increase



When administrators of RECAP were asked how an expansion of funding may be used to expand their evaluation and continuous improvement efforts, they noted several potential options:

- **Re-institute CLASS observations and the Pre-K PACE assessment** tool to learn more about family circumstances and children’s experiences (including adversity).
- **Expand communication between RECAP and families**, perhaps via an online portal, where parents could fill out surveys and receive the information collected about their child.
- **Adopt innovative measurement tools** that measure executive functioning and kindergarten readiness.

Recommendations

Indexing state funding for UPK to the K-12 Foundation Aid per-pupil amount will provide sustained investment in programs that have already reached universal status.

The Children's Agenda recommends **indexing state-funded UPK allocations to the K-12 Foundation Aid per-pupil amount for all preschool students in higher needs districts like Rochester**. This change would provide an immediate boost in funding, approximately \$9M for RCSD, to help districts recover from the lasting impacts of the pandemic by stabilizing their workforce and ensuring students have access to the high-quality education they deserve. Long term, because the Foundation Aid formula accounts for yearly inflation, UPK in Rochester and throughout the state would benefit from a sustaining and predictable funding formula.

New York State leaders are understandably focused on expanding the number of Pre-K seats in areas of the state without universal preschool offerings, as evidenced by the robust investment in the most recent NYS budget. However, this **should not come at the expense of sustained investment in existing programs which have already reached universal status**. Urgent state-level action should be taken in the 2024-25 budget in order to prevent the deterioration of high-quality UPK programs in Rochester and other high needs districts.