

Children Receiving Preschool Special Education Services

DEFINITION

Children receiving preschool special education services is the percentage of children ages three to five who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and are receiving special education services in Rhode Island.

SIGNIFICANCE

Preschool special education is an important component of the early care and education system, providing specially designed instruction so each child can meet learning standards. The federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* specifies that children ages three to five with disabilities, including developmental delays, have the same right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment as school-age children with disabilities.¹

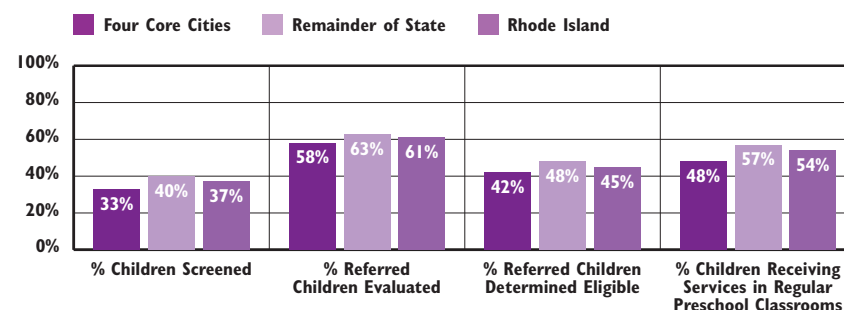
Developmental delays are identified when a child does not reach milestones at the same time as other children their age. Some young children with developmental delays are eventually diagnosed with a disability while others catch up to their peers when provided with high-quality educational opportunities, therapies, or interventions.^{2,3} Routine developmental screening during the early stages of life, followed by evaluation and diagnostic assessment, helps children gain access to

needed services to promote positive outcomes and prevent ongoing educational challenges.⁴

In Rhode Island, school districts work to screen every child ages three through five every year through the Child Outreach screening program.⁵ During the 2023-2024 school year in Rhode Island, districts completed developmental screenings for 37% of children ages three to five, up from 36% the previous year but down from 39% pre-pandemic. Preschool-age children in the four core cities were less likely to receive a developmental screening (33%) than children in the remainder of the state (40%). Of the children who were referred for evaluation based on positive screens, 61% were evaluated and 45% were determined eligible for special education. Children in the four core cities were less likely to be referred for evaluation and to be determined eligible for special education services than children in the remainder of the state.^{6,7}

Approximately 17% of U.S. children ages three to 17 have a developmental disability, with higher prevalence among low-income children, children with low birthweight, and boys.⁸ Under *IDEA*, each state sets its own criteria to determine the magnitude of a delay needed to qualify for special education services.⁹

Preschool Special Education Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion Rates, Rhode Island, June 2024



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2023-2024 Child Outreach data and June 2024 Special Education Census. The percentage determined eligible is of those children referred for evaluation from Child Outreach screening.

◆ In June 2024, there were 3,518 children ages three to five receiving preschool special education services (10% of all preschool-age children), up from 3,368 (9%) the previous year. Children in the four core cities were slightly more likely to receive preschool special education services (11%) than children in the remainder of the state (10%).^{10,11}

◆ Preschool children have improved outcomes when participating in high-quality inclusive early childhood programs. However, young children with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing high-quality, inclusive early care and education.^{12,13}

◆ In June 2024, 54% of preschool-age children who received special education services received those services within an inclusive early childhood classroom. Children in the four core cities were less likely to receive preschool special education services in an inclusive early childhood setting (48%) than children in the remainder of the state (57%).¹⁴

◆ Many young children in Rhode Island receive *IDEA* services outside of inclusive preschool programs, with 19% receiving services through “walk-in” visits to a service provider, 17% enrolled in a separate special education class or school, and 10% enrolled in a preschool setting but receiving special education services in another location.¹⁵

◆ In June 2024, 48% of children receiving preschool special education services qualified under the developmental delay category, 39% had an identified speech/language disability, 11% were diagnosed with autism, and 3% had another diagnosed disability.¹⁶

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Table 36.

Children Ages 3 to 5 Receiving Special Education Services, Rhode Island, 2024

SCHOOL DISTRICT	# OF CHILDREN AGES 3-5	DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING EVALUATION, AND ELIGIBILITY, 2023-2024 SCHOOL YEAR				PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION BY SETTING JUNE 2024				
		% POPULATION SCREENED	# REFERRED FOR EVALUATION	% EVALUATED OF REFERRED	% DETERMINED ELIGIBLE OF REFERRED	% IN INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASS	% IN SELF-CONTAINED SETTING	% IN OTHER SETTING	TOTAL # RECEIVING SERVICES	% RECEIVING SERVICES
Barrington	608	37%	20	95%	67%	67%	0%	33%	58	10%
Bristol Warren	670	51%	35	72%	68%	54%	1%	45%	67	10%
Burrillville	456	36%	*	80%	70%	41%	0%	59%	49	11%
Central Falls	954	58%	34	69%	60%	60%	22%	18%	142	15%
Charlton	636	51%	29	67%	56%	59%	0%	41%	88	14%
Coventry	1,001	37%	29	83%	71%	49%	0%	51%	104	10%
Cranston	2,601	35%	42	39%	25%	59%	9%	33%	246	9%
Cumberland	1,263	31%	14	40%	29%	61%	18%	21%	85	7%
East Greenwich	558	48%	12	80%	60%	98%	0%	2%	54	10%
East Providence	1,483	28%	15	60%	52%	25%	52%	23%	134	9%
Exeter-West Greenwich	364	38%	*	75%	38%	39%	0%	61%	38	10%
Foster	121	NA	NA	NA	NA	50%	8%	42%	12	10%
Glocester	200	NA	NA	NA	NA	45%	0%	55%	22	11%
Jamestown	115	47%	*	67%	33%	86%	0%	14%	*	6%
Johnston	904	54%	37	65%	61%	81%	1%	19%	129	14%
Lincoln	714	42%	35	76%	63%	71%	14%	14%	104	15%
Little Compton	68	44%	0	NA	NA	86%	0%	14%	*	10%
Middletown	587	40%	18	58%	45%	48%	2%	50%	42	7%
Narragansett	201	43%	*	100%	75%	62%	0%	38%	21	10%
New Shoreham	21	67%	0	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	0	0%
Newport	622	40%	28	82%	74%	63%	13%	25%	48	8%
North Kingstown	859	59%	25	71%	47%	64%	1%	35%	77	9%
North Providence	959	34%	14	42%	30%	58%	8%	34%	93	10%
North Smithfield	368	41%	12	100%	58%	37%	20%	43%	35	10%
Pawtucket	2,690	23%	104	69%	38%	63%	18%	19%	248	9%
Portsmouth	544	38%	*	50%	44%	55%	0%	45%	42	8%
Providence	7,465	34%	412	52%	39%	39%	31%	31%	713	10%
Scituate	276	NA	NA	NA	NA	32%	0%	68%	19	7%
Smithfield	508	61%	25	71%	34%	55%	0%	45%	60	12%
South Kingstown	593	53%	16	89%	56%	70%	0%	30%	53	9%
Tiverton	385	41%	*	29%	17%	61%	0%	39%	41	11%
Warwick	2,167	33%	40	63%	48%	46%	38%	16%	210	10%
West Warwick	852	37%	48	65%	50%	51%	34%	14%	140	16%
Westerly	508	50%	23	51%	36%	93%	0%	7%	58	11%
Woonsocket	1,725	33%	66	84%	66%	53%	7%	40%	259	15%
Charter Schools	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	100%	0%	0%	*	NA
State-Operated Schools	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	0%	100%	0%	*	NA
Collaboratives	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Four Core Cities	12,834	33%	616	58%	42%	48%	23%	29%	1,362	11%
Remainder of State	21,212	40%	1,199	63%	48%	57%	13%	30%	2,143	10%
Rhode Island	34,046	37%	1,815	61%	45%	54%	17%	29%	3,518	10%

Sources of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), June 2024 Special Education Census. Beginning in 2020, the early childhood special education census data was adjusted to exclude children age five on June 30 who were enrolled in kindergarten, and they were included in the K-12 special education census.

2023-2024 Developmental screening, referral, evaluation, and eligibility data is from the RIDE Office of Student, Community, and Academic Supports. Foster, Glocester, and Scituate school districts collaborate as the Northwest Region to conduct screenings, evaluations, and eligibility determinations and data are not available separately for these districts. The Northwest Region screened 39% of their age 3 to 5 population and fewer than 10 children for evaluation. Of those referred for evaluation, 100% had an evaluation completed and 88% were determined eligible for preschool special education services in 2023-2024.

*Fewer than 10 students are in this category. Actual numbers are not shown to protect student confidentiality. These students are still counted in district totals and in the four core cities, remainder of the state, and state totals.

The denominator is the number of children ages three to five residing in each district during the 2023-2024 school year from the Rhode Island Department of Health's KIDSNET database shared with RIDE.

Due to changes in the denominator, screening rates and percentage receiving preschool special education services should not be compared with data in Factbooks published before 2016.

Inclusive early childhood class means children receive the majority of their special education services in a regular early childhood education class at a public school, a Head Start program, or a community-based child care program or preschool. Data include children who are district-placed and who are parentally placed.

The Charter school is Highlander Charter School.

The State-Operated schools is the Rhode Island School for the Deaf.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

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References

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References for Children Enrolled in Early Intervention

⁸ Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Medicaid Core Set Measure, Developmental Screenings Children Under Age 3, Calendar Year 2023, Federal Fiscal Year 2024.

^{9,10,11,12} Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2019 - 2024.

¹³ Anderson, P. (2021, November 26). Rhode Island Early Intervention program for infants and toddlers in 'crisis.' *The Providence Journal*. Retrieved March 18, 2023, from <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/2021/11/26/rhode-island-early-intervention-program-shortage-therapists-clinicians/8748277002/>

¹⁴ Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Early Intervention Data Dashboard, Retrieved January 20, 2025, from www.eohhs.ri.gov/consumer/families-children/early-intervention-program/early-intervention-data-dashboard

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References for Children Enrolled in Early Head Start

¹¹ Rhode Island KIDS COUNT calculations using enrollment data from Early Head Start programs for the numerator and estimating the number of low-income children under age three using number of children under age 3 according to Census 2020, Table PCT12 multiplied by the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (at or below 185% of the federal poverty level) in each city or town's school district for the denominator.

¹⁵ Sandstrom, H., Kuhns, C., & Drukker, D. (2024). *Staff shortages in Early Head Start programs*. Urban Institute.

¹⁶ National Head Start Association. (2023, October). *An update on Head Start's ongoing workforce crisis*.

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References for Children Receiving Child Care Subsidies

⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2021). *The economics of child care supply in the United States*. Retrieved April 2, 2022, from www.treasury.gov

⁸ McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K. L. (2021). *Early childhood workforce index 2020*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.

⁹ National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *Transforming the financing of early care and education*. The National Academies Press.

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). *May 2023 State occupational employment and wage estimates, Rhode Island*. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ri.htm

^{11,12,13} Rhode Island Department of Human Services, Child Care Assistance Program enrollment, 2003-2024.

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References for High-Quality Early Learning Programs

^{13,14,15,19} Rhode Island Department of Human Services, Rhode Island Department of Education, Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children, licensed child care programs and public schools with BrightStars ratings, January 2021 – January 2025.

¹⁶ Maxwell, K. L., Blasberg, A., Early, D. M., Li, W., & Orfali, N. (2016). *Executive summary: Evaluation of Rhode Island's BrightStars Child Care Center and Preschool Quality Framework*. Child Trends.

^{17,20} Rhode Island Department of Human Services, Child Care Assistance Program enrollment, December 2024.

¹⁸ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). *May 2023 State occupational employment and wage estimates, Rhode Island*. Retrieved January 22, 2025, from https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ri.htm

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References for Children Enrolled in Head Start or RI Pre-K

¹⁰ National Head Start Association. (2022). *Fact sheet: State investments in Head Start and Early Head Start to support at-risk children and families*. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from <https://nhsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-EHS-State-Investments.pdf>

^{11,12,13} Rhode Island KIDS COUNT calculations using Rhode Island Head Start and RI Pre-K program enrollment data as the numerator and the estimated number of children ages three and four from Census 2020 as the denominator for all children and multiplied by the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (at or below 185% of the federal poverty level) to estimate the number of low-income children.

^{14,15,16,19,29,32,34} Rhode Island Head Start and Early Head Start Program reports to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, October 2015-2024.

¹⁷ National Head Start Association. (2023, October). *An update on Head Start's ongoing workforce crisis*. Retrieved March 23, 2025, from www.nhsa.org

^{18,20,21,30,36,37} Rhode Island Department of Education, RI Pre-K, October 2015-2024.

²² Bustamante, A. S., Dearing, E., Zachrisson, H. D., Vandell, D. L., Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2021). *High-quality early child care and education: The gift that lasts a lifetime*. Retrieved February 19, 2024, from www.brookings.edu

^{23,26} Barnett, W. S. & Friedman-Krauss, A. H. (2016). *State(s) of Head Start*. National Institute for Early Education Research.

²⁴ Schanzenbach, D. W. & Bauer, L. (2016). *The long-term impact of the Head Start program*. Retrieved March 25, 2021, from www.brookings.edu

²⁵ Barnett, W. S. (2012). *Rhode Island State Pre-K Demonstration Program evaluation*. Presentation to the Rhode Island General Assembly.

^{31,35} Rhode Island Department of Human Services, children participating in the Child Care Assistance Program, December 2024.

³⁵ Office of Head Start, Program Information Report (PIR) Summary Report, 2024, State Level – Rhode Island. Retrieved March 23, 2025, from the Head Start Enterprise System at <https://hses.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/pir/reports>

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^{1,3,9,12} Hebbeler, K. & Spiker, D. (2016). Supporting young children with disabilities. *The Future of Children*, 26(2), 185-205.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *Facts about developmental disabilities*. Retrieved February 13, 2022, from www.cdc.gov

^{4,5} Rhode Island Department of Education. (2018). *Rhode Island's guidelines for implementing Child Outreach screening*.

⁶ Rhode Island Department of Education, 2023-2024 Child Outreach Screening, Referral, Evaluation and Eligibility Data.

⁷ Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 Child Outreach Screening Rates.

⁸ Zablotsky, B., et al. (2019). Prevalence and trends of developmental disabilities among children in the United States, 2009-2017. *Pediatrics*, 144(4), 1-11.

^{10,14,15,16} Rhode Island Department of Education, June 2024 Special Education Census.

¹¹ Rhode Island Department of Education, June 2019 Special Education Census.

¹³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Policy statement on inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs*. Retrieved January 26, 2024, from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>

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Source of Data for Table/Methodology for Public School Enrollment and Demographics

Students enrolled in state-operated schools, charter schools, and collaboratives are not counted in totals for the four core cities or for the remainder of the state, but they are included in the Rhode Island state totals.

References for Public School Enrollment and Demographics

¹ Barton, P. E. & Coley, R. J. (2009). *Parsing the achievement gap II*. Educational Testing Service.

^{2,3,5,7,10} Rhode Island Department of Education [RIDE]. (2024). *Public schools enrollment dashboard*. Retrieved December 4, 2024, from <https://datacenter.ride.ri.gov/Home/FileDetail?fileid=994>

⁴ RIDE. (2024). *Private/parochial school data, 2023-2024 school year*.

⁶ RIDE. (2024). *RI Pre-K enrollment October 1, 2024*.

⁸ RIDE. (2024). *Office for Diverse Learners, Special Education Census, 2023-2024 school year*.