

Children Enrolled in Head Start or RI Pre-K

DEFINITION

Children enrolled in Head Start or RI Pre-K is the percentage of low-income children and all children ages three and four enrolled in a Rhode Island Head Start or RI Pre-K preschool program. Head Start is managed by the federal government and RI Pre-K is managed by the Rhode Island Department of Education.

SIGNIFICANCE

Learning disparities appear early and grow over time without access to enriching early learning experiences. Participation in high-quality early learning programs from birth through kindergarten entry helps to ensure children enter school with the skills needed to succeed. Without government funding, children from low-income families and Black and Latino children would have less access to high-quality preschool compared to higher-income and white families.^{1,2}

Decades of research have shown that high-quality preschool programs help children gain academic and social-emotional skills prior to school entry and can produce positive outcomes that last well into the school years, including reduced need for special education services and improved high school graduation rates. Sustaining these positive outcomes requires additional investments and high-quality learning in

the early grades and beyond.^{1,2}

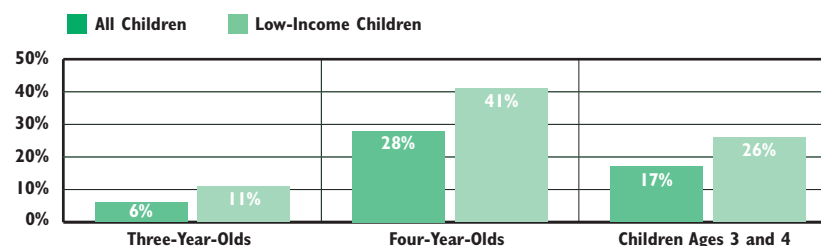
Head Start is a federally funded, comprehensive early childhood program for preschool children ages three through five who are low-income and/or have high needs. Head Start programs deliver early education; dental, medical, and mental health support; nutrition services, and developmental screenings. Families are involved in program decision making, build parenting skills, and are supported to enter and remain in the workforce.^{3,4}

State-funded Pre-K programs are growing across the U.S. As of 2024, 44 states and Washington, DC operated state Pre-K programs, serving 37% of four-year-olds and 8% of three-year-olds across the U.S.⁵ RI Pre-K is delivered by public schools, Head Start agencies, and child care programs that are selected through a competitive grant process and meet the same high-quality standards. *The Rhode Island Prekindergarten Education Act* establishes a state goal to provide access to publicly funded, high-quality Pre-K for all three and four-year-olds by building on existing early childhood education infrastructure in communities.^{6,7}

Rhode Island is one of 14 states and Washington, DC that invest state funds in Head Start and/or Early Head Start to serve more children, support more competitive teacher salaries, and help programs meet their federally required 20% funding match.⁸



Percentage of Children Ages 3 and 4 Enrolled in Head Start and/or RI Pre-K, Rhode Island, 2025-2026

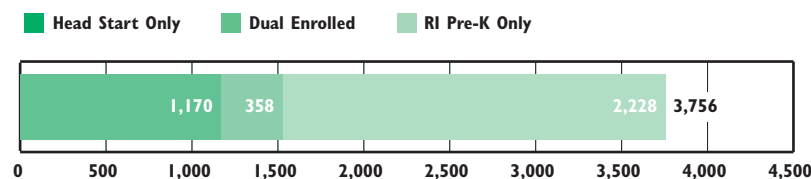


Source: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT calculations using October 2025 enrollment in Head Start and RI Pre-K as numerator and Census 2020 population of children ages 3 and 4 as denominator with low-income population estimated using the percentage of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

- ◆ As of October 2025, there were 3,756 children ages three and four enrolled in Head Start, RI Pre-K, or both during the two years before kindergarten, down 3% from 3,877 in 2024. These programs reached approximately 17% of all preschool-age children and 26% of low-income preschool-age children.⁹
- ◆ Of the total, 1,170 children were enrolled in Head Start only, 2,228 children were enrolled in RI Pre-K only, and 358 were dually enrolled in both Head Start and RI Pre-K with braided funding.⁹
- ◆ In the five core cities, approximately 29% of low-income preschool-age children and 26% of all preschool-age children were enrolled in Head Start, RI Pre-K, or both, while in the remainder of the state, enrollment for low-income preschool-age children and all preschool-age children was approximately 22% and 11% respectively.⁹



Number of Children Ages 3 and 4 Enrolled in Head Start, RI Pre-K, or Both, Rhode Island, 2025

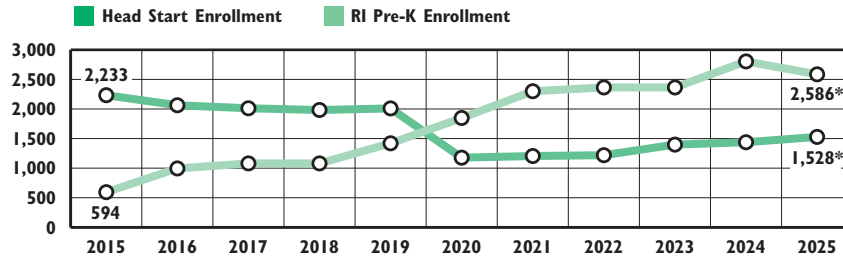


Source: Rhode Island Head Start programs and Rhode Island Department of Education, October 2025 enrollment.

Children Enrolled in Head Start or RI Pre-K



Head Start and RI Pre-K Enrollment, 2015-2025

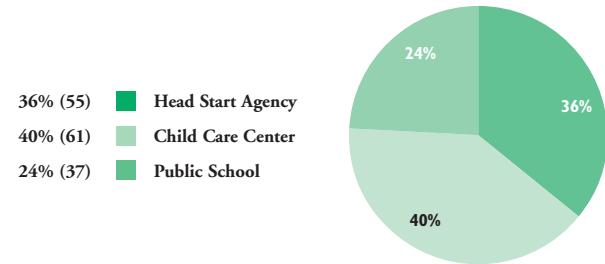


Sources: Head Start program reports to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2015–2025. RI Pre-K enrollment, Rhode Island Department of Education, 2015-2025. *Starting in 2019, RI Pre-K and Head Start began braiding funding to enable eligible children to be dually enrolled in both RI Pre-K and Head Start. The number of children enrolled in both programs was 140 in 2019, 176 in 2020, 253 in 2021, 294 in 2022, 285 in 2023, 353 in 2024 and 358 in 2025.

- ◆ In October 2025, there were 1,528 children enrolled in Head Start, up 6% from 2024 but down 32% from 2015. Of these, 358 (23%) were dually enrolled in RI Pre-K.¹⁰
- ◆ Of the 1,528 children enrolled in Head Start, 651 were age three (43%) and 877 (57%) were age four at the start of the school year. Ninety percent of children enrolled in Head Start were enrolled in a classroom that operated for at least six hours per day.¹⁰
- ◆ In October 2025, there were 222 eligible children on a waiting list for Head Start.¹⁰ Nationally, Head Start programs are facing significant staffing challenges, including high turnover, persistent vacancies, and low compensation for educators causing temporary and even permanent classroom closures.¹¹
- ◆ In October 2025, there were 2,586 children enrolled in RI Pre-K, down 8% from 2,804 children in 2024. Of these, 358 (14%) were dually enrolled in Head Start. In 2025 there were more than four times as many children enrolled in RI Pre-K than in 2015.¹²
- ◆ Of the 2,586 children enrolled in RI Pre-K, 99% were age four at the start of the school year. Only 17 children (1%) were age three, all of whom were dually enrolled in Head Start.¹²
- ◆ Of the 2,586 children enrolled in RI Pre-K, 1,922 (74%) were low-income and 664 (26%) were higher income.¹²



RI Pre-K Classrooms by Setting, Rhode Island, 2025



n = 153

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, October 2025.

- ◆ As of the 2025-2026 school year, there were 153 RI Pre-K classrooms with 55 (36%) operated by Head Start agencies, 61 (40%) operated by child care centers, and 37 (24%) operated by public schools.¹²



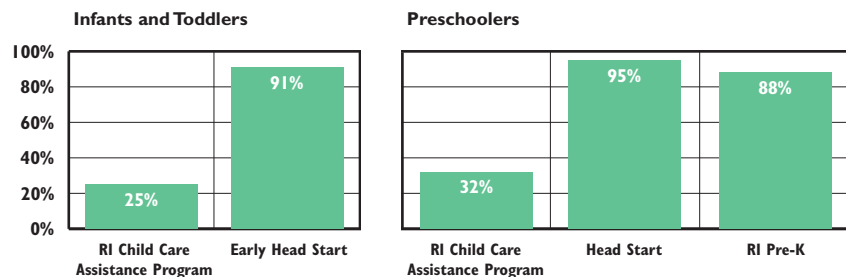
High-Quality Public Preschool Improves Outcomes for Children

- ◆ Sustained access (two or more years) of high-quality early childhood education improves children's readiness for school and narrows the achievement gap by half. High-quality early childhood programs are rich with language and conversations and offer many opportunities to play and engage in hands-on exploration.¹³
- ◆ Decades of research have shown that Head Start improves children's academic, cognitive, language, and social-emotional skills and health including reduced childhood obesity and improved immunization rates. Head Start children are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and receive a postsecondary degree, license, or certification.^{14,15}
- ◆ A 2012 evaluation of RI Pre-K found that it improves children's language and math skills and closes the achievement gap between low-income children and higher-income children by three-quarters.¹⁶

Children Enrolled in Head Start or RI Pre-K



Enrollment in Programs with a High-Quality BrightStars Rating by Funding Source, Rhode Island, 2025



Sources: Rhode Island Head Start Programs, 2025. Rhode Island Department of Education, 2025. Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2025.

◆ Across the U.S., Head Start centers are typically higher quality than many other early care and education programs.¹⁴ Rhode Island Head Start programs score above the national average and significantly above research-based thresholds for emotional support and classroom organization and meet the research-based threshold for instructional support based on classroom observations of teacher-child interactions.³

◆ In 2024, Rhode Island was one of only five states with a Pre-K program that met all 10 recommended quality benchmarks, including teachers who have a bachelor's degree with specialized training in early childhood education and program monitoring that includes annual classroom observations.⁵

◆ As of 2025, 95% of children enrolled in Head Start and 88% of children enrolled in RI Pre-K were in a program that had achieved a high-quality BrightStars rating of four or five stars. In comparison, only 32% of preschool-age children in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) were enrolled in a program that achieved a high-quality BrightStars rating.^{10,12,17}

◆ As of 2025, 91% of infants and toddlers enrolled in center-based Early Head Start were in a program that had achieved a high-quality BrightStars rating of four or five stars. In comparison, only 25% of infants and toddlers in the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) were enrolled in a program that had achieved a high-quality BrightStars rating.^{10,17}



Children Enrolled In RI Pre-K and Head Start

◆ As of October 2025, 213 (15%) children enrolled in Head Start had a developmental delay or disability and received special education services from their local school districts. Also, 32 children (2%) enrolled in Head Start were in foster care and 48 (3%) were homeless.¹⁰

◆ In 2024-2025, of the children and pregnant women with reported race/ethnicity, Rhode Island Early Head Start and Head Start programs reported 1% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 3% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 17% were Black, 12% were Multiracial, 29% were Some other race, and 38% were white. More than half of children enrolled (58%) were Hispanic (of any race). More than one-third (35%) spoke a primary language other than English at home.¹⁸

◆ As of October 2025, 337 (13%) children enrolled in RI Pre-K had a developmental delay or disability and received special education services from their local school districts. Also, 34 children (1%) were in foster care and 21 children (1%) were homeless.¹⁹

◆ Of the children enrolled in RI Pre-K in October 2025 with information about race and ethnicity, 2% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 4% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 11% were Black, 32% were Hispanic/Latino, 17% were Multiracial, and 35% were white. Thirty-one percent spoke a language other than English at home or were bilingual.¹⁹



RI Pre-K Financing & Staffing

◆ In 2023, RI Pre-K teachers in community-based programs (child care and Head Start) were paid about \$22,000 less than RI Pre-K teachers in public schools.⁵

◆ Experts estimate that Rhode Island was underfunding the RI Pre-K program by \$13.9 million for 2024 enrollment. To close the teacher wage gap, funding levels should be increased by \$5,888 per child to reach at least \$15,927/child.⁵

◆ In 2024, national experts estimated that, Rhode Island would need to spend an additional \$113.2 million per year to serve all four-year-olds and close the teacher wage gap.³

Children Enrolled in Head Start or RI Pre-K

Table 36.

Children Enrolled in Head Start and/or RI Pre-K, Rhode Island, 2025

SCHOOL DISTRICT	# CHILDREN AGES 3 AND 4	% LOW-INCOME CHILDREN	ESTIMATED # LOW-INCOME CHILDREN AGES 3 AND 4	AGE 3		AGE 4				ESTIMATED % OF LOW-INCOME CHILDREN AGE 3 OR 4 IN HEAD START OR RI PRE-K	ESTIMATED % OF ALL CHILDREN AGE 3 OR 4 IN HEAD START OR RI PRE-K
				ENROLLED IN HEAD START ONLY	DUAL ENROLLED IN RI PRE-K & HEAD START	ENROLLED IN HEAD START ONLY	DUAL ENROLLED IN RI PRE-K & HEAD START	ENROLLED IN RI PRE-K ONLY LOW-INCOME	ENROLLED IN RI PRE-K ONLY HIGHER-INCOME		
Barrington	404	14%	57	1	0	0	1	0	0	4%	0%
Bristol	263	38%	100	7	0	1	10	10	2	28%	11%
Burrillville	321	44%	141	4	0	8	1	0	0	9%	4%
Central Falls	673	89%	599	14	0	13	0	151	11	30%	28%
Charlestown	104	30%	31	3	0	0	1	0	0	13%	4%
Coventry	692	38%	263	15	0	2	18	38	20	28%	13%
Cranston	1,617	52%	841	49	0	42	41	121	90	30%	21%
Cumberland	815	24%	196	2	0	3	0	0	0	3%	1%
East Greenwich	299	13%	39	2	0	0	0	0	0	5%	1%
East Providence	871	55%	479	36	0	13	4	124	85	37%	30%
Exeter	120	22%	26	0	0	1	0	3	6	15%	8%
Foster	53	31%	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%	0%
Glocester	188	23%	43	1	0	1	0	0	0	5%	1%
Hopkinton	160	30%	48	0	0	0	1	0	0	2%	1%
Jamestown	62	11%	7	0	0	1	0	0	0	15%	2%
Johnston	540	61%	329	7	1	12	4	28	21	16%	14%
Lincoln	469	33%	155	1	0	1	0	33	21	23%	12%
Little Compton	55	20%	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%	0%
Middletown	365	38%	139	12	0	0	6	48	18	48%	23%
Narragansett	139	24%	33	0	0	1	1	0	0	6%	1%
New Shoreham	22	45%	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%	0%
Newport	440	72%	317	23	3	2	21	2	10	16%	14%
North Kingstown	534	24%	128	2	2	10	0	7	9	16%	6%
North Providence	602	45%	271	14	0	14	8	9	18	17%	10%
North Smithfield	215	26%	56	0	0	1	0	0	0	2%	0%
Pawtucket	1,781	75%	1,336	46	0	44	9	188	83	21%	21%
Portsmouth	347	18%	62	4	0	0	0	9	9	21%	6%
Providence	4,364	86%	3,753	223	0	279	18	528	85	28%	26%
Richmond	159	30%	48	0	0	0	2	0	0	4%	1%
Scituate	164	28%	46	1	0	1	0	0	0	4%	1%
Smithfield	337	24%	81	1	0	4	1	17	18	28%	12%
South Kingstown	412	23%	95	0	2	1	8	1	0	13%	3%
Tiverton	266	38%	101	9	6	0	0	0	0	15%	6%
Warren	174	38%	66	5	0	0	4	18	8	41%	20%
Warwick	1,522	52%	791	42	0	3	37	35	18	15%	9%
West Greenwich	94	22%	21	1	0	0	0	13	13	68%	29%
West Warwick	668	62%	414	18	0	2	28	26	36	18%	16%
Westerly	388	45%	175	9	3	2	11	22	18	27%	17%
Woonsocket	1,122	72%	808	82	0	74	106	133	65	49%	41%
Five Core Cities	8,380	81%	6,788	388	3	412	154	1,002	254	29%	26%
Remainder of State	13,441	38%	5,108	246	14	124	187	562	410	22%	11%
Rhode Island	21,821	54%	11,783	634	17	536	341	1,564	664	26%	17%

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Head Start Programs, children enrolled as of October 2025, by child residence. Rhode Island Department of Education, children enrolled in RI Pre-K as of October 2025, by child residence.

The estimated number of children ages three and four is from Census 2020, Summary File 1. The percentage of low-income four-year-olds is estimated using the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (at or below 185% of the federal poverty level) in the local public school district with regional school district data used for all communities in the region.

The city/town table was redesigned in 2023 to include children ages three and four. Percentages should not be compared with prior Factbooks.

Five core cities are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

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