

Universal Prekindergarten (UPK)

Background

President Obama has focused new attention on the importance of high quality early childhood education and its link to later student achievement and success in school. This federal support is demonstrated in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. More information about implementation will be released as it becomes available.

In the current negotiations for the New York State budget NYSUT is advocating to maintain funding for UPK at FY 08-09 levels (\$452 million) for an additional two years.

UPK implementation in 2008-09

Every public school district in New York state received an allocation to establish or maintain a UPK program in 2008-09. A total of \$36,295,570 or 14.6 percent of the funds were unexpended and returned to the state. A total of 275 districts returned 100 percent of their allocations. District reasons for returning UPK allocations included: lack of space, allocation insufficient to support a program start up, parent opposition, difficulty in including wrap around child care services, transportation problems, and uncertainty of continuation of state funding. To find your district's UPK allocation for 2008-09 go to: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/nyc/2008-2009UPKAllocations.html>.

Who is eligible for UPK?

Every public school district in New York State is now eligible to obtain state funding for universal prekindergarten. Section 3602-e of Education Law defines an "eligible child" as a child who resides within a UPK participating school district and who is four-years of age on or before December 1st or otherwise eligible to attend kindergarten the following school year. A child who is age-eligible to attend kindergarten is not eligible for the UPK program. Two or more school districts may submit a joint application to operate a joint program.

Highlights of Universal Prekindergarten Program Requirements

- The primary purpose of UPK is to provide four-year-old children access to high quality prekindergarten programs that prepares them for future school success by developing strong foundational skills in early literacy and numeracy.
- UPK programs must operate a minimum of two and one-half hours per day, five days per week for a minimum of 180 days per year.
- By law, the school year is defined as July 1st through June 30th. Therefore, a district could design its UPK program to operate for a minimum of 180 days, and include a schedule other than the tradition school calendar, including during summer and school vacation periods.
- The law requires that districts use a minimum of 10 percent of their UPK grant award to contract with one or more eligible agencies to collaborate in the provision of the instructional program for a specified number of enrolled children. These agencies are selected based on a competitive process established by the school district. Eligible agencies include child care and early education providers, day care providers, early

childhood programs or centers or community-based organizations such as approved preschool special education programs, Head Start, nursery schools, libraries and museums which meet the standards and requirements of this Subpart. (Regulations of the Commissioner of Education Subpart 151-1.2 (b)).

- The Regulations require that the program adhere to uniform quality standards for all UPK classrooms including both district-based and eligible agency-based classrooms. The standards include: curricula aligned with State learning standards and with instruction in the early elementary grades of the district, effective and developmentally appropriate instructional strategies, a process for baseline and ongoing assessment of development of language, cognitive and social skills, screening for health and nutrition, and employment of staff with a teaching license or certificate valid for service in the early childhood grades. The collaborating agencies may employ staff with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field with a written plan to obtain early childhood certification within five years. A collaborating agency with staff without teaching certificates must employ an onsite director with a teaching license or certificate for early childhood or child hood grades.

Is participation in UPK mandatory for a school district?

No. UPK is a voluntary program for both school districts and children. Parents and/or guardians may choose, but are not required, to enroll their children in a UPK program.

Advice to local leaders:

1. With the expansion of UPK allocations, more school districts have chosen to participate. Some districts have not chosen to participate because of lack of district space for a UPK class and insufficient state funds to support a program. Local Leaders should explore the advantages of advocating with the executive committee if their district does not currently have a UPK program.
2. While Chapter 57 of the Laws of 2007 expanded the number of districts eligible to receive a state allocation for a UPK program, it also eliminated the requirement that a district form a prekindergarten policy advisory board to make a recommendation to the board of education regarding whether the district should implement a prekindergarten program. There is no requirement for union involvement in UPK decisions. Local presidents should work with school administrators to establish/expand program operated by the district.
3. If a UPK program is located in a school district the teachers are members of your local. Be sure to include UPK teachers in union activities.
4. The school district is required to provide fiscal and program oversight and professional development for all teachers and staff in both district and agency UPK settings. Their professional development must be based on the instructional needs of the children and should be included in the district's Professional Development Plan (PDP).
5. NYSUT's goals for UPK include the following: increase total state allocation; increase allocations for start up programs; increase number of public school based UPK programs; raise program standards and increase coordination of UPK programs with other early childhood programs and with K-grade 3 school programs.

Resources

NYSED site for all information related to UPK: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/nyc/upk.html>.

For information on eligible community agencies go to the New York State Child Care Coordinating Council: www.nyseccc.org.

AFT early childhood resources: <http://aft.org/earlychildhood/index.htm>.

NEA early childhood resources: <http://www.nea.org/tools/12975.htm>.