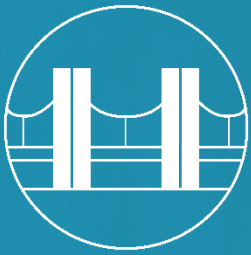# Preschool for All Executive Summary

The program is largely achieving its equity goals, but needs to address risks to expansion

Multnomah County Auditor's Office
Jennifer McGuirk, County Auditor
April 2025

Executive Summary

Preschool for All is largely reaching its equity objectives, but could do more to support preschools to serve diverse children. The program also faces risks to reach its goal of universal preschool by 2030.

The Preschool for All program was created after voters approved a ballot measure in 2020, which created a new tax on high-income earners to fund the program.

The program is guided by the Preschool for All Plan. This implementation plan focuses on addressing systemic issues in early childcare including providing access to preschool for families who have had the least access in the past and raising teacher wages. The plan also lays out a timeline to get to universal preschool by 2030.

The program has been under scrutiny, in part because it has brought in more money than it has spent, resulting in a large balance. Some of that balance was planned, but some of it is because tax returns were higher and expenses were lower than the program's budget.

In this audit, we found that:

- Program leaders need to communicate clearly about changes
- Preschool for All has reached many families from priority groups
- The program has supported preschools to serve diverse children, but more support is needed
- Leaders need to address risks to expansion

Program leaders need to communicate clearly about changes

As they implemented the program, program leaders made changes from the Preschool for All Plan and what was presented to voters in the ballot measure summary. Program leaders have not always communicated clearly and timely about these changes. As a new program, clear communication is critical to build trust with the public and help people understand how the program is being implemented.

Preschool for All has reached many families from priority groups

Preschool for All prioritizes children in Multnomah County who have had the least access to quality, affordable preschool. Preschool for All is effectively prioritizing families in its application process, based on its priority groups and families' application responses. However, there are some barriers in the process to applying priorities.

Children from the following groups get a priority in the application process:

- Families with low incomes
- Children experiencing homelessness
- Children in foster care
- Children who speak languages other than English
- Children with disabilities or developmental delays

The majority of children who apply and enroll appear to have a least one priority, though the percent of children with at least one priority decreased in the most recent school year.

The application process also takes into account families' preferred preschools. Some families had no priorities and were still able to get into the program because they applied at less popular preschools. The program also allows preschools to set aside some spaces for families with children who are continuing from toddler care. This is

another way that families who are not from priority groups can get in. At the same time, some families with priorities were unable to get in.

The majority of applicants and enrollees are in priority groups

Percent of **applications**, **offers**, and **enrollments** with at least one priority indicated on their application
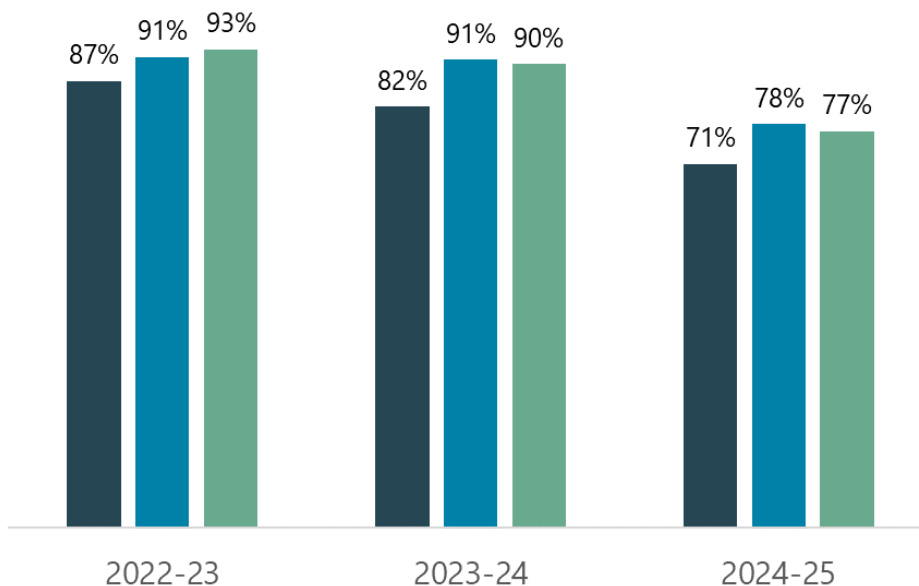
Source: Auditor analysis of data provided by Preschool for All from the MVP and BridgeCare data systems, based on families' application responses. Note: Does not include returning children or ineligible applications. It does include applications, offers, and enrollments made mid-year. It also includes children who enrolled for the school year but did not stay the whole year.

Preschool for All helps families from priority groups apply to preschool through contracts with culturally specific organizations. However, we found that there are opportunities for more focused outreach to help families from all priority groups to apply. The program's no expulsion policy further supports access.

According to interviews, families who were able to get into the program appreciate it.

The program has supported preschools to serve diverse children, but more support is needed

With Preschool for All prioritizing children from priority groups, the program needs to know that preschool providers are prepared to offer inclusive and culturally responsive care. In interviews we heard that providers being prepared to serve children with disabilities was a particular area of concern.

The program has created several supports for providers. Supports include:

- Training opportunities on topics like culturally responsive teaching practices and working with challenging behaviors
- Coaching for teachers in preschool classrooms, provided by contractors
- Inclusion team and inclusion funds to support serving children with disabilities

The inclusion team supports providers as they serve children with disabilities and helps them access funds for supplies, training, or extra staff.

The program should continue to develop its training program to help ensure that providers can serve children in a way that supports a child's specific needs and backgrounds. This could benefit all children in the classroom.

Program leaders need to address risks to expansion

The Preschool for All Plan projected that the program would offer universal access to preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in the county by 2030. However, there are risks that threaten the program's ability to achieve that goal. Program leaders need to focus on addressing those risks and growing the program, so more families can be served.

Preschool for All forecasts that it will have to grow from around 2,000 seats to 11,000 seats in five and a half years. In order to do that, it will have to get more existing preschool providers to participate and build new capacity.

So far, the Preschool for All has 133 participating preschool sites, including small and BIPOC-owned preschools. However, many existing preschool providers in the county have not yet applied or have not qualified.

Preschool for All is reaching revised goals, but not original goals

Actual seats compared to the **range in the original plan** and **revised minimum goals**
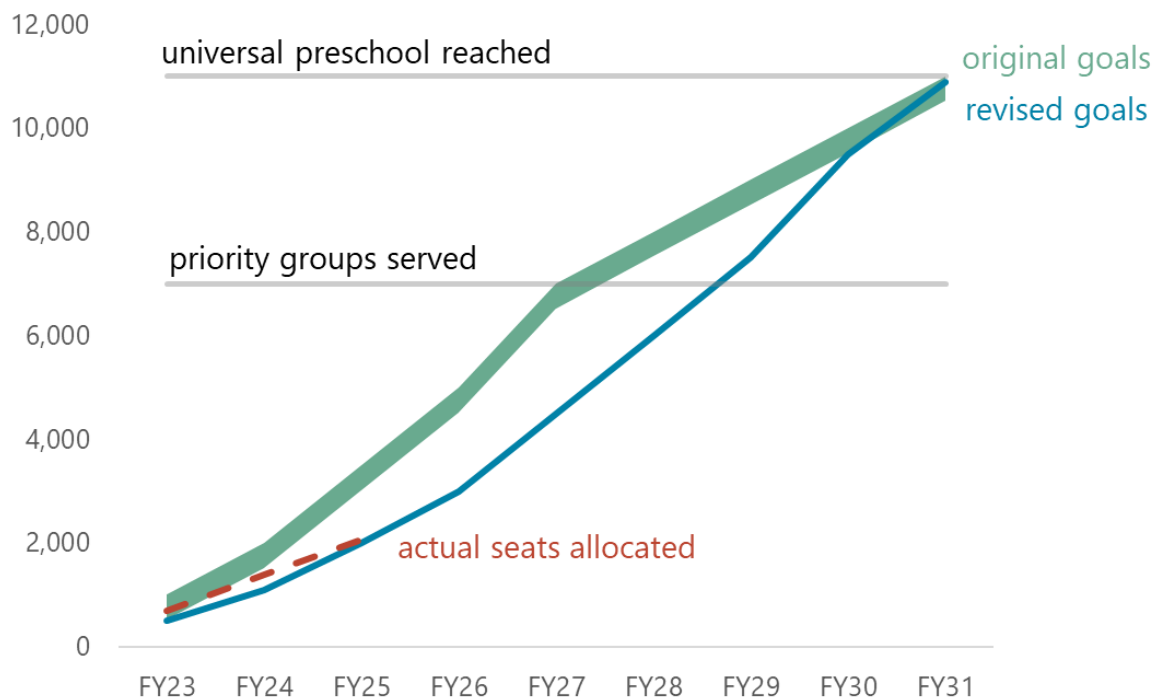
Source: Auditor analysis of Preschool for All Plan and program documents provided by the Preschool and Early Learning Division. Notes: Preschool for All revised its goals downward in 2022. The model for when targets are reached assumes 3,000 seats in existing publicly funded preschool, like Head Start, on top of what is shown in the graph. FY25 seat allocation does not include mid-year seats. The estimate of the priority groups was based on a combination of income and race/ethnicity data and did not account for other factors. When universal preschool will be reached and priority groups served are forecasted estimates.

The Preschool for All program has requirements that are new for private preschools. For example, Preschool for All controls the application and enrollment process, requires specific teacher wages, and requires most preschools to offer 10-hour days. These requirements have goals, such as promoting equity and inclusion and meeting family needs. However, they may contribute to why some providers have hesitated to apply.

Preschool for All is also working to increase the capacity of the educator workforce and preschool facilities. These services were slow to get started but are now operational. The facilities fund aims to grow and improve facilities in early childcare overall, but could clarify requirements and goals for growing the Preschool for All program.

Recommendations

We made 16 recommendations, based on the above findings. The full report includes more details on what led to each recommendation. Our recommendations focused on improving communication and transparency, providing additional supports, getting feedback from preschool providers, and monitoring and adjusting processes for capacity growth.

We recommend that the Department of County Human Services, no later than May 1, 2025:

1. Develop and implement a process to verify the accuracy of families' application answers used for priority weighting. At a minimum, the process should verify income with documentation, since income is the highest weighted and is straightforward to document.

We recommend that the Department of County Human Services, no later than April 1, 2026:

2. Adjust budgets and the forecast to better reflect actual spending.

3. Ensure communications to providers, the Board of County Commissioners, and the public reflect current practices and note in a timely manner when changes from the plan and county code have occurred.

4. Make priority group language consistent across all communications, including contracts, applications, program instructions, and communications to the public.

5. Provide information about the availability of seats at each preschool on the website, to provide more information for families that are applying.

6. Create focused outreach strategies for the each of the priority groups in the Preschool for All Plan.

7. Add more trainings on culturally responsive and accessible preschool.

8. Provide instructions to family navigator organizations, encouraging them to visit and get to know at least some preschools.

9. Add the provider program guide to the website.

10. Create a system to improve data tracking of all preschools that have applied, the outcome, and the reason for the outcome.

11. Create and implement a process for engaging with preschools that have applied but did not participate.

12. Create and implement a formalized mechanism for preschools of various sizes (both participating and not participating) to provide input on the Preschool for All program.

13. Work with central purchasing and the county attorney to review contract requirements for opportunities to reduce burdens on preschools, while still protecting the county. Consult with the county equity contracting group as a resource.

14. Publicly report annually on the progress of the facilities fund. Include updated analysis on the estimated number and capacity of existing private and public preschools, as available data allows.

15. Specify and communicate facility fund guidelines to include requirements for creating Preschool for All seats specifically.

16. Adjust reporting requirements for academic navigators to better monitor if the investments are building new teacher capacity.

Audit Staff

Mandi Hood, Senior Performance Auditor
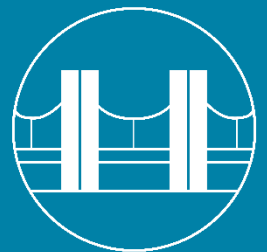Caroline Zavitkovski, CIA, Audit Director