



# West Virginia's progress toward universal prekindergarten



Summary



Institute of Education Sciences  
U.S. Department of Education



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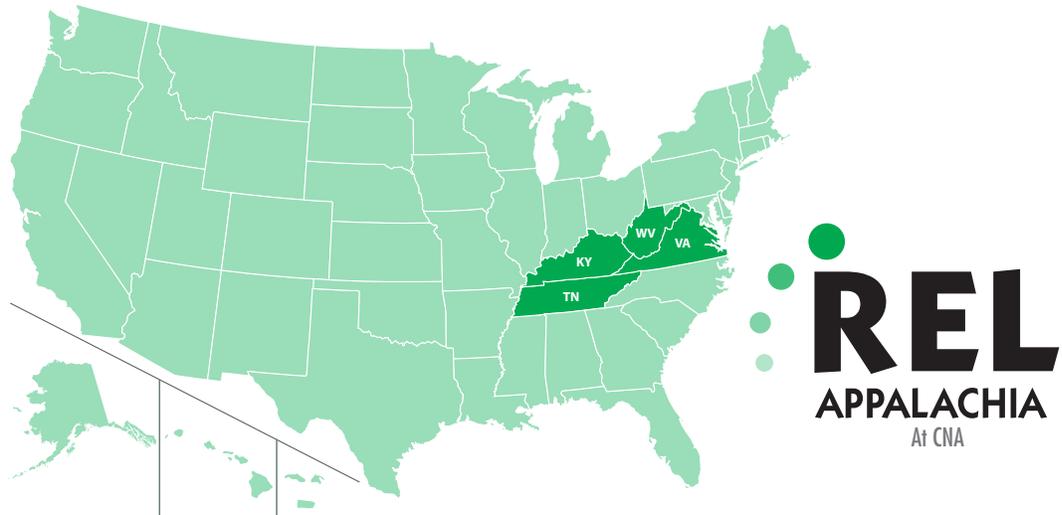
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# West Virginia's progress toward universal prekindergarten

**The report examines rates of participation in West Virginia's universal, voluntary prekindergarten program from 2002/03 to 2006/07. It describes the share of seats provided by collaborative partners and public school systems and analyzes participation rates by demographic and socioeconomic subgroup and county characteristics.**

Many states use targeted prekindergarten (PreK) programs to help qualifying children get a better start in school. Targeted programs admit only children who meet specific criteria, such as low household income. In contrast, West Virginia's voluntary PreK program is universal—it is open to all four-year-olds. Only a few other states have such programs, including Georgia and Oklahoma.

In 2006/07 West Virginia's program was half-way into the 10-year period set for reaching its goal of making PreK available to all four-year-olds. (The program will have met that objective, as defined by West Virginia educators, if in 2012/13 it has an 80 percent participation rate and no waiting list.) Since participation in the program is voluntary, West Virginia state policymakers wondered whether certain factors had been associated with differences in participation rates over 2002/03–2006/07. Had children from all subgroups participated in

the program equally? Had participation varied across counties? Similarly, had participation varied across subgroups within counties—children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, children of a racial/ethnic minority, children receiving special education services? Finally, had participation varied between rural and nonrural counties?

Responding to those concerns, this study was designed to answer four questions:

1. What was the rate of participation in West Virginia's universal, voluntary PreK program by the eligible population (defined as all four-year-olds) in 2006/07—and by how much had that rate increased since 2002/03?
2. What share of program participant seats was provided by collaborative partner programs rather than public school systems in 2006/07—and by how much had that share increased since 2002/03?
3. From 2002/03 through 2006/07 did children in certain subgroups—children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, children of a racial/ethnic minority (race/ethnicity other than White), and children receiving special education services—participate in West Virginia's program at

similar, higher, or lower rates compared with other children?

4. From 2002/03 through 2006/07 did program participation rates in West Virginia counties vary with the demographic or socioeconomic characteristics of a county's eligible children, with counties' rural or nonrural status, or with the socioeconomic status of county residents?

The report answers these questions using data on public school enrollments and county PreK program characteristics provided by the West Virginia Department of Education. In addition, 2000 Census data on education, income, and poverty prevalence were used. The Common Core of Data (a program of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics) was used for information on county urbanization. To measure the size of the eligible population, the average of reported enrollment totals in grades K–2 was used as a proxy. To measure the size of three subgroups within the eligible population—children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, children receiving special education services, and children of a racial/ethnic minority—the reported percentage of kindergarten students in each subgroup was used as a proxy. (This difference between the two proxies was made necessary by limitations in the data for subgroup membership in grades 1 and 2.)

The report finds that:

1. Statewide participation in West Virginia's PreK program rose from 26 percent in 2002/03 to 43 percent in 2006/07—an average annual increase of 4.2 percentage points. To reach the program's objective of universal access in 2012/13 (defined as 80 percent statewide participation), participation would have to continue increasing by 6 percentage points annually, on average, from 2006/07 through 2012/13.
2. Although in 2002/03 the only documented providers of publicly funded PreK seats under the program were public school systems, in 2006/07 nearly a third of the seats were provided by approved collaborative partners.
3. Participation in the West Virginia PreK program varied by subgroup.
  - In 2002/03 children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch participated in the PreK program at the same rate as the eligible population (all four-year-olds). However, from 2003/04 participation by children in this subgroup began to lag behind the rate for the eligible population. In 2006/07, 37 percent of children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch participated in the PreK program, compared with 43 percent for the eligible population.
  - Children of a racial/ethnic minority were a small but growing fraction of the eligible population from 2002/03 (1.5 percent) through 2006/07 (3 percent). They participated in the PreK program each year at rates similar to those for the eligible population. For example, in 2006/07 their participation rate was 45 percent, compared with 43 percent for the eligible population.

- Participation in the PreK program by children receiving special education services began in 2002/03 at 42 percent—much higher than the 26 percent rate for the eligible population. That difference had narrowed by 2006/07, when participation by children receiving special education services was 49 percent (the highest for any subgroup in 2006/07) compared with 43 percent for the eligible population.
  - Rural counties (as classified in 2000/01) had consistently higher PreK program participation rates, on average, than nonrural counties. In 2002/03 the average participation rate for rural counties was 33 percent, compared with 14 percent for nonrural counties. By 2006/07 the average participation rate for rural counties had grown to 48 percent, compared with 35 percent for nonrural counties.
4. Further statistical analysis of participation rates, using multiple covariates to control for other factors, showed that membership in certain demographic and socioeconomic subgroups (children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, children of a racial/ethnic minority, and children receiving special education services) was not associated with participation in the PreK program. However, differences in certain county characteristics were associated with PreK program participation:
- Participation rates were higher in counties with higher percentages of high school graduates in 2000.
  - Participation rates were higher in smaller counties measured in terms of public school enrollments in grades K–12.
  - Participation rates were higher in counties classified as rural in 2000/01.
- There was also some evidence of an inverse association between countywide income levels and PreK program participation rates.
- Two data limitations mean that this report’s findings must be interpreted with caution. First, the West Virginia Department of Education suppressed its data on PreK program participants wherever there were fewer than 10 participants in a given data cell (county, year, or subgroup). That weakens the report’s conclusions about subgroups—especially in the small, often rural counties where data were most likely to be suppressed. Second, data were not available on private PreK program participation or on the use of other (non-PreK) early education programs. Because of these limitations, the results do not provide an overall measure of the extent of participation in early education programs in West Virginia.
- It is not possible to infer from this report’s findings that a causal relationship exists between a particular child, classroom, or county attribute and the extent of participation in West Virginia’s universal, voluntary PreK program.