UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
Carl Vinson Institute of Government

Pre-K Enrollment Study

Caregiver Survey Findings

October 2026

Georgia's Pre-K is a voluntary, lottery-funded program that provides free early care and education for eligible 4-year-olds. The program operates through local school systems and child care learning centers, giving families a no-cost option before kindergarten.

For more than a decade, approximately 60% of Georgia's 4-year-olds enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K Program each year. However, that percentage dropped substantially to 49.1% in 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 public health emergency. The percentage rose in the years after but has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

In 2025, the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) contracted with the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government to examine the decline in Pre-K enrollment. The first phase of the study was a survey of caregivers that asked about their views of pre-kindergarten, their experiences with Georgia's Pre-K, and the factors associated with their decisions to apply or not apply for the program.

The second phase of the research will comprise focus groups with parents and caregivers to delve more deeply into their perceptions of Georgia's Pre-K. Results from the focus groups will be incorporated with the survey findings into a final comprehensive report.

About the Survey

The Institute of Government research team surveyed a random statewide sample of 5,000 households likely to have pre-kindergarten-aged children and 2,759 caregivers whose children were on the official Georgia's Pre-K waitlist, which comprises age-eligible children whose families applied to a Pre-K provider but were not offered a seat. Providers maintain their own lists and submit them to DECAL for a statewide picture of documented unmet demand.

The research team collected responses from May through June 2026. The final sample included 375 caregivers with at least one child under age 8, approximately half from the address-based sample and half from the waitlist; the response rate was about 7%. Findings were weighted to better reflect Georgia caregivers with young children. Because the final sample includes roughly equal numbers of waitlisted caregivers and randomly selected households, the findings identify patterns for further study rather than providing a statewide picture of caregiver views.

Among the respondents, 260 reported submitting Georgia's Pre-K applications for at least one child, 43 had a child not yet eligible for the program, 53 reported not submitting applications for their child(ren), and 19 either did not answer the question or indicated "I don't know."

Key Findings from the Caregiver Survey

- **Caregivers generally viewed pre-kindergarten programs and Georgia's Pre-K positively.** More than three-quarters (85%) said pre-kindergarten programs are "extremely" or "very" helpful for school readiness, and 83% said Georgia's Pre-K would be "extremely" or "very" helpful for their own children. Among caregivers who viewed Georgia's Pre-K as at least "somewhat" helpful, 92% cited children's skill development and preparation for elementary school.
- **Quality and safety were the leading factors in caregivers' application decisions.** Most (96%) respondents rated quality of education as "extremely" or "very" important in their decision on whether to apply for Georgia's Pre-K, and 93% placed similar importance on provider safety procedures. Provider reputation (90%), children's school readiness (89%), and the program's free cost (87%) also ranked highly.
- **Most survey respondents (71%) had applied to Georgia's Pre-K for at least one eligible child.** Among the 43 caregivers whose children were not yet eligible, 82% said they were "extremely" or "very" likely to enroll when eligible. Preparing children for elementary school (68%) and opportunities to practice positive social behaviors (51%) were the most frequently selected reasons for enrolling or planning to enroll.
- **Current and prospective applicants often had clear provider and setting preferences.** When asked how many Georgia's Pre-K providers they would consider, 36% of respondents indicated they would enroll only at their preferred provider, the most common response. Sixty-four percent preferred Georgia's Pre-K in their local school system, while 14% preferred a child care center.
- **Location and keeping siblings together mattered to caregivers with multiple children.** Among caregivers with two or more children, 75% said it was "extremely" or "very" important to enroll all children at the same school or provider, and 72% placed similar importance on Georgia's Pre-K being near their other children's school or child care.
- **Applicants generally described the application process as clear and easy.** Most respondents (91%) with experience applying to Georgia's Pre-K said the process was clear, and 89% said it was easy. Most written comments praised the process's ease, but some open-ended responses expressed concerns about lotteries, provider availability, and finding a program that fit family schedules or existing child care arrangements.
- **Application patterns differed across some caregiver characteristics.** Within the survey sample, non-applicants were more likely to be non-Hispanic, age 35 or older, have a high school education or less, and live in urban counties.
- **Some caregivers preferred other pre-kindergarten options.** Among the 85 respondents who had not applied for Georgia's Pre-K for all eligible children, 22% cited a preference for a faith-based program. Others cited private-pay pre-kindergarten (19%), half-day programs (18%), and part-time programs (15%). Fifteen percent said they had not been aware of Georgia's Pre-K.