Advancing First Class Pre-K in Alabama:
Brief 1: Expanding Access to First Class Pre-K

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Introduction

Alabama has significantly expanded enrollment in its high-quality, nationally recognized First Class Pre-K program in recent years. However, enrollment still falls short of universal access. This has often been defined as at least 70% of 4-year-olds, although no standard definition for universal access exists. Currently, 41% of Alabama's approximately 59,000 four-year-olds are enrolled in Pre-K.

This brief analyzes county-level enrollment and waiting list data to identify where and how many new First Class Pre-K classrooms are needed. It also incorporates insights from Pre-K directors and parents to help understand barriers and facilitators to expansion.

Using what we learned, we provide recommendations to guide the strategic expansion of the First Class Pre-K program.

Highlights

- **9% of 4-year-olds** (5,200 children) are on at least one First Class Pre-K waiting list.
- **Enrollment rates and waiting lists vary significantly by county**, with urban counties generally showing both lower enrollment rates and higher waitlist rates. County-level enrollment ranges from 19% (Shelby County) to 95% (Marengo County).
- Our analysis identified **20 key counties to target for Pre-K expansion** based on their high waitlist and low enrollment rates.
- Barriers to Pre-K enrollment and expansion include **local competition and limited after-school care, transportation, and available classroom space**.

Recommendations

- **Geographically Target Expansion**: Prioritize adding First Class Pre-K classrooms in the 20 counties identified as having high waitlists and low enrollment. These counties are listed on page 6.
- **Increase Capacity in Target Counties:** Aim to accommodate at least 50% of the waitlisted children, approximately 115 new classrooms. This will increase statewide Pre-K access by about 3.5 percentage points.
- **Address Access and Expansion Barriers:** Expanding First Class Pre-K access beyond 50% statewide is likely to require significant financial investment to address barriers like a lack of classroom space, the need for after-school care options, more fully funding teacher salaries, and transportation for Pre-K students.
- **Continue Analysis:** Refine expansion strategies using site-specific waiting list and enrollment data and mapping. This will allow for better visualization and understanding of specific regional challenges and expansion opportunities.

Project Overview

This brief is part of the **Advancing First Class Pre-K in Alabama** project conducted by the University of Alabama for the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. The larger project examines current First Class Pre-K funding, implementation, access, stakeholder perspectives, and comparisons to other state Pre-K programs. Our overarching goal is to offer recommendations for expanding First Class Pre-K while maintaining high levels of quality.

Findings

Pre-K enrollment and waitlist rates vary significantly across Alabama's 67 counties. Enrollment ranges from **19%** in Shelby County to **95%** in Marengo County. Counties with the highest waitlist rates—the proportion of 4-year-old children in a county who are registered on a waitlist for Pre-K programs, relative to the total population of 4-year-olds in that county—include Autauga (19%), Shelby (17%), and Elmore (15%).

Metropolitan areas and their surrounding suburbs (e.g., Birmingham, Huntsville, Montgomery, Mobile) **generally have lower enrollment and higher waitlist rates**. This reflects high demand exceeding existing capacity, especially given rapid population growth in some of these areas (e.g., Shelby County), which often outpaces efforts to expand Pre-K capacity, resulting in lower enrollment rates despite high demand.

Conversely, **rural counties often have higher enrollment rates**, largely due to their smaller populations. This means that public school Pre-K classrooms are generally able to meet the demand. For example, in Marengo County, 90% of First Class Pre-K classrooms are in public schools. First Class Pre-K in rural communities, whether in public school or another setting, helps to bridge gaps in early education access that often exist in rural areas.

The **inverse relationship between enrollment and waitlist rates**, shown in Figure 1, underscores the need for targeted expansion in counties with higher unmet demand, generally counties with higher population.

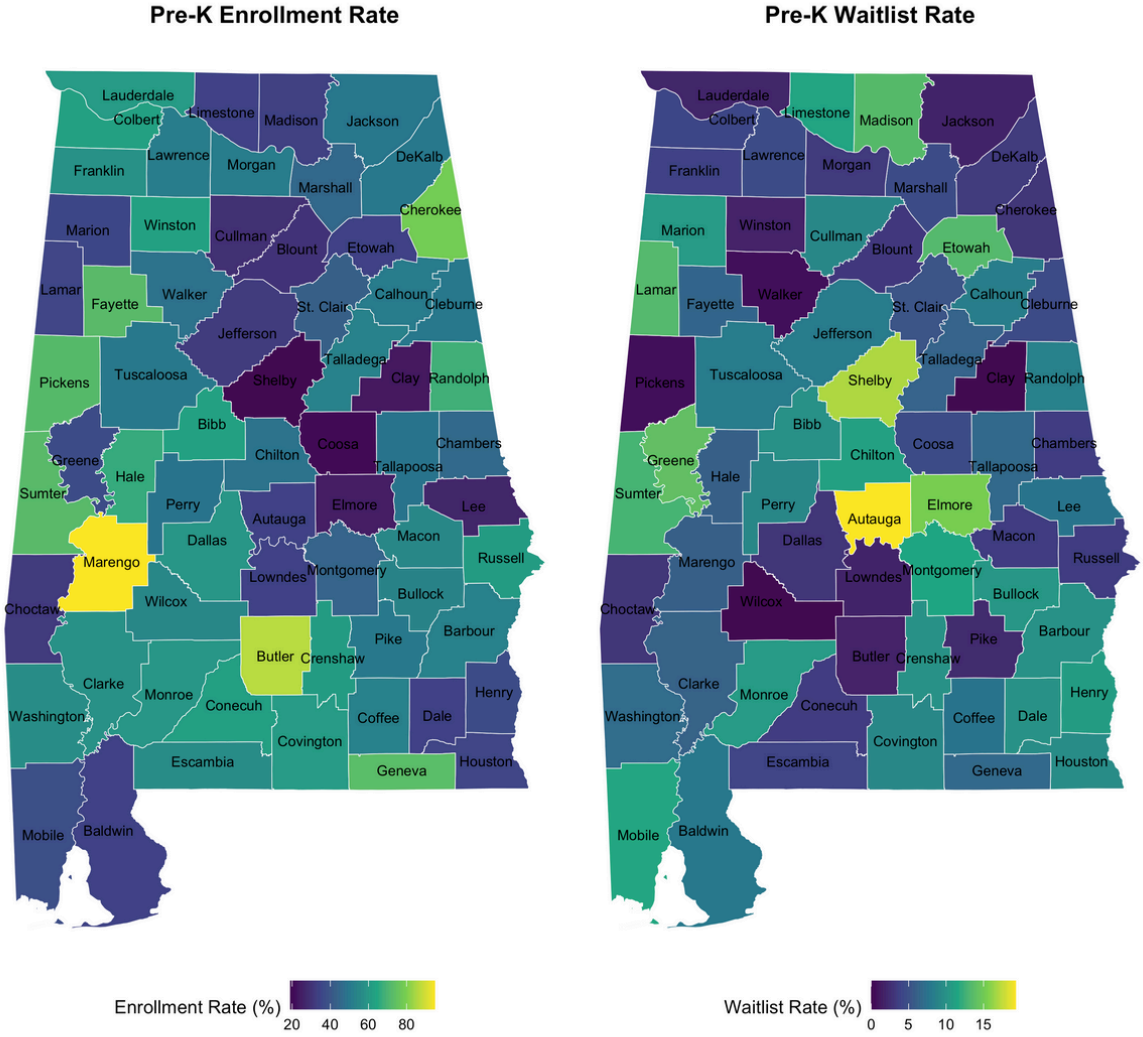

Figure 1. Geographical Distribution of Pre-K Enrollment and Waitlist Rates across Alabama.

In rural areas, public school Pre-K classrooms can often meet much of the Pre-K need. This is likely not the case in densely populated areas, where existing public schools may be near or at capacity and have insufficient space to add additional Pre-K units without significant infrastructure investments. Therefore, expansion in high-need, highly populated counties will likely require **adding classrooms across all delivery types**.

"We need busing a thousand percent. That is something I work on every year." - Public School Pre-K Director

Focus Groups

These findings align with feedback shared by First Class Pre-K directors. During focus groups, directors across Pre-K delivery types answered a range of questions about their experiences with First Class Pre-K, including their perceptions of why families may choose not to enroll in the program and challenges families may face in accessing Pre-K.

Some directors reported local competition for enrollment between programs in a county, with multiple programs competing for the same families in order to be fully enrolled. This tends to negatively affect classrooms not located in public schools, as many families prefer a public school program.

Directors also identified hours of operation, specifically the need for after-school care, as an area that needs to be addressed in order for First Class Pre-K to expand. Public school leadership noted the need to increase grant amounts to more fully fund teacher salaries and identified this as a key barrier to adding more classrooms, second only to space constraints. Directors across program types identified transportation as a barrier for some families, since most Pre-K classrooms do not offer busing.

"The only time we get somebody decline a spot is if we can't offer them extended day." - Pre-K Director

Family Interviews

We interviewed families who had a child in kindergarten who had not attended First Class Pre-K to understand their reasons for not enrolling. Families consistently identified the location of available Pre-K classrooms and the hours of operation as two primary reasons their child did not attend Pre-K.

Families varied in their location preferences, with some preferring a classroom in their local public school and others wanting to keep their child in the child care program they already attended for Pre-K. They also varied in their views about hours of operation. For example, a small number of families believed First Class Pre-K operated too many hours. However, most often, families reported needing after-school care for their child, and if this wasn't available, attending Pre-K was not feasible for their family. Directors echoed this in focus groups, noting the challenge of filling their classrooms when they did not offer after-school care.

"If it would've been at the school she would be going to kindergarten, we would've used it." -Parent

Together, the focus group and interview results, combined with the and county-level waiting list and access analyses, provide compelling evidence that strategically targeting expansion to high-demand, low-access areas is crucial to avoid harming enrollment in existing Pre-K classrooms.

"We [Head Start and local school] are supposed to have this partnership, but we are competing for the same kids. It kind of murkies the partnership." - Head Start Pre-K Director

The disparity in enrollment rates between metropolitan and rural counties underscores the strain that population size and growth place on Pre-K in urban areas. While access rates in rural counties benefit from smaller populations, metropolitan areas face more challenges keeping up with growing demand.

Targeting Counties for Expansion

Additional factors like family preferences, transportation, availability of other early care and education options, and local policy differences may also influence these patterns and should be explored further in future work.

To determine where to add additional Pre-K classrooms, we recommend **prioritizing counties with below-average enrollment rates and above-average waitlist rates.** This expansion strategy would likely generate the largest increase in enrollment at the lowest cost.

Figure 2 visually represents the inverse relationship between access and waiting list rates. Each dot represents a county, with its size and color indicating the total population of 4-year-olds residing there. Larger dots in yellow or green correspond to counties with a higher number of 4-year-olds. The two red dashed lines mark the overall state averages for enrollment and waitlist rates, serving as reference points. The solid green line represents the average relationship between enrollment and waitlists across the state. The last page of this brief includes a QR code and link to view an interactive version of this diagram.

Counties in the upper left quadrant (Lower Enrollment, Higher Waitlists) are the most critical targets for Pre-K expansion efforts due to their significant unmet demand relative to existing capacity. With some exceptions, these counties generally have higher populations of 4-year-olds.

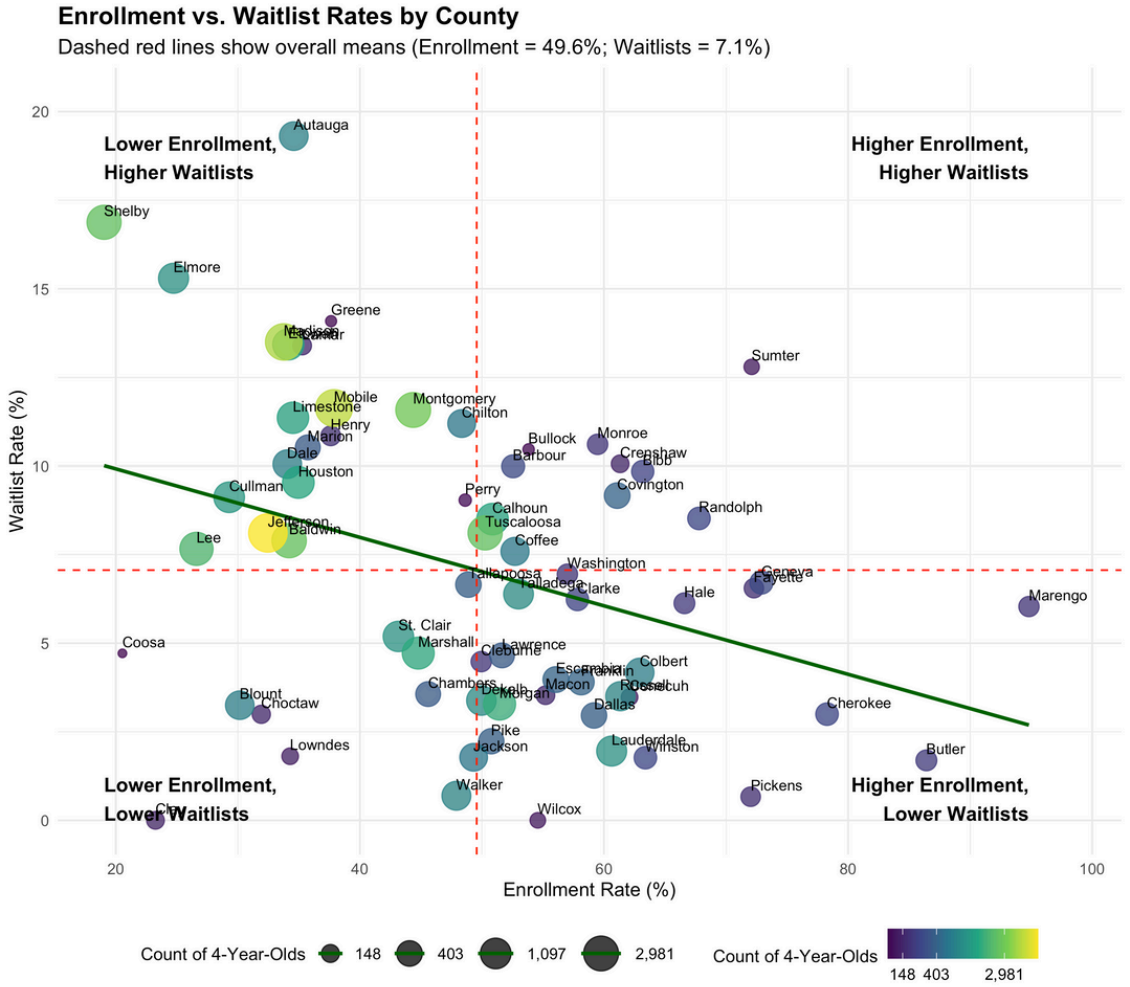

Figure 2. Relationship Between Pre-K Enrollment and Waitlist Rates Across Alabama Counties

Focusing on these areas addresses immediate need and maximizes statewide impact due to the weighted average calculation of statewide enrollment rates.

We recommend focusing Pre-K expansion investments in this specific group of counties for two key reasons. First, addressing the high waitlist rates in these counties directly addresses immediate need. Second, adding classrooms in these counties is likely to produce a more dramatic increase in the state's overall Pre-K access rate, because counties with larger populations contribute more to the statewide access rate.

Number of Classrooms to Add

The 20 high-priority counties identified in the top left quadrant of Figure 2 have approximately 36,600 four-year-olds, with 12,200 currently enrolled and 4,100 on waitlists. Figure 3 shows the impact of resolving 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100% of current waitlists, assuming a classroom size of 18 students.

Resolving 50% of the waitlist would require roughly **115 new classrooms**, increasing the statewide enrollment rate by 3.5 percentage points. Accommodating all waitlisted children in these counties would require approximately **229 new classrooms**. This would increase the statewide enrollment rate to **48%**, a 7-percentage-point increase.

Investing in these new classrooms would not only alleviate immediate demand in high-need areas but also enhance the overall coverage of First Class Pre-K throughout Alabama, thereby positioning the state closer to achieving its goal of universal access. However, these expansion scenarios depend on fiscal resources, interested and eligible families enrolling in the program, and space for new classrooms in these counties.

Figure 3 shows the impact of resolving 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100% of these waitlists, assuming an average classroom size of 18 students.

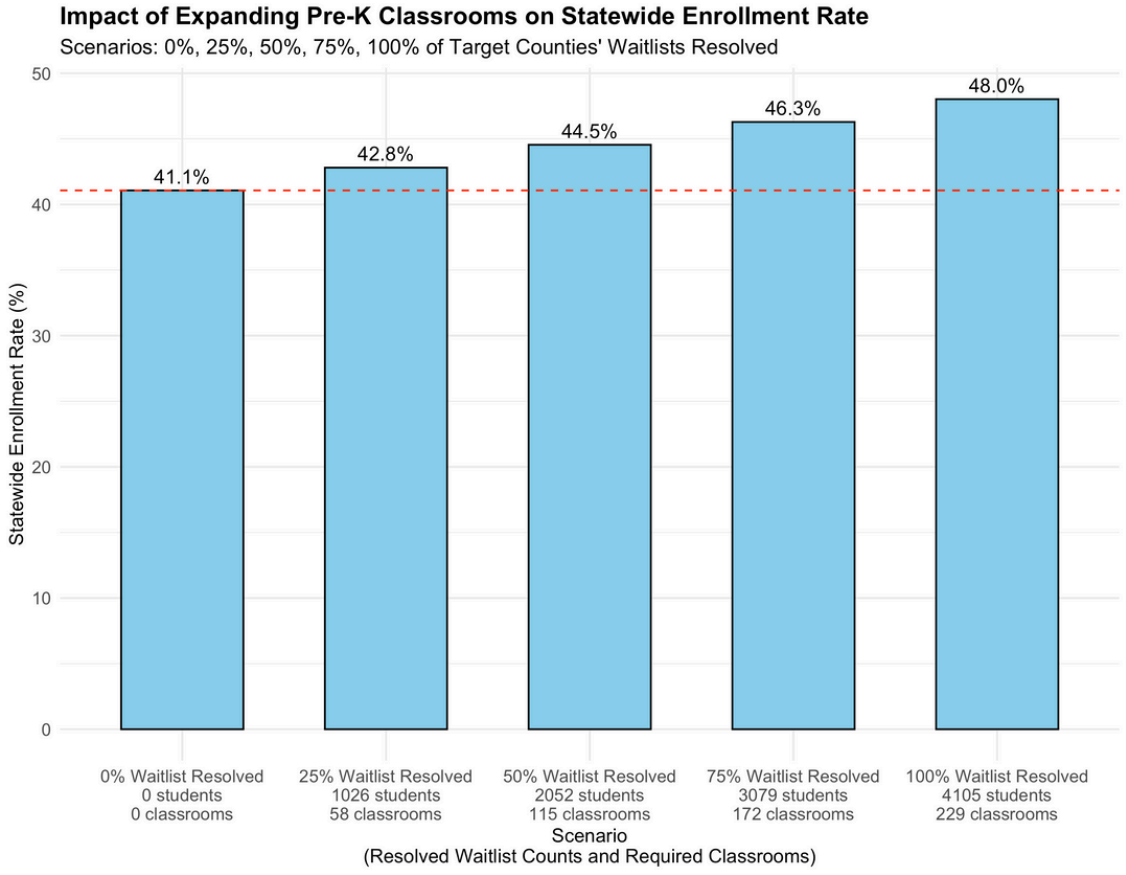

Figure 3. Impact of Resolving Waitlists on Statewide Pre-K Enrollment Rates across Different Scenarios

Twenty High-Priority Counties for First Class Pre-K Expansion

Region	Counties
Region 1	Cullman, Limestone
Region 2	Madison
Region 3	Greene, Lamar, Marion, Perry
Region 4	Jefferson, Shelby
Region 5	Etowah
Region 6	Autauga, Chilton, Elmore, Montgomery
Region 7	Baldwin, Mobile
Region 8	Dale, Henry, Houston, Lee

Additional Considerations

Although the 20 target counties are places with high demand and low supply of First Class Pre-K, these counties may also have significant space constraints within existing early childhood programs and public schools. Therefore, helping to **address space concerns** in interested sites across setting types is important.

We anticipate that this targeted recruitment will help increase Pre-K access across Alabama. However, as shown in Figure 3, resolving the waitlists in the 20 target counties will only bring access to around 48% of 4-year-olds. **Bringing access above 50% will likely require significant financial investment** to address systemic barriers. In the table on the right, we present a hypothetical example of some of the efforts that may be required to increase the Pre-K access percentage to 50%, 60%, or 70%.

Together, these results reveal several key findings to support the intentional statewide expansion of the First Class Pre-K program. First, expansion should be **geographically targeted** so as not to harm enrollment of existing Pre-K classrooms. Second, we recommend setting **incremental expansion goals** and reevaluating and adjusting those regularly. Finally, expanding First Class Pre-K beyond 50% of 4-year-olds is likely to take a significant investment to address current barriers.

Anticipated Actions That May Be Required to Meet Access Targets

To Reach 50% Access:

- Targeting growth in communities with waitlists
- Addressing some of the major funding concerns for public school and non-public school classrooms (e.g., teacher salaries, facility costs)

To Reach 60% Access:

All of the 50%, PLUS

- Addressing space concerns in public schools
- Fully funding teacher salary costs
- Targeted recruitment in lower-access communities
- Funding before and after-school care

To Reach 70% Access:

All of the 60%, PLUS

- Public awareness campaign about benefits of FCPK
- Offering transportation
- Producing more credentialed ECE teachers
- Bringing in most eligible sites (Head Start, child care, public schools, etc.)

Methods

Our analysis used 2024-2025 Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education data on county-level access, including First Class Pre-K enrollment, county-level waitlist numbers, and four-year-old population, and qualitative data from focus groups with Pre-K directors and interviews with families who did not send their child to First Class Pre-K.

Administrative Data. The waiting list data analyzed here is de-duplicated and aggregated at the county level. Therefore, we assume that families want to attend Pre-K in the same county where they live, which may or may not be true. These analyses also do not consider local regulations that restrict enrollments, such as some public schools' requirements that children attend Pre-K in the school for which they are zoned. Incorporating more specific and detailed waitlist data and socioeconomic indicators into future analyses could yield deeper insights into the drivers of enrollment disparities and inform targeted strategies to improve access across the state.

Calculating pre-K enrollment and waiting list rates by county involves small and sparse counts, especially in rural counties, that can affect the degree of certainty and reliability of these rates. To address these issues, standard errors were calculated for each enrollment rate, and 95% confidence intervals were plotted to provide interval estimates. Additionally, a Bayesian hierarchical model was applied to generate shrinkage estimates, which adjust less reliable rates toward the overall mean, improving their reliability. We illustrated the negative association between county-level Pre-K enrollment and waitlist rates through a scatterplot and a fitted linear regression line.

Focus Groups. We conducted 15 virtual focus groups with 68 First Class Pre-K directors. Groups were separated by program types: public schools, child care programs (including private child care, faith-based, community organization, and private school classrooms), universities, and Head Start. Focus groups lasted 60-90 minutes and averaged 4-5 participants each. They were conducted using a semi-structured protocol that included questions about the adequacy of First Class Pre-K funding, feedback on program implementation, and ideas for continued program improvement. Groups were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were coded using the Rapid and Rigorous Qualitative Data Analysis (RaDaR) coding technique (Watkins, 2017). This included two rounds of data restructuring and reduction. A team of coders used open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to code the reduced data.

Interviews. We conducted 21 interviews with parents of children in kindergarten who did not participate in the First Class Pre-K program during the previous school year. Participating parents represented most regions of the state but had higher levels of education and higher household income than the general population on average. We recruited participants through paid social media advertising. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 20 minutes. Parents were asked questions about their child care arrangements, why they selected them, their awareness of First Class Pre-K, and whether they had considered using First Class Pre-K. Interviews were recorded, and recordings were transcribed. The transcripts were coded using the RaDaR coding technique and open coding.

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View and explore the figures from this brief using the QR code or the following link: https://tinyurl.com/FCPKenroll