

Advancing First Class Pre-K in Alabama:

Fact Sheet: Expanding Access to First Class Pre-K

July 2025

Alison Hooper and JoonHo Lee, The University of Alabama

Introduction

This fact sheet summarizes key findings about Pre-K access from the Advancing First Class Pre-K in Alabama project. Alabama's nationally recognized Pre-K program provides high-quality early education. However, only 41% of the state's four-year-olds are currently enrolled, leaving thousands of children without access to this critical opportunity.

Key Findings

- **Significant Demand:** 5,200 Alabama four-year-olds are on First Class Pre-K waiting lists.
- **Uneven Access:** Enrollment rates vary dramatically by county, from 19% to 95%. Metropolitan areas and counties with growing populations often have lower enrollment rates due to high demand and limited classroom space.
- **Targeted Expansion Needed:** To maximize impact, Pre-K expansion should prioritize counties with high waitlists and low enrollment rates.

A strategic investment to expand First Class Pre-K will yield significant returns:

- **Addressing Immediate Need:** Targeting the 20 high-priority counties will directly address some of the unmet demand for First Class Pre-K.
- **Boosting Statewide Access:** Resolving 50% of the waitlist in these 20 priority counties would require an additional 115 classrooms, resulting in a 3.5 percentage point increase in the statewide enrollment rate.
- **Laying the Foundation for Future Success:** High-quality Pre-K has been shown to improve children's academic achievement, social-emotional development, and long-term life outcomes.

Without increased investment:

- Thousands of Alabama children and families will continue to miss out on the benefits of high-quality Pre-K.
- The opportunity gap will persist, limiting opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Alabama will fall further behind other states in providing universal access to early education.

Recommendations

To continue expanding access to First Class Pre-K while maintaining high quality, we recommend:

- Allocating additional funding to add new First Class Pre-K program in the next legislative cycle – a critical step towards achieving universal access.
- Supporting a Strategic, Two-Phased Approach:
 - **Phase 1: Achieve 50% Access Statewide:** Add about 250 classrooms, focused on high-priority counties, and increase classroom grant amounts to account for rising costs. This would directly address waitlists and increase the statewide enrollment rate by approximately nine percentage points (41% to 50%). This phase is achievable within the program structure and builds on existing infrastructure.
 - **Phase 2: Expand Beyond 50% with a Transformative Investment:** Reaching greater than 50% access will necessitate a significantly larger financial commitment.

Expansion beyond 50% is likely to require:

- **Addressing Space Concerns:** Building new facilities and/or renovating existing spaces to accommodate Pre-K classrooms.
- **Fully Funding Teacher Salaries:** Ensuring competitive compensation to attract and retain qualified educators.
- **Expanding Support Services:** Providing options for transportation and after-school care to meet the needs of working families.
- **Strengthening the Early Childhood Workforce:** Expanding pathways and financial incentives for early educators to pursue credentials.
- **The Bottom Line:** A substantial, targeted investment in First Class Pre-K is essential to increase access, ensure high-quality learning opportunities for all Alabama children, and build a stronger future for our state.

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

For more information, see this research brief: Hooper, A., & Lee, J. (2025). Brief 1: Expanding Access to First Class Pre-K in Lower-Access, Higher-Demand Counties. Advancing First Class Pre-K in Alabama: A Roadmap for Expanding Access.

This project was funded by the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE). The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by ADECE.