

Why Pre-K 4 SA is Still Needed

The State Still Does Not Directly Fund Full-Day Pre-K

HB 3 (2019) required districts to offer a full day of pre-K instruction to eligible four-year-olds, but formula funding stayed at the half-day rate. Districts were provided additional funding, known as the Early Learning Allotment, but this funding was insufficient to cover all required expenses, including full-day pre-k, reading academy training for all K-3 teachers, and high dosage tutoring programs. Districts had to cover the difference using grants, federal Title I dollars, and local funds redirected from other needs.

The 2025 session's major school-finance bill, HB 2, changed how the Early Education Allotment is distributed among districts to encourage districts to apply the funds to full-day prekindergarten, but it did not correct the underlying half-day formula. Funding for three-year-olds remains at ½ day with no additional funding to expand to full-day. For this reason, few San Antonio area districts offer pre-k to three-year-olds outside of Head Start classrooms.

State Eligibility Remains Narrow

Public schools are permitted to serve only a portion of prekindergarten students. Eligibility categories are limited to income below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines, homelessness, foster care, emergent bilingual status, active-duty or killed in action military, Star of Texas Award, and children of classroom teachers. By design, Pre-K 4 SA is open to any three- or four-year-old in San Antonio with priority given to low- and middle-income, military connected, homeless, and children in foster care.

Eligibility Category	Pre-K 4 SA	Public School Districts
Low income (<185% FPL/ ≈57% SMI)	✓	✓
Middle income (186-220% FPL/ 85% SMI)	✓	—
Active-duty military	✓	✓
Military veterans	✓	—
Military reserve	✓	—
Child of armed forces member killed in action	✓	✓
Homeless	✓	✓
Foster care	✓	✓
Emergent bilingual	✓	✓
Children of teachers	✓	✓
Children of Star of Texas Award recipients	✓	✓
Children with exceptional needs	✓	—
4-year-olds, full day	✓	✓
3-year-olds, full day	✓	Half Day Only



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PRE-K 4 SA BRIEF ON THE STATE OF EARLY EDUCATION, AUGUST 2026

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Why Pre-K 4 SA is Still Needed (cont.)

HB 2 (2025) Tightened Districts’ Ability to Serve Beyond State Eligibility

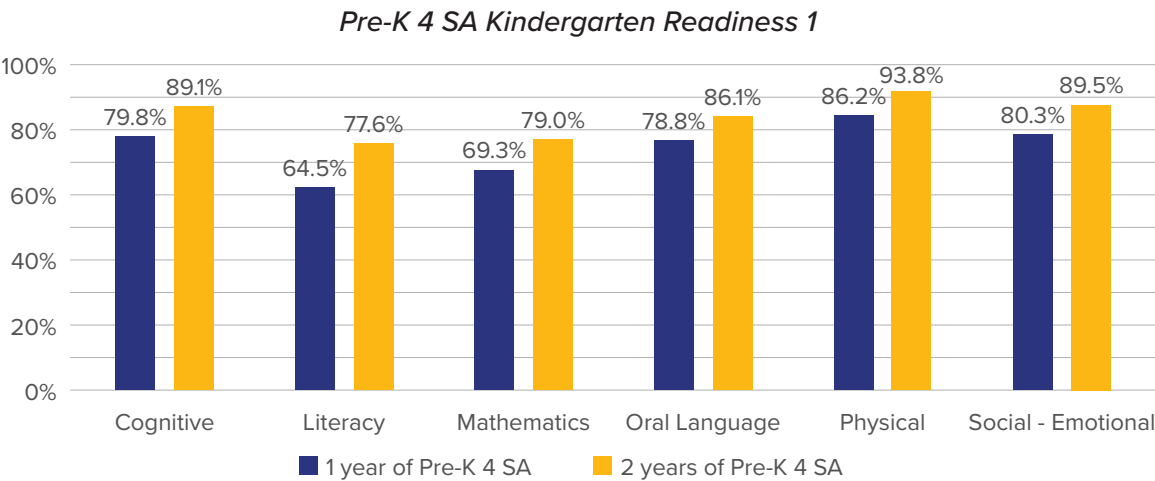
Before HB 2, districts with open seats could offer tuition-based pre-K to families outside the state’s free-eligibility. This had the unintended consequence of destabilizing private child care for children under the age of three. To correct this, HB 2 narrowed school districts’ ability to serve children beyond those who are eligible for free public pre-kindergarten.

Starting in the 2027–2028 school year, a district may only offer tuition-based pre-K if one of the state’s newly designated intermediary organizations first confirms that no eligible private child care provider is available to serve the child. The same new intermediary sign-off is now required before a district can build or repurpose a classroom to serve pre-k students at all.

Texas Currently Does Not Require Quality in Pre-K

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) tracks ten minimum quality benchmarks for state pre-K programs nationally. Texas met four of the ten as recently as the 2022–2023 school year; after the Legislature loosened teacher-credential requirements in 2023 (HB 2729, allowing associate degrees in place of a bachelor’s degree), Texas dropped to just two of ten benchmarks in 2024. NIEER also ranks Texas 40th nationally in per-child pre-K spending.

Conversely, Pre-K 4 SA was built with high-quality at its core. Pre-K 4 SA Education Centers are NAEYC accredited and meet all 10 NIEER benchmarks. Additionally, external evaluations consistently demonstrate that Pre-K 4 SA delivers exceptionally high-quality early education that results in children being more than kinder ready.



Source: Westat (2026). Pre-K 4 SA Education Centers: Year 12 (2024-2025) Evaluation Brief

Why Pre-K 4 SA is Still Needed (cont.)

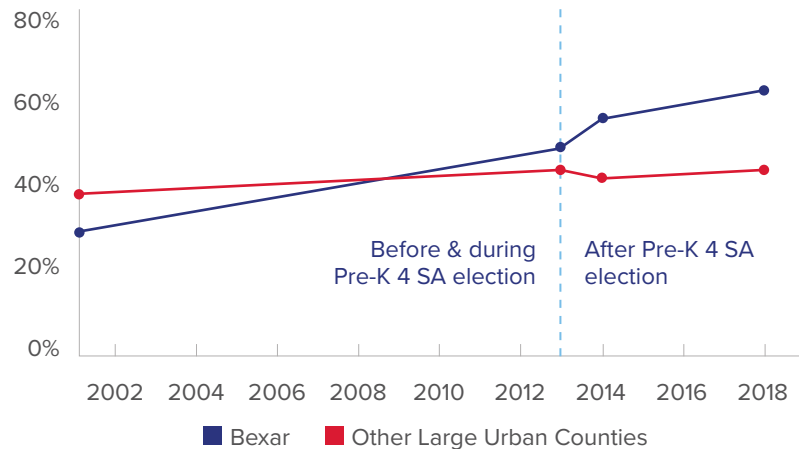


Only 20% of Eligible 3-Year-Olds are Being Served

When Pre-K 4 SA launched in 2013, only 46.8% of eligible four-year-olds in San Antonio enrolled in public prekindergarten. By 2018, enrollment increased to 61.3%, far outpacing other urban areas in Texas. A study by the Urban Education Institute in Texas attributed this rapid rise to the presence of Pre-K 4 SA.

Source: Villarreal, M.U. (2019) *Impact Study of Prekindergarten for San Antonio* (2019). Urban Education Institute at UTSA.

Percent of public school first-graders who participate in public pre-k



By 2022, 90% of eligible four-year-olds in San Antonio were enrolled in prekindergarten. For three-year-olds, the story was very different. Only 12% of eligible three-year-olds were enrolled in public pre-K, largely because so few school districts offered prekindergarten to three-year-olds. Low-income families who wanted an alternative faced another barrier; the waiting list for a child care scholarship that would let them enroll in a participating private child care center numbered in the thousands, leaving most families with few real options.

Pre-K 4 SA began admitting three-year-olds in 2023 to help close that gap. By the 2024-25 school year, three-year-old enrollment in public prekindergarten had risen to 20%, an increase driven almost entirely by the roughly 1,000 three-year-olds Pre-K 4 SA serves each year. Pre-K 4 SA remains committed to expanding access by working through partnerships with school districts and high-quality child care providers to reach more three-year-olds.

Early Learning is Far More than Prekindergarten

While enrollment in prekindergarten is important, early learning is much more than a single year of classroom instruction before kindergarten. It is the accumulation of experiences, relationships, and skill-building that begins at birth, long before any child is old enough to qualify for a pre-K seat. An estimated 90% of a child's brain growth happens before age five. Foundational skills such as

language, self-regulation, early literacy and numeracy are already taking shape in infancy and toddlerhood. By the time a child walks into a prekindergarten classroom, three to four years of the most critical developmental window have already passed, largely outside the reach of any coordinated public system.



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Early Learning is Far More than Prekindergarten

Neither the private market nor state policy has closed the structural gap in early learning. What makes San Antonio a national leader in early learning is we did not wait for state policy or the market to catch up with brain research. The visionary Brainpower Task Force designed Pre-K 4 SA to address the full early learning age span, not just the single year the state funds. That design shows up in how the program operates: infant and toddler classrooms at its newest campus, citywide coaching and quality-certification support for nearly 100 independent child care providers serving children well below pre-K age, and professional development

open to early learning educators across San Antonio, regardless of what age group they teach. Where state law treats early education as a single grade level, San Antonio built a program around the idea that birth to five is one continuous developmental period and that a city serious about school and career readiness has to invest in all of it, not just the year immediately before kindergarten.



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