

The State of pre-K after the 2019 Legislative Session

By Rachel Boggs and Chandra Villanueva

There is a long history of public support for early childhood education programs in Texas. In 1984, Texas established a state supported pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) program to develop math, language and social skills for low-income, homeless, and limited English proficient three- and four-year-olds. Over the years, lawmakers have expanded eligibility to include children in foster care, children of active duty members of the armed forces, and children whose parents were injured or killed while serving in the military, as a peace officer, or first responder. While access to pre-K has increased over time, the funding necessary to provide high-quality early education has not always been available.

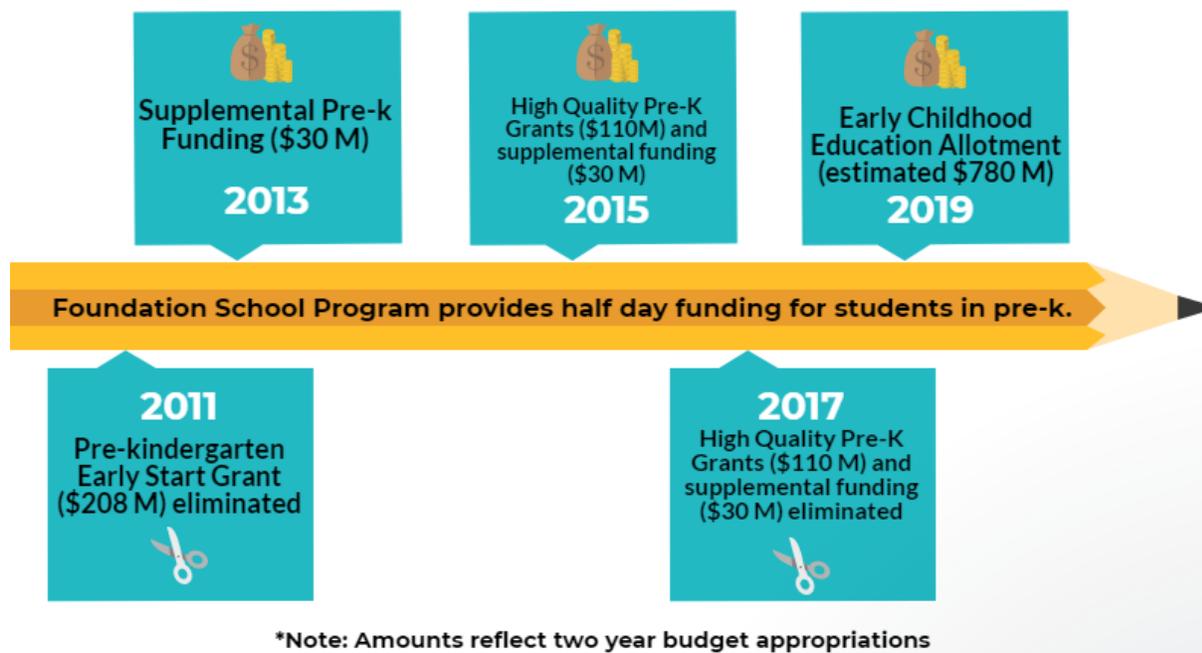
This year, early education was again a top priority for the Legislature after lawmakers eliminated all supplemental and grant funding for pre-K in 2017. While the 2019 Legislature made improvements to program delivery and quality, the pre-K program continues to lack full, predictable funding.

Funding for pre-K has been Inconsistent

The primary source of pre-K funding is through the Foundation School Program, the formulas and laws used to fund the maintenance and operation of Texas schools. School districts receive state funding for a half-day of instruction, meaning about four hours of pre-K. Many districts choose to provide a full-day pre-K program instead, because the longer day of education is better for the students and for working parents. But even full-day programs only receive half-day funding from the state. There have been some grant programs that provided supplemental support for pre-K, but there are not any of those left at this time.

Lawmakers made deep cuts to public education in 2011, including the elimination of the Pre-K Early Start Grant Program. This grant program had provided \$208 million every two years to school districts to improve or expand their pre-K programs. As a first step toward restoring pre-K funding after the 2011 cuts, lawmakers dedicated \$15 million a year in supplemental pre-K funding in both the 2013 and 2015 budgets.

In 2015, lawmakers passed HB 4 to create the “High Quality Pre-k Grant Program,” which provided additional funding to school districts who meet high-quality pre-K standards related to curriculum, teacher qualifications, academic performance, and family engagement. Lawmakers capped funding for this grant program at \$110 million for the two-year budget cycle with all funding awarded during the second year of the budget. The Texas Education Agency reported that during the 2016-17 school year the grant provided an additional \$734 per-student to roughly 159,000 pre-K students.ⁱ



Unfortunately, lawmakers in 2017 eliminated funding for the “High-Quality Grant Program” and the supplemental pre-K funding. At the same time, the Legislature required all school districts, even those who did not apply or turned down grant funding, to implement the high-quality standards.

As a result, lawmakers tasked districts with trying to offer high-quality pre-K programs without the necessary resources.

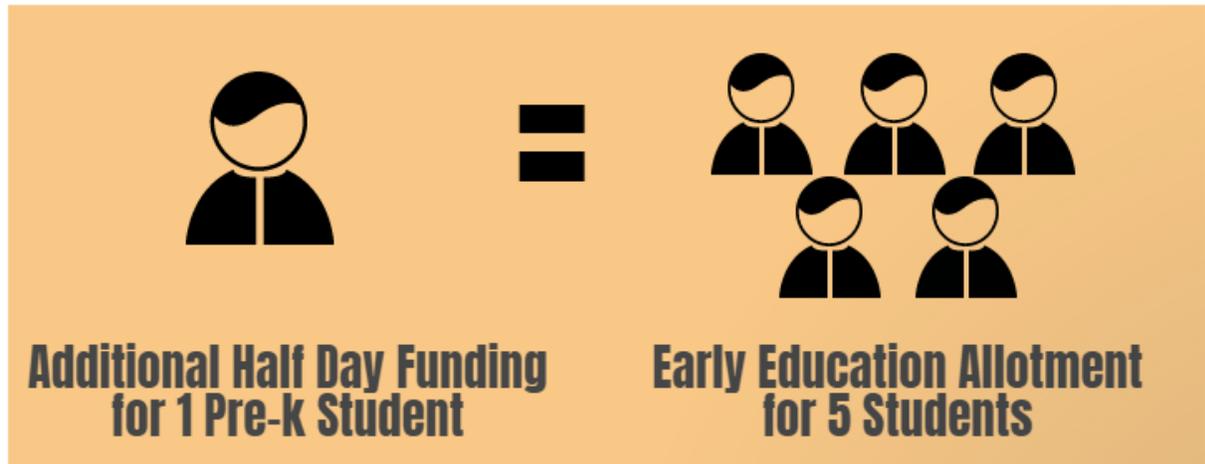
In particular, many districts used the grant funding to hire additional staff and maintain the required better student-teacher ratios. With the elimination of the grant, districts either had to seek outside funding or operate with less staff, leading to worse student-teacher student-teacher ratios.ⁱⁱ

HB 3: Pre-k & Early Childhood Education Allotment

HB 3, the omnibus school finance law passed by the 2019 Legislature, requires all pre-K programs to meet high quality standards and mandates that all districts must provide full-day pre-K to eligible 4-year-old students. Districts without the capacity to support full-day pre-K are required to solicit and consider public-private partnerships to provide full-day pre-K before seeking a waiver for this requirement.

Notably, HB 3 does not include direct funding for full-day pre-K, meaning pre-K students will continue to be counted as half a student for funding purposes.

Instead of directly funding full-day pre-K, lawmakers established the Early Childhood Education Allotment. The Allotment provides 10 percent additional funding over the base level for economically disadvantaged students or English language learners in kindergarten through third grade. The additional funding bumps up to 20 percent for students who are both ELL and low-income. With this allotment, schools have the flexibility to invest in strategies that will improve third grade reading and math outcomes, including full-day pre-K. School districts will not be required to fund full-day pre-K with the extra funding.



Tying pre-K funding to an allotment for students in grades kindergarten through third is not the best practice because it moves the funding formulas even further away from being cost based and student directed. The cost of providing a full-day pre-K program has nothing to do with how many low-income students and English language learners are in kindergarten through third grade. The costs of associated programs for low-income and ELL students are different than the costs of full day Pre-K.

CPPP supports and has advocated for additional funding for student groups that need additional assistance, but pre-K students in a full-day program should simply be counted as a full-day student, like students in every other grade. To keep the gains made in pre-K, students need to transfer into a high-quality kindergarten through third grade environment. Instead of asking school districts to use the Early Education Allotment to fund full-day pre-K, lawmaker should require those funds be used to support the academic advancement of the student in the grades that generate the funding.

CPPP will monitor developments during the interim period and continue to advocate for full funding of full-day pre-K in Texas.

ⁱ House Research Organization. (2018). *HB 3 Bill Analysis* Retrieved from <https://txhronews.wordpress.com/2018/01/08/legislature-directs-some-pre-K-spending-on-quality-standards/>

ⁱⁱ Dugyala, R. (2018). The Texas Legislature took away \$118 million in pre-K funding. Now districts are scrambling. Retrieved from <https://www.texastribune.org/2018/03/27/texas-schools-lost-pre-K-funding-districts-scrambling/>