



Gov. Andrew Cuomo speaks during a news conference and budget bill signing ceremony in the Red Room at the state Capitol. | AP Photo/Mike Groll

## Cuomo plan could bring order to complex system of pre-K programs

By KESHIA CLUKEY | 01/17/17 05:31 AM EST

ALBANY — The state's pre-Kindergarten programs could be consolidated under plans announced by Gov. Andrew Cuomo last week.

It figures to be a complex process. There currently are seven programs (one is federal) and seats for nearly 120,000 full-day or half-day students, according to state Education Department data.

“It’s a positive step in the right direction,” New York State Association of School Business Officials executive director Michael Borges said of Cuomo’s proposal. “The consolidation ... eventually will provide a more streamlined, efficient way to deliver pre-K that’s easier to manage and monitor.”

In his State of the State book of legislative priorities released Wednesday, Cuomo proposed merging the programs, starting with the state’s first full-day program for high-needs districts and the Universal Pre-K program.

“With these proposed changes, prekindergarten programs will have the same rigorous program requirements as well as high health and safety standards,” the proposal stated. Cuomo also called for an additional \$5 million to expand pre-K programs across the state, with preference given to high-need districts with no current program.

Further details about the proposal are not yet available, although they could be included in his executive budget proposal, due Tuesday.

There are so many different programs statewide because of the difficulty in reforming old ones, as well as new priorities from different lawmakers and governors over the years, said Bob Lowry, New York State Council of School Superintendents deputy director for advocacy and communication.

“I think there’s just complications with trying to have new pre-K programs addressing specific populations,” Lowry told POLITICO New York. “[It’s] easier to create new programs rather than to try to amend the existing ones to accommodate the new priorities.”

Now there’s a basically “incoherent system,” Lowry said.

The state’s first program, Targeted Pre-K, originally called “Experimental Pre-K,” was put in place in 1966, providing grant funding for full- or half-day programs for high-need students ages 3 and 4. The program was folded into Universal Pre-K in 2007-08, but as of this school year, three Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) still participate. The total state dollars going to Targeted-Pre-K is \$1.3 million, according to Education Department 2016-17 data.

Universal Pre-K (UPK) began in 1997, funded through a formula based on state school aid and providing full- or half-day to all 4-year-olds. There are currently 444 school districts that offer UPK programs at a cost of approximately \$385 million.

In 2013 the state offered a “Priority Pre-K” \$25 million competitive grant aimed at providing full- and half- day programs for high-needs 4 year-olds. Districts can receive renewed funding by meeting performance targets through 2018. Twenty-five districts currently participate.

Another competitive grant, this one for \$340 million, came about in 2014 for districts to offer full-day pre-K for 4 year-olds. The grant, which can be renewed based on performance targets through 2019, had regional targets and also allowed individual entities, such as charter schools, to apply. There are currently 53 districts and 17 community-based organizations participating.

In 2015 a \$25 million federal Preschool Development Expansion Grant became available. The grant, which is non-competitive and formula-driven, is aimed at full-day programming for 4 year-olds at or below 200 percent poverty, distributed at a rate of \$10,000 per child, through 2018. Five districts currently receive funding through the grant.

Thirty-four districts participate in another competitive “EPK” grant, which started in 2015 and provides \$30 million through 2020 of full- or half-day programs for high-need students ages 3 and 4.

The seventh program, the 3Prekindergarten Program (3PK), was established last year with about \$10.36 million going to 25 school districts through 2021 to provide full- or half-day programs for high-needs 3 year olds.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has created one of the largest and most influential universal pre-Kindergarten programs in the country with more than 70,000 4 year olds enrolled at the start of the current school year. De Blasio campaigned for mayor in 2013 on a promise to implement universal pre-K, and it remains his administration's signature initiative.

Having so many programs with so many requirements can be difficult for a district to administer, and many small, poorer districts don't have the administrative capacity to apply and compete for grants, Lowry said.

There also is inconsistency in how pre-K is administered. For example, some districts spend money on providing seats for 3 year olds while not all districts are able to provide seats to 4 year olds. And four districts, Brighton, Pittsford, Haverstraw-Stony Point and

Shenendehowa, offer only half-day kindergarten, with only Harverstraw offering Universal Pre-K, according to the state Education Department. The Rush Henrietta and Washingtonville districts offer full- and half-day programs, along with universal pre-K.

One of the major issues facing upstate districts, especially those in rural areas, is providing transportation for pre-K students, said Statewide School Finance Consortium executive director Rick Timbs. There is no state aid available for transporting pre-Kindergarten students, although legislation has been introduced.

The burden then falls on parents to get students to and from the programs, which often puts low-income families at a disadvantage — the very kids who need the programs the most, Timbs said.

Timbs lauded Cuomo's proposal to begin consolidation, but said instead of adding another round of categorical aid, funding for pre-Kindergarten should be included in the state's school aid formula, distributed based on district-need. The formula would also provide more predictability for the districts than grant funding, he said.

The state Education Department and state Board of Regents also have been pushing for consolidation and strategic funding.

The department and the policy-making board have proposed expanding the allocation process for Universal Pre-Kindergarten, with pre-K funding streams being absorbed as the competitive contracts expire.

"We need to streamline that and make the process much easier and more of a guaranteed allocation for our districts across the state," state education commissioner MaryEllen Elia said in an audio statement about the department and board's priorities.

While doing so would create a number of programs offering seats to 3 year olds as well as 4 year olds, the Regents recommended focusing on 4 year olds first, before creating additional funding for 3 year olds.

Currently 63 percent of the state's eligible 4 year olds are being served, according to the department.

"We really think that our students in New York all deserve to have that opportunity for a pre-K experience that prepares them and allows them to have the kinds of skills that they need as they move into Kindergarten," Elia said.

Read the Regent's proposal here: <http://politi.co/2jsUKUD>, Cuomo's book of priorities here: <http://on.ny.gov/2jsYN3p> and more information on the various pre-K programs, here: <http://bit.ly/2jsYBRy>.

-- *Additional reporting by Eliza Shapiro.*