



## **Division of Early Childhood Services Mixed Delivery Handbook**

**For State-Funded Preschool Districts, Providers, and Head Start Programs**

2026

New Jersey Department of Education

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# Guidance on Collaboration with Providers and Head Start Programs

Since the inception of state-funded preschool in New Jersey, the state has supported a mixed delivery model of implementation. The mixed delivery model is a collaboration between district and licensed child care providers (Private Providers), and/or Head Start programs to serve eligible three- and four-year-olds in preschool programs that meet New Jersey Department of Education (Department) regulatory requirements, including the employment of appropriately licensed and qualified teaching staff, and allow for expanded access to publicly funded early learning programs. A mixed delivery system helps ensure and broaden high-quality access in various settings. Districts that implement a mixed delivery model expand the accessible preschool landscape, which helps to ensure that all three-and four-year-olds within a funded district can attend a high-quality preschool program. When children succeed in their first years of school, there are many positive outcomes, including a reduction in the early achievement gap. This manual is created in response to the requirements of P.L. 2025,c.100 and is intended to assist all parties in the collaboration with support and guidance as they partner to provide preschool programs within their communities.

Preschool Education Aid (PEA) is provided to districts by the Department, which is responsible for subcontracting and supporting non-districts. Providers and Head Start programs are funded through the district based on county per-pupil rates for each fiscal year. Private Providers and Head Start programs have directors, teachers, and assistants with experience and training in working with young children and delivering developmentally appropriate early education practices. Private providers and Head Start programs often offer families before and after-care, extending beyond the six-hour school day, as well as summer program opportunities. The mixed delivery model provides families with a choice of which publicly funded program best suits their needs. Additionally, the Department recognizes mixed-aged instructional grouping as best practice, fostering social interaction, modeling, mentoring, and leadership among children. This approach also helps to reduce potential program waitlists. When contracting with a district, providers and Head Start programs meet the rigorous criteria of high-quality preschool with the support and resources provided by PEA funding. District, private providers, and Head Start programs funded via PEA and operating within a mixed delivery model should familiarize themselves with the requirements outlined in the administrative code N.J.A.C. 6A:13A, Elements of High-Quality Preschool Programs, as well N.J.A.C. 3A:52, Manual of Requirements for Child Care Center which specify the positions, policies, and practices necessary for PEA districts.

## Communication

The district's early childhood contact should meet with the contracted provider directors on a regular basis. This ensures all relevant information is shared in a timely manner. Agendas should incorporate the needs of the district and provider. District fiscal staff should be included in these meetings when items are relevant to budget and other fiscal matters. A process of joint agenda setting should be considered, allowing the contracted private providers and Head Start programs an opportunity to include items relevant to programming. Processes with timelines should be developed and shared with all contracted parties to clearly delineate how to address issues that arise such as recruitment and enrollment, timeliness of payment, student placement, and budget transfer request.

# Personnel: District Positions/Supports

Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-4 Program Staffing

## Early Childhood Administrator

Each district must appoint an in-district administrative position to oversee the preschool program as required in administrative code. An in-district early childhood supervisor is required at a ratio of one for every 750 enrolled preschool children, excluding students enrolled in LEAs' district stand-alone early childhood education buildings. For districts with fewer than 750 enrolled preschool children, the early childhood supervisor position may be combined with another in-district school administrator position with the same certification and qualifications required of an early childhood supervisor or may be contracted with a county or regional educational services commission approved by the New Jersey State Board of Education. The early childhood supervisor's responsibilities include developing and implementing the district-wide preschool budget, a three-year preschool program plan, annual updates, and professional development plans. This role also involves supervising registration, recruitment, and outreach efforts, overseeing contractual compliance with providers and local Head Start programs, collaborating and communicating with the districts' office of special services, and facilitating transition initiatives in collaboration with early intervention programs and other preschool-to-kindergarten through third-grade administrators.

Additionally, the early childhood supervisor is responsible for meeting regularly with providers and local Head Start programs to foster collaboration and program implementation, including, but not limited to, fiscal and curriculum information, overseeing the implementation of the comprehensive preschool curriculum and performance-based assessment, providing assistance to all staff responsible for the implementation of appropriate early childhood practices within the preschool program, administering strategies designed to help teachers and other professionals optimize children's learning and development in all domains, coordinating annual program evaluation, and hiring, supervising, and ensuring evaluation of all in-district staff funded by the preschool program budget. Furthermore, the early childhood supervisor ensures that each provider and local Head Start program implements a system for classroom teacher observations.

## Preschool Instructional Coach (PIC)

All districts funded through PEA, as a requirement of administrative code must hire a Preschool Instructional Coach (PIC) at a ratio of 20 preschool classrooms for each coach. Classrooms at providers and Head Start programs operating under the PEA mixed delivery model are included in this ratio. The Preschool Instructional Coach must regularly visit preschool classrooms in district operated, provider and Head Start programs to model, coach, informally observe using structured observation tools, and give feedback to teaching staff. The percentage of time spent at each location should be determined by the number of PEA classrooms located at the site, however, the amount of time may need to be adjusted due to the specific needs of each teacher (i.e., novice teachers may need more coaching supports). This coaching is based on the reflective cycle to support implementing the comprehensive curriculum and Preschool Standards. The PIC cannot have supervisory or teaching duties, nor provide direct services to children. The PIC's role is to offer coaching and support teaching practices development. Also, any classroom observations or structured observation tools should not be used for evaluating staff. The PIC should not be assigned other responsibilities (i.e., covering classrooms in teacher absences) during their funded hours in this position.

## Preschool Intervention and Referral Specialist (PIRS)

All districts funded through PEA are required in administrative code to hire a Preschool Intervention and Referral Specialist (PIRS) at a ratio of 20 preschool classrooms for each specialist. This includes classrooms at district operated, providers and Head Start programs operating through the PEA mixed delivery model. The percentage of time spent at each location should be determined by the number of PEA classrooms located at the site, however, the amount of time may need to be adjusted due to the specific needs of each teacher (i.e., novice teachers may need more coaching supports). The PIRS must conduct regular classroom visits at providers and Head Start programs to observe, use the assessment tool The Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool for Preschool Classrooms (TPOT), model, provide feedback, and make recommendations about appropriate strategies, classroom

modifications, and the selection of adaptive materials to address the needs of children with challenging behaviors or potential learning difficulties. The PIRS may not have supervisory or teaching responsibilities, nor provide direct services to children but rather provide direct coaching to the preschool staff. The PIRS should not be assigned other responsibilities (i.e., covering classrooms in teacher absences) during their funded hours in this position.

## **Community Parent Involvement Specialist (CPIS)**

All districts funded through PEA must hire a Community and Parent Involvement Specialist (CPIS) as required in administrative code. The CPIS is a district-level position that manages the district's family services. The CPIS is responsible for conducting the community needs assessment, staffing the Early Childhood Education Advisory Council (ECAC), organizing family involvement plans and activities, and coordinating efforts with other district professionals, community programs, and providers. Additionally, the CPIS collaborates with family workers at providers and Head Start programs to promote family involvement and social services activities.

## **Nurse**

Districts that receive funding via PEA are required by administrative code to hire at least one nurse for every 300 preschool students in fully funded state preschool programs, including providers and Head Start program students. The nurse does not need to be on site. The district, provider, and Head Start program can arrange health services if the center already employs a nurse. The nurse is responsible for providing health services to all students, including those in providers and Head Start programs. If the Head Start program already has a nurse, the district nurse will coordinate services with the Head Start nurse. Private Provider centers can access the Child Care Health Consultants for technical assistance and consultation.

District's must ensure that nursing services are available in a provider or Head Start program setting, unless the Head Start program provider already has a nurse. This includes basic child health services such as required health screenings for vision, hearing, dental, height, and weight, as well as record keeping and parent education. Additionally, parent education should include regular health and safety topics tailored to meet the specific needs of enrolled families.

## **Fiscal Specialist**

The district is required in administrative code to ensure the fiscal accountability and integrity of the preschool program. The fiscal specialist is a position that is allowable and responsible for monitoring each contracting provider and/or local Head Start program for compliance with the preschool program contract, tracking teacher certification information and reporting it to the Department, monitoring expenses and reviewing quarterly expenditure reports providing financial management assistance to contracting providers and local Head Start programs in the development and monitoring of their annual budgets, and collaborating with contracting providers and/or local Head Start programs in the development of any corrective action plans in response to any findings of an audit and/or a limited review examination.

# Personnel: Provider and Head Start Program Center Positions

## Provider/Head Start Director

The director of a provider or Head Start program must meet the qualifications outlined in the Manual of Requirements for Childcare Centers (N.J.A.C. 3A:52) and the Elements of High-Quality Preschool Programs (N.J.A.C. 6A:13A). Responsibilities include developing and implementing the overall program, creating budgets, attending required district meetings, supervising, and evaluating staff assigned to the preschool education classrooms, and working full-time on-site, except when required at district, Department, or NJ Department of Children and Families (NJDCF) functions. The director must be present on-site at the center for at least five of the six hours of the comprehensive educational program day and is responsible for the day-to-day program administration and teacher supervision. Additionally, the director cannot hold any other position, such as instructional staff member or family worker, during the same hours as their role as center director. If the director is off-site for a required district, Department, or NJDCF function, or is using paid time off, they must appoint an on-site designee following the Manual of Requirements for Childcare Centers, N.J.A.C. 3A:52. This designee cannot be a PEA-funded classroom teacher or teacher assistant.

## Preschool-Third Grade (P-3) Certified Teacher

The district is responsible for ensuring that each PEA classroom has one certified teacher and one appropriately qualified teacher assistant to ensure the requirements of administrative code are met. Teachers working in PEA classrooms must hold at least a bachelor's degree and, at minimum, a Certificate of Eligibility (CE), or Certificate of Eligibility with Advanced Standing (CEAS), which is required for preschool through grade three or an equivalent preschool certification. After the initial year of the school district's preschool program implementation, all preschool teachers must also hold a bachelor's degree and at least a CE or CEAS for preschool through grade three or an equivalent preschool certification. District are encouraged to verify teaching credentials and maintain a database of teaching staff for the Budget Workbook submission. Teachers from Head Start programs and providers are typically not district employees. While teachers in mixed delivery programs must meet the same standards as districts, they generally remain employees of Head Start program or the provider. Private providers and Head Start program teachers may apply for district teaching positions. However, the district cannot actively recruit teachers from collaborative sites or fill in-district positions within the current school year, as this might violate employment agreements with the provider or Head Start program. Additionally, districts and providers/Head Start programs should ensure pay parity for teachers comparable to the district's salary scale. Finally, the district must establish a mentoring program as specified in N.J.A.C. 6A:9C-5.1. This applies to any teachers in contracted program classrooms, as they are viewed as part of the district preschool program if the district receives PEA funding. The same mentoring rules must be applied for both in- district and provider classrooms. For additional details on teacher certification requirements, consult the Department's Office of Certification and Induction.

## Teacher Assistants

The district must ensure that all preschool teacher assistants, whether they are new hires or current staff, have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Additionally, teacher assistants in schools supported by Title I funding must meet the requirements outlined in Every Student Succeeds Act, P.L. 114-95. The district board of education must also ensure that teacher assistants in providers or local Head Start programs receive compensation comparable to those employed by the district, based on equivalent certification and credentials. It is recommended that salaries for provider assistants align to a +/- 2% of the district salary guide. The salary guide should be shared with provider directors and inform the annual provider budget process. Furthermore, the district must provide professional development and training specific to preschool education for all early childhood education administrators, teachers, and teacher assistants.

## Family Workers

Family workers are employees of the provider and/or Head Start program who have experience working with families and knowledge of local community resources and social service programs. One family worker should serve a maximum of 75 children

and their families in Provider and Head Start program settings as required in administrative code. If the provider or Head Start program has fewer than 75 children, the family worker can be combined with another position, except the Director of the program. The family worker promotes preschool student learning and development and supports the needs and well-being of preschool students' families to ensure the families' well-being and to foster students' learning and development. In addition to supporting families, they work closely with the CPIS, in-district social workers, Preschool Instructional Coaches, and Preschool Referral Intervention Specialists, teachers, Provider center directors, and other district professionals as needed. They also assist in recruitment and outreach efforts, plan family engagement activities and events, and maintain ongoing communication with families to ensure their social and health services' needs are met.

## **Head Start Required Positions**

Head Start programs require positions similar to PEA roles, such as the PIC and Nurse, it may be possible for the Head Start program to offer these services. In these cases, coordinating services between the districts and providers is essential to ensure a high-quality preschool program and that all requirements are met, including staff qualifications for each role. Together, they can determine how often services should be provided, considering factors like the number of classrooms, the needs of individual children and staff, reporting mechanisms, and other elements involved in implementation.

# Program Operations

## Eligibility, Recruitment, and Enrollment

Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-2 Eligibility, Enrollment, and the Universe of Preschool Students. The district is responsible for establishing procedures for recruiting, enrolling, and placing all eligible resident preschool children in the preschool program. The district should include all contracting providers in developing a cohesive, formal plan for determining eligibility, recruitment, and enrollment procedures within the mixed delivery model.

## Projected Enrollment

The LEA is responsible for submitting projected enrollments for the following school year to the Department by November 15. The submission requires the LEA to complete an enrollment forecast based on how many preschool students will be served by age and location. As required in P.L. 2025, c.100 any significant redistribution of seats from the prior year requires approval by the Department. When the LEA submits the projected enrollment form, a letter to the Commissioner of Education that provides justification for the requested redistribution of seats must be sent simultaneously via email to the Division of Early Childhood Services at [doeearlychild@doe.nj.gov](mailto:doeearlychild@doe.nj.gov) by or before November 15th. If the request to reduce contracted seats originates with the contracted provider, the LEA should include a copy of the letter received from the provider requesting the reduction of seats as an attachment.

## Eligibility

The only requirements for enrollment in a PEA program are age and residency within the school district pursuant to administrative code. If funded through PEA, a district, provider, or Head Start program cannot require preschool students to be toilet-trained before enrollment. Eligible children cannot be denied enrollment, nor can they be removed from the program due to a lack of toileting skills. All providers and Head Start programs contracting with a state-funded preschool must comply with all requirements. All New Jersey preschool programs should follow the Personal Hygiene Requirements outlined by the NJDCF, Manual of Requirements for Providers.

## Head Start Income Eligibility

Head Start, through federal requirements (Sec. 645 of the Head Start Act), has specific recruitment, enrollment, and registration requirements. Head Start must determine the eligibility of potential families before placing children in classrooms. Children from birth to age five from families with incomes below the poverty guidelines are eligible for Head Start (children aged three to five and older) and Early Head Start (children from birth to age three) services. This includes children from homeless families, families receiving public assistance such as TANF or SSI, and foster children, regardless of their foster family's income. The poverty guidelines are adjusted for family size and are used to determine financial eligibility for federal programs like Head Start and Early Head Start. These guidelines are issued annually in the Federal Register by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## Recruitment

The district and all providers share responsibility for recruiting and enrolling children into the program. Together, districts, providers, and Head Start programs should analyze district enrollment data and survey the community to develop and implement strategies for recruiting and enrolling hard-to-reach families. There is some flexibility in how this can be managed, so it should be discussed with contracting providers and Head Start programs and a plan developed and agreed upon before recruitment and enrollment begin. Strategies may include allowing providers to recruit and fill seats within their programs, parental selection at registration, canvassing neighborhoods, and attending community events.

## Enrollment Procedures

As required by P.L. 2025, c. 100 the district, provider, and/or Head Start programs are responsible for developing strategies for school district to establish centralized enrollment systems that prioritize family choice when determining a preschool student's placement. Disallowing family choice could create unnecessary barriers to registration and enrollment. Family choice should be

considered when determining student placement. However, it is essential to communicate clearly with families that factors such as school proximity and classroom availability may limit the ability to honor every preference. While parent input is valued, it does not guarantee placement at a specific location. Students with IEPs may be placed in provider and Head Start programs, considering family choice and ensuring that students are served in the least restrictive environment. Factors such as availability of wrap-around care, sibling enrollment, and convenience of work and home are all aspects parents consider when choosing placement. Every county has a [Child Care Resource Agency \(CCR&R\)](#) which can serve as a resource to families seeking early education programs. Connecting with the local CCR&R can provide support to the enrollment and registration process.

## **Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)**

Districts must ensure preschool children with disabilities are included in general education settings to the greatest extent possible, as outlined in N.J.A.C. 6A:14-4.2(a)1. Students with IEPs can be placed in any mixed delivery setting, and the necessary services must be provided. Therapies are recommended to be integrated into the preschool classroom, such as push-in services where therapies are offered within the classroom, rather than pull-out services where the student is removed to receive therapies. Students with IEPs served in provider or Head Start program settings must be funded through the district's general education funds. The contract template provided by the New Jersey Division of Early Childhood Services (DECS) is for students funded with PEA. Therefore, districts should offer a separate contract or an addendum to the DECS contract template that specifically addresses students with IEPs. This contract or addendum will clarify expectations and payment details. Any district employee wishing to work individually with students at provider and Head Start program locations must have a Child Abuse Record Information (CARI) check completed for each site to ensure the provider complies with licensing requirements. If a program staff member believes that a student may require an evaluation by the Child Study Team, consult with the PIRS to determine the appropriate next steps.

# Program Planning

Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-3 Program Planning

## Classroom Configuration

There is no requirement for how students should be placed in PEA classrooms. Some PEA programs separate three-year-olds and four-year-olds into different classrooms. However, there are advantages to having three- and four-year-olds in the same classroom. This approach allows children to interact and develop skills both chronologically and developmentally. Practically, mixed-age grouping helps districts serve more students by reducing potential waiting lists that result from age-specific classroom capacities.

## Calendar/Hours of Operation

Full-day preschool is defined in N.J.A.C. 6A:13A as a six-hour comprehensive educational program conducted during the day, aligned with the district's grade one through twelve daily school calendars, and not exceeding the 10-month academic period. While the number of school days must match the district's, the provider and Head Start program calendars do not have to be identical to the district calendar. Provider and Head Start programs should work together to set their calendars based on required student contact days and the number of teacher professional development days on the district calendar, excluding any extended year or summer programs. Districts and private providers should also consider transportation, emergency contacts, and communication with parents when determining the most suitable calendar for their program.

## Meals

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) offers reimbursement to enrolled providers, ensuring that nutritious meals and snacks are served to children at the provider center(s). All providers partnering with districts are responsible for applying to participate in CACFP, and districts are required to make sure providers apply. Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-4.

## Attendance

Please refer to N.J.A.C 6A:13A-9 Contract

When a district enters a contract with a Provider or Head Start program, each entity should review and clarify the student attendance requirements in their agreement. Districts have a financial arrangement for each student enrolled in a provider and/or Head Start program. Every private and Head Start program must collect and report attendance data for each enrolled child. The provider and district must collaborate to address chronic absenteeism, which is defined as missing ten percent of enrolled school days or 18 days in an 180-day school year. Days should be prorated based on the actual number of student attendance days. Providers with high absenteeism rates should develop an action plan in partnership with the district to improve student attendance. Family workers should be included in the plan, offering support and resources to families. If any enrolled child is absent without an excuse for up to ten consecutive days, the district and provider must make every effort to contact the family and support them in getting the child to school. Efforts to contact the family are encouraged to begin before reaching ten consecutive unexcused absences—ideally starting as early as the third day of absence without contact.

The provider must make persistent efforts by reaching out to the family, offering home visits, resources, and other community supports to encourage the child's attendance. If these efforts are unsuccessful and the child remains absent without an excuse for ten consecutive days, the child may be disenrolled from the program and replaced by another enrolled child. The child would be eligible to re-enroll in the future. If an enrolled student has a parent/guardian who has military orders they cannot be removed from the roster based on the N.J.S.A. 18A:75, "Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children."

## Uniforms

The district should promote districtwide policies, but these should be discussed and agreed upon before they are put into effect. Families involved in the program cannot be charged fees for uniforms at any time. According to New Jersey law, districts can

establish uniform policies that apply to all students in the district, from pre-K to grade 12. These policies must include provisions to assist economically disadvantaged students, as outlined in N.J.S.A. 18A:11-8(a). Additionally, N.J.S.A. 18A:11-8(b) states that the district may offer an opt-out option for parents regarding the school uniform policy. If this option is available, no student shall face academic penalties, discrimination, or be denied admission to school if their parents choose not to follow the uniform policy.

## **Family Engagement**

Family engagement in education is a dynamic and collaborative partnership that links families, schools, and communities with the common goal of supporting a child's academic and personal development. This involvement goes far beyond simply informing parents about school events or student progress; it emphasizes the importance of building strong, trusting relationships between educators and families. Through open communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibilities, families are actively involved in meaningful ways, such as participating in decision-making, like joining the ECAC, establishing home-school connections, contributing to learning activities at home, and collaborating with teachers to set goals for student success. When families are genuinely engaged, students are more likely to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally, creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for everyone.

## **Parent Education**

The district must include parent education activities in the preschool program to help identify strategies for encouraging and supporting families in staying involved in their child's education as required in N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-4 Parent education workshops and activities should align with parent interests and needs, identified through surveys and data collection. Topics may include parenting skills, community resources, academic support, health, safety, and more. All providers and Head Start program families should have access to these parent education opportunities.

## **Field Trips**

All students in the PEA program, including district, provider, and Head Start program, should be able to participate in field trip opportunities. Field trips must be educational, aligned with the district's approved preschool curriculum, and follow [NJDOE Field Trip Guidance](#). Visits to amusement parks, carnivals, movie theaters, theme parks, and water parks are not allowed. Districts should have a policy to ensure all field trips, whether organized by a provider or an in-district school, go through a central district approval process. Procedures should be consistent for both in-district classes and providers. Families in the program must never be charged fees for field trips.

## **Celebrations**

It is important to consider different perspectives on holidays and their meanings for the communities, families, and children we serve in our schools. These special occasions can hold religious, cultural, historical, and personal significance. It is also vital to recognize that some families in our communities may not celebrate any holidays during the year. To respect and acknowledge all families, programs should avoid favoring one celebration or holiday over others. Consider planning a variety of celebrations throughout the school year that support thoughtfully designed classroom experiences. The adopted policy should align with the goals of the curriculum and the New Jersey Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards. It should also reflect the diversity of the community and be inclusive of all families served by the preschool program through intentionally created developmentally appropriate activities and celebrations that support overall classroom goals.

End-of-year celebrations for preschoolers should be planned based on developmentally appropriate practices that focus on children's interests and active engagement. The celebration must also consider the age-appropriate length of time. An appropriate end-of-year celebration should be participatory and meaningful for all children. Familiar music and movement activities, reciting poems, and finger plays, or acting out familiar stories are suitable options for the designated day. Families in the program should never be charged fees for these celebrations. Please see the [Planning for Holiday Activity and Celebrations Guidance](#) for more information.

## Graduations

Traditional graduation celebrations for preschool students are often not appropriate for their developmental level and can disrupt the educational day. End-of-year celebrations should be suitable for the age group and based on student interests and engagement. Time should not be taken away from instructional time to prepare for these celebrations. Please refer to the [Graduation/Preschool Celebration Guidance](#) for more details.

## Security

Each provider has its policies regarding security measures. While the specific regulations may vary, providers are required to implement security measures to ensure the safety of children. These measures may include securing entry and exit points to prevent unauthorized access, having proper procedures for signing in and out visitors, parents, and guardians, having emergency plans in place, including evacuation procedures and lockdown protocols, conducting comprehensive criminal background checks on staff members and volunteers and providing training to staff on safety protocols and emergency responses.

The New Jersey Department of Human Services' Division of Family Development (NJDHS/NJDFD) has prepared a Statewide Emergency, Disaster and Recovery Plan (the Plan) specific to subsidized childcare services and programs. The Plan adopts the five key topic areas recommended by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) as a framework to support childcare providers, children in their care, and their families before, during, and after an emergency or disaster. The key topic areas include planning for continuation of services to Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) families, coordination with emergency management agencies and key partners, regulatory requirements and technical assistance for child care providers, provision of temporary child care services after a disaster, and rebuilding child care. For more information, please refer to the ["New Jersey Child Care Assistance Program Statewide Emergency, Disaster, and Recovery Plan"](#) (2022).

## Child Abuse Clearance Inquiry

Any staff member who will be alone with a child in a provider and/or Head Start program must have a Child Abuse Record Information check (CARI) completed as required in N.J.S.A. 9:6-8.11. A CARI check is a NJDCF-required background check to determine whether an individual has a substantiated report of child abuse and/or neglect. These checks are specific to each center. Therefore, if a district employee provides individual services (such as speech or OT), a CARI check must be completed for each location they are assigned to. CARI is submitted to the state through the provider. There is a small fee associated with the check. A provider and/or Head Start program staff member must supervise any staff member who has not completed a CARI while they are with children.

# Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-5 Curriculum and Assessment

## Curriculum

All PEA-funded classrooms are required by administrative code to implement a research-based and scientifically validated early childhood curriculum aligned with the NJ Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards through the Department review process. While centers may select a different curriculum than the districts, the contracting provider and the district must mutually agree to this, and it must be listed on the Department's aligned list on the Departments Preschool website. If an alternative is chosen, factors to consider include training in each curriculum. Discussions for the Preschool Instructional Coaches and Administrators should focus on ensuring coaching and supervision are effective, data collection and procedures are consistent, and ongoing professional development is maintained.

## Supplemental Curriculum

Preschool programs should ensure fidelity and complete implementation of their chosen curriculum before adding any additional curricular enhancements. Such enhancements must be submitted to the Department through the districts and approved by the DECS prior to implementation. Providers and Head Start programs should be involved in discussions when a district considers a supplemental request. These discussions should include the reasons for the request, the implementation plan, and an opportunity to address any concerns the provider or Head Start program may have. The district should also communicate what supports will be provided to classroom teachers, such as coaching, professional development, and financial responsibilities related to purchasing and implementing the enhancements. Once in place, curricular enhancements will be incorporated into the DECS monitoring and assessment of the preschool program.

## Child Assessments

All districts operating with a mixed delivery model must ensure that ongoing performance-based assessments of children are conducted as required by the administrative code. These assessments should align with the comprehensive curriculum outlined in the district's three-year preschool program plan and/or annual update, cover all learning domains, incorporate multiple sources of evidence gathered over time and be used for curriculum planning and parent reporting. The assessment data should not be used to determine children's classroom placement. The Provider shall grant the District or Department designee(s) necessary access to conduct needs assessments and data collection.

## Classroom Quality Assessments

Districts are responsible, pursuant to the administrative code, for implementing a reliable classroom-quality assessment tool at least once a year, beginning in the first year of preschool program implementation. This assessment is used to evaluate program quality in each district, provider, and/or local Head Start program preschool classroom, then combine the data to develop professional development plans for all teaching staff. "Classroom-quality assessment instrument" means a reliable and valid tool with a set of criteria and a rubric for scoring that is used to assess aspects of classroom quality, such as teacher-child interactions and the availability of materials and activities that support early learning and development. The goal of the classroom-quality assessment is to collect consistent information on classroom practices, support coaching, and improvement of student experiences and learning, and provide data for professional development and long-term planning aimed at overall quality improvements.

# Program Evaluation and Professional Development

## Program Evaluation

Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-8 Program Evaluation

The district must ensure continuous quality improvement for its preschool program through either the annual Self-Assessment and Validation System (SAVS) or Grow NJ Kids. Districts are notified when they become eligible to participate in the SAVS. The SAVS evaluates the entire program, while Grow NJ Kids evaluates each location individually. If a district participates in the SAVS process, the contracted providers must be included. If the district is enrolled in Grow NJ Kids, then all contracted providers and Head Start programs must enroll independently. While the requirement is to participate in one of the systems, there is nothing that prevents a district, provider or Head Start program from participating in both systems. Districts participating in Grow NJ Kids are required to complete the rating process for validation. Each district, along with contracted providers and Head Start program locations, must enroll in Grow NJ Kids. The SAVS is also a three-year process, including two years of self-assessment and one year of validation visits by the Office of Preschool Education. The SAVS evaluation covers the entire program, and providers and Head Start program locations must submit the required documentation to the district.

## Professional Development

Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-3 Program Planning

All districts should provide provider and/or Head Start programs with appropriate in-service training and systematic professional development activities. The district shall include the provider's teachers in all professional development opportunities offered to the preschool teaching staff. Professional development should include curriculum and assessment, as well as any locally identified topics related to health, safety, and developmental topics (separation anxiety, toileting, etc.). The number of district professional development days must match the number of provider professional development days. The provider teachers must participate in a specified number of professional development in-service, training, and workshops offered by the district, as outlined in the contract. Moreover, the provider agrees to permit Preschool Instructional Coaches to deliver coaching and professional development services in the provider's contracted classrooms. The district, together with the center director and teaching staff, must develop a professional development plan that details the role and activities of the Preschool Instructional Coach for the school year. Each preschool teacher assistant working in a State-funded preschool program must follow an individual professional development plan (PDP), which includes at least 20 hours per year of qualifying experience that supports improved practice. The 20-hour annual qualifying experience should be based on actual full-time employment and adjusted on a pro rata basis for part-time work or absences, including family or medical leave.

# Contract Guidance

Please consult the [2025-2026 Child Care Contract](#) and [2025-2026 Head Start Contract](#) and Private Provider Budget Workbook Guidance and for more details on the topics below.

## Three-year Contracts

Districts and contracting private providers and/or Head Start programs providing preschool education services through PEA will have the option to enter into contracts with terms up to three years pursuant to P.L. 2025, c. 101. Multi-year contracts will require amendments if any information contained in the executed contract changes, including but not limited to increases or decreases in contracted seats; number of professional development days; number of school calendar days. Contract templates are provided by the Department, and fully executed contracts must be submitted to the Department.

## Record Reviews

The district and the Department are responsible for regularly monitoring the provider to ensure it offers a quality program. The Provider is required to allow the district, the Department, and the NJDCF access to its site and program records to verify compliance with all aspects of the contract.

## Substitute Teachers

The district must provide the provider and/or Head Start program with a list of substitute teachers. Individuals serving as substitutes must hold an Department-issued Substitute Teacher or Paraprofessional Certificate.

## Contract Renewal/Non-Renewal

Under the Provider and Head Start contracts, the district, Department, and the provider and/or Head Start program must follow these processes for renewing or not renewing the preschool program contract.

## Contract Renewals

The district must, as a requirement of administrative code, notify any provider and/or Head Start program in writing on or before May 1 of each contract year about its intention to renew the preschool program contract for an additional one-year term. The provider must respond within thirty (30) days of receiving a renewal notice from the district, indicating acceptance or rejection of the renewal offer. Eligibility for contract renewal depends on each provider and/or Head Start program classroom maintaining a minimum reliable score of 4.5 unless discussions with the Department result in a different score entry on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3). The ECERS-3 must be administered by the district by a qualified individual recognized as reliable by the tool developer in each classroom at least once every three (3) years.

## Contract Non-Renewals

The district must notify the provider, Department, DECS, and NJDCF Office of Licensing by May 1 of each contract year if it plans not to renew a provider's preschool program contract or intends to reduce slots, pursuant to administrative code. This notification should include reasons for non-renewal, such as, but not limited to, fiscal mismanagement, poor classroom quality, and district space availability. For fiscal mismanagement, the district must provide documentation that confirms financial issues and demonstrates efforts to help the provider and/or Head Start program address these problems. Concerning poor classroom quality, the district must show that it first evaluated classroom quality and developed a plan for improvement, following Section V of the contract. If non-renewal is based on district space availability, the district must demonstrate there is accessible in-district classroom space and that the new setup meets the high-quality standards in N.J.A.C. 6A:13A and the preschool facilities standards in N.J.A.C. 6A:26. Additionally, the district must prove that serving preschool children within district space is more cost-effective, considering all related costs.

Moreover, the current in-district preschool program must have an ECERS-3 score of at least 4.5, as measured by a reliable evaluator through the Environment Rating Scales Institute (ERSI). The provider can contest the non-renewal and/or slot reduction by notifying the district and the Department in writing within ten (10) business days of receiving the notice. The Department will review and confirm whether the non-renewal decision is justified. An appeal may be made to the Commissioner of the Department (“Commissioner”) pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:3, Controversies and Disputes. Following non-renewal, the district shall recover from the provider all playground materials, including both installed and uninstalled equipment, as well as start-up classroom materials and technology, or their monetary value. The amount recovered will be based on the current market or depreciated value (per the Federal Depreciation schedule), whichever is lower.

## **Contract Non-Compliance**

All parties are expected to thoroughly review the contract and ensure full compliance with its terms. If a district, private provider, or Head Start program fails to uphold any part of the agreement, the appropriate party should initiate a meeting or written correspondence to address the issue. Should these efforts not result in a resolution, the attorneys representing each party must make every reasonable attempt to resolve the matter. If legal counsel is unable to reach an agreement, a request to the Office of Controversies and Disputes would be filed.

## **Contract Disputes**

Each district should identify a single person to resolve payment disputes and provide the process for resolving the issue being disputed. If the issue cannot be resolved, a request to the Office of Controversies and Disputes would be filed.

# Budget and Finance Guidance

## Budget Guidance Payments

Districts should not adjust payments based on enrollment during the first two months. The district must make eleven (11) monthly payments to the Provider, each equal to one-eleventh (1/11) of the revenues specified in the Provider's District-approved 2024-2025 budget planning document, as outlined in VII Compensation (A) of the Private /Head Start contract. Payments are due on: August 1, September 1, October 15, November 15, December 15, January 15, February 15, March 15, April 15, and May 15. A final payment must be made on or before August 1. Students with IEPS served at provider or Head Start program settings should be funded through the district's general education funds. Please refer to the Provider and Head Start contracts for additional information regarding Compensation.

## Quarterly Expenditure Reports

Quarterly expenditure reports for quarters ending September 30, December 31, March 31, and June 30 must be submitted to the district within thirty days of end of each quarter, except for the final quarter (June 30). For the final quarter, the report is due within two weeks of June 30.

## Insurance

The district must pay for any additional insurance required by the district. The provider shall obtain and maintain at its own expense the following:

- General Liability Insurance
- Comprehensive Automobile Insurance
- Workers' Compensation Insurance
- Employers Liability Insurance
- Employee Fidelity Bond

## Transportation

Districts must include transportation to preschool children in both district-operated and contracted classrooms, including Head Start programs, in accordance with their overall district transportation policy and N.J.A.C. 6A:27. Providers are not responsible for funding student transportation.

## Non-Allowable and Allowable Provisions of the Program

The district must ensure that the budget for each program, including the provider and/or Head Start program, supports and aligns with the children's needs and the actual costs of the six-hour comprehensive educational program and day, and meets the requirements of N.J.A.C. 6A:13A. Services outside of the six-hour school day can be charged to families. Provider and/or Head Start programs can charge for before and aftercare, as well as summer services. The provider and/or Head Start program should not charge any registration or other fees to parents or families of children in the program if the children are eligible for free access. Additionally, the provider and/or Head Start program should not require parents or families to participate in wrap-around services to be eligible for enrollment. Finally, regardless of delivery location, charging families for field trips, celebrations, special events, uniforms, and supplies is not permitted.

## Budget for Staffing Budget Withholding

Withholding funds from the county per-pupil rate for costs related to the operation of the PEA program is allowed; however, additional terms about withholding are detailed in the PEA contract. Both parties must agree on the terms or percentage, depending on the individual provider and/or Head Start program budget. Documentation proving that the district and contracted program met in advance during the contract year is required. The district must explain the withholding listed in their PEA Budget

submission and include details in their Budget Narrative for Department approval. Funds can only be withheld for services directly provided to contracted providers and Head Start programs and must follow the recommended ratios in the budget guidance. If payment issues cannot be resolved locally, an appeal may be filed with the Commissioner according to N.J.A.C. 6A:3, Controversies and Disputes.

## **Provider Director**

Department funding supports director salaries. Provider and/or Head Start programs must allocate director salaries proportionally based on documented income from other sources, such as child care subsidy, Head Start, infant/toddler classrooms, and/or tuition-based preschool classrooms. Exceptions to the standard proration for support costs are allowed when the provider and/or Head Start program and the district agree, based on reasonable and customary costs and verifiable documentation, that other funding is insufficient to cover the provider's typical proration for these items. In such cases, the district will work with the provider to approve a higher percentage of costs covered by Department funding. It is recommended that salary payments for the director align with the director's salary scale, unless otherwise approved by the district. Department funding cannot be used for costs related to infant/toddler or non-contracted Head Start classrooms or tuition-based preschool classrooms.

## **Teacher Parity and Equitable Staffing**

Please refer to N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-10 Fiscal Oversight

The district is responsible for distributing salary guides to providers and/or Head Start programs. Compensation for certified teachers and teacher assistants working with providers and/or Head Start programs must be comparable to that of teachers or teacher assistants employed by the district board of education, based on equivalent certification and credentials. It is recommended that salaries for provider teachers and assistants align to a +/- 2% of the district salary guide. The salary guide should be shared with provider directors and inform the annual provider budget process. Additionally, the district must ensure that certified teachers and teacher assistants in contracting providers and local Head Start programs have similar work schedules, including student contact time and teacher contract time, with the same number of hours per day and days per year as established by the district for its certified staff. The work schedule must also include the same amount of preparation time and lunch time as district-certified teachers and teacher assistants.

# Federal Compliance

## Suspension/Expulsion

Under N.J.S.A. 18A:37-2c, it is crucial for all providers and Head Start programs to know that students enrolled in preschool within a school district or charter school cannot be suspended. Even "partial suspension," where children are removed from their classroom or sent home early due to challenging or inappropriate behavior, is not allowed. The goal of early childhood programs is to prepare young children for success in school, and suspending or expelling them undermines their learning and conflicts with this purpose. Additionally, suspending or expelling young children is not developmentally appropriate for managing behavioral issues and offers no positive results in the short or long term. It is essential to keep children in the classroom and school so they can receive the support services they need. The support from the PIRS and PIC can help classroom staff adapt to the environment to better support the child. Referrals to the Child Study Team may also be appropriate in some cases.

Although the NJDCF Child Care Licensing Manual permits suspension and expulsion, all PEA School classrooms, including private providers and Head Start programs, are not permitted by state law to suspend or expel state-funded preschool students. Children in classrooms that are not funded by PEA must follow any applicable state or federal laws.

New Jersey mandates that all childcare providers receiving public funds through the Child Care Subsidy Program must implement policies that prevent suspension, expulsion, or denial of services due to children's behavior (ages birth to five). For more information, Please refer to the Department of Human Services Division of Family Development Office of Child Care Operations ["Policy Statement on Prevention of Suspension and Expulsion of Children Birth to Age Five from Early Childhood Programs"](#) as well as guidance on ["Suspension and Expulsion Elimination Best Practices."](#)

## Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

According to New Jersey state law (N.J.S.A. 9:6-8.10 and 18A:36-25) and Department of Education regulations (N.J.A.C. 6A:16-11), anyone who suspects that a child has been abused or neglected by a parent or caregiver must immediately notify Child Protection and Permanency (CP&P), a division of the NJDCF. Providers and Head Start programs are not required to get permission from the district to report abuse or neglect, but they should inform the district about the report. If a staff member is accused of child abuse or neglect, the Institutional Abuse Investigation Unit (IAIU) is responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect in out-of-home settings such as foster homes, residential centers, schools, and detention centers. Providers and Head Start programs must follow their policies and procedures regarding child abuse and neglect to remove staff members accused of incidents. They should also notify the districts of the incident if it involves students in their PEA-funded classrooms.

## Incident Reports

Providers and Head Start programs should adhere to the Manual of Requirements for Child Care Centers regulations (N.J.A.C. 3A:52-7.10) regarding incident reports. Districts and contracting providers should develop a policy to ensure that districts are informed about any incidents that occur.

## Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) and Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB)

The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) N.J.S.A. 18A:37-14 applies to all students, including preschool-aged children enrolled in public districts. The ABR sets requirements for districts regarding the Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) of students under their care. It is important to note that the Department does not specify an age range for students to receive services, nor does the Department exempt any age group from receiving the required services. Private providers and Head Start programs must follow the district's policies and report incidents to the school principal. The school's anti-bullying specialist from the principal's school must investigate the reports. Districts are responsible for training staff in provider and Head Start programs in the district's HIB policies and procedures. The Bullying Bill of Rights Act (ABR) in New Jersey mandates that teachers receive training on harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) in school settings. If a staff member is accused of harassment, intimidation, or bullying (HIB), they are entitled to due process, including a hearing before the board.

# State Compliance

## Facility Requirements

All preschool classrooms must include a minimum of 42 square feet of usable space per child in each classroom, with a maximum of 15 students per classroom. Preschool toilet rooms must be located either inside the classroom or on the same floor. If outside the classroom, the districts must ensure student supervision and designate these facilities for use by only preschool and Kindergarten students. Please see N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-7.1 et seq. for additional information.

## Volunteers

When involving volunteers with providers, both the provider and the Head Start program must adhere to mandatory rules found in N.J.A.C. 3A:52-4.10 to ensure the safety and well-being of children. Key considerations when allowing volunteering include criminal background checks, child abuse clearances, training and orientation, supervision and boundaries, health and hygiene, and New Jersey age requirements.

## Managing Weather-Related Closures

In New Jersey, schools are legally required by administrative code, to provide at least 180 days of instruction to ensure students receive adequate learning time. This requirement does not include days when schools are closed due to holidays, teachers' institutes, or bad weather. A school day must include at least four hours of instruction. Before the school year begins, the district, provider, and the Head Start Program should discuss potential weather-related closures. During this meeting, they should establish policies and procedures. If a Head Start program or provider chooses to close and the district remains open, the Head Start program and/or provider will need to make up the missed day. The district, provider, and Head Start program must agree on transportation plans for closure days. Districts coordinate with bus companies to assess whether it is safe to operate school buses during severe weather and communicate clearly with parents about transportation updates, provide information on alternative arrangements or rescheduled bus services, and implement safety measures during winter weather. Student safety remains the highest priority, and transportation decisions are made accordingly. For specific concerns regarding transportation during weather-related closures, it is recommended to check your local district's official announcements or contact them directly.

## Supporting Contracted Licensed Child Care Providers in Maintaining Access to Infant and Toddler Care

Publicly funded preschool programs are a vital investment in our children's future, with proven benefits for school readiness and family well-being. As we aim to serve our community's preschool-aged children, it is important to consider the impact on the entire early childhood ecosystem, including the network of mostly private-sector providers that provide infant and toddler care. Most private child care centers rely on a mixed-age business model, where the revenue from caring for preschool-aged children helps to offset the higher costs associated with providing high-quality care for infants and toddlers. These younger children require lower staff-to-child ratios, more specialized training, and a greater level of direct care, making infant and toddler care significantly more expensive to provide. When a school district opens a new preschool, it can naturally attract families who might otherwise enroll in private providers. This shift, while beneficial for the families who gain access to free or low- cost preschool, can create financial challenges for private providers. In response, some providers may need to make difficult adjustments, such as raising fees for infants and toddlers and reducing or closing classrooms entirely. A robust early childhood system requires a healthy and balanced market that provides choices for families at every stage of a child's development, from infancy through the preschool years. School districts are encouraged to adopt a balanced and collaborative approach. Before expanding preschool services, districts should:

- Engage with private childcare providers as partners.
- Consider the indirect costs of neglecting the infant-and-toddler population when developing preschool plans.
- Prioritize mixed delivery models that preserve existing childcare infrastructures to the maximum extent possible.

By taking these steps, school districts can ensure that their efforts to expand publicly funded preschools do not have an inverse impact on the infant and toddler system. A comprehensive approach will strengthen the entire early childhood ecosystem, providing a stable foundation for all our community's children and the working families who depend on it.