

A STRONGER START

Expanding GA's Lottery-Funded Pre-K to 3-Year-Olds



Georgia is nationally recognized for its Lottery-Funded Pre-K Program, which serves the majority of the state's four-year-olds in high-quality early learning settings. **However, Georgia does not currently serve any three-year-olds in its Pre-K program.**¹ Many states, including Kansas, Arkansas, and Nebraska, serve a significant number of three-year-olds through their state-funded pre-kindergarten program (**often called "3K"**).²

Launching a targeted, phased-in 3K pilot in Georgia to provide an additional year of high-quality Pre-K would promote kindergarten readiness,³ help alleviate many of the challenges families face affording early care and learning, and support parents' participation in the workforce.

Georgia is ranked
10th
in the U.S. for serving
4-YEAR-OLDS
but tied for
LAST
(35th) for serving
3-YEAR-OLDS²

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL READINESS

According to the Healthy and Ready to Learn Measure, **one in three Georgia children are not developmentally "on track"** across key domains of development **by age three.**⁴ **By third grade, only 35% of Georgia students read proficiently,**⁵ a key indicator of long-term educational success.⁶ Because brain development and language acquisition are most rapid before age four,⁷ earlier access to high-quality learning environments—characterized by lower class sizes and well-prepared teachers—is critical to strengthening school readiness. Research from Georgia and other states consistently shows that participation in Pre-K improves early academic outcomes. **When children receive multiple years of high-quality care, the effects are even stronger and more enduring.**²

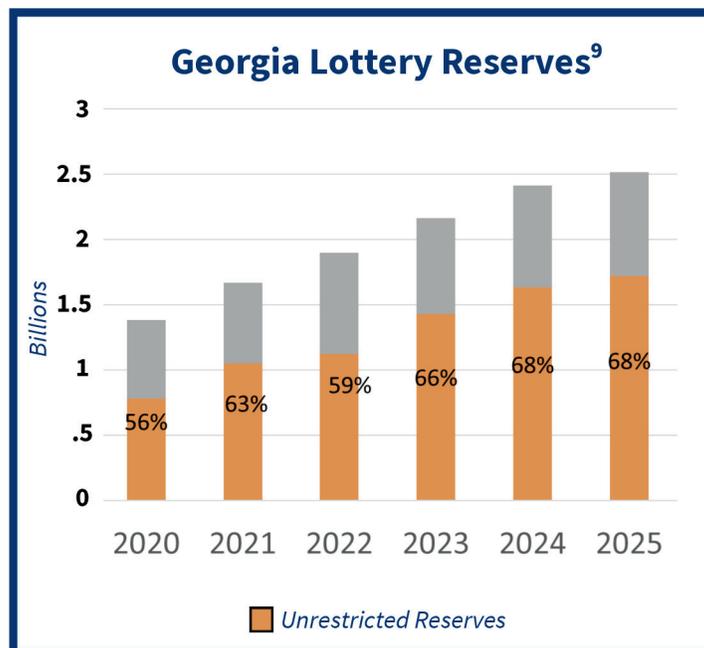
SUPPORTING WORKING FAMILIES

The cost of care for children under age five places significant strain on household budgets and forces many families to make difficult career and financial decisions. **Child care disruptions already cost Georgia's economy at least \$2.5 billion each year in lost productivity,**⁸ underscoring the broader economic consequences of limited access to affordable care.

FUNDING

Since the creation of the Georgia Lottery in 1992, proceeds have been dedicated to specific educational purposes, namely higher education (i.e., the HOPE scholarship) and voluntary Pre-K. **The Georgia Lottery continues to perform well.** In FY25, it transmitted \$1.6 billion to the Lottery for Education Account and Lottery reserves swelled to \$2.5 billion, of which around \$1.7 billion sit in an "unrestricted" reserve account.⁹

The constitutional amendment approved by Georgia voters that created the Georgia Lottery for Education did not specify the age of children served, stating simply "voluntary prekindergarten" as an allowable use of Lottery funds (Ga Const. Art. I, § 2, ¶ VIII).



KEY COMPONENTS OF A “3K” PROGRAM

Mixed-Delivery Model

Building on Georgia’s existing Pre-K Program for four-year-olds, the pilot would operate in public schools and private early learning providers, with consideration for developmentally appropriate settings.

High-Quality Standards

Classrooms would align with Georgia’s Pre-K requirements, including developmentally appropriate class sizes, approved curricula, well-prepared teachers, and compensation that supports workforce stability.

Targeted, Phased-In Approach

The pilot would prioritize communities with the greatest need (e.g., low reading proficiency), allow the state to evaluate outcomes and costs before broader expansion, and include a phased approach to implementing any new teacher requirements.

BUILDING A STRONGER CHILD CARE SYSTEM

A well-designed 3K pilot can strengthen—rather than displace—the broader child care market when paired with intentional safeguards. Research from Georgia’s original Pre-K rollout shows minimal negative impact on private providers and overall growth in the child care workforce,¹⁰ and lessons from other states indicate that **coupling 3K expansion with operational supports** helps preserve infant-toddler capacity. In addition, because approximately 16% of Georgia’s child care subsidy scholarships serve three-year-olds,¹¹ a 3K program could reduce reliance on full-day subsidies for this age group and **ease pressure on the broader child care assistance system** (Georgia’s Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Program).

A 3K pilot would be an important step, but not a standalone solution to Georgia’s child care challenges. Significant, complementary investments in infant- and toddler-care, as well as supports for the broader early childhood education workforce, remain essential to ensuring a stable, accessible child care system for Georgia families.

THE ASK

State leaders should utilize Lottery reserves to implement a pilot 3K program. This recommendation reflects those of the 2024 Senate Study Committee on Access to Affordable Child Care,¹² and would support our state’s 128,000 three-year-olds, many of whom are missing out on high-quality early childhood education that sets them up for success and supports their parents’ ability to participate in the workforce.



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