



#StayStrongNC

2023-2024 Additional Guidance for NC Pre-K Programs

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NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**
Division of Child Development
and Early Education



2023-2024 Additional Guidance for NC Pre-K Programs

NC Pre-K Contracting Agencies must provide this guidance to all NC Pre-K sites and NC Pre-K teaching staff. Sites should contact their Contracting Agency and Contracting Agencies should contact their NC Pre-K Program Policy Consultant with questions about this guidance. For specific questions about contracts, please contact your DCDEE Contract Administrator.

1. Purpose

The **2023-2024 Additional Guidance for NC Pre-K Programs** is meant to address program expectations specific to **NC Pre-K programs and classrooms** for the 2023-2024 program year. **This guidance applies to all NC Pre-K classrooms, regardless of the setting in which they operate (public school, private child care center, Head Start program.)** This guidance may be amended by the NC Pre-K state office as needed.

2. Health and Safety Guidance

All preschool programs in public schools and private sites are required to follow the health and safety guidance outlined in the [ChildCareStrongNC Public Health Toolkit](#).

3. Site Level Staff Flexibilities

a. Long-term Substitute Teachers

While the expectation from DCDEE is that all sites will work to secure qualified lead teachers and teacher assistants, we recognize the impact that COVID-19 has had on the ability for programs to hire and/or maintain qualified staff. Therefore, for the 2023-2024 program year, DCDEE will continue to offer flexibility to programs by **waiving the 12-week limitation** for long-term substitutes serving in NC Pre-K classrooms.

b. Interim Site Administrators

While the expectation from DCDEE is that all sites will work to secure qualified Site Administrators, we recognize the impact that COVID-19 has had on the ability for programs to hire and/or maintain qualified staff. Therefore, for the 2023-2024 program year, DCDEE will continue to offer flexibility to programs by **waiving the 12-week limitation** for Interim Site Administrators serving at NC Pre-K sites.

4. Child Care Rule .3013 - NC Pre-K Teacher Assistant Education and Credentials

DCDEE recognizes that the requirements outlined in [Child Care Rule .3013](#) may have caused programs additional burden during a time when obtaining qualified staff has been challenging for everyone. In an effort to support NC Pre-K programs across the state, DCDEE will allow additional flexibilities to help educators and programs transition into rule .3013. **These flexibilities apply to both new hires and existing staff.**

DCDEE strongly encourages NC Pre-K Teacher Assistants to make every effort to meet the requirements of rule .3013. as these specific flexibilities will expire June 2024.

- Individuals who have received a qualifying letter from our Workforce Education Unit certifying them as a Lead Teacher, may qualify to serve as an NC Pre-K Teacher Assistant
 - If a Teacher Assistant **has at least 9 EC credit hours** on their qualifying letter, they will qualify as an NC Pre-K teacher Assistant for the 2023-2024 program year.
 - If a Teacher Assistant **has less than 9 EC credit hours** on their qualifying letter, they must enroll in approved EC courses **and complete** 9 EC credit hours by the end of the 2023-2024 program year. These courses must be completed by the spring of 2024 in order to count for the 2023-2024 program year.

- If a Teacher Assistant **does not meet the aforementioned flexibilities, nor do they currently hold a CDA nor hold or are working towards an Associate Degree**, they must enroll in CDA courses immediately in order to qualify as an NC Pre-K Teacher Assistant for the 2023-2024 school year. CDA must be completed by the end of the 2023-2024 program year.

Teacher Assistants that do not meet the requirements of rule .3013 will not be approved to serve in the 2024-2025 school year.

5. Legislative Rate Increases for Private Sites

In the [2021–2023 biennium budget](#), the NC General Assembly included funding to increase NC Pre-K rates in private child care programs. They included special provisions that required DCDEE to use the funding to increase salaries and gave DCDEE flexibility in how to distribute these funds. For the 2022-2023 program year, the Division of Child Development and Early Education allocated approximately \$3.5M to NC Pre-K Contracting Agencies to provide legislative rate increases for private sites. DCDEE used the flexibility allowed by the special provisions to provide monthly supplemental payments to private site classrooms with at least one enrolled NC Pre-K child and a qualified lead teacher or long-term substitute. Classrooms received a flat classroom rate of \$4,895 which was distributed in 10 equal payments of \$489.50.

Beginning with the 2023-2024 program year, the Division of Child Development and Early Education will **no longer have the flexibility to provide monthly supplemental payments to private site classrooms**. The \$3.5M referenced above will instead be used to increase the standard, monthly reimbursement rate for private sites as outlined in the guidance below.

A. Increase to Standard Reimbursement Rate for Private/Nonpublic sites

The NC Pre-K reimbursement rate for private/nonpublic sites will increase from \$682 per-child to **\$719 per-child**, an increase of approximately 5.425%.

Private/Nonpublic
2022-2023 Rate: \$682 – Any NC Pre-K Lead or Long-term Substitute Lead Teacher
NEW 2023-2024 Rate: \$719 – Any NC Pre-K Lead or Long-term Substitute Lead Teacher

B. Classroom Eligibility Requirements

ALL per-child private site rates currently in use that are **less** than \$719 (based on site type indicated in NC Pre-K Plan) will be **increased** to reflect the 2023-2024 reimbursement rate.

- Contracting agencies will be **required** to reimburse at the NEW NC Pre-K reimbursement rate and **may not** assign rates below \$719 per child, per month for any classroom.

Sufficient funding will be provided to ensure all per-child private site rates meet the NEW NC Pre-K reimbursement rate.

Any per-child private site rates currently in use that are already **at or above** \$719 (based on site type indicated in NC Pre-K Plan) will **remain as they are**. **No additional funding** will be provided to further increase those above-standard rates.

C. Funding Amounts

The amount of funding allocated to each county/region will vary based on the following factors:

- Per-child rates currently in use for private sites
 - Any per-child private site rates currently in use that are already **at or above the NEW NC Pre-K reimbursement rate** (based on site type indicated in NC Pre-K Plan) **will remain as they are.**
- Number of slots allocated to private sites
- Administrative dollars will be calculated based on 10% of the new direct services funding amount.

NOTE: DCDEE strongly encourages that these funds be used to maintain teacher salary increases where possible. However, we recognize that some counties and sites will see a reduction in funding for the 2023-2024 program year due to the reasons listed above. Therefore, NC Pre-K sites receiving reduced additional funding as compared to the 2022-2023 school year **will not be required** to continue paying the increased salaries for teachers as was mandated in the previous program year.

D. Payment Distribution

These funds are being implemented as per-child rate increases and will therefore be distributed via the standard monthly NC Pre-K reimbursement process.

The 2023-2024 NC Pre-K Plan database system will be updated to allow the NEW NC Pre-K reimbursement rate to be assigned to private site classrooms at the start of the year during the initial budgeting process. Any questions about discrepancies in your payment rates should be directed to your NC Pre-K Program Policy Consultant.

6. Categorical Eligibility for NC Pre-K

In an effort to minimize administrative burden and support children who are experiencing other circumstances or hardships that may impact their school readiness, DCDEE is now allowing the use of “categorical eligibility” as an **additional means** for determining a child’s eligibility for the NC Pre-K Program.

NOTE: No changes are being made to the existing eligibility criteria – children may still be determined eligible for NC Pre-K based on income and/or additional risk factors as described in Section 3 of the NC Pre-K Program Requirements & Guidance.

Categorical Eligibility Requirements

Beginning with the 2023-2024 program year, an age-eligible child will be considered “categorically eligible” for NC Pre-K if the child/family is:

- Experiencing homelessness
- In foster care
- Receiving refugee services
- Receiving Public Assistance **(for family sizes of 8 or less*)**
 - WIC
 - Public Housing
 - TANF/Work First
 - Medicaid
 - SSI
 - Food and Nutrition Services (Food Stamps)
 - SNAP

Family income verification is **not required** for children who are considered categorically eligible for NC Pre-K. However, sufficient documentation must be collected to verify children meet Categorical Eligibility criteria.

Examples of documentation may include, but are not limited to:

- Parent statement regarding homelessness status
- Letter/statement from DSS regarding foster care placement
- Public Assistance enrollment/award letters (less than 12 months old from time of application)

****Family sizes of 9 or more cannot be considered “categorically eligible” based on receiving Public Assistance due to the income thresholds used by the programs listed above - income would still need to be collected and verified for these families.***

Priority to Serve

Contracting Agencies are required to serve eligible children as defined below:

- **Income eligible and categorically eligible** - Children who are determined eligible based on their family's income being at or below 75% of the state median income level and children who are categorically eligible are given the highest priority and served first.
 - Children with identified additional risk factors who are not income eligible or categorically eligible should only be considered if there are any remaining placements after all other children have been placed.

Redetermining Eligibility

If you have already determined eligibility for child applications that have been received for the 2023-2024 NC Pre-K school year, there is no need to redo eligibility or reprint Scorecards for these child applications. These children will remain eligible for the 2023-2024 NC Pre-K school year as there have been no changes to the existing eligibility criteria.

Families with incomplete applications due to missing income information should be notified of the new categorical eligibility criteria and given an opportunity to provide relevant documentation, if applicable.

NC Pre-K Updates/Adjustments

- **NC Pre-K APP** and **NC Pre-K Kids** systems will be updated to include categorically eligible criteria.
 - Additional guidance outlining system changes will be released at a later date.
- The **NC Pre-K Program Requirements and Guidance** manual, Section 3, will be updated to include categorical eligibility.