

# EDUCATIONAL



THE UTAH STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION  
Report to the Education Interim  
Committee

## Preschool: Grants for High Quality School Readiness Programs

November 2024

**Jonathan Collins**  
Research Consultant  
Jonathan.collins@schools.utah.gov

**Jared Lisonbee**  
Preschool Education Specialist  
Jared.lisonbee@schools.utah.gov

**Cristina Barrera**  
Preschool Education Specialist  
Cristina.barrera@schools.utah.gov

**Katrina Herd**  
Preschool Education Specialist  
Katrina.herd@schools.utah.gov

**Julie Clark**  
Early Learning Coordinator  
Julie.clark@schools.utah.gov

# Preschool: Grants for High-Quality School Readiness Programs

## STATUTORY REQUIREMENT

### U.C.A. Section 35A-15-303

requires the Utah State Board of Education, in consultation with the School Readiness team, to conduct an ongoing review and evaluation each school year of grant recipients under the Becoming High Quality School Readiness Program and Expanded Student Access to High Quality School Readiness Program. The State Board is required to submit an annual report including a summary of an evaluation of these programs to the Education Interim Committee.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the 2019 General Session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 166, *School Readiness Amendments*, to improve the coordination and alignment of preschool programming. This report is provided to the Education Interim Committee as a summary of an evaluation of and the efficacy of the High Quality School Readiness (HQSR) Grant Programs. During the 2023-2024 school year, the HQSR Becoming High Quality (BHQ) and Expanded Student Access (ESA) preschool grant programs served 40 preschool programs comprised of 9,610 students, with 24% qualifying as eligible students as defined in the statute. Overall, students entering kindergarten from high-quality public preschool programs had a higher proportion of students proficient in literacy and numeracy than students from non-high-quality public preschool programs. High-quality preschool participants performed at higher levels than the state average in literacy and at the same level as the state average in numeracy..

## BACKGROUND

---

In the 2014 General Session, the Legislature passed House Bill 96, *Utah School Readiness Initiative*, which provided funding for preschool programs. The Utah School Readiness (SR) Initiative operated to increase school readiness, improve academic performance, and reduce remediation costs associated with poor educational outcomes. Under the Initiative, the SR Board could enter into results-based financing contracts with private entities to fund proven high-quality early childhood education programs serving at-risk students. The HQSR Grant Program was also established with this Initiative. Existing preschool programs could apply for this funding to improve the elements of quality in their program. The program was designed so that the improvements were implemented over the course of three years, at which point the participating program could transition to the HQSR-Expansion program.

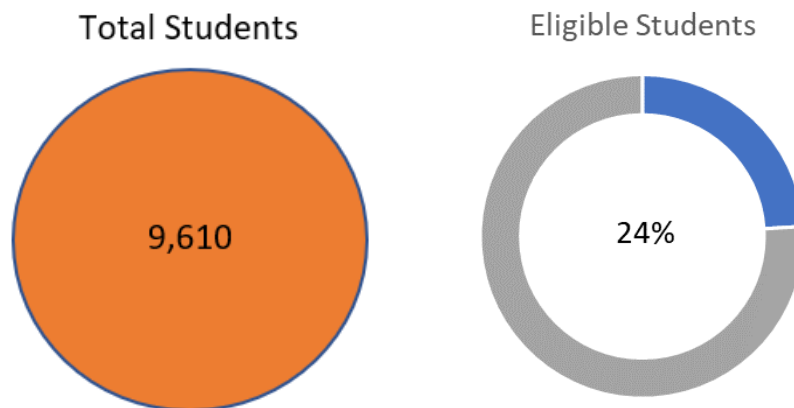
In 2016, in Senate Bill 101, the High-Quality School Readiness - Expansion (HQSR-E) grant program was established to expand access to HQSR programs for eligible children. The HQSR-E program provided grant funds to LEAs and private providers with existing early education programs deemed high-quality, as determined by the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition* (ECERS-3) and some additional rubric criteria. SR programs were eligible to apply for HQSR-E funding if they provided services to four-year-old children who were economically disadvantaged, could illustrate how funds would be used to expand their preschool programs, and were deemed high-quality based on the criteria noted above. The HQSR-E program ended in June 2019 but was replaced by the Expanded Student Access (ESA) to High Quality School Readiness Programs grant program.

During the 2019 General Session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 166, *School Readiness Amendments*, to improve the coordination and alignment of preschool programming. The state appropriated \$6 million from the General Fund to continue the support of program funding previously provided by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reserve funding through the HQSR-E grant. This appropriation was combined with the ongoing \$3 million from the previous HQSR grant, for a total of \$9 million supporting both the Becoming High Quality (BHQ) and ESA grant programs.

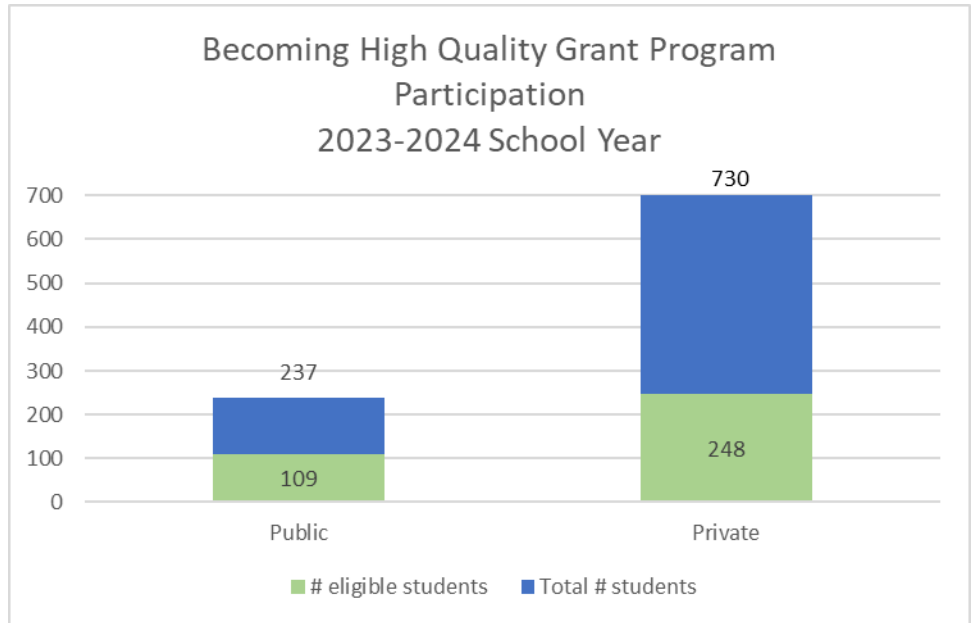
Also included in Senate Bill 166, the School Readiness (SR) Board governs both the BHQ and ESA grant programs for public and private providers. The BHQ program provides funding to help existing preschool programs increase elements of high quality. The ESA program allows high-quality preschool programs to expand access and provide seats to eligible students. An eligible student is one who is economically disadvantaged and whose parent or guardian reports they also have experienced at least one risk factor (mother is 18 or younger, parents with a low reading ability, exposure to substance abuse, etc.) or a student who is an English learner.

## **PROGRAM PARTICIPATION**

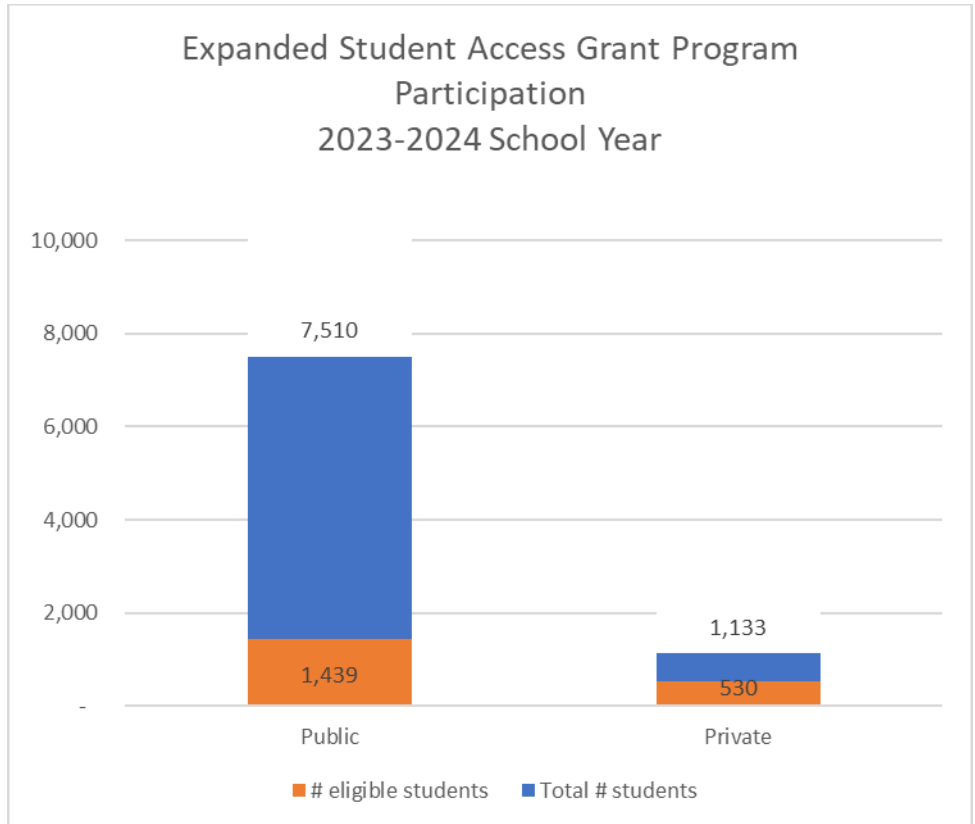
During the 2023-2024 school year, the BHQ and ESA programs served 40 preschool programs consisting of 9,610 students. Of these students, 2,326 (24%) were eligible based on the above criteria.



The BHQ grant program served 967 students, with 237 students in public programs and 730 students in private programs. Of the 237 students in a grant-receiving public preschool program, 46% (109) qualified as eligible students. Of the 730 students in a grant-receiving private preschool program, 34% (248) qualified as eligible students. The proportion of eligible students in the program is reflected below.



The ESA grant program served a total of 8,643 students, with 7,510 students in public programs and 1,133 students in private programs. Of the 7,510 students in a grant-receiving public preschool program, 19% (1,439 students) qualified as eligible students. Of the 1,133 students in a grant-receiving private preschool program, 47% (530) qualified as eligible students. The proportion of eligible students in the program is reflected below.



#### PROGRAM EVALUATION

The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and the SR team use the ECERS-3 tool to determine whether a school readiness program is high-quality. Observers demonstrating scoring reliability with ECERS-3 experts conduct the observations; the team consists of employees from the Department of Workforce Services Office of Child Care, USBE, and external coaches.

The ECERS-3 is designed to assess classroom quality for children ages three to five. One of the principal characteristics of the ECERS-3 is the reliance on observation as the primary source of information on which to base assessment of classroom quality. It views the physical environment, children’s relationships with one another and with significant adults, and instruction as integrated. Assessors examined 35 indicators across six subscales. The subscales include Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interaction, and Program Structure.

In November 2023, the SR Board approved cut scores for participant programs. The ECERS-3 has a total possible score of 7. For both public and private programs, a minimum overall score of 3.67 is required, with a score of 4 on the Language and Literacy and a 4 on the Interaction subscales.

In November 2021, the SR Board approved the following observation ratios: for public providers, a minimum of three observations per 500 students with one additional observation per every 500 students over 500. Due to the generally smaller size of private programs, DWS OCC recommended observing a

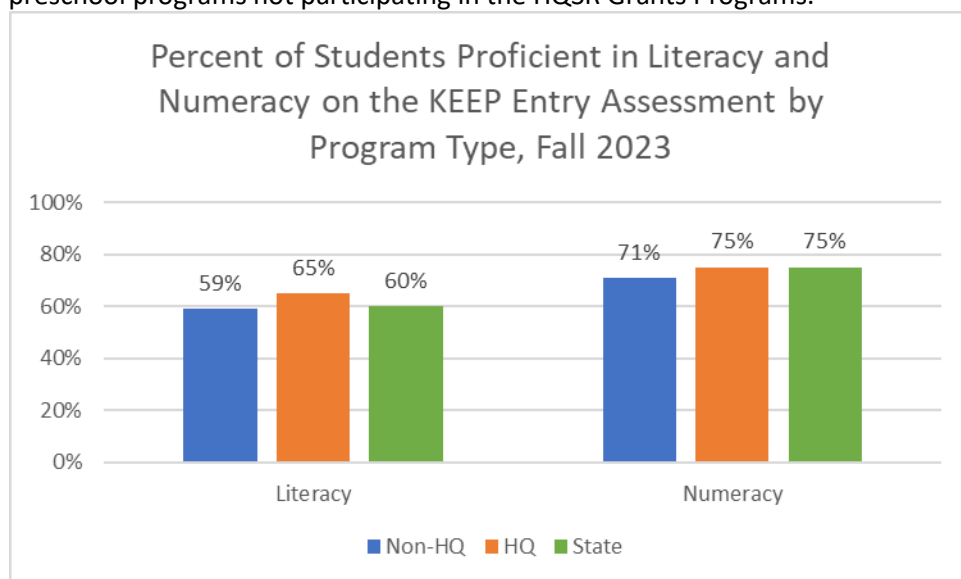
minimum of one-third of classrooms in a program. If a private provider serves over 500 students, DWS OCC will follow USBE guidelines.

In 2019, the SR Board approved a look-back period for ECERS-3 observations. This decision was made to reduce the workload of grant administrators. Observations were conducted for new applicants, and ECERS-3 observations conducted within the look-back period were used for returning applicants.

## **PROGRAMMATIC OUTCOMES**

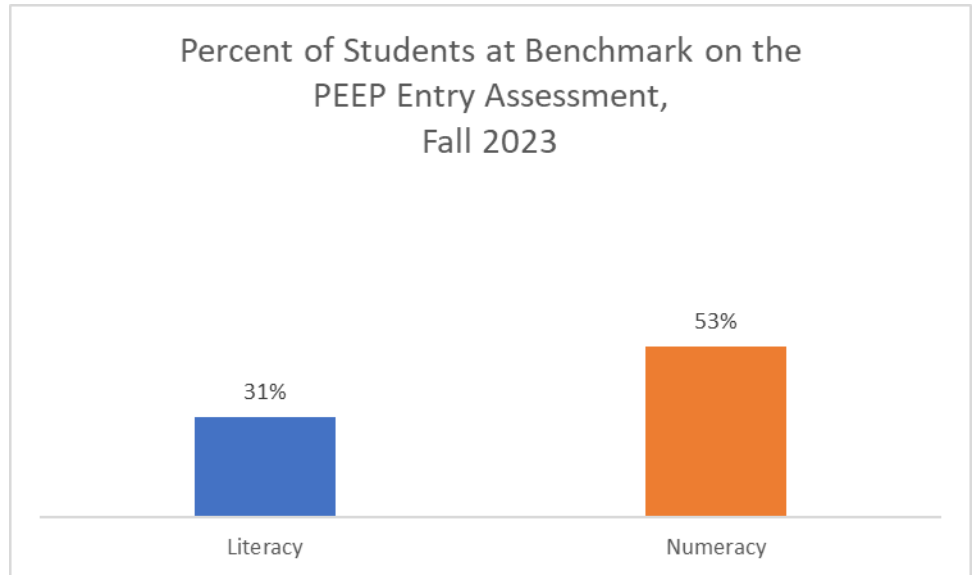
To evaluate programmatic outcomes for students exiting the ESA program, USBE looked at school year 2023-2024 Kindergarten Entry and Exit Profile (KEEP) proficiency levels assessed at the beginning of the academic year. Students entering kindergarten who attended high-quality preschool programs in school year 2022-2023 were compared to those entering kindergarten who attended public preschool programs that were not participating in the HQSR Grants Programs.

Overall, students entering kindergarten from high-quality programs had a higher proportion of students proficient in literacy and numeracy than those from non-high-quality public programs (see figure below). High-quality program participants performed at higher levels than the state average in literacy. Student performance for those who attended high-quality was equal to the state average in numeracy. However, it should be noted that public preschool programs serve a relatively small proportion of students and a higher proportion of at-risk students. Of the 42,845 students who took the KEEP Entry, 5,364 attended high-quality preschool programs, and 3,943 attended public preschool programs not participating in the HQSR Grants Programs.

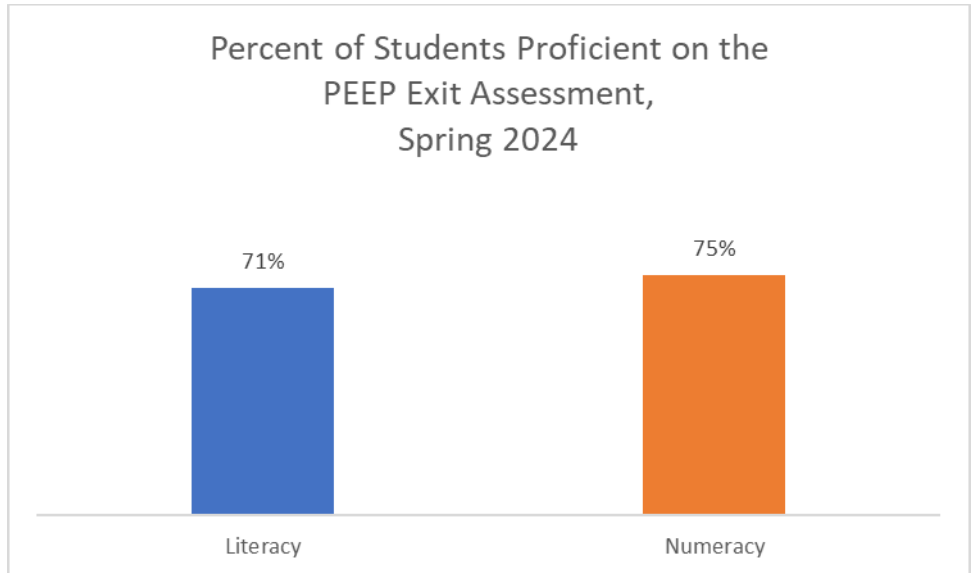


The Pre-kindergarten Entry and Exit Profile (PEEP) Entry assessment is based on the *Utah Core State Standards for Early Learning for Ages 3 to 5*. Students who take the PEEP Entry assessment are considered at either performance level 1: “Support Needed” or performance level 2: “At Benchmark.”

In the fall of 2023, 7,715 preschool students took the PEEP Entry. Of this group, 31% were At Benchmark in literacy, and 53% were At Benchmark in numeracy.



The PEEP Exit is the same exam as the KEEP Entry and is designed to track academic losses over the summer between preschool and kindergarten. A student can score within either performance level 1, 2, or 3. A student earning a performance level 3 is considered “Proficient.” In the spring of 2024, 7,390 students took the PEEP Exit. Of this group, 71% were Proficient in literacy, and 75% were Proficient in numeracy.



It should be noted that the PEEP Entry and PEEP Exit assessments are different tests and based on different sets of early learning standards, so increased proficiency does not necessarily reflect growth. However, in 2022, the SR Board approved a new measure to represent program efficacy. By creating a contingency table to compare the PEEP Entry performance level and PEEP Exit performance level, a PEEP Progress score can be calculated for each student in a program, with a total possible score of 150. A PEEP Progress average score can then be calculated for each program. The SR Board approved a program average progress cut score of 103 for grant recipients. In the 2023-2024 school year, 29 programs met this cut score in literacy, and 29 programs met this cut score in numeracy.

## Conclusion

The BHQ and ESA grants served a total of 9,610 students across 40 programs in the 2023-2024 school year. Of these students, 2,326 (24%) qualify as eligible by the program’s definition. These students generally showed greater readiness for kindergarten than their peers who attended non-high-quality public programs. Students who had participated in high-quality preschools also showed higher proficiency in literacy than other students entering kindergarten statewide. These data reflect the positive impact of high-quality preschool on students from more academically at-risk backgrounds.