IES Institute of Education Sciences

STUDY SNAPSHOT
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Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest
At Education Northwest

State-Funded Preschool in the Last Frontier: Alaska's Pre-Elementary Grant Program

Alaska's Pre-Elementary Grants (PEGs) provide funding directly to school districts to support the development and expansion of locally designed preschool options. Created in 2016, the grants serve historically disadvantaged students (defined in this study as Alaska Native students, economically disadvantaged students, English learner students, students with an Individualized Education Program, and students in rural remote schools). School districts that receive PEG funds must define and identify the children in their communities who are most in need of support and implement or expand a PEG preschool program to serve those children. In 2018/19, 1,339 kindergarten students in Alaska participated in a PEG-funded program.

This is the first study to look at implementation of PEG programs, the characteristics of PEG districts and the students served, and the student outcomes related to participating in state-funded preschool, including participating in a PEG program. Data sources included documents submitted by PEG districts to the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), interviews with PEG district program directors, and DEED administrative data. In addition to the years in which PEGs were available (2016/17 to present), the analyses also examined the relationship between participating in state-funded preschool programs in 2013/14, 2014/15, and 2015/16 and student outcomes. The study findings have important implications for Alaska's effort to expand preschool and might also be of interest to other predominantly rural states that are considering similar efforts. Practitioners, program directors, and state agency staff in Alaska can use the findings to improve programming, provide more targeted support to PEG districts, and modify the grant program. For example, close community partnerships, home outreach to parents, and summer bridge programs might help improve program quality, access, and capacity. The promising results highlight the need for further research on the impact of participating in state-funded preschool in Alaska and point to additional data collection that could support that research.

Key findings

- **In 2018/19 PEG districts served a higher proportion of certain groups of historically disadvantaged students than did non-PEG districts.** For example, economically disadvantaged students constituted 47 percent of students in PEG districts and 42 percent of students in non-PEG districts.
- **Kindergarten students who had participated in PEG programs were more likely to be Alaska Native or enrolled in rural remote schools in 2018/19 than were non-PEG students in the same districts.**
- **Most PEG districts used the program's flexible funding to build structures and supports to improve preschool access, capacity, and quality in 2018/19.**
- **Implementation challenges facing programs that received PEG funding included low enrollment, insufficient funding, and staff recruitment and retention problems.**
- **Participation in state-funded preschool programs between 2013/14 and 2017/18 was positively related to kindergarten readiness, kindergarten and grade 2 English language proficiency, kindergarten and grade 1 attendance, and grade 3 assessment scores in math.** The positive relationships varied across student groups.