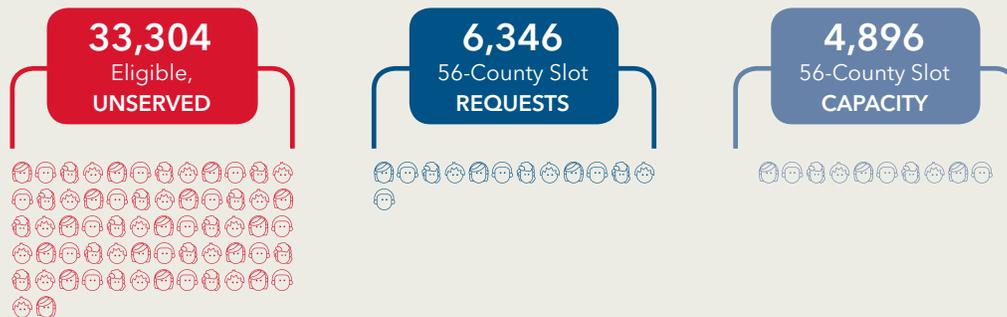


“Waiting Lists” - Undercounting Unmet Need

A close look at the data confirms that “waiting lists” maintained by only some North Carolina counties are not an accurate measure of demand and need for the NC Pre-K program.

In 2017, when funding for an additional 1,750 slots was announced, 56 counties requested more than 6,000 new slots. However, those 56 counties only had capacity to add 4,800 slots. Somehow, that capacity level came to be viewed as the number of children on “waiting lists,” with state funding increases tied to that number. The problem is that the number of students a county is “able” to enroll at a given point is not an accurate measure of demand and need for the NC Pre-K program.

INACCURACY OF NC PRE-K “WAITING LISTS”: 2017



Additional data underscore this conclusion because so-called “waiting lists” have serious limitations as indicators of the underserved eligible population:

- First, waiting lists include only children in families who tried to enroll. Many eligible families may not seek to enroll because they: (a) lack knowledge about the program and the important benefits to their children from high-quality pre-K; (b) know that a program is full; (c) are hesitant to enroll in a state-run program or share family information, especially if they are immigrants; (d) are limited by difficulties in proving eligibility; and/or (e) have other challenges related to transportation, homelessness, work schedule, or language.
- Second, providers at full capacity may consider ongoing outreach - and creation of a waiting list - a waste of resources if families will inevitably be disappointed when they are denied enrollment.
- Third, there is no statewide, centralized waiting list, nor is there a standardized process in place for NC Pre-K contractors to develop waiting lists. As a result, counties that do keep lists can develop them in whatever manner they deem appropriate.
- Fourth, any waiting list can vary substantially from one month or year to another for reasons unrelated to changes in unmet need, such as families who move abruptly without notice.
- Finally, because NC Pre-K is a 10-month program for 4-year-olds, a waiting list can only be addressed on an annual basis. The children on any year’s list will age out of eligibility during a year, and a new number will age in. A single year’s “waiting list” simply cannot be phased out over a multiyear period of time.

Accordingly, the data point that is most relevant when seeking to expand NC Pre-K is the number of children who are eligible for the program but who do not have access to it. North Carolina needs to move beyond the notion of thinking that inaccurately labeled “waiting lists” as the metric to be used for expanding the NC Pre-K program - especially when there are almost 33,000 eligible but unserved children across North Carolina who the program was designed to serve and who would benefit most from participation.

To serve those 33,000 children, advocates for expanding NC Pre-K have set a goal of enrolling 75% of all children eligible for the program. Serving 75% of eligible children is a conservative estimate for providing early education services to all eligible children who are likely to participate, and thus a reasonable goal to set.