



# THE POWER OF PRESCHOOL

Expanding early education options gets children ready for academic and social success



**Y**ou don't have to have lived in Durham to recognize this community's strong investment in its future. You see it everywhere—arts, food, culture, entertainment, infrastructure. You name it; it's happening.

Equally important is our community's commitment to providing outstanding educational opportunities for our children. More than three decades of research shows that engaging young children in learning during those precious early years provides a strong foundation for future success in school and beyond.

Durham leaders know this, and as a result, our community leads North Carolina in providing resources to ensure that children across Durham County have equitable access to preschool experiences – a commitment critical for preparing children from kindergarten through higher education and beyond.

“What I would say to parents is, ‘Apply.’ We have a variety of programs to serve students,” said Karen Thompson, Durham Public Schools director of early education. “Being in preschool is the foundation for your school years. Setting our students up for success is so important.”

DPS currently offers preschool at 30 of its 32 elementary schools, several of which are programs for students with special needs only. DPS preschool programs are a crucial component of a broader network of preschool services offered through a partnership among DPS, Families and Communities Rising, Head Start, Durham's Partnership for Children, and the Child Care Services Association, which officially renamed itself Early Years on Nov. 1. Early Years is the managing agency for this partnership, known as Durham PreK.



## A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

The DPS Board of Education and the Durham County Commissioners provide more than \$10 million each year for preschool programs. New DPS elementary schools now include space for at least two PreK classrooms, with the new Murray-Massenburg Elementary School, which opened in August 2024, housing three. The DPS long-term plan is to offer some type of PreK in every school.

Dr. LaToya McCrimmon is the preschool coordinator for the Whitted School in Durham, which operates eight preschool classrooms. She said that preschool is a time for children to learn basic skills and build confidence in going to school and making friends. The concept of learning through play is woven throughout all programs.

“We explain to them that there are teachers who care for them and to help them be safe,” said McCrimmon, who added that punctuality and attendance are very important. “Most [DPS preschool programs] start at 7:45 a.m., which is earlier than most daycares they might have been used to. If you are late, you have missed a piece of the instructional day.”



Educational and social-emotional development activities include:

- Writing skills, letter formation, and sounds;
- Reading skills;
- Social skills, including how to behave, share, and take turns;
- Putting on clothes, shoes, and jackets;
- Managing bathroom routines with minimal assistance;
- Math skills, such as counting and number recognition;
- Beginning science activities, such as exploring basic facts about nature;
- Sensory, music and movement skills.

There is also ample time for recess, where students can play indoors or outdoors, along with special offerings such as arts and music activities and computer skills.

Dr. Rita Rathbone, DPS magnet specialist, said the Montessori preschool programs are based on holistic concepts, including practical life skills, sensorial learning, math, language, and cultural studies.

“We provide loving, safe, and caring environments,” Rathbone said. “It can be very stressful for a first-time parent to drop their kids off at PreK. They should feel very comfortable leaving their precious child in our hands.”

### DURHAM PREK PARTNERSHIP

No matter your family income or where you live, there is a Durham PreK program to suit your family’s needs. These organizations work together to ensure the right fit for 4-year-old children whose parents want them to experience programming that nurtures and prepares them for future success. A “one-stop” universal application process helps match students with the best fit. Parents are asked to list their top three preferences, which include DPS schools and private preschool programs.

“We try to do placement based not just on the student’s address, but on what type of seat is offered, as well,” Thompson said.

Dr. Linda Chappel, senior vice president of Triangle Area Child Care Resource and Referral Services at Early Years, says the Durham PreK program is a statewide model for how a community can support its children. Durham PreK goes above and beyond the NC Pre-K program, which supports preschool in Durham. Additional county funding provides many more seats for children whose families desire preschool experiences.

“What we believed in Durham was that all children could benefit from preschool,” said Chappel, a member of the initial planning committee comprising more than 50 educators

	DPS DURHAM PREK SITES	DPS MONTESSORI PREK
<b>Student Age</b>	Must be 4 years old by Aug. 31	Must be 4 years old by Aug. 31
<b>Application</b>	Starting in February at Durham PreK website	January only at DPS website
<b>Potty Training</b>	Can be in process	Can be in process
<b>Bus transportation provided</b>	No	Yes
<b>Multi-age classrooms</b>	No	Yes (PreK and K in class together)
<b>Cost</b>	Sliding scale	Sliding scale



and community leaders who met weekly for a year. “Starting with 4-year-olds, we saw this as a way to really bring forth an investment for Durham’s children, to set them up for a lifetime of success.”

Families who fall below 400 percent of the poverty level qualify for a free seat, funded by the federal Title I program, the state NC Pre-K program, or Durham PreK, which funds 653 seats throughout the county. For non-Title I or EC programs, those whose incomes are above that threshold pay on a sliding-scale basis.

can apply through Durham Public Schools online or receive in-person assistance if needed. Support for non-English speakers is also provided.

## PLANNING FOR GROWTH

More than 40 percent of Durham County’s 4-year-olds are enrolled in a Durham PreK program, whether in DPS, Head Start, Durham’s Partnership for Children, or a private setting. While some parents may prefer to have their 4-year-olds at home or in alternative care like with a grandparent or nanny, the program aims to serve as many families as possible who wish to take advantage of preschool programs.

Durham PreK has set a long-term goal of serving 75 percent of eligible students in Durham County. With the ongoing commitment from county and city leaders, along with the Durham PreK partnership, there’s little doubt it can be done.

Chappel said that quality programs are readily available, if families want them for their children.

“A family is going to make a choice that will affect their child’s whole academic trajectory,” Chappel said. “Preschool matters. What you do to get your child ready for their formal education could really impact their success. The investment in structural strategies is strong. It’s not just about equitable access, it’s about investing in quality.”

For more information and to apply to a Durham PreK program (including all DPS programs except Montessori), visit <https://www.dpsnc.net/Page/214> or <https://durhamprek.org>. For DPS Montessori preschool options, contact the Office of Student Assignment at (919) 560-2059 for more information and applications, available Jan. 6-31, 2025. Due to limited space, those interested in Montessori programming should also apply to Durham PreK in case they are not selected in the lottery. The Montessori lottery is not accessible through the PreK application. 🌸

Durham PreK applications will be available in February 2025 for students who will be 4 years old by Aug. 31, 2025. This includes DPS preschool programs, except at Watts Montessori, Morehead Montessori, and Little River Montessori schools. These magnet schools offer programs for 4-year-olds, but acceptance at those schools is based on the district’s lottery system, which opens on Jan. 6, 2025. A separate sliding-scale fee applies to these schools. Families

