

# Universal preschool becomes law <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

A new law will open up early education to every child in the state.

During a ceremony Wednesday at the Stafford Technical Center in Rutland, Gov. Peter Shumlin signed a bill into law that will offer 10 hours of early education to every 3- and 4-year-old in the state.

"This bill ensures that no matter where you live, your 3- or 4-year-old will have access to high-quality early education programs, and arrive at school better prepared to learn," Shumlin said.

"The children who aren't ready to learn when they begin elementary school are very likely to challenge our resources throughout their school years and potentially throughout their lives," he continued. "We know that high-quality pre-kindergarten is far less expensive than remediation, retention and special education later on."

Rebecca Holcombe, secretary of the state Agency of Education, said an abundance of evidence demonstrates the efficacy of early education as a means to close the performance gap between students who live in poverty and those who do not.

"On average, children who attend intensive, high-quality preschool programs are less likely to repeat a grade, drop out of high school, commit crimes or be placed in special education," Holcombe said.

"They are likely to get better jobs and earn more money over the course of their work lives," she said. "We see universal preschool as integral to Vermont's future economic vitality and to the ability of our youngest and most vulnerable to thrive in school and their communities."

While Vermont is increasing access to pre-kindergarten education - which, in theory, will increase the number of students in the programs - pre-K enrollment declined slightly on the national level during the 2012-13 school year, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

This represented the first decline since NIEER began tracking enrollment numbers in 2001.

Nationally, 28 percent of the nation's 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in a pre-K program in 2012-13, compared with 48 percent of children of the same age in Vermont.

Vermont is one of 40 states plus the District of Columbia that offers state-funded pre-K education. During the 2012-13 school year, Vermont ranked fourth in the nation in offering access to early education, with the District of Columbia ranking first with 87 percent enrollment.

New York ranked 10th with 23 percent enrollment; Maine ranked 13th with 18 percent; Massachusetts came in 28th with 9 percent enrollment. New Hampshire does not offer state-funded early education, according to the NIEER study.

In Vermont, the new law provides for 10 hours of early education a week for 35 weeks a year at an array of approved programs, which include public schools, private early education and care programs, and Head Start.

The law also breaks down existing geographical boundaries and allows a child to access any program, and not just the one in his or her town.

Sen. Kevin Mullin, R-Rutland, a lead sponsor of the bill in the senate, discussed how the new law fixes that residential wrinkle.

"A family with identical income living in a similar house paying the same property taxes to fund early education, depending on where they live, they either get the help or they don't, and that's just wrong," Mullin said.

"If you're raising the money through a broad-based tax like the property tax, there should be equal opportunities for every child in Vermont," he said.

Rep. Sarah Buxton, D-Tunbridge, was the lead sponsor of a similar bill in the House.

"It strengthens Vermont's appeal to young and working families. Over 70 percent of children under 6 live in households where all the adults are in the workforce. This is the reality of our current economy," Buxton said.

"Universal access to high-quality learning is the silver bullet, because it strengthens our foundation for learning at a time when we know

what matters and it's proven to provide high returns on our investments"

- reprinted from the Times Argus

**Region:** United States <sup>[2]</sup>

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