



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Opinion: Truly Universal Pre-K is a Societal Lifeline

SENATOR JAMES SKOUFIS December 5, 2022

| ISSUE: **UNIVERSAL PRE-K, CHILD CARE, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, ACCESS TO EDUCATION**



In 2014, the Republican majority in the State Senate cut a deal with the Democratic-controlled Assembly: the five boroughs would get about \$500 million per year for universal pre-k, while the rest of the state would forego the pre-k money and, instead, get property tax relief checks autographed by the Governor. Besides the educational inequity this created, the other problem was that the property tax relief program had an expiration date while the UPK money continued in perpetuity.

In 2021, I made it clear to Senate leadership that I would not support a budget unless the rest of the state's four-year-olds were finally given the same attention that New York City's had received for the past seven years. **Our children should not be disadvantaged because of the zip code in which they reside.**

We rallied enough suburban and upstate colleagues and were successful: in the past two years alone, we've secured a total of \$230 million for UPK outside the five boroughs along with a commitment to fully phase in the program for every four-year-old over the next two budgets.

Whether you're a current, former, or future working parent, you're at least tangentially familiar with the chaos of juggling costly childcare, drop-offs and pick-ups, keeping food on the table, navigating unruly sleep schedules, and still managing to bring your whole self, or close to it, to work.

According to the [Economic Policy Institute](#), the average cost of childcare for one four-year-old in New York is over \$12,000 annually. In Orange County specifically, the average two-parent, two-child household is spending over \$30,000 a year on childcare—all while housing costs skyrocket and inflation at the national level forces even the most cautious spender to tighten their purse strings.

Thanks to our important work over the past two years, **every single four-year-old in the state will soon be able to access pre-k without any out-of-pocket costs, no strings attached.** The geographical unfairness that has dominated this issue is coming to an end: no longer will New York City reap an enormous benefit on the backs of Hudson Valley constituents.

**The return on pre-k investment for our kids is indisputable.** A recent multi-decade study of [Boston's ambitious universal pre-k program](#) showed students who were enrolled in pre-k had higher high school graduation rates down the line, as well as college attendance rates. The

Perry Project, a 1960s study out of Michigan that focused on pre-kindergarten's impact on under-resourced communities, showed kids who were enrolled in pre-k were far less likely to get arrested, receive public assistance, or be unemployed in adulthood. They, and even the kids of these kids, also earned more money throughout their lives than those who weren't enrolled. Earlier interactions with trained educators could even help us identify learning disabilities sooner, further improving academic outcomes.

Nationwide, New York ranks the sixth most expensive place to raise a child, and as a new parent, I feel this acutely. With the full phase-in of universal pre-k on the very near horizon, Hudson Valley families are on the cusp of a seachange, one that will positively impact their economic, educational, and quality of life outlooks for generations to come.