



Pima Early Education Program Scholarships



FY 2025-2026 ANNUAL REPORT



PIMA COUNTY
COMMUNITY & WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT

PEEPS

Pima Early Education
Program Scholarships



OVERVIEW

Expanding Access, Building Opportunity

The **Pima Early Education Program (PEEPs)** is a countywide initiative that expands access to high-quality preschool for children ages 3-5 from low-income families, while strengthening the supply and quality of early childhood programs across Pima County. In its fifth year, PEEPs funded tuition costs for **1,489 children** and, together with partner efforts, helped **4,939 children** access high-quality preschool countywide. Through strategic public investment, partnerships with school districts and community organizations, and complementary philanthropic support through Accelerate Quality, PEEPs is helping families access affordable, high-quality preschool while building the capacity of local providers to serve more children. Together, these efforts are ensuring more children enter kindergarten prepared to learn and giving families greater opportunity to work, pursue education, and strengthen their economic stability.



"Amazing program with amazing support and professionals. Thanks to the PEEPS scholarship, I was able to keep my employment while also being able to afford care for my daughter. She is kindergarten-ready and has been learning to read and add, an achievement I thought she would learn in kindergarten. I am very grateful for the kindness and respect brought to us and the rest of the children attending."

– PEEPS Parent

KIDS & PRESCHOOLS!

The two primary goals of the Pima Early Education Program:

- Increase the number of 3-5 year-old children from low-income families attending high quality preschools in Pima County
- Increase the number of high-quality preschools in Pima County serving low-income families.

Pima County measures progress at both the program level (PEEPs) and the system-level (combined with others that fund high-quality preschool for families in need). At the program level, **PEEPs served 1,489 children from income eligible families during this fifth year of the program.**

PEEPs Contracts by Type	Total # of Students Served
Pima County Funded Quality First Scholarships	610
Pima County Funded School District Expansion Classes*	664
Pima County Funded Head Start Extended Day Classes	215
Totals	1,489

*This includes the Pima Community College Desert Vista class operated by Child-Parent Centers.

School District	# of PEEP Classes	# of Students Served
Amphitheater Unified School District	13	227
Flowing Wells Unified School District	3	56
Marana Unified School District	4	70
Pima Community College Desert Vista	1	20
Sahuarita Unified School District	1	20
Sunnyside Unified School District	5	92
Tucson Unified School District	10	179
Total	37	664

At the system level, PEEP and other programs assisted 4,939 children from families with incomes at or below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level in attending high-quality preschool programs in Pima County. This means that **collectively PEEP and our partners are serving about 38% of the need (4,939 out of 13,032).**

Funding Sources Currently Supporting Children in High Quality Preschool in Pima County

Pima Early Education Program Scholarships

Provides funding for
low-income families
(at or below 300% FPL).

First Things First Quality First Scholarships

Provides funding for low-income
families (at or below 300% FPL).
County & State Programs

Head Start

Provides funding for very low-income
families (at or below 100% FPL)
*does not include Tribal Head Start.
Federal Program

Arizona Department of Economic Security

Child-Care Subsidies funding for
low-income working families
(at or below 165% FPL).
State Program

Filling the Gap

Systems-level approach
to filling the high-quality
preschool gap

13,023

Estimated number of
eligible children who
need access to high-
quality preschools

*(Using 60% uptake rate
of the total number
unserved as of June
2021 baseline date.)*

8,084

Number unserved to date

As of June 2026

4,939

Estimated number of
eligible 3, 4, & 5 year
olds enrolled in high-
quality preschools,
funded at least in
part by a variety of
federal, state and local
dollars

As of June 2026.

3,660

Baseline

June 2021



As of
6/30/26

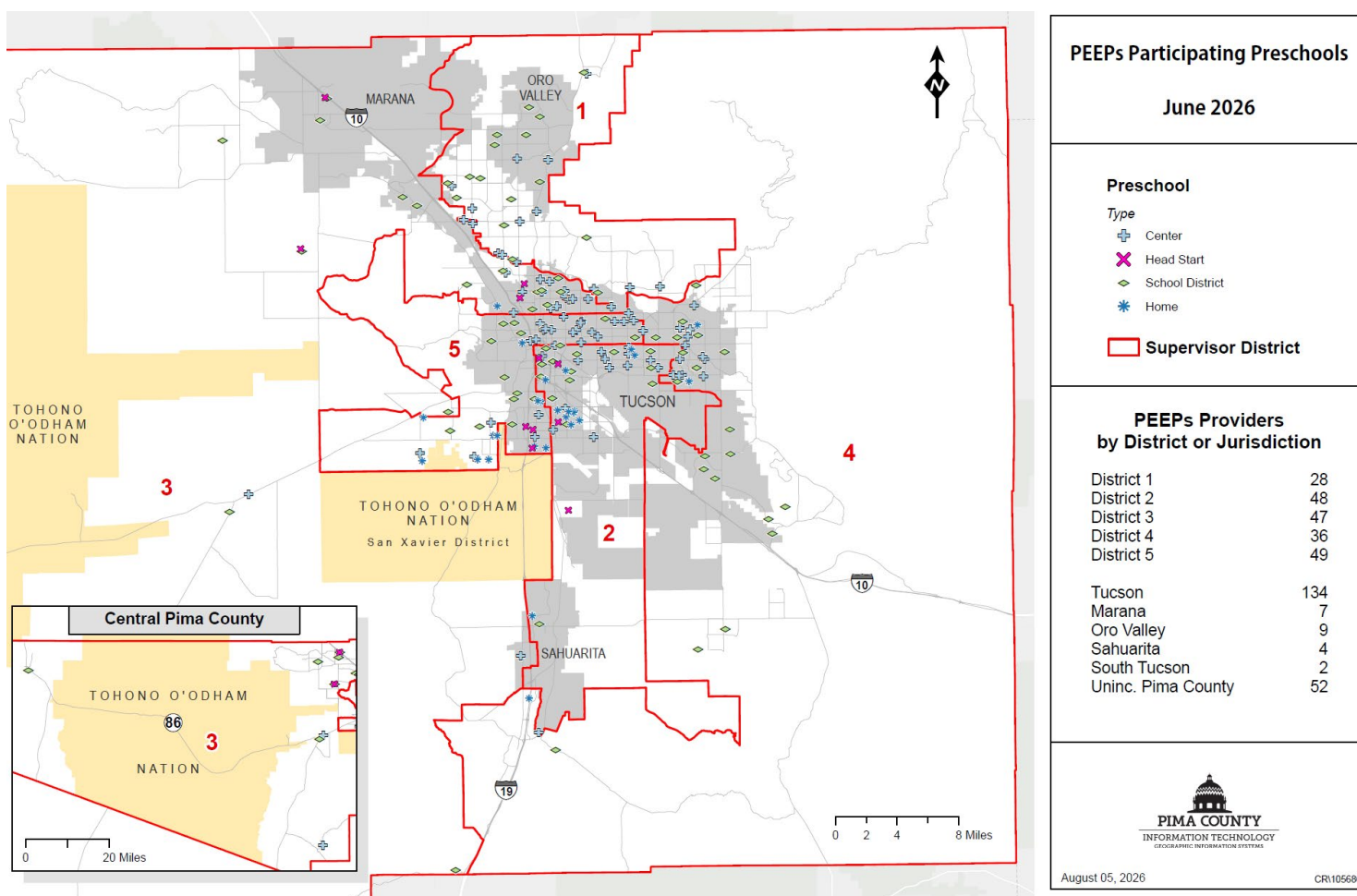
Ensuring that families can access high-quality preschool requires more than scholarships—it requires a strong and growing network of providers with the capacity to serve them. Increasing the number of high-quality preschools is therefore a central goal of PEEPs.

When PEEPs began tracking this measure in June 2021, Pima County had 199 high-quality preschool providers recognized by the Arizona Department of Economic Security Division of Child Care (DES DCC). By June 2026, that number had grown to **316 – a 59% increase in five years**. This growth reflects the collective efforts of Pima County and its community partners, including the expansion of PEEPs school district classrooms, collaboration among DES Division of Child Care and First Things First, and the United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona's Accelerate Quality program. Together, these investments are helping providers pursue and sustain high-quality programs while increasing the number of high-quality preschool options available to families throughout Pima County.

The continued growth of the provider network is an important foundation for PEEPs and the broader early childhood system: scholarships can help families afford preschool, but a strong supply of high-quality providers ensures families have somewhere to use them.

Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) recognized high-quality providers	June 2021 Baseline #'s	FY25 Total # HQ Providers	FY26 Total # HQ Providers
Quality First 3-5 star preschools (some also Nationally Accredited)	142	235	246
Head Start centers and Early Head Start programs	50	50	50
Nationally Accredited preschools (Not in QF) contracted with DES	7	22	20
Total	199	307	316

Of the 208 PEEPs participating providers for Year 5, 42% were private childcare centers, 40% were operated by public school districts, 13% were home providers, and 5% were operated by Head Start.



The State of Arizona recognizes high-quality preschools as those participating in the State's First Things First Quality First Program with a rating of 3-5 stars, those participating in the Federal Head Start program, and those with certain national accreditations.

Of the Quality First PEEPs participating preschools, 86 percent have a four-star rating or above.

Jurisdiction	Number of Quality First PEEPs Preschools by Rating			
	3-Star	4-Star	5-Star	Total
Town of Marana	1	3	2	6
Town of Oro Valley	2	3	4	9
Town of Sahuarita	0	3	0	3
City of South Tucson	0	0	2	2
City of Tucson	16	53	55	124
Unincorporated Pima County	7	16	25	48

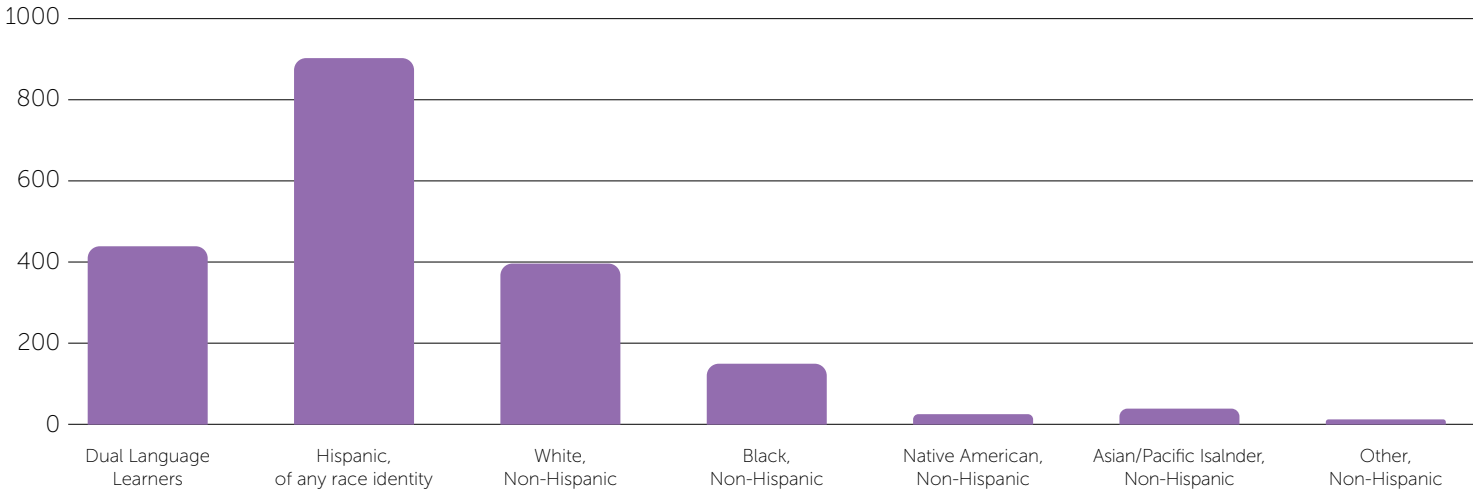
Research continues to show that high quality early childhood care and education is one of the most effective ways of reducing poverty and improving the health, safety and wealth of individuals and communities. Those who benefit the most from high quality preschool are children from economically disadvantaged families, children of color and dual language learners. While all PEEPs children had to be from economically disadvantaged families with incomes below 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, data on race, ethnicity and dual language learners was collected for PEEPs participants across the 3 program components: school district expansion classes, extended day Head Start programs, and Quality First scholarship recipients.

Demographic data collected this year, shows that children **belonging to a racial or ethnic minority accounted for 75% of the total group** with 62% identified as Hispanic of any race. Additionally, **428 of 1,469 (29%) children were recognized as dual language learners.**

“This year was such an amazing first time school year for my autistic child. We are thankful she had the opportunity to go and have the wonderful staff to help her thrive everyday! We look forward to it next year again.”

– PEEPS Parent

PEEPs Demographic Composition SY2026



PEEPS

Pima Early Education Program Scholarships

"I am truly grateful for being able to receive this support for our child, and it allowed me to work full time as well."

– PEEPS Provider

"Thank you! I cannot express adequately the difference this program made in our lives"

– PEEPS Parent

"The extended day program helped me to be able to work. I was able to attend English classes. I know he is prepared to go to kindergarten. I truly appreciate having the extended day program available for my child."

– PEEPS Parent

"Having my son in the extended day program has him very well prepared for kindergarten. I have been able to have a part-time job and be active in the program."

– PEEPS Parent

"I am beyond grateful for everyone at our Marana Head Start location. The services and support that CPC's extended day program provides my family is indescribable."

– PEEPS Parent

Growing, Learning and Preparing for Success

PEEPs was also able to track children’s development throughout the preschool year through its partnership with Child-Parent Centers/Head Start. Child Parent Centers utilize the SmartTeach assessment which provides an ongoing measure of children’s progress across key developmental and learning domains.

Fall-to-spring data for children participating in PEEPs Head Start extended-day classrooms show substantial increases in the percentage of children meeting or exceeding age-level expectations across every domain measured. The greatest gains were in mathematics, which increased from 27% of children meeting or exceeding expectations in the fall to 82% in the spring, a 55 percentage-point increase.

These results provide an encouraging snapshot of children’s development during the preschool year and demonstrate the progress children made across multiple areas of learning and development. The data also provides teachers and program staff with information they can use to understand children’s strengths and needs and support continued learning and individual growth.

PEEPs-SmartTeach Growth Report 3’s and Pre-K 4’s Fall/Winter/Spring 2025-2026

Learning Domain	Fall 2025 (Below/Meeting+)	Winter 2025-2026 (Below/Meeting+)	Spring 2026 (Below/Meeting+)	Overall Growth
Physical	46% / 54%	18% / 82%	5% / 95%	+41%
Social-Emotional	53% / 47%	29% / 71%	8% / 92%	+45%
Language	55% / 45%	25% / 75%	14% / 89%	+44%
Cognitive	56% / 44%	26% / 74%	11% / 89%	+45%
Literacy	71% / 29%	38% / 62%	18% / 82%	+53%
Mathematics	73% / 27%	38% / 62%	18% / 82%	+55%

In addition to PEEPs children in Headstart programs, this year our first group of PEEPs children that attended PEEPs school district expansion classes during the 2021 school year completed their 3rd grade school year! Through partnerships with school districts we were able to gather progress data from third-grade assessments for a portion of these students. Since our first group of PEEPs children was relatively small, the data presented here includes children that attended PEEPs funded classes in that inaugural year, plus children that attended similar high-quality preschool classes funded by the school districts.

Arizona’s Academic Standards Assessment (AASA) is the statewide achievement test for Arizona students in grades 3-8. Specifically, third-grade assessment benchmarks are vital checkpoints that measure whether students are meeting essential reading and math milestones before a critical shift in their educational journey.

The table below demonstrates the AASA English Language Arts (ELA) data that we were able to obtain of the PEEPs and similar high-quality preschool students compared to those that did not attend a school district preschool class.

3rd grade AASA ELA proficiency	PEEPs/ high-quality preschool count	PEEPs/ high quality preschool %	Students with no record of attending preschool count	Students with no record of attending preschool%	Difference
Highly proficient	52	10.6%	401	9.4%	+1.2 pp
Proficient	103	21.0%	780	18.3%	+2.7 pp
Minimally proficient	285	58.2%	2,612	61.4%	-3.2 pp
Partially proficient	50	10.2%	462	10.9%	-0.7 pp
Proficient or highly proficient	155	31.6%	1,181	27.7%	+3.9 pp
Total	490	100%	4,255	100%	

Takeaway: Students who attended PEEPS and similar high-quality preschool classrooms had a higher rate of Proficient or Highly Proficient performance on the 3rd-grade AASA ELA assessment than students with no record of attending preschool **(31.6% vs. 27.7%)**.

Students in third grade also take an oral reading fluency assessment, known as the Acadience Reading test. This test measures how accurately and effortlessly a student can decode connected text aloud, as well as their reading speed in a brief one minute period. The table below reflects the Acadience end of year scores available for students who attended PEEPs or similar high-quality school district preschool classrooms.

ACADIENCE END-OF-YEAR SCORE	COUNT	PERCENT
ABOVE	170	33%
AT	110	21%
BELOW	61	12%
NO DATA	67	13%
WELL BELOW	108	21%
TOTAL	516	

Takeaway: Students who attended PEEPs and similar high-quality preschool classrooms demonstrated strong early literacy outcomes, with **54% scoring At or Above the Acadience End-of-Year benchmark**.

This data shows that students who attended PEEPs or similar high-quality preschool classrooms demonstrated stronger third-grade ELA and early literacy outcomes than students who did not attend a school district preschool class. While these results do not establish that preschool was the cause of these differences, they provide an encouraging early indication of how access to high-quality preschool may contribute to students’ longer-term educational outcomes.

While these student outcomes provide an early look at longer-term educational progress, families also experience the impact of PEEPs immediately. Parent feedback provides another perspective on how the program is supporting children and families.

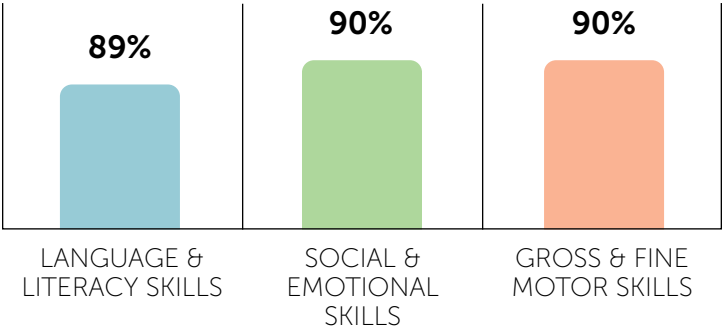
PARENT SURVEY RESULTS

In May 2026, PEEPs staff developed and administered a PEEPs parent questionnaire to families in our school district classes. A total of **205 parents shared their experiences**, 32% of the number of children served this year in our PEEPs school district classes.

This survey focused on children’s development and the economic impact these PEEPs classes have had on individual families. Results showed **9 in 10 parents** gave PEEPs the highest possible rating for preparing their child for kindergarten.

In addition, 83% of respondents reported PEEPs supported their employment by helping them either **maintain existing employment (69%)** or **obtain new employment (14%)**. Overall, surveyed parents responded highly to how PEEPs has impacted their family’s economic well-being with 91% of respondents stating PEEPs helped meet household financial needs.

Percentage of PEEPs Parents Who Rated 10/10 in Child’s Skills



“My husband and I are so thrilled and beyond grateful for the PEEP program and preschool staff! I was not expecting my son to learn as much as he has this past year. Seeing him write his own name and ask how to spell other words has been so exciting. He’s really grown this past year and I feel he is so prepared for next year and kindergarten. We so thankful for the education he has received.”

– PEEPS Parent



PARTNER SPOTLIGHTS

Amphitheater Public Schools –

Superintendent Todd Jaeger, “As a PreK–12 district, Amphitheater supports students from their first day in preschool to graduation. We are committed to helping every student fulfill the Promise of a Graduate and leave our schools prepared for their next steps beyond high school.”

Todd Jaeger has served as Superintendent of Amphitheater Public Schools since 2017, building on a career in public education and a long history of service to the Amphi community.

As Superintendent, Todd leads a district focused on preparing students for success in college, career and life. Guided by Amphi’s Promise of a Graduate, the District’s vision for every student, he is committed to ensuring each child has the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills and character needed to thrive. The Promise of a Graduate reflects both the District’s commitment to every student and the potential inherent in every child.

Under Todd’s leadership, Amphi has expanded high-quality preschool opportunities to every elementary school, making early childhood education accessible to more families across the District. Each Amphi high school also offers a preschool program, giving students interested in Early Childhood Education hands-on experience working with young learners while creating meaningful connections with preschool students.

“Having preschool programs at Amphitheater High School, Canyon del Oro High School and Ironwood Ridge High creates something truly special. Our Early Childhood Education students gain meaningful, hands-on experience while building relationships with our youngest learners. Those connections make a real difference for the big kids and the little ones, too.”

Todd has also led the District to invest in safe, modern learning environments, with voters demonstrating strong community support through the approval of multiple bonds and overrides. Most recently, in 2024, voters approved an \$84 million bond to support safety and security, technology, transportation and school improvements. Amphi schools continue to earn statewide and international recognition for excellence, with six schools receiving A+ School of Excellence designations in 2025 and 2026, and two schools earning international STEM awards.

“I am incredibly proud of Amphitheater’s commitment to providing high-quality preschool programs with certified teachers and a strong curriculum at every elementary school. Early childhood education lays the foundation for lifelong learning, and we are committed to ensuring every child in our community has the opportunity to get that strong start with us.”



Extended Day Head Start –

Center Manager at Summit View Letty Pinales, “The extended PEEPS program gives the parents a safe and high-quality preschool program in which they can leave their child, so they can go to work or school. This free program provides childcare services for parents who cannot afford childcare. Thank you for giving parents an opportunity to better themselves and help them provide for their family.”

With more than 30 years of experience in early childhood education, Maria Leticia Pinales

(Letty) has dedicated her career to supporting the growth and development of young children at Child-Parent Centers/Head Start program. She spent 15 years teaching three-year-olds and another 15 years teaching four-year-olds, helping children build the foundational skills, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning that prepared them for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Throughout her teaching career, Letty has been passionate about creating engaging, nurturing learning environments where

children could thrive. One of her greatest joys is watching students achieve developmental milestones, gain self-confidence, and discover their unique strengths. A strong advocate for the role of music in early learning, she incorporates music into her classroom daily by providing a variety of instruments for children to explore and by sharing her love of singing and playing the guitar with her students.

Today, Letty serves as the Center Manager at Summit View Head Start, where she continues to support children, families, and educational staff while advancing the mission of providing high-quality early childhood education.

In her personal time, Letty enjoys reading, playing the piano, and hiking. Her lifelong commitment to learning, creativity, and community continues to inspire her work and the lives of those she serves.



De Colores Learning Center –

Owner, Rosana Jimenez. Rosana Jimenez began her career in early childhood education by opening a family childcare home so she could care for her own children while providing quality care to other families in her community. As demand grew, she expanded to a group home and ultimately transformed her home into De Colores Learning Center & Childcare, creating a diverse, welcoming environment where children and families could thrive.

Recognizing that quality early childhood education required a deeper understanding of child development, Rosana pursued formal education in early childhood education at Central Arizona College. She earned her Child Development Associate (CDA), ECE Certificate, and Associate of Applied Science in Early Childhood Education, becoming the first student in a monolingual class at the college to attain the AAS in ECE.

Throughout her career, Rosana has remained committed to continuous quality improvement and collaboration. She has worked with Quality First, First Things First, Pima Community College, tribal communities, and state and local agencies to strengthen the quality of care provided to children and families. Under her leadership, De Colores has twice achieved a five-star Quality First rating and has maintained its high-quality status. The center also pursued and achieved national accreditation through the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA).

Rosana's commitment to quality is grounded in a belief that strong relationships are essential to children's social and emotional development. Through De Colores Learning Center & Childcare, she continues to provide a safe, nurturing, and high-quality environment where children can learn, grow, and thrive.

"The extended PEEPS program gives the parents a safe and high-quality preschool program in which they can leave their child, so they can go to work or school. This free program provides childcare services for parents who cannot afford childcare. Thank you for giving parents an opportunity to better themselves and help them provide for their family."

– Center Manager Summit View



EXPENSES & BUDGETING

FY26 marked an important milestone for PEEPs as the program transitioned to being funded primarily through Pima County’s Library District tax levy. This investment provides sustainable local funding for PEEPs while maintaining the program’s broader community partnership model.

In FY26, the City of Tucson and Town of Marana contributed an additional \$475,000 to expand access to high quality preschool in Pima County. This local investment demonstrates the growing recognition that early childhood education is a shared community responsibility and an important investment in children, families and the future workforce.

PEEPs is also strengthened by complementary public and philanthropic investments. Private funders contribute through United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona’s Accelerate Quality program, which complements PEEPs by increasing preschool capacity and supporting providers in achieving and sustaining high-quality standards. In addition, Department of Economic Security Division of Child Care (DES DCC) childcare subsidies help support eligible children in PEEPs school district classes, while school districts contribute facility improvements, staffing and administrative resources. Though not reflected in the dollar amounts in the following tables, these investments extend the reach of PEEPs and allow public dollars to be used strategically to serve more children.

“The impact that the collective staff has had will last a lifetime in my child’s education. Thank you!”

– PEEPS Parent

FY26/Year 5 PEEPs Budgeted and Actual Expenses

IGAs & Contracts	Budgeted Expenses	Actual Expenses
First Things First Quality First Scholarships	\$4,489,184	\$4,050,926
Child-Parent Centers, Inc. Head Start Extended Day	\$937,595	\$937,595
School District IGAs Expansion Preschool Classes	\$6,066,421	\$5,837,905
PEEPs Administration	\$230,000	\$214,430
Total	\$11,723,200	\$11,040,856

Actual expenses for PEEPs for year 5 were below budget by about \$680,000. There were cost savings in our school district classes by utilizing the “last dollar in” approach with children using DES childcare subsidies. For Year 6, \$11.5 million is budgeted for PEEPs primarily from Pima County’s Library District, including \$153,000 from the Town of Marana and the remaining funds from FY26.

PEEPs’ impact is also strengthened by complementary investments that expand the supply and quality of preschool programs available to families.

Accelerate Quality Updates

Since 2021, **Accelerate Quality (AQ)**, created through a partnership between United Way of Tucson and Pima County, has complemented PEEPs by strengthening the supply of high-quality early care and education programs in Pima County. While PEEPs helps families access high-quality preschool, AQ helps ensure that a strong network of providers exists to meet that demand by supporting quality improvement, business sustainability, and expansion of high-quality capacity.

In FY26, AQ provided quality improvement tools and support to 98 childcare and preschool providers – helping 82 providers sustain a high-quality rating and supporting 16 providers working toward becoming high-quality programs. An additional 73 providers received business development services through digital literacy courses and targeted coaching focused on strengthening business practices.

Through grants and individual donations, AQ investments reached 1,408 children in local childcare and preschool programs. These investments demonstrate the value of pairing public investment in access with private and philanthropic investment in provider capacity and quality.

AQ Success Story: Investing in Quality

A family childcare provider opened her program in 2025 with a commitment to creating a safe, welcoming, high-quality environment for children. As a new business, however, much of her initial investment was needed to address essential needs, including repairing monsoon-related roof damage and improving the outdoor learning environment. These necessary expenses left limited resources for additional materials and quality improvements.

Recognizing the provider's commitment to quality, Accelerate Quality (AQ) provided targeted funding and technical assistance. AQ staff worked with the provider to identify improvements that would have the greatest impact on children's learning experiences and supported the purchase of intentional learning materials to create a more engaging and inclusive environment where children could explore, build skills, and develop meaningful connections.

The provider and her teacher assistant also received individualized coaching focused on strengthening teacher-child interactions using strategies aligned with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) framework. The coaching helped educators strengthen relationships with children, enhance instructional practices, and create more responsive learning experiences.

With targeted investment, coaching, and a commitment to continuous improvement, the program achieved a four-star quality rating. Their success illustrates how strategic support can help early childhood providers overcome financial and capacity barriers, strengthen quality, and create better learning environments for children.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Increase high-quality preschool capacity while addressing existing need for financial aid.
2. Distribute scholarships efficiently and effectively through existing programs and partners.
3. Do not supplant existing public assistance for preschool and utilize local funding as a "last dollar in" approach.
4. Coordinate with existing agencies that provide public assistance for high-quality preschool to establish baseline need and simple system-level benchmarks, monitor progress and refine collaborative efforts to improve the system as a whole.
5. Establish scholarship rates that cover the full cost of providing high-quality preschool per child, based on accepted cost of quality and local market rate studies, considering wages necessary to attract quality teachers, and accounting for current DES subsidy rates and school district in-kind contributions, and pandemic-related increased costs.
6. Ensure participating preschool providers are geographically dispersed, with priority given to preschools serving lower income/ higher need neighborhoods, tribal and rural areas.
7. Connect eligible families to high-quality preschools and financial assistance, including parents in local workforce development programs.
8. Collaborate with partners to connect participating families with other community resources to accelerate family and community wide benefits.
9. Maximize multi-year partner contributions to make the program more sustainable.
10. Advocate with partners for a long-term state-wide solution.
11. Remain flexible as providers and families recover and rebuild from the pandemic.
12. Review, reevaluate, revise, and report regularly with input from stakeholders.





Pima Early Education Program Scholarships

PEEPs Multi-Departmental Oversight Team

Dustin Williams, Superintendent of Schools
Steve Holmes, Deputy County Administrator
Daniel Sullivan, Community and Workforce Development Director
Tess Mayer, Library Director
Theresa Cullen, Health Department Director
Heath Vescovi-Chiordi, Economic Development Director
Rhonda Pina, Community and Workforce Development Deputy Director
Deborah Bryson, Deputy Superintendent of Schools
Nicole Fyfe, County Administrator's Office Senior Advisor

Program Staff

Nicole Scott, Program Manager
Irene Moreno, Program Coordinator



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