

## How are preschool-aged children faring in the Kyrgyz Republic?

**For Families** finds that the burdens of poverty, inequality, and violence are disproportionately borne by Kyrgyzstan's youngest children, while the preschool education system is failing to redress these inequalities. We recommend urgent reform of the early education system to support the well-being of the nation's youngest residents.

# Snapshot: Preschool Education in the Kyrgyz Republic

Context, Costs, and Legal  
Framework

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## Part I. Country Context

The Kyrgyz Republic is located off of the north-western tip of China, in the heart of the Eurasian continent. Prior to its independence in 1991, the country was a member of the Soviet Union; its governmental and institutional structures – including its standard preschool educational model – thus still largely follow Soviet structures, both for better and for worse (World Bank 2011). The majority of Kyrgyzstan’s 6.3 million citizens live in rural areas and rely on agriculture and animal husbandry for their income. Given the challenges of this lifestyle, the Kyrgyz Republic also has high rates of internal and external migration, with men and women alike travelling to the nation’s two urban centers – Bishkek and Osh cities – and further on to Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkey, and other foreign countries to improve their income-earning opportunities. Many of the nation’s children thus live in fluid family situations, with one or both of their parents absent for long periods of time, and are at heightened risk of abuse and neglect due to the lack of stable parent-caregiver relationships (UNICEF 2010a).

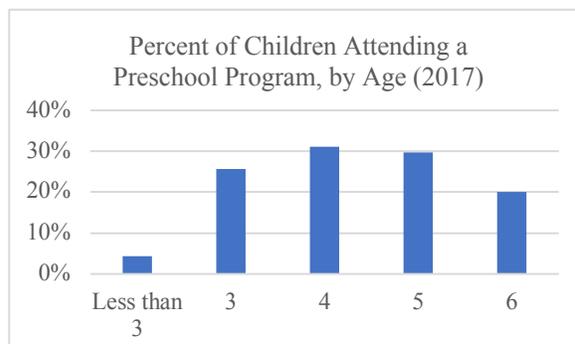
Almost 20% of the Kyrgyz Republic’s 6.3 million residents – or 1.2 million children – are aged 6 or younger (NSC 2018c). The majority of these young children live in rural areas, while more than 43% live in poverty – a rate ten percent higher than that of the overall population (OECD 2018a). Most children in the Kyrgyz Republic live in households of four to six members (63%) and have at least one sibling (UNICEF 2010a). Of note for children’s early brain development – for which responsive caregiving and a safe-living-environments are key (Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University 2017), 22% of children in Kyrgyzstan reported witnessing family violence while more than half have been victims of family violence themselves (65% in rural areas and 52% in urban areas) and familial neglect (72% versus 48%, respectively) (UNICEF 2010a). Meanwhile, 18% of the nation’s children under 5 are stunted while 43% have anemia, both indicators of under-nourishment (National Statistics Committee 2012). In sum, many children in the Kyrgyz Republic face significant barriers to their development starting from an early age, with the majority facing intersecting disadvantages of rural residence, poverty, and violence.

**Preschool programming:** Preschool programming is primarily provided through the framework of formal, institutionalized preschools, which largely follow a Soviet model of 10-hour-per day, nursery-type programs (World Bank 2011). In part because of the expense of this model, rates of preschool attendance are low, with notable disparities across geographies and groups. Officially, some 22% of preschool-aged children (i.e. those aged 3 to 7) were attending a preschool program as of 2017.

**Teacher training and qualifications:** As of 2017, some 61% of caregivers in preschool educational institutions had completed higher education (these caregivers are the primary instructors in Kyrgyzstani preschools whereas other specialists – such as pedagogues, therapists, etc. – do not interact with children on a daily basis. The rate of higher education completion among these specialists was 67%). In urban areas, 68% of caregivers had completed higher education whereas only 56% of those in rural areas had. Note that completion of higher education does not necessarily mean that the individual attained a degree in education, preschool or ECE/ECD topics; it simply means that (s)he attained a university degree. Statistics were not available on teachers’ participation in ongoing professional development activities at the time of this report, though it is worth noting that the Ministry of Education and Science maintains a schedule of ongoing professional development classes for preschool educators.

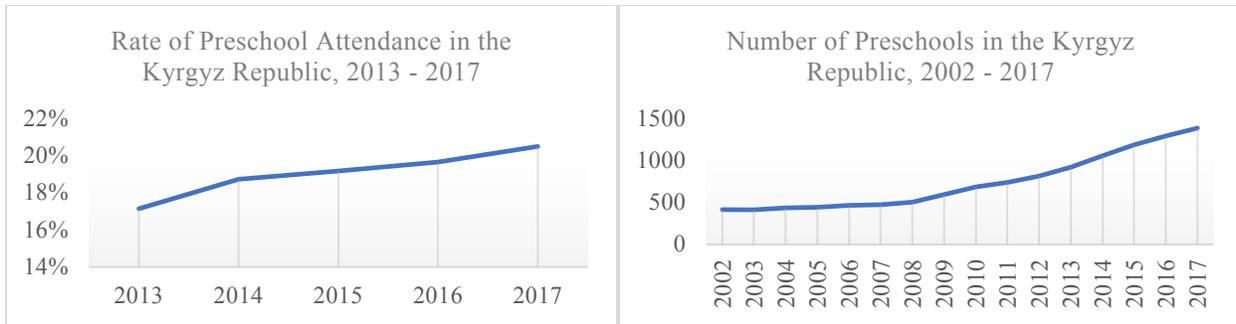
**Equity of access:** Children living in urban areas attend preschool at a rate more than twice as high as that of children in rural areas (40% versus 16% attendance, respectively) (NSC 2014a). Meanwhile, half of children living in the richest households attend preschool while only some 13% do from the poorest households (NSC 2014a).

**Earliest-age ECE/ECD:** It is worth making special note of the state of early childhood development programming for children aged 0 to 3 in the Kyrgyz Republic, given growing recognition of the vital importance of ECE/ECD for this earliest-age group. Unfortunately, in the Kyrgyz Republic, educational and developmental opportunities for children aged 0 to 3 are limited. Only 4% of 0 to 3 year olds attended a preschool program in 2017. Meanwhile, the legislative framework for preschool education states that preschool educational organizations are to cover children from ages 6 months to 7 years, leaving out the vital period from 0 to 6 months. (Incongruously, the *Law on Preschool Education* defines the preschool age as 0 to 7 years, while setting the starting age for preschool educational programs at 6 months). Moreover, the *State Educational Standard* lacks an educational or programmatic framework for children aged 6 months to 1.5 years, though it does authorize nurseries, nursery-preschools, and a limited number of other preschool organizations to work with this age group. During interviews for this report, some members of the Ministry of Education stated that programs for children younger than 3 were not their responsibility, but rather were under the purview of the Ministry of Health. There thus seems to be a lack of clarity and focus on educational opportunities for the nation’s youngest citizens both within the legal-regulatory framework and institutional structures that are technically responsible for implementing it.



\*Note that in addition to the 183,041 0 to 6-year-olds covered in the table above, some 4,037 children aged 7 and up were attending preschool as of 2018. The above includes attendees in kindergarten (detskie sadi), nursery kindergarten (yasli-sadi), nursery (yasli), school-kindergarten (shkoli-detskie sadi), and community kindergarten (obshinnie sadi). They do not include attendance in the government’s 240-hour primary-school prep for 6 to 7-year-olds, which are reportedly attended by almost all 6 to 7-year-olds. Source: NSC and MoES as of January 2018.

**Government investments:** While the above snapshot paints a disheartening picture in terms of access, equity of that access and ECD opportunities, it belies the significant progress that the government has made in the areas of early learning and school readiness over the past 15 years. The rate of preschool attendance among 3 to 5-year-olds from the poorest households almost doubled from 2006 to 2014 (from 7% to 13%), while 98% of first-graders had taken part in at least one school readiness program as of 2016 (UNICEF 2018). Nearly 1,000 new kindergartens were opened from 2002 to 2017 (National Statistics Committee 2018b), leading to resultant increases in attendance and accessibility (OECD 2018).



Source: NSC (2017). Rates of preschool attendance are the author’s calculations, based on data from the National Statistics Committee and Ministry of Education and Science.

These improvements in ECE access have come on the back of significant government efforts. Starting from the mid-2000’s, the Kyrgyz Republic began putting in place the normative-legal framework for the ECE gains cited above. This began with the adoption of the *Law on Preschool Education* in 2009 and, in 2012, the *State Educational Standard for Preschool and Childcare*, which took the next step in institutionalizing inclusive, equitable preschool programming, resulting in meaningful on-the-ground changes soon thereafter. Thus, “starting in 2013, the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) made a major effort to revive preschool education. This involved privatising preschools, simplifying licensing procedures, exempting preschools from value-added-tax (VAT), providing government buildings to kindergartens and, most significantly, opening community kindergartens” (OECD 2018: 42). The national government also took over payment of preschool teachers’ salaries in 2013, alleviating local governments from this heavy expense. In all, combined public expenditures on preschool from national and local budgets rose from 1.7 million KGS in 2011 to 5 million KGS in 2017 (Ministry of Finance 2018).

In sum, the Kyrgyz Republic has made meaningful investments in early childhood learning over the past 15 years, resulting in progress over the past decade. At the same time, significant gaps exist in terms of nationwide access to preschool programming, the equity of that access where it does exist, and the government frameworks for earliest age ECD/ECE programming (and in particular for children aged 0 to 3).

## Part II. Costing the preschool educational system

As noted above, the government has significantly increased its financial investment in the preschool system over the past decade. Combined, national and local government spending on preschool education rose from 1.7 billion KGS in 2011 to 5.0 billion KGS in 2017. Adjusting for inflation, this represents a doubling of government expenditures, most of which has come from the national budget.<sup>1</sup> As a result, by 2017 the Kyrgyz Republic was spending roughly 0.7% of its GDP

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, breaking down spending between national and local authorities reveals that the national government has increased its spending on preschool education by 32 times (22 times when adjusting for inflation) in this 7-year period, from 0.08 billion in 2011 to 2.7 billion KGS in 2017. Local government expenditures also increased, though by the relatively modest amount of 1.5 times (from 1.57 billion to 2.34 billion KGS). The dramatic rise in national government spending is related to its near complete assumption of payment of teacher salaries starting in 2013, relieving local budgets of this rapidly rising expense.

on preschool services, or some 14% of its overall spending on education (Ministry of Finance 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Notably, the increase in government spending has not been associated with an equally large increase in the portion of children attending preschool. Over the same time period that government investment in preschool doubled, the number of children attending preschool rose by only 8%. By 2017, some 178,701 children were attending public preschool in the Kyrgyz Republic, an increase of 11,000 pupils over 2011. This means that for every 1% increase in access to preschool from 2011 to 2017, the government spent some 630 million KGS (430 million KGS inflation adjusted).

Teachers' salaries and children's meals are the two most significant costs in running a kindergarten, a fact that holds both at the national and local levels.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, for example, local governments spent the most on children's meals (1.2 billion som), teacher salaries (331 million som) and facilities services (electricity, water, gas, etc.: 266 million som), while the national government spent most on salaries (2.2 billion som), payments to the social fund (an expense linked to salaries: 384 million som), and children's meals (47 million som). Some 75% of overall spending goes to paying teachers and providing children's meals. Note that the same patterns and breakdowns hold for prior years.

It is also worth mentioning that these numbers do not include the significant financing burden shouldered by parents, who are increasingly called on to provide meals and other financial support to the preschools that their children attend. Note, for example, that in addition to the 5 billion KGS spent by the government on preschool education in 2017, parents paid an additional 1.2 billion KGS in "fees" for their children's preschool education (these "fees" were tracked by the National Statistics Committee and are legally registered as payments to educational programs and for child "maintenance" (meals); reportedly, parents additionally pay under-the-table fees to ensure their children's spots in public preschool institutions). Taking these caregiver contributions into account, parents paid some 17% of a total of 6 billion KGS that went to public preschool education that year.

Given these figures, total government expenditures on preschool education would have amounted to some 25 billion KGS in 2017 if 100% of the Kyrgyz Republic's preschool-age children were to attend preschool, with untold additional payments by parents to cover meals and other expenses. It is unlikely that anything close to this could be achieved in the near term given the country's resources and household budgets. Alternative methods of financing the preschool education system and a re-structuring its programming are needed for the government to meet its legislative guarantee to provide of all children with the right to a preschool education.

### **Part III. Legal-regulatory framework for ECE/ECD**

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<sup>2</sup> Calculations are the author's own, using data for the period from January to December, 2017, provided on the Ministry of Finance's "Open Budget" portal. Data is inclusive of spending by local and national governments combined.

<sup>3</sup> Teachers' salaries are set by the government Resolution "On the introduction of a new wage system for workers in educational organizations" of 19 January 2011 No. 18 (as amended 4 September 2018 No. 415). Currently, preschool educators earn anywhere from 32 to 38 KGS per hour, depending on their level of professional education (Appendix 2). Assuming a 40-hour work week, this comes to roughly 1,280 KGS per week or 5,120 KGS per month for the lowest salary level.

**Right to preschool education:** Every child in the Kyrgyz Republic has a guaranteed right to preschool education. The Kyrgyz Republic’s *Law on Education* provides that, “the State ... ensures the availability of educational services of pre-school educational organizations for all segments of the population” (art. 15, ¶ 3), while the *Law on Preschool Education* states that “the State guarantees children’s right to receive a preschool education” (art. 18.1) and that this right be provided on a non-discriminatory and equitable basis (art. 5.1). This legislation is supported further by the Children’s Code, which states that the “government shall ensure the right of children to access the educational services of preschool educational organizations” (art. 10.5), by the Constitution’s provision that, “the government shall put in place the conditions for teaching every citizen the government, the official, and one foreign language, *starting from preschool*” (art. 45.3; emphasis added), and by the Kyrgyz Republic’s obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>4</sup> At every level of legal authority – from international conventions to the Constitution to domestic codes, legislation, and regulations – children’s right to preschool education and the government’s obligation to provide it are reaffirmed.

**Legal-regulatory structure of the preschool educational system:** Preschool educational programming is largely governed by two normative-legal acts in the Kyrgyz Republic: the *Law on Preschool Education* and the *State Educational Standard on Preschool Education and Caregiving*. While the *Law on Preschool Education* provides a framework for the preschool educational system, it is the *State Educational Standard* that offers the bulk of implementing details and core details for early childhood education in the Kyrgyz Republic. Below, core details from each are provided to give a basic understanding of the legal framework around ECE/ECD in Kyrgyzstan.

As a preface these details, it is worth noting that the time of its publication in 2009, the *State Educational Standard* was in-line with well-accepted guarantors of preschool educational quality such as fixed ratios of teachers and caregivers to students, maximum group sizes, and age-appropriate curricula (OECD 2018b). Research conducted in the intervening decade has shown – somewhat surprisingly – that while the quality of staff-child interaction is indeed key to educational quality (measured by progress in children’s academic, behavioral, and social skills), fixed staff-child ratios and group sizes have very little correlation to such improved interactions and, therefore, to educational and developmental outcomes (ibid). Rather, “staff in-service training”, “quality monitoring and rating improvement systems”, and “participation [by staff] in ECEC-specific professional development” show more meaningful impact on the quality of staff-child interactions and, with them, on educational outcomes for children (OECD 2018b: 12-13). As such, the *State Educational Standard* may be ripe for review and improvement, especially in light of the shortcomings in terms of preschool teachers’ trainings, professional development opportunities, and the lack of any comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system to assess the quality of staff-child interactions.

Children are considered to be of “preschool age” in the Kyrgyz Republic from birth up to their 7<sup>th</sup> birthdays (*Law on Preschool Education*, art. 1, ¶¶ 3, 4), while preschool educational organizations

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<sup>4</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that, “the right to education during early childhood [as guaranteed in the UN CRC] ... begins at birth and [is] closely linked to young children’s right to maximum development (art. 6.2)” (General Comment No. 7, para 28). The Committee goes on to recommend that, “State parties support early childhood development programs, including home- and community-based preschool programs, in which the empowerment and education of parents (and other caregivers) are main features” (para. 31).

are authorized to provide programs for children age 6 months to 7 years (see Table 2 for further details on each preschool institutional form).

Table 1. Types of Preschool Programs Authorized by Law

Name of Institution	Age of Children Covered	Legislative Description
Nursery	6 mo. to 3 yr.	Provide childcare, education, and developmental activities.
Nursery School	6 mo. to 7 yr.	
Kindergarten	3 yr. to 7 yr.	
Specialized Kindergarten	Unspecified, presumably 3 yr. to 7 yr.	Provide specialized programming for children with disabilities.
Child Development Center	Unspecified	Provide physical and mental development, early detection of the child’s individual developmental needs, diagnostics and the provision of special education and related services, as well as the improvement of the health of children who attend other educational institutions or who are being brought up at home.
Progymnasium	Unspecified	Provides “comprehensive development of the child for training in innovative schools, e.g. lyceums, gymnasiums, etc.” (¶10).
Maternal school	Unspecified	Provides half-day and full-day programs for children who do not attend other kindergarten(s) and includes interactive programming for parents and children.
Community kindergarten	6 mo. to 3 yr.	Provides half-day and full-day childcare, education, and development activities and is considered a structural subdivision of local self-government bodies.
Short stay kindergarten	Unspecified	Provides half-day (3 to 5 hour) programs and is created to optimize the use of resources and increase the coverage of children with pre-school education.
<i>Source: Law on Preschool Education art. 7(1). Additional categories exist, related to orphanages and serving children with disabilities.</i>		

All preschool programs, regardless of type, are required to provide children with education, care, a safe environment, and hygiene instruction; they are also required to interact with parents and share with them information on supporting their children’s psychological well-being and educational achievements (*Law on Preschool Education*, art. 8; *State Educational Standard on Preschool Education and Childcare*).

Meanwhile, the *State Educational Standard* sets a baseline for preschool programs, requiring that all facilities, furniture, games, toys, and reading materials must be safe, in-line with government sanitary and safety regulations, and age-appropriate for the group(s) with which they are used (art. 10, 14). Moreover, preschools must have an emergency evacuation plan and provide emergency trainings to children (art. 13), and involve professional medical workers in sessions on health and hygiene, provide periodic reviews of children’s health, maintain first-aid materials and medicines

in a child-proof location, and have a full-time medical worker available (art. 11). Moreover, preschools are required to provide children with healthy and safe meals and snacks (art. 13).

The *State Educational Standard* also lays out a basic educational plan – i.e. a curriculum – that preschools must use as a minimum standard (art. 8(1)). Because the content of this plan is particularly relevant when considering teacher skills, requirements, and the financing of them, below is a copy of this standard curriculum for children *without* disabilities. *Note that children with disabilities must be provided with courses, materials, and learning conditions that accommodate their specific form of disability (for example, blindness, deafness, learning disability, etc.). Specific curricula are included in the State Educational Standard for children with each form of disability and can be found in article 8.*

Table 2. Baseline Curriculum for Preschool Programs

	Name of Class	2 <sup>nd</sup> early age group (1.5 to 2 yrs)	1 <sup>st</sup> junior group (2 to 3 yrs)	2 <sup>nd</sup> junior group (3 to 4 yrs)	Middle group (4 to 5 yrs)	Older group (5 to 6 yrs)	School readiness group (6 to 7 yrs)
1	Acquaintance with the world and speech development	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	Speech development	1	1	1	1	1	1
3	Reading and writing	-	-	-	-	1	2
4	Elementary math concepts	-	-	1	1	1	2
5	Games for sensory development	3	3	-	-	-	-
6	Construction	-	-	1	1	1	1
7	Story time	1	1	1	1	1	1
8	Music	2	2	2	2	2	2
9	Sports	2	2	3	3	3	3
10	Molding	-	1*	1*	1*	1*	1*
11	Application	1*					
12	Drawing		1	1	1	1	1
13	Kyrgyz (for Russian-speaking group); Russian (for Kyrgyz-speaking group)	---	---	---	1	2	2
	Total	11	12	12	13	15	17
	Time spent	8 – 10 min.	10 – 12 min.	12 – 15 min.	15 – 20 min.	20 – 25 min.	25 – 35 min.

*Courses marked with an asterisk can be provided once every other week.*

Note also that the table provided in the official *State Education Standard* starts at left with the “2<sup>nd</sup> early age group, aged 1.5 to 2” and does not include a curriculum for younger children (presumably the 1<sup>st</sup> early age group, currently defined as age 6 months to 1.5 years). It is unclear if this is intentional or was an oversight in the law. Regardless, it is suggested that the *State Educational*

*Standard* be amended to include guidance on educating children from 0 months to 1.5 years, which is a pivotal period in cognitive and emotional development.

The *State Educational Standard* also includes requirements for grouping of children and staffing of preschools:

Maximum number of children per educational group (*State Educational Standard* art. 5(1)):

- Aged 6 months to 1.5 years: up to 15 children
- Aged 1.5 to 2: up to 20 children
- Aged 2 to 3: up to 25 children
- Aged 4 to 5, 6 to 7: up to 30 children (each age group)
- Mixed-aged groups: 20 to 25 children

Staff requirements (*State Educational Standard* art. 5(4)):

- For children up to 3 yrs: 2 care-takers and 1 helper for every 10 to 15 children;
- For children 3 to 7 years: 2 care-takers and 1 helper for every 25 to 30 children;
- Note that additional requirements apply for children with disabilities. Details are provided in article 5 of the State Educational Standards.

In addition to the staffing requirements regarding care-takers and helpers, the model course plan and financing regulations for preschools make clear that music teachers, speech therapists, psychologists, language teachers, and other educational specialists should be on-hand for all preschool educational programs.

#### **Part IV. Conclusion**

At the start of this report, we noted the significant challenges that Kyrgyzstan's preschool-aged children face including poverty, inequality, and family violence. Internationally, high-quality preschool education and early-age interventions have been shown to counteract the corrosive effects that such disadvantage can have on children's well-being and growth (OECD 2018b; UNICEF 2016). Indeed, the earlier such interventions come in a child's life, the more positive they are in terms of physical and mental health, educational achievement, and even career success in adulthood (UNICEF 2014, 2016, 2017). These benefits are most pronounced where preschool offerings are equitably distributed across the population and where they are of high *process* quality – meaning that children's interactions with teachers and caregivers are consistently supportive, constructive, and conducive to learning and development (OECD 2018b). It is clear that Kyrgyzstan's youngest citizens could benefit enormously from greater access to and improved quality of the country's preschool educational system, as well as an extension of national preschool offerings to more systematically and comprehensively cover children aged 0 to 3.

While the Kyrgyzstani government's increased investment in preschool education shows a laudable level of political will, the results have been insufficient. The mere 8% rise in attendance despite a tripling of spending on preschool education suggests that new, innovative, and more efficient models are needed to expand the preschool system – especially if its quality is to be maintained (or better yet, enhanced). This report thus ends with a call for further experimentation, improvement, and study of the preschool education system to ensure the well-being and equality of children in the Kyrgyz Republic.

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