

San Antonio, TX's Keep Pre-K 4 SA

A November 2020 Ballot Measure Case Study



Summary

In 2012, voters in San Antonio, TX, levied a 1/8 cent sales tax to establish a citywide early childhood education program called Pre-K 4 SA. The program offers free preschool, meals, and transportation for qualifying children, as well as a grant program and job training for teachers. The original ballot language required voters to renew the sales tax that funded the program every eight years after its passage. In March 2020, the Keep Pre-K 4 SA campaign kicked off with plans to bring the renewal vote to the ballot in May 2020. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the state to push the election to fall 2020, which significantly altered the campaign's timeline and strategy. The campaign adjusted to the new ballot date, and in November 2020 voters approved the reauthorization of the sales tax that will generate approximately \$36 million annually for Pre-K 4 SA.

How Did the Keep Pre-K 4 SA Campaign Begin?

Pre-K 4 SA is an early childhood and family initiative that offers full-day preschool for 4-year-olds in the city. It is free for qualifying children, including those who receive benefits through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), those learning to speak English, and children experiencing homelessness. Program enrollment is also available to non-qualifying children on a sliding scale. The program provides free meals and transportation for all attendees. Pre-K 4 SA also provides job training for parents of its students, a free professional learning program for teachers of pre-K to third grade, and competitive grants to other providers. Former San Antonio Mayor Julian Castro originally introduced the program, which voters passed in 2012 with 53% approval.¹ The program serves 2,000 children throughout San Antonio. Independent studies show that students who attend

Ballot Measure/ Tax Details

Proposed Tax

1/8 cent sales tax
renewal

Annual Revenue

\$36 million

Final Vote Results

73.3% approval

San Antonio Details

Population

1,547,250

Population Younger Than 18 Years

25% (U.S. average: 22%)

Median Household Income

\$50,980

(U.S. average: \$68,703)

Pre-K 4 SA have higher third-grade test scores and elementary school attendance grades, particularly among students identified as economically disadvantaged.²

When Pre-K 4 SA originally passed, the measure required voters to renew the sales tax increase—and, by extension, the program—within eight years. In late 2019, the Keep Pre-K 4 SA political action committee was formed and hired Anamaria Suescun-Fast of talkStrategy (formerly known as The DeBerry Group), a communications and advocacy agency with experience running public awareness campaigns for education and civic issues in San Antonio, to manage the campaign.

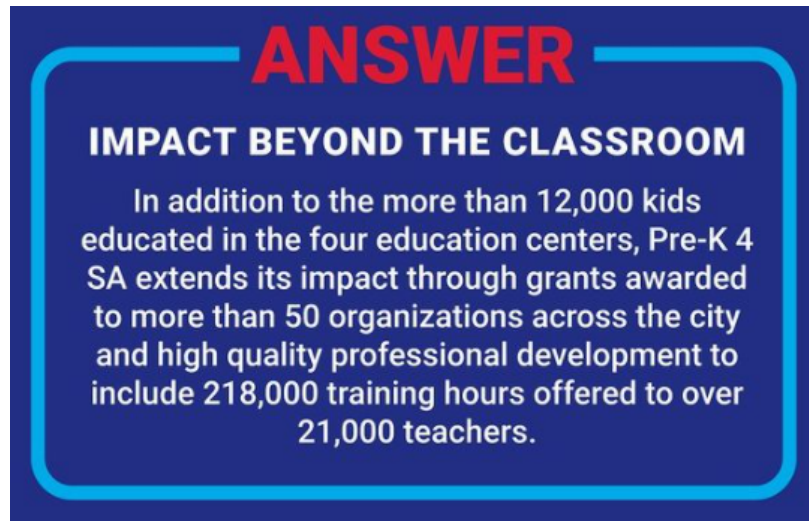
How Did the Campaign Leverage Pre-K 4 SA's Existing Results?

With eight years to prepare for reauthorization, the Keep Pre-K 4 SA campaign team compiled a substantial number of success stories and third-party data to use in the campaign materials and outreach. The program places a high value on family engagement, which Pre-K 4 SA provides through adult education classes for parents and computer and Wi-Fi access for families. This sustained engagement supports families and alumni, but in 2020 the campaign discovered that most people in the broader community still were unfamiliar with the program and its results. Consequently, the Keep Pre-K 4 SA campaign needed to engage in significant public education about its impact to secure a successful reauthorization.

The campaign prepared to use individual family success stories to highlight the program's importance in the community during a kickoff press conference scheduled for March 13, 2020, leading up to a ballot vote in May 2020. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the election date into limbo, and campaign organizers did not know whether their vote would take place in the July primary runoff election or the November presidential election. Much of the campaign's communications—as well as fundraising efforts—paused while the state considered the two options.

Eventually, the state moved all May ballot measures, including the reauthorization of Pre-K 4 SA, to the November 2020 ballot. This significantly altered the campaign's timeline, but it also provided an opportunity to highlight how the Pre-K 4 SA program helped kids and families during the summer, especially as the pandemic reached new heights in San Antonio. Starting in March, Pre-K 4 SA switched to a virtual model of helping kids and families. The program kept in touch with all of its participating families and provided meals, free digital devices to support children's online learning, and daily virtual activities for kids. In early April, teachers and staff provided between 200 and 500 meals a day to both currently enrolled families and alumni. The Keep Pre-K 4 SA campaign elevated these efforts, primarily on social media, for voters to see how important the program was to the community. Campaign organizers estimate they drafted over 200 infographics, [social media posts](#), success stories, and more. This effort to highlight the program's impact continued throughout the summer before the campaign switched to more traditional get-out-the-vote content after Labor Day. Then, the campaign began publishing more digital ads, television spots, op-eds, and instructions for early voting and vote by mail.

“The number one benefit of running a reauthorization campaign is having success stories, solid metrics, and a story about the program’s return on investment,” said Suescun-Fast. “The original 2012 ballot measure won just 52% of the vote because voters were skeptical that a city-run program could work. So we focused on getting the results of the program in front of voters and eight years later won 73% of the vote.”



An example of one of the campaign's social media posts

How Did the Campaign Build a Bipartisan Coalition?

Even though the Pre-K 4 SA program’s original champion, former Mayor Castro, was a Democrat, the program became popular with both Democrats and Republicans thanks to its results and metrics. Multiple independent program evaluations show that students who attended Pre-K 4 SA had lower rates of future grade repetition and placement in special education and higher rates of school attendance. These results are even stronger for students whose families are economically disadvantaged or students with limited English proficiency.³

Keep Pre-K 4 SA leveraged its bipartisan political support in digital and social media ads. Political figures including Texas’ former speaker of the house, Joe Straus, and his successor, Steve Allison, both prominent Republicans, supported the measure. Straus even recorded a video to share his support. The campaign also highlighted popular community and business leaders who supported Pre-K 4 SA, such as Peter J. Holt, CEO of HOLT CAT and chairman of Spurs Sports & Entertainment, and notable San Antonio car dealer and country music singer Rick Cavender, who wrote a [song](#) supporting the program’s reauthorization.

The campaign attracted no major opposition to the measure. Suescun-Fast attributes this to the demonstrated success of the program. “It’s hard to organize against a proven program that has served thousands of children and has a return of \$156 for every \$100 invested,” she said.

What Happened During the Program's First Year After Reauthorization?

Due to COVID-19, Pre-K 4 SA learning centers reported a 25% decline in enrollment at the start of the 2020–2021 school year.⁴ In response to safety concerns during the pandemic, the program took steps to limit in-person enrollment to half the usual amount. For the following 2021–2022 school year, the program worked diligently to ensure that children could return to the classrooms safely. In the fall of 2021, they succeeded in once again serving all 2,000 children.⁵

How Will the Reauthorization Help San Antonio Kids?

The ½ cent sales tax raised \$36.4 million in fiscal year 2019 that the city will use to provide preschool education, grants, and teacher support. During its first eight years, Pre-K 4 SA supported 13,000 students and impacted more than 198 schools. Each year the program provides 10,000 hours of professional learning to 2,000 early childhood educators. A 2020 report by a third-party evaluation firm estimates that the total societal benefit of the program is \$10,590 per child who attends one year of pre-K.⁶ This monetary benefit comes primarily from increased parent participation and earnings in the workforce, where parents are afforded more time for their careers while their children are in care.



Implications for Texas and Beyond

This reauthorization joins the dozens of other [local dedicated children's funds](#) that voters have reauthorized successfully, most in the last two decades. (A local dedicated children's fund is a city, county, or school district revenue stream that voters choose to dedicate exclusively to child and youth services beyond K-12 classroom instruction.) Pre-K 4 SA is the only such fund in Texas. Advocates for potential new funds can look to San Antonio as a model for pursuing new revenue for children and youth in a purple state.

In June 2019, Texas governor Greg Abbott signed [House Bill 3](#), a massive \$11 billion school finance measure that will increase teacher salaries and fund full-day pre-K for eligible 4-year-old children. When the bill was first proposed, supporters of Pre-K 4 SA worried that the general public would see it as a replacement for the Pre-K 4 SA program and wouldn't vote for reauthorization. However, the program's leaders understood that this bill still leaves room for San Antonio's early care effort. For instance, the bill did not expand the number of children eligible for pre-K nor set a high standard for early childhood education benchmarks, both things that Pre-K 4 SA addresses. House Bill 3 also lacks a dedicated and stable funding source, relying instead on state legislature allocations (something that has proved volatile during COVID-19). In fact, leaders of the Pre-K 4 SA program championed the passage of the bill. This demonstrates how communities can pursue two separate efforts—on both the state and local levels—to raise money for kids.



Lessons Learned

The key to running a reauthorization campaign is showing program results. Pre-K 4 SA had eight years of program data and personal testimonials to draw upon for its campaign. The campaign's priority was translating those results to the voters so that average citizens would understand the importance of the program. Keep Pre-K 4 SA developed hundreds of campaign materials to do this including testimonies, TV spots, and digital and social media ads.

The campaign received bipartisan support because of the strength of Pre-K 4 SA's results. Having multiple independent evaluations that spoke not only to students' educational results but also to the fiscal impact on the community were important to convince different parties to support it.

Endnotes

- 1 Bexar County Elections Office, *November 6, 2012 – Special Election Data*, (December 7, 2012), distributed by City of San Antonio Elections and Campaign Finance Office, <https://www.sanantonio.gov/Portals/0/Files/CampaignFinanceElection/ElectionResults/November2012-Official-Election-Results.pdf>.
- 2 Michael U. Villarreal, *Impact Study of Prekindergarten for San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: Urban Education Institute, 2019).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Bekah McNeel, "In San Antonio, an Ambitious Effort to Expand Pre-K is Crumbling as Parents Shield Their Children from the Pandemic," *The Texas Tribune*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/01/06/san-antonio-pre-k-coronavirus/>.
- 5 Tiffany Huertas and Ken Huizar, "Pre-K 4 SA to Test Staff, Children for COVID-19 When They Return to School," *KSAT*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.ksat.com/news/local/2021/08/03/pre-k-4-sa-to-test-staff-children-for-covid-19-when-they-return-to-school/>.
- 6 Lauren Decker-Woodrow, et al., *Benefit-Cost Analysis of Pre-K 4 SA* (Rockville, MD: Westat, 2019).

ABOUT CHILDREN'S FUNDING PROJECT

Children's Funding Project is a nonprofit social impact organization that helps communities and states expand equitable opportunities for children and youth through strategic public financing.

childrensfundingproject.org