

**REFORMS IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION DURING THE YEARS OF
INDEPENDENCE IN UZBEKISTAN**

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Annotation / Abstract: This article examines the major reforms implemented in the sphere of preschool education in Uzbekistan during the years of independence. It analyzes the legislative, organizational, institutional, and pedagogical changes carried out from 1991 to the present, highlighting the impact of national development strategies on the modernization of early childhood education. Special attention is given to the establishment of a separate governance structure for preschool education, the introduction of new state standards, expansion of preschool coverage, public-private partnership mechanisms, digital transformation, as well as inclusive education initiatives. The article concludes that the reforms undertaken since independence have created a fundamentally new preschool education system aligned with international standards and aimed at strengthening human capital in the country.

Keywords: Preschool education; independence; educational reforms; early childhood development; public-private partnership; inclusive education; digital transformation; educational policy; Uzbekistan; human capital.

Introduction. Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has identified education as a core priority of national development. Preschool education, as the initial stage of continuous education, plays a crucial role in shaping children's intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development. The early years determine the foundations of personality formation and influence later academic performance. Therefore, strengthening the preschool system has been recognized as a strategic direction for enhancing human capital and ensuring long-term national progress.

1. The Initial Phase: Preserving the System and Establishing Legal Foundations (1991–2000)
The early years of independence were marked by significant economic and institutional difficulties. One of the primary challenges was preserving the existing network of preschool institutions inherited from the Soviet period. Despite financial constraints, the state recognized the importance of maintaining the preschool sector for the protection and development of children. A major milestone of this period was the adoption of the Law on Education (1997) and the National Program for Personnel Training, which established the legal framework for the modernization of the entire education system, including preschool education.

Modernization Efforts and Gradual Development (2000–2016)

From the early 2000s, preschool education underwent gradual modernization. Efforts were made to preserve existing kindergartens, open private preschool institutions, renew educational programs, and improve teacher training. These developments prepared the foundation for the large-scale reforms that followed. The period after 2017 brought fundamental changes to preschool education. A separate Ministry of Preschool Education was established, followed by the adoption of a new Law on Preschool Education (2019). Preschool enrollment increased sharply, modern curriculum ('Ilk Qadam') was introduced, teacher qualification standards were upgraded, and digital technologies became widely integrated.

Development of Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)

Public-private partnership mechanisms were actively introduced, increasing the share of private preschool institutions. Tax incentives, subsidies, and voucher-based financing contributed to greater competition and improved quality of services. Public-Private Partnership represents a long-term cooperation between the state and private actors aimed at designing, financing, constructing, and managing infrastructure or social service facilities. While retaining public oversight and regulatory authority, the state delegates certain functions and operational responsibilities to private partners. The core principle of PPP is the balanced distribution of risks and obligations in accordance with the competencies of each side. Before 2017, Uzbekistan's use of PPP mechanisms was limited and fragmented. Individual projects were carried out mainly through investment agreements or concessions based on separate governmental decisions. The absence of a unified legal framework constrained private-sector participation and limited investor confidence.

A decisive shift occurred with the adoption of the Law “On Public-Private Partnership” (No. ZRU-573) in 2019, which laid down the conceptual foundations of PPPs, defined their forms, and regulated procedures of project selection, tendering, and oversight. This law marked the beginning of a new stage in the country's infrastructure governance, enabling transparent, competitive, and internationally recognized PPP practices. A significant institutional milestone was the establishment of the PPP Development Agency of Uzbekistan in 2018. Positioned as the central authority responsible for PPP coordination, the Agency performs key functions: assessment of project proposals, preparation of concept notes, methodological guidance, tender support, and registration of PPP contracts. In addition to the central agency, line ministries—such as the Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Preschool and School Education, and municipal authorities—have gradually developed institutional capacities to prepare and manage PPP projects. The interplay between the central agency and sectoral ministries ensures policy coherence, transparency, and professional evaluation of risks. The institutional reforms also aligned national PPP processes with international standards, making Uzbekistan one of the fastest-growing PPP markets in Central Asia. Inclusive education for children with special needs became a key direction. Inclusive groups were established, and the number of psychologists, speech therapists, and defectologists increased. Adapted educational programs were developed. The most dynamic progress has been achieved in the energy sector. Large-scale Independent Power Producer (IPP) projects—such as the 1,500 MW Sirdarya CCGT, as well as solar and wind power plants developed by international companies—have significantly transformed the country's energy landscape. Through competitive tenders supported by international financial institutions, Uzbekistan has managed to attract billions of dollars in foreign investment. The introduction of healthcare PPPs marks another strategic milestone. The dialysis PPP project implemented with an international operator has improved the quality and accessibility of medical services. This initiative demonstrates how PPPs can introduce modern standards, advanced equipment, and performance-based service delivery into the national healthcare system.

Conclusion

During the years of independence, Uzbekistan made significant progress in reforming preschool education. Structural, legal, and pedagogical transformations led to the creation of a modern and internationally aligned preschool education system. The reforms contributed to enhancing human capital and ensuring sustainable national development.

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