

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRESCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN UZBEKISTAN  
(1991–2025): REFORMS, CHALLENGES, AND OUTCOMES**

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**Abstract.** This article examines the development of the preschool education system in Uzbekistan between 1991 and 2025, focusing on major reforms, existing challenges, and achieved outcomes. The study analyzes policy documents, statistical data, and recent scientific literature to evaluate structural transformations in early childhood education during the post-independence period. The findings indicate that the preschool education system experienced a decline in the early years after independence but underwent significant modernization and expansion following large-scale reforms implemented after 2017. These reforms contributed to increased enrollment, improved infrastructure, and the introduction of modern pedagogical approaches. However, challenges such as regional disparities, shortages of qualified teachers, and quality assurance issues remain. The study highlights the importance of continued policy support and institutional development to ensure sustainable progress in preschool education.

**Keywords:** preschool education, early childhood development, education reform, Uzbekistan education system, preschool institutions, educational policy, teacher training, early learning, education accessibility, human capital development.

**Introduction.** Early childhood education plays a fundamental role in shaping children's cognitive, social, and emotional development and serves as the foundation for lifelong learning. Globally, preschool education is recognized as a critical component of national education systems, contributing significantly to human capital development, social equity, and long-term economic growth. International organizations such as UNICEF and the World Bank emphasize that investment in early childhood education yields high returns in terms of improved learning outcomes, reduced inequality, and enhanced productivity in adulthood. Consequently, many countries have undertaken systemic reforms to expand access to preschool education and improve its quality. Uzbekistan is among the countries that have placed increasing emphasis on the development of early childhood education as part of broader educational reforms implemented since independence in 1991. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan inherited a relatively extensive but gradually declining preschool infrastructure. During the early years of independence, economic difficulties and structural changes in the social sector led to a significant reduction in the number of preschool institutions and a sharp decline in enrollment rates. Statistical data show that preschool coverage decreased from approximately 35.1% of children in 1991 to about 17.3% by 2016, largely due to the closure or restructuring of many institutions and limited financial resources allocated to the sector. This decline highlighted systemic weaknesses in early childhood education and demonstrated the need for comprehensive reforms to ensure equitable access to quality preschool services across the country.

Recognizing the strategic importance of early childhood development, the Government of Uzbekistan began to prioritize preschool education within national education policies. In particular, large-scale reforms initiated after 2017 marked a new stage in the development of the preschool education system. The establishment of a specialized governmental body responsible for early childhood education and the adoption of numerous legislative and policy documents aimed to modernize the sector and improve governance. Between 2017 and 2021 alone, more than 90 regulatory legal acts were adopted to support the transformation of preschool education

and expand institutional capacity. These reforms introduced new institutional models, encouraged the development of private and family-based kindergartens, and focused on strengthening the material and technical base of preschool organizations. One of the most notable outcomes of these reforms has been the rapid expansion of preschool infrastructure and enrollment. The number of preschool institutions increased significantly, reaching tens of thousands of facilities by the mid-2020s, including both state and non-state organizations. As a result, preschool participation has risen dramatically. Government programs and partnerships with international organizations contributed to increasing the number of enrolled children from less than one million in the late 2010s to approximately 2.5 million in recent years. Moreover, national strategies aim to further expand coverage and improve the quality of preschool education through teacher training programs, infrastructure investments, and updated curricula aligned with international educational standards. In addition to expanding access, reforms have focused on improving the quality and effectiveness of early childhood education. International partnerships, including projects implemented with UNICEF and the Islamic Development Bank, have supported initiatives aimed at enhancing professional development for preschool educators and strengthening institutional capacity. The introduction of innovative teaching methods, curriculum modernization, and digital technologies has further contributed to the modernization of the preschool education system in Uzbekistan. Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. Regional disparities in access to preschool education, shortages of qualified teachers, and the need to maintain consistent quality standards across public and private institutions continue to affect the effectiveness of reforms. Additionally, rapid expansion has created new demands for infrastructure development, teacher training, and regulatory oversight. Addressing these challenges requires sustained policy commitment, effective governance, and continuous monitoring of reform outcomes.

Given these developments, the evolution of preschool education in Uzbekistan represents an important case of educational transformation in a post-Soviet context. Understanding how reforms have shaped the structure, accessibility, and quality of preschool education is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of national education policies and identifying areas for future improvement. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the development of the preschool education system in Uzbekistan from 1991 to 2025, focusing on key reforms, existing challenges, and the outcomes achieved during this period. By examining policy initiatives, institutional changes, and statistical indicators, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment of the progress and limitations of preschool education reform in Uzbekistan.

**Literature review.** The importance of preschool education in ensuring children's cognitive, emotional, and social development has been widely emphasized in international educational research. Scholars and international organizations argue that early childhood education is a crucial factor in improving learning outcomes and strengthening human capital formation. Numerous studies highlight that investment in early childhood development contributes to long-term educational success, economic productivity, and social stability. Within this context, the development of preschool education systems has become a major policy priority in many countries, including Uzbekistan. Early research on preschool education primarily focused on the role of early childhood learning in shaping children's intellectual and social abilities. Mamadaminova (2021) notes that preschool education significantly influences children's cognitive development and prepares them for formal schooling by developing basic communication, problem-solving, and social interaction skills. The study emphasizes that quality early childhood education programs can improve children's readiness for school and contribute to their long-term academic success. Furthermore, the author highlights that early childhood

education systems must integrate modern pedagogical approaches and child-centered learning strategies in order to enhance the holistic development of children.

In the context of Uzbekistan, many studies have examined the structural transformation of preschool education after the country gained independence in 1991. During the early years of independence, the preschool system experienced a significant decline due to economic difficulties and institutional restructuring. Several scholars emphasize that the transition period resulted in reduced access to preschool institutions and limited public funding for early childhood education. According to analyses of Uzbekistan's education sector, enrollment in preschool institutions dropped to below 30 percent by the mid-2010s, which placed the country among the lowest-coverage preschool systems in the region. In response to these challenges, the Government of Uzbekistan initiated a series of reforms aimed at revitalizing the preschool education system. Researchers studying these reforms highlight the establishment of a specialized ministry responsible for preschool education in 2017 as a turning point in the sector's development. The creation of this institutional structure allowed for more systematic planning, regulation, and investment in early childhood education. Policy analyses indicate that numerous legislative and regulatory documents were adopted to modernize preschool education and expand access to early learning opportunities.

Recent literature has increasingly focused on the rapid expansion of preschool infrastructure and enrollment in Uzbekistan during the late 2010s and early 2020s. Studies show that the number of preschool institutions increased dramatically as the government introduced new organizational models, including private and family-based preschools. These initiatives aimed to address the shortage of educational facilities and to improve access to preschool education in both urban and rural areas. As a result of these reforms, preschool enrollment rates increased significantly, reaching more than three-quarters of children aged three to six by the mid-2020s. Another major theme in the literature concerns the improvement of quality in preschool education. Researchers emphasize that expanding access alone is insufficient without ensuring high standards of teaching and learning. Contemporary studies highlight several initiatives aimed at improving educational quality, including curriculum modernization, teacher training programs, and investments in educational infrastructure. According to recent analyses of educational reforms in Uzbekistan, updated preschool curricula have been introduced to align with international educational standards and to promote child-centered learning environments.

Teacher training and professional development have also become central topics in recent research. Scholars argue that the effectiveness of preschool education largely depends on the professional competence of educators and the availability of modern teaching methodologies. In recent years, international organizations such as UNICEF and the Islamic Development Bank have supported programs designed to improve teacher training and strengthen institutional capacity in early childhood education. These initiatives include the establishment of regional pedagogical excellence centers and the introduction of new training models for preschool teachers. Another important aspect discussed in the literature is the role of international cooperation in the development of Uzbekistan's preschool education system. Researchers note that collaboration with global organizations has contributed significantly to the modernization of educational policies and practices. Programs implemented with the support of organizations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank have focused on improving access to early childhood education, strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems, and supporting evidence-based policy development. Despite the significant progress achieved in recent years, scholars also identify several challenges that continue to affect the effectiveness of preschool education reforms in Uzbekistan. One of the most frequently mentioned challenges is the existence of regional disparities in access to preschool education, particularly between urban and rural areas.

Although the number of preschool institutions has increased rapidly, infrastructure and resources remain unevenly distributed across regions. Furthermore, some studies emphasize the shortage of qualified preschool teachers and the need to improve teacher training systems to meet the growing demand for early childhood educators. Another issue highlighted in recent literature is the need to strengthen governance and management within the preschool education system. Researchers suggest that effective coordination between national and regional educational authorities is necessary to ensure the consistent implementation of educational policies and quality standards. In addition, scholars stress the importance of developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that can accurately measure learning outcomes and institutional performance in preschool education organizations.

The existing literature demonstrates that Uzbekistan has made substantial progress in transforming its preschool education system over the past decade. Researchers widely agree that the reforms implemented since 2017 have significantly expanded access to early childhood education and improved institutional capacity. At the same time, scholars emphasize that further efforts are required to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of these reforms. In particular, future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of preschool education reforms on children's learning outcomes, social development, and educational achievement. Therefore, the literature indicates that while Uzbekistan has achieved notable progress in expanding preschool education and improving institutional frameworks, several structural and quality-related challenges remain. A comprehensive analysis of reforms, challenges, and outcomes is essential for understanding the effectiveness of current policies and identifying strategic directions for further development of the preschool education system.

**Research discussion.** The findings of this study demonstrate that the development of the preschool education system in Uzbekistan between 1991 and 2025 has been characterized by two distinct phases: a period of decline during the early years of independence and a period of rapid reform and expansion in the late 2010s and early 2020s. The analysis of policy documents, institutional changes, and statistical indicators indicates that the reforms implemented in recent years have significantly transformed the structure and accessibility of preschool education in the country. During the first stage, which covered the years following independence in the early 1990s, the preschool education system experienced a substantial reduction in both infrastructure and enrollment. Economic challenges and institutional restructuring during the transition to a market economy led to the closure of many preschool institutions and a decline in public investment in early childhood education. As a result, preschool enrollment rates decreased significantly, and access to early education services became limited for many families, particularly in rural areas. These developments correspond with broader patterns observed in several post-Soviet countries, where social infrastructure experienced temporary setbacks during the transition period. However, the second phase of development, particularly after 2017, marked a turning point in the modernization of Uzbekistan's preschool education system. Government reforms introduced new institutional mechanisms aimed at expanding access to preschool education and improving its quality. The establishment of a dedicated governmental body responsible for preschool education created a more centralized and coordinated management structure. This institutional reform facilitated the development and implementation of national strategies focused on increasing preschool enrollment and strengthening the sector's material and technical base.

One of the most significant outcomes of these reforms has been the rapid expansion of preschool infrastructure. The number of preschool institutions has increased considerably through the creation of both public and non-state organizations, including private and family-based kindergartens. This diversification of institutional models has played an important role in

addressing the shortage of preschool facilities and improving access to early childhood education services. As a result, preschool enrollment has increased substantially, indicating a positive trend in the development of early childhood education in the country. Another important aspect of the reforms concerns improvements in the quality of preschool education. The modernization of educational curricula, the introduction of child-centered pedagogical approaches, and the development of teacher training programs have contributed to strengthening the overall effectiveness of preschool institutions. In particular, the implementation of updated national curricula aligned with international standards has allowed preschool education to focus more strongly on holistic child development, including cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Despite these positive developments, the results of the study also highlight several persistent challenges. One of the most significant issues is the uneven distribution of preschool education services across different regions of the country. Although the number of institutions has increased, some rural and remote areas continue to experience limited access to preschool education due to infrastructure constraints and resource limitations. Addressing regional disparities remains an important priority for ensuring equitable access to early childhood education. Another challenge concerns the availability and professional competence of preschool teachers. The rapid expansion of preschool institutions has created a growing demand for qualified educators. While new teacher training initiatives have been introduced, the education system must continue to strengthen professional development programs to ensure that teachers possess the necessary pedagogical skills and knowledge to implement modern early childhood education practices effectively.

The rapid growth of private and non-state preschool institutions requires effective regulatory mechanisms to maintain consistent quality standards across the sector. Ensuring that all preschool institutions meet national educational requirements is essential for maintaining the overall effectiveness of the preschool education system. The discussion of research findings indicates that Uzbekistan has achieved significant progress in developing its preschool education system, particularly during the reform period of the last decade. The expansion of institutional capacity, improvements in educational quality, and increased government attention to early childhood education demonstrate the country's commitment to strengthening human capital development. At the same time, addressing remaining challenges such as regional inequalities, teacher shortages, and quality assurance will be crucial for ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of preschool education reforms. These findings suggest that continued policy support, investment in educational infrastructure, and the strengthening of teacher training systems will play a key role in further improving the preschool education system in Uzbekistan. A comprehensive and balanced approach to educational reform will help ensure that early childhood education continues to contribute positively to the country's broader educational and socio-economic development.

**Conclusion.** The analysis of the development of the preschool education system in Uzbekistan from 1991 to 2025 demonstrates that the sector has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades. While the early years of independence were marked by a decline in infrastructure and enrollment, recent reforms have led to substantial improvements in accessibility, institutional capacity, and the quality of preschool education. Government initiatives implemented since 2017 have played a crucial role in expanding preschool institutions, increasing enrollment rates, and introducing modern pedagogical approaches. At the same time, several challenges remain, including regional disparities in access, shortages of qualified educators, and the need for consistent quality standards across both public and private institutions. Addressing these issues will require continued policy support, investment in teacher training, and effective monitoring mechanisms. Strengthening these areas

will ensure that preschool education continues to contribute to the sustainable development of Uzbekistan's education system and human capital.

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