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CONTACT: Ernest Landante, Jr.
elandante@nieer.org

Montana Reverts Back to Being a Preschool Desert

Federal/State Partnership Needed to Better Serve Young Children and their Families

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ—The COVID-19 pandemic set back state preschool enrollment and funding across the nation, according to the 2020 edition of *The State of Preschool Yearbook* by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

Montana’s legislature denied a bill to maintain a small but successful pilot preschool program, returning the state to the list of only six remaining states to deny its youngest children the benefits of a high-quality state-funded preschool education.

“Montana’s children are missing out on the proven benefits of high-quality preschool experiences,” said Dr. Steven Barnett, NIEER’s senior co-director and founder. “The state legislature’s decision to end the preschool pilot program will impact children in the years to come.”

Now is the time for a renewed commitment to high-quality pre-K for all beginning with those in the lowest income families. Nationally, the report found that:

- Growth in state-funded preschool was slowing before the pandemic.
- The pandemic imposed serious setbacks and reversed recent progress.
- Uneven progress among states is worsening inequality in children’s access to high-quality preschool.
- Most states spend too little per child to support high-quality, full-day pre-K and few reach all their 3- and 4-year-olds.

Nationwide, enrollment in state-funded preschool increased slightly in 2019-2020, but took a hit in 2020-2021 as many programs closed or only offered virtual learning and parents were hesitant to send children to in-person school during the pandemic.

“Montana must act now to mitigate the pandemic’s impacts on young children. It is time for the state to recommit to high-quality preschool,” said Barnett. “The federal government should provide support for, and states commit to, high-quality pre-K. While federal rescue and recovery dollars can help, a new federal initiative NIEER has proposed could bring \$22.7 million in federal support to Montana for preschool during the next four years.”

Across the country the survey reveals bipartisan support for preschool with both "red" and "blue" states among the nation's leaders in high quality pre-K. That offers hope that the nation can move ahead to expand access to high-quality pre-K more rapidly in the future.

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The National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research and the translation of research to policy and practice.