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Most US Preschoolers Don't Get a Quality Pre-K Education, the Pandemic Made it Worse *Federal/State Partnership Needed to Expand High-Quality, Full-Day Pre-K for 3- & 4-Year-Olds*

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

The annual survey found:

- 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, and
- most states spend too little per child to support high-quality, full-day pre-K and few reach all their children.

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

"Lawmakers need to act now to address learning loss, stress on young children and families, and get pre-K back on track," said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's founder and senior co-director.

In several of the largest states, including Florida and Texas, quality standards are very low, and most children in pre-K are unlikely to receive the quality of education needed to provide long-term gains in learning and development.

"Funding is a key impediment to quality and current spending is less than half of what is needed in many states," said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor. "Teaching staff are poorly paid and some programs offer children as little as 10 hours of preschool each week. To have a lasting impact, more funding is needed to improve quality for children, support full-day programs, and provide teachers with competitive salaries and benefits. Nationwide, we estimate that programs need an average of at least \$12,500 annually per child to do this, a significant increase from current investments in most states."

"For nearly 20 years, annual progress on preschool has been slow and uneven, and at this pace universal pre-K will remain an unfulfilled promise into the next century," said Barnett. "Beyond federal rescue and recovery dollars for the short-term, we need a new federal-state partnership to accelerate progress toward high-quality pre-K beginning with the most disadvantaged children many of whom still receive no pre-K at all. This would require that federal and state governments steadily increase spending on pre-K during the next 30 years, expanding programs to reach all 3- and 4-year-olds beginning with the many in low-income families who still do not attend pre-K."

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.

THE STATE OF PRESCHOOL: 2020 FAST FACTS

Forty-four states, Washington, D.C., and Guam provide publicly-funded preschool to more than 1.64 million children.

Only eight states enroll more than 50% of their 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-K.

States spent more than \$9 billion on pre-K in 2019-20, a 3.4% percent increase from last year, inflation adjusted.

State spending per child was \$5,499, an inflation-adjusted increase of \$144 since last year.

Six state-funded preschool programs met all 10 quality standards benchmarks, 11 states met fewer than half.

Not all programs required remote learning when they closed in Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Five million 3- and 4-year-olds lack access to preschool.

A new federal-state partnership could bring high-quality, full-day pre-K to all 3- & 4-year-olds under 200% of poverty by 2040 and to all regardless of income by 2050.

Dr. Friedman-Krauss also noted that “despite the growing need, few states have adequate policies to support preschool-age Dual Language Learners.”

Only 12 state-funded preschool programs require teachers to have specific training or qualifications related to working with Dual Language Learners. Just 31 programs can even report the number of children enrolled who speak a language other than English.

The 2020 State of Preschool Yearbook is the only national report on state-funded preschool programs, tracking enrollment, spending, and policies to support quality since 2002. This year’s report includes a special section on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on state funded preschool programs.

The 2020 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Cost modeling and funding analyses were supported with funding from the PNC Foundation. For more information and detailed state-by-state profiles on quality, access, and funding, please visit www.nieer.org.

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.