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Too Many Utah Preschoolers Didn't Receive High-Quality Education Amid Pandemic

State funding for preschool programs declined nationally for the first time since 2014, enrollment decreased in almost every state

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and intensified existing problems of access to high-quality early childhood education in Utah, leading to declines in enrollment and state funding during the 2020-2021 school year, according to the [2021 State of Preschool Yearbook](#), released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Utah compensated for drastic decreases in state funding for preschool by using federal funding during the 2020-2021 school year. The state met the continuous quality improvement system quality standards benchmark for the first time.

Key findings from the annual survey - focused on the first school year fully impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – are summarized below. In 2020-2021, many states funded preschool to maintain capacity despite unprecedented drops in enrollment due to the pandemic. To account for this, we report both spending per child and spending per child if the program was at capacity (full enrollment equivalent). For some states, the two are the same. States are ranked on the latter.

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool in Utah was 2,038, a decrease of 175;
- State spending for preschool programs in Utah was \$1,878,272, a decrease of \$5,192,059 (inflation adjusted);
- Utah spent \$902 per child but spending per child equaled \$832 for the program at full capacity;
- Utah met 3 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Utah will need to substantially increase its investments in preschool to meet all 10 quality standards benchmarks, progress toward universal access, and provide a full-day program.

UTAH: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 43rd (3%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 28th (1%)
- State spending per child: 44th (\$832)
- All reported spending per child: 43rd (\$3,250)

According to the report, 298,000 fewer children were enrolled in preschool nationally than in the prior year due to [difficulties created by the pandemic](#) such as health risks, closed classrooms, and remote preschool. States across the country served less than 30 percent of 4-year-olds and less than five percent of 3-year-olds in 2020-21. Most states preserved capacity during 2020-2021 allowing enrollments to rebound in the current year, but far too many children still lack access to preschool. Further, total state pre-K spending was \$8.97 billion, an inflation adjusted decrease of

nearly \$255 million (3%) from the previous year. Nationally, this is the largest decline since the Great Recession. States also used at least \$440 million in pandemic relief funding to support preschool, more than offsetting the decline in state spending and preserving pre-K capacity that otherwise would have been lost. However, nationally, state spending per child remains about the same as it was 20 years ago, adjusted for inflation.

“Our country has yet to adequately invest in high-quality preschool programs, while the pandemic has erased a decade of progress and exacerbated inequality,” **said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER’s founder and senior co-director.** “Children and parents in Utah need high-quality, full-day preschool programs that support early learning and parental employment. The pandemic has made it even clearer that such preschool programs are essential for young children and their families. Utah and its localities must step up.”

“Too many children in Utah and across the country missed out on a year of learning. Utah must implement best practices that mitigate health risks in order to get children back into classrooms,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “And teachers, who were already underpaid and often did not receive benefits, are burnt out as they’ve worked to provide support and learning to young students amid the challenges of the past year. There is no time to waste. Utah should provide the resources to address pervasive problems in access to high-quality early learning.”

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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.