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## **Utah Funds State Preschool for the First Time but the Pandemic Threatens Progress**

*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 country, 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.

The 2019-20 school year marks the first year Utah had a state-funded preschool program included in the State of Preschool Yearbook. The program met only 2 of 10 minimum standards for high-quality preschool.

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.

“We are thrilled to introduce Utah to the State of Preschool Yearbook, and look forward to helping the state benchmark progress over time,” said Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's founder and senior co-director. “The state has a long way to go to increase access and improve standards for preschool quality. We are concerned that state funding was cut in 2020-2021.”

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.

“Utah must act now to mitigate the pandemic's impacts on young children and pre-K programs and sustain its new commitment to 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 \$67.1 million in federal support to Utah 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.*

### **UTAH: 2020 FAST FACTS**

Met 2 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 2,258 children in 2019-20.

Total state funding was \$6,940,000 in 2019-20.

State spending-per-child was \$3,074.

Utah national rankings:

- 44 in access for 4-year-olds
- 28 in access for 3-year-olds
- 37 in state spending per child