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Rhode Island Increased Preschool Enrollment and Spending 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 nationally. Rhode Island was one of only a few states to increase preschool enrollment and spending 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.

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 Rhode Island was 1,848, an increase of 428;
- State spending for preschool programs in Rhode Island was \$14.4 million, an increase of \$335,333 (inflation adjusted);
- Rhode Island state spending per child and spending per full enrollment equivalent was \$7,792;
- Rhode Island met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Rhode Island is not within reach of at least 70% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education.

RHODE ISLAND: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 31st (16%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 9th (\$7,792)
- All reported spending per child: 10th (\$9,504)

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 Rhode Island 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. Rhode Island must keep advancing. Although the state only serves a fraction of 4-year-olds, it has steadily increased access each year, most recently through braiding state funding with Head Start.”

“Too many children in Rhode Island and across the country missed out on a year of learning. Rhode Island must implement best practices that mitigate health risks so children remain safe in classrooms,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “And teachers 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. Rhode Island must continue its commitment to high-quality early learning and increase investments to reduce gaps in access to preschool.”

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The 2021 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates 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.