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**Arizona Pre-K Higher in Quality but Serves Relatively Few Children says National Report**

***Three Percent of 4-Year-Olds Served by the State’s First Thing First Scholarship Program***

*Washington, D.C. —* Across the nation, state funding for pre-K decreased by more than half a billion dollars in 2011-2012, the largest one-year drop ever, says a new study from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), which has tracked state pre-K since 2002.

The *State of Preschool 2012* yearbook cited two other “firsts”: After a decade of growth, enrollment in state pre-K has stalled. And despite stagnant enrollment, state funding per child fell to $3,841 — well below the $5,020 (inflation-adjusted) national average in 2001-2002.

Arizona is among the states whose support for pre-K has diminished over the last decade, largely due to the defunding of its Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) for the 2010-2011 year. After one year on the “no pre-K” list, Arizona again offers state-funded pre-K through First Things First (FTF), a voter-created early childhood organization. The FTF Prekindergarten Scholarship program was expanding its early education efforts as the state was eliminating ECBG and holds its program to standards now qualifying it for the *State of Preschool* report.

While FTF fills some of the service gap left by ECBG, the proportion of children enrolled in Arizona’s publicly funded pre-K has declined. In 2002, the state ranked 28th in the nation in access for 4-year-olds but in 2012, Arizona ranked 35th. In terms of spending per child, Arizona ranked 32nd in 2012 while it previously ranked ninth in the nation in 2012. When it comes to program quality, Arizona pre-K has made significant gains. The FTF initiative garners six of NIEER’s ten benchmarks for quality standards, while the ECBG program garnered only three at the time of its defunding.

“Even though the nation is emerging from the Great Recession, it is clear that the nation’s youngest learners are still bearing the brunt of the budget cuts,” said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. Reductions were widespread with 27 of 40 states with pre-K programs reporting funding per child declined in 2011-2012.

The adverse consequences of declining funding were manifested in a retrenchment in program quality as well. Seven programs lost ground against benchmarks for quality standards while only three gained. Only 15 states plus the District of Columbia provided enough funding per-child to meet all 10 benchmarks for quality standards. And, only 20 percent of all children enrolled in state-funded pre-K attend those programs. More than half a million children, or 42 percent of nationwide enrollment, were served by programs that met fewer than half of NIEER’s quality standards benchmarks.

Education in the years before kindergarten plays an important role in preparing our youngest citizens for productive lives in the global economy. Yet, our nation’s public investment in their future through pre-K declined during the recent economic downturn at the very time that parents’ financial capacity to invest in their children was hardest hit. America will pay the price of that lapse for decades to come. Barnett also noted that “while the recession greatly exacerbated the decline in funding, there was already a general trend in the states toward declining funding for quality.” In this respect, President Obama’s new universal pre-K proposal is especially timely. “We have studied the President’s plan and find it provides states with strong incentives to raise quality while expanding access to pre-K. The plan will assist states already leading the way, states that lost ground during the recession, and the 10 states that still have no state-funded pre-K,” he said.

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*The National Institute for Early Education Research (*[*www.nieer.org*](http://nieer.org/)*) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.*