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**Florida Ranks First in Nation for Pre-K Access But Quality Remains Low Says National Report**

***State Spending Per Child Declined Ten Percent***

*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.

Florida is no exception. Even though the state has ranked in the bottom tier of state in spending per child since the program launched in 2005, spending declined an additional ten percent between 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 when adjusted for inflation. Quality standards remain low as the state program continues to meet only three of NIEER’s ten benchmarks for quality standards. Maximum class size has been increased from 18 to 20 children. Legislation enacted in 2011 to hold programs accountable for improving children’s learning resulted in about one-third of participating VPK Programs in the 2010-2011 being placed on probation. “Governor Scott should take necessary steps not just to fulfill Florida’s state constitutional amendment ensuring access, but to bring the program up to a high-quality standard,” said NIEER director Steve Barnett.

“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,” Barnett said. 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.*