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**Georgia State Pre-K Loses Ground on Quality, Enrollment and Financial Support Says National Report**

***Recession Has Dealt Serious Blows to Historically Strong 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.

Georgia is no exception. While the state has long been a leader in providing high-quality pre-K to a high proportion of its 4-year-olds, the recession has had decidedly negative effects. In 2002, the state ranked 2nd in the nation in access to the program for 4-year-olds. By 2011, that ranking had fallen to 4th in the nation and in 2012 it had fallen to 6th. Spending per child has also declined. In 2002, the state ranked 10th in spending per child but by 2012 that ranking had fallen to 25th. Between 2011 and 2012, spending fell by $945 per child.

In 2010-2011, the state reduced the length of the program year, cutting teacher pay and resulting in higher teacher turnover. Ten of the 20 days cut were returned the following year and the program will return to a full 180 day school schedule for 2013-2014, but program standards were loosened for both class size (from 20 to 22) and student-teacher ratio (from 1-10 to 1-11.)

“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.*