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ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-K IN ILLINOIS LAGS BEHIND OTHER STATES

Efforts to Expand Preschool Education Stalled With Illinois' Economy

New York, NY — Many 3- and 4-year-olds across the nation still lack access to high-quality preschool education despite modest gains in enrollment, quality, and funding, according to an [annual report](#) by the nonpartisan National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. While several states, including Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi, and New York made significant progress through a concerted effort to increase enrollment and funding and improve quality, progress is slow and uneven nationally and quality standards are particularly low in some of the nation's largest states such as California, Florida and Texas. Despite the relatively good news this year, the rate of progress is so slow that it will take 150 years for the nation to reach 75 percent enrollment in state pre-K even at age 4.

In Illinois, enrollment was unchanged in 2014-2015 as approximately 75,000 children were served. Illinois provided pre-K for 20 percent of 3-year-olds, 4th highest percentage nationally for this age group, and 27 percent of 4-year-olds to retain its national ranking of 20th among 43 states. In terms of quality standards, the state continued to meet eight of NIEER's 10 minimum quality standards benchmarks. Illinois fell further behind in its national ranking for state resources spent per child. With an adjusted decrease of \$50 per child, the state dropped three positions to 34th, well below its ranking of 17th in 2012.

"Illinois' economic future depends on early investment in its kids," said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. "Ensuring that every child has access to high-quality preschool can help pave the way for their success in school, on the job, and in communities across the state. Illinois has made minimal progress over the years, and any momentum for early education seems lost as other states move ahead. Illinois needs to do more. Your kids, their families, and the state depend on it."

The State of Preschool Report for the 2014-2015 school year, which includes objective state-by-state profiles and rankings, indicates that urgent action is needed from lawmakers at all levels of government to ensure that every child – particularly those from low-income families – have access to high-quality early education. For the first year, NIEER also analyzed states' early education workforce and Dual Language Learner policies. In a state where one-quarter of preschool-age children are identified as DLL and 34 percent of this population, 14,161 children, attend pre-K, Illinois was one of just 4 states where policies required teachers to possess specialized training and provide additional services for children and families. While lead pre-K teachers are required to meet the same qualifications as kindergarten

teachers in Illinois with a bachelor degree with early childhood certification, state policy does not guarantee them the same salary and benefits as kindergarten teachers.

The report finds that total state spending on pre-K programs across the nation increased by 10 percent, or \$553 million, since the previous year, bringing state spending in 2014-2015 to over \$6.2 billion. The number of children served by state-funded pre-K served increased by 37,167 in 2014-2015, bringing the total to almost 1.4 million children – the largest number of children ever served by state-funded pre-K. With an average rate of \$4,489, states also made one of the most significant increases in spending per child in recent history.

Despite these gains, the report’s findings underscore that those states like California, Florida, and Texas with the largest populations of young children are falling behind—they were among the states that met the fewest quality standards benchmarks, and Texas and Florida also reduced enrollment and spending in 2014-2015. Nationally, enrollment has risen by just one percentage point for both 4- and 3-year olds over five years. The sluggish pace of change disproportionately impacts low-income families.

“We’re encouraged to see several states such as Michigan, New York, and South Carolina increasing enrollment and others improving quality, but access to high-quality pre-K in the United States remains low and highly unequal,” said Barnett. “Expanding access to quality pre-K programs is one of the best investments we can make, and it’s critical that we raise and standardize salaries for early education teachers and have strong Dual Language Learner policies in states with large Hispanic populations like Illinois. State governments should increase and stabilize funding for pre-K and raise standards for the benefit of all children.”

The State of Preschool Report reviews state-funded pre-K programs on 10 benchmarks of quality standards, including the presence of a qualified instructor, class size, teacher-to-student ratio, presence of an assistant, and length of instruction per day.

For more information on *The State of Preschool 2015* yearbook and detailed state-by-state breakdowns on quality benchmarks, enrollment, and funding, please click [here](#).

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