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

Enrollment of 3- and 4-Year-Olds in High Quality Public Programs Very Limited

[New York, NY]—Many 3- and 4-year-olds in the U.S. 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 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 Minnesota, enrollment of preschoolers in the state's supplement to Head Start was 1,381, down by 359 children in 2014-2015. Minnesota continued to meet 9 of NIEER's 10 minimum quality standards benchmarks. The state spent \$20.1 million to supplement the federal Head Start program, with \$10.8 million going to increase enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds and increased funding by \$5 million for the 2015-2016 school year. Although the state's overall supplement to Head Start did increase this year, a larger portion was directed to Early Head Start than in previous years and consequently enrollment of and spending for 3- and 4-year-olds declined. Minnesota enrolled only 1 percent of the state's 3- and 4-year-olds through their supplement to Head Start but do serve other children through the School Readiness Program and the Early Learning Scholarships Programs, which are not profiled in NIEER's new report. Governor Dayton supports expanding Minnesota's investment in young children through a Preschool for All Initiative that would provide free, voluntary early learning programs for all 4-year-olds.

"Minnesota's economic future depends on early investment in the state's youngest citizens," said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. "Ensuring that every child has access to high-quality preschool can help to pave the way for their success in school, on the job, and in Minnesota communities."

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 (DLL) policies, which reveal that Minnesota has few policies in place to support the pre-K workforce or DLLs. The state does not require salary parity with K-3 public school teachers nor are teachers required to have specific training related to teaching DLLs.

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 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 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 increasing in enrollment and 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. 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.