



Press Release

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New Report: Nationwide Access to High-Quality Pre-K Remains Low Despite Small Gains in Enrollment and Rising Standards

National Institute for Early Education Research Urges Federal and State Legislators to Prioritize State-Funded Pre-K

NEW YORK—Many three- and four-year-olds 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 some states step forward, others drop back resulting in slow and uneven progress. One state, New York, made dramatic progress through a concerted effort to increase enrollment and funding and improve quality in New York City. Yet, three states—California, Florida and Texas—that enroll nearly 40 percent of all children in state-funded pre-K have particularly low quality standards. Florida and Texas also reduced funding in 2014-2015.

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. These new surveys reveal that pre-K teachers are much more poorly paid and supported than teachers of older children even when they have equivalent qualifications and few states have the policies needed to adequately educate the nearly one in four preschoolers who are Dual Language Learners.

“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 NIEER Director Steve Barnett. “Expanding access to quality pre-K programs is one of the best investments we can make, and it’s critical that we raise salaries and benefits for early education teachers and ensure that teachers are prepared to support children from homes speaking a language other than English, including states with large Hispanic populations. State governments should increase and stabilize funding for pre-K and raise standards for the benefit of all children. For proof that it’s possible, one need look no further than New York.”

The report’s findings indicate that many states have made significant strides in expanding pre-K programs, which were among the hardest hit by the Great Recession. With New York leading the way, total state spending on pre-K programs increased by 10 percent, or \$553 million, since the previous year,

bringing state spending in 2014-2015 to over \$6.2 billion. New York's efforts to expand pre-K, in particular in New York City, accounted for two-thirds of this increase. In 2014-2015, New York added over 13,000 new spaces in its pre-K programs, expanded access to full-day services, and allocated an additional \$358 million to improve quality.

"High-quality early education is a necessity, not a luxury," said New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio. "Here in New York, we've seen firsthand that action by city and state governments can lift enrollment and the quality of education for tens of thousands of children in our communities. At a time of political polarization, these initiatives receive wide bipartisan support – and for good reason. There's no better way to ensure future success for our kids than to invest in their early education."

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 rate of \$4,489, states also made one of the most significant increases in spending per child in recent history. In New York, funding per child increased by 70 percent. The report also indicates that several states made significant progress in terms of quality, with two states – West Virginia and Mississippi – reaching all 10 of the report's minimum quality standards benchmarks for the first time.

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. These three states were among the states that met the fewest quality standards benchmarks and Texas and Florida both reduced enrollment and funding.

NIEER is releasing the report at an event in New York City with Mayor Bill de Blasio, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Early Learning at the U.S. Department of Education Dr. Libby Doggett, President of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, and retired Major General in the U.S. Air Force Michael S. Hall.

Dr. Doggett said, "Quality early education programs nurture children's cognitive, social, and emotional development to enhance their lives now and in the future. In the long run, this increases achievement, makes kids more likely to stay in school, decreases social problems, and leads to higher earnings. It's heartening to see several states—led by both Republican and Democratic governors—commit to improving their pre-K programs. While we still have a lot of work ahead of us to ensure that all kids have access to high-quality pre-K, this year's report indicates that many states are moving in the right direction."

Enrollment nationwide has risen by just one percentage point for both four- and three-year-olds over five years. The sluggish pace of change disproportionately impacted low-income families. At this growth rate, it will be decades before all children in low-income families are enrolled. Across all income levels, it would take more than 150 years to reach 75 percent enrollment.

While most pre-K funding comes from state government budgets, local and federal governments also contribute to these programs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which Congress passed in December 2015, encourages state funding of early education by making federal grants available to states for quality pre-K programs. The NIEER report's findings suggest that the federal government should provide additional incentives to states to fund high-quality pre-K to decrease the large numbers of children left out.

Other key findings of the state of preschool 2015 include:

- Across all public programs—Pre-K general and special education enrollments plus federally funded Head Start—at most 41 percent of 4-year-olds and 16 percent of 3-year-olds were served.
- Arkansas, Connecticut, Michigan, New York, South Carolina and Vermont added five percent or more to enrollment in 2014-2015.
- Mississippi, Indiana and Hawaii made notable new efforts in the 2014-2015 year.
- New York, DC, Michigan, Ohio, Connecticut, Washington, Alabama, New Mexico, and California increased funding by \$10 million during the same period.
- Six states – Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Mississippi and West Virginia – and one of Louisiana’s programs met all 10 of the quality standards benchmarks, up from four states in the previous school year; and 24 states met at least eight. West Virginia and Mississippi are the newest states to meet all 10 benchmarks.
- Five states met fewer than half of the benchmarks – California, Ohio and Vermont met four; Florida met three; and Texas met only two.

The state of preschool reviews state-funded pre-K programs on 10 benchmarks for minimum quality standards, including the presence of a qualified teacher and assistant, 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 and detailed state-by-state breakdowns on quality standards 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.