



Press Release

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2016 STATE OF PRESCHOOL YEARBOOK SHOWS ARKANSAS INCREASES SPENDING PER CHILD

Arkansas meets 9 benchmarks but more work is needed to improve access

New Brunswick, NJ — Arkansas' ABC/ABCSS preschool program enrollment dropped despite receiving a federal Preschool Development Grant, according to the 2016 State of Preschool Yearbook released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

The State of Preschool Yearbook is the only national report on state-funded preschool programs with detailed information on enrollment, funding, teacher qualifications, and other policies related to quality. Decades of research shows that early childhood education can prepare children for greater success in elementary school and beyond, with benefits largest for the most disadvantaged — but only if quality is high.

Arkansas preschool enrollment dropped slightly to 20,558 children, while still meeting nine of NIEER's 10 current quality standards benchmarks. Nationwide, state-funded preschool program enrollment reached an all-time high, serving nearly 1.5 million children, 32 percent of 4-year-olds and five percent of 3-year-olds. State funding for preschool rose eight percent to about \$7.4 billion, a \$550 million increase. State funding per child increased to \$4,967, exceeding pre-recession levels for the first time. Five states met all 10 current quality standards benchmarks. Nine states had programs that met fewer than half; and seven states do not fund preschool at all.

“Early childhood education is a great investment,” said NIEER Director W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D. “We see Arkansas once again demonstrated a commitment to high-quality, meeting nine of NIEER's quality

standard benchmarks, but more work is needed expand access and provide stable funding so ABC/ABCSS can maintain the high-quality pre-K that helps children get the best possible start in life.”

In Arkansas:

- Total state funding for ABC/ABCSS was \$112.5 million, a small increase from 2014-2015
- Enrollment of 3-year-olds increased by 572 to 7,127, falling slightly in nationwide rank from 2014-2015 yet remaining among the top 5
- Enrollment of 4-year-olds decreased by 986 to 12,314, slipping from 12 to 18 in national rank
- State spending per child was \$5,472 in 2015-2016; state resources per child ranking improved from 22 to 18 among 44 states with programs. Funding per child including both federal and local sources was \$7,773.
- Arkansas met nine of 10 of NIEER’s current quality standards benchmarks
- The state received a competitive federal Preschool Development grant used to improve quality of 1,506 preschool seats in ABC/ABCSS and enroll 1,371 additional children in full-day high-quality preschool seats statewide

Current benchmarks were designed to help states build programs, focusing on resources and policies related to the structural aspects of public pre-K— elements needed for a high-quality program but not fully defining one. This year, NIEER is introducing major revisions to the policy benchmarks for the first time since the Yearbook was launched in 2003. The new benchmarks raise the bar by focusing on policies that more directly support continuous improvement of classroom quality. State profiles in the 2016 Yearbook include both current and new benchmark scores.

Arkansas met seven of the new benchmarks, meeting new requirements for early learning and development standards that are culturally sensitive, supported, and aligned with other state standards and child assessments. They also meet the new curriculum supports benchmark. However, current policies fell short of benchmarks requiring professional development, ongoing-coaching, and individualized professional development plans for both lead and assistant teachers *and* a continuous quality improvement system.

“States meeting current benchmarks should be proud of their accomplishments,” Dr. Barnett concluded. “But simply meeting the benchmarks does not guarantee children are receiving a high-quality classroom experience. Research indicates most states need to do more to ensure high quality for every child.”

The State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation while the survey data on which it relies was funded by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The findings, interpretations, and conclusions in this report are solely those of the authors. For more information and detailed state-by-state profiles on quality access, and funding, please visit www.nieer.org.