



Press Release

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NEW RESEARCH REVEALS GROWING INEQUALITY AMONG STATES IN ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC PRESCHOOL

Montana falling behind as most states now invest in public preschool programs

New Brunswick, NJ — Inequality in access to quality public preschool has gotten worse over the past decade as some states made great progress providing quality pre-K for all while children in other states such as Montana are being left behind, according to the 2016 State of Preschool Yearbook released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

NIEER's new report shows states made modest improvements in enrollment, spending and quality standards for public preschool programs in the past year. Alabama, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and West Virginia set policies that met all 10 quality standards benchmarks NIEER assessed and had funding levels consistent with their standards. However, nine states had programs that met fewer than half; and seven states don't fund preschool at all. Such differences in state policies and resources mean that early learning opportunities vary dramatically, depending where a young child lives.

Montana remains one of the seven states without a state-funded preschool program for 2015-2016. However, the state did receive a federal Preschool Development Grant which enabled them to provide high-quality, full-day preschool to 462 4-year-olds, nearly four percent of the state's 4-year-olds.

"Early childhood education is a great investment," said NIEER Director W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D. "Research shows high-quality preschool can help provide a solid foundation for academic as well as social and emotional development--and reduce the expense of grade retention, special education and incarceration. But more work is needed to make sure children in STATE get the best possible start in life."

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.

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 8 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.

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.

“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. We hope Montana will soon see the value of investing in early education.”

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.