



Press Release

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

Gap widens between states providing pre-K for all children and others doing little or nothing

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 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.

The NIEER *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, such as the presence of a qualified teacher and assistant, small class size, and low teacher-to-student ratio. NIEER has been tracking state preschool policies and programs since 2002.

State-funded preschool programs now serve almost 1.5 million children nationwide, yet access to high quality remains highly uneven from state to state. Decades of research shows that early childhood education can prepare children for greater success in elementary school and beyond, with largest benefits for the most disadvantaged students – but only if quality is high.

This year, NIEER is introducing major revisions to the policy benchmarks for the first time since the Yearbook was launched. Current quality standards benchmarks were designed to indicate the minimum standards for state policies to support quality; new benchmarks focus on policies that more directly support continuous improvement of classroom quality. State profiles in the 2016 Yearbook include both current and new benchmark scores.

(more)

“States meeting all current benchmarks should be proud of their accomplishments,” said NIEER Director W. Steven Barnett Ph.D. “But simply meeting the benchmarks does not guarantee children are receiving a high-quality classroom experience. That’s why we’ve introduced major revisions to our assessment of state policies, raising the bar for what it means to support pre-K quality.”

Highlights of the 2016 Yearbook include:

- More states than ever -- 43 plus the District of Columbia and this year, Guam-- provide publicly funded preschool
- State-funded preschool program enrollment reached an all-time high, serving nearly 1.5 million children, 32 percent of 4-year-olds and 5 percent of 3-year-olds. The District of Columbia, Florida, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin had highest enrollment among 4-year-olds, all serving more than 70 percent
- State funding for preschool rose 8 percent to about \$7.4 billion, a \$550 million increase driven mostly by additional spending in California and Texas
- State funding per child increased 5 percent to \$4,967, exceeding pre-recession levels for the first time
- Alabama and Rhode Island are the only states meeting all 10 new (and current) benchmarks
- Federal Preschool Development Grants helped 18 states make strides in funding, enrollment and quality
- Just four states require teachers of dual language learners to have special qualifications

The *2016 State of Preschool Yearbook* shows most states have made serious efforts to provide adequate preschool funding, although Florida, for example, falls far short of providing adequate funding for quality. And 21 states still enroll fewer than 1 in 10 4-year-olds in state pre-K, including the seven states that have no state-funded pre-K.

Some states have minimal policy standards in place to support quality in preschool education. Children in states that have done little or nothing to provide high-quality early education, such as Florida and Arizona, have been left far behind.

Recent studies have found that poor quality can render preschool programs ineffective at best, or even harmful. Research over the past decade indicates states must do more to support quality beyond providing adequate resources. Policies are needed that assure good teachers are providing engaging, intentional and individualized education for every child.

Responding to these concerns, NIEER’s new benchmarks focus on policies that more directly support continuous improvement in children’s experience in the classroom. The *2016 Yearbook* includes both current and new benchmark scores for each state, recognizing that it takes time for states to revise policies to meet new standards. Scores on new benchmarks clearly demonstrate many states must do much more to ensure quality.

In addition, we conclude the federal government could promote more equal access to high quality by taking two steps. First, expand the federal Preschool Development Grant program--which appears to already be making a difference--to help more of the states that are lagging behind. Second, sponsor a national study of classroom quality in public and private preschools similar to one conducted in 2005, but with representative results for each state.

“It is critically important that parents and taxpayers both know how their state’s pre-K policies stack up against what is required to provide a good early education,” Dr. Barnett concluded. “Research indicates most states need to do more to ensure high quality for every child. “

The *2016 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.

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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. **For more information, contact: Michelle Ruess** mruess@nieer.org 848-932-4350