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NIEER Research Reveals States Choose Quantity Over Quality in Pre-K *Enrollment Grows but Inadequate Funding Short-Changes Teachers and Children*

New Brunswick, NJ—A new state-by-state report shows more young children enrolled in public pre-K programs but a troubling lack of policies ensuring the quality classroom experiences they need to get ready for kindergarten.

The State of Preschool 2017 annual report, based on 2016-17 academic year data, finds states heeding the demand for pre-K and expanding access to publicly funded programs in a variety of settings. But instead of supporting quality early learning with adequate resources, most state programs invest too little to help children catch up with their more advantaged peers by kindergarten.

“Recent changes in federal policy—including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) —make it clear that progress in early education depends more than ever on the states,” said NIEER Senior Co-Director Steven Barnett. “Our report highlights which states invest best in their young children and which leave too many children behind.”

The NIEER *State of Preschool* yearbook is the only national report on state-funded preschool programs. This year’s report includes a special section on policies affecting Dual Language Learners (DLLs), and also highlights changes since 2002, when NIEER began tracking state pre-K.

Research shows early childhood education can help prepare all children for greater success in elementary school and beyond — but only if quality is high. Today, access to high quality varies widely from state to state—and even within states, as some municipalities add their support for pre-K.

Enrollment in state-funded preschool programs has more than doubled since 2002—with more than 1.5 million children now enrolled nationwide. Funding, however, has failed to keep pace, with spending-per-child *decreasing* when adjusted for inflation.

Access to high quality varies widely. Alabama, Michigan, Rhode Island, and West Virginia have expanded enrollment while maintaining high quality standards. California and Texas lead on policies supporting Dual Language Learners.

Seven states do not invest in preschool programs; and some of the programs meeting few quality benchmarks serve the largest numbers of children. This failure to invest in quality preschool is taking a toll.

State of Preschool 2017 Fast Facts

43 states, D.C. and Guam provide publicly funded preschool to more than 1.5 million children

10 states enroll 50% or more of their 4-year-olds in public pre-K

States spent \$7.6 billion on pre-K in 2016-17, a 2% increase from the previous year (inflation-adjusted)

Real state spending-per-child enrolled in pre-K decreased

3 states met all 10 new quality standards benchmarks--8 states met fewer than half

Most states don’t know how many dual language learners are enrolled in pre-K or what language they speak

Many states with high numbers of non-English speaking children—including AZ, NM, NV, and NY--do not require pre-K teachers to have *any training* specific to working with DLLs

“As recently as the 1970s, the United States led the world in education. Since then, other countries have passed us by, investing more in both the early years and college education,” Dr. Barnett noted. “Most developed nations now offer universal preschool-- even China has committed to pre-K for every 4-year-old by 2020. Meanwhile, the United States has made little progress. This is no way to compete globally now--or in the future. Our first step back to leadership is quality preschool.”

Expanding access to quality pre-K is a priority for both family advocates and law enforcement because it can improve outcomes for children and communities.

“Quality early education is the most critical social justice issue out there,” said Mark Shriver, CEO of Save the Children Action Network and Senior Vice President of U.S. Programs and Advocacy at Save the Children. “Quality early learning programs are among the most effective ways to break the cycle of poverty and ensure equal opportunity for all children. There is bipartisan support for early education because it not only gives children a strong start in life, it makes good economic sense. Reports from Nobel Prize-winner James Heckman and other economists show high rates of return on public investments in early childhood education due to improved outcomes in education, health, sociability, economic productivity and reduced crime, but only for high-quality programs.”

Speaking on behalf of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, Police Chief Jeff Gibson, of Bedford, Texas, said he knows state investments in pre-K pay off. “If we can invest even just a little bit of money in pre-K programs now, it will mean long-term savings in remedial education, health outcomes, and incarceration,” Chief Gibson noted. “Coming from a state that spends nearly six billion dollars a year on incarceration in state and local facilities alone, that’s one small investment that would go a long way.”

Mississippi has embraced preschool as the leading edge to overall improvement of its schools, maintaining quality while expanding enrollment. “Mississippi’s Early Learning Collaborative program has proven that high-quality early childhood education prepares children for success in kindergarten and has a lasting impact on student learning over time,” said Dr. Carey Wright, state superintendent of education for Mississippi. “Increased access to high-quality early childhood education is one of the key drivers of rising student achievement in Mississippi.”

In New Jersey, the Abbott preschool program, available to all 3- and 4-year-olds in the state’s poorest districts, is celebrating 20 years of boosting achievement. Karla Medina credits Ironbound Early Learning Center in Newark with preparing her four children for kindergarten. “Preschool is important to lay a foundation for a love of school and a love to learn,” Medina said. “Thanks to loving, caring teachers, they learned social behavior, following routines, so by the time they got to kindergarten, they were ready.”

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