

How Will The COVID-19 Pandemic Impact Pre-K? *Lessons from the Great Recession*

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We've all heard the saying that those who don't learn history are doomed to repeat it. Living in the current COVID-19 pandemic, we'd be wise to revisit our history lessons for post-COVID policy guidance. Many states have already made and proposed budget cuts in response to the COVID-19-induced recession's impact on revenue. Since state revenues lag the economy, it's a safe bet state budget problems will worsen before they improve. We can make more specific predictions about impacts on pre-K by looking closely at what happened in the last major recession.

NIEER's analysis of the Great Recession's impacts on state pre-K found the worst impacts occurred up to four years after the recession began. Funding declined about \$1 billion a year compared to the pre-recession trend. Moreover, a decade later, national per child funding levels haven't fully recovered. As a result, program quality and access haven't fully returned to their previous trends, either. Only four states met all ten minimum quality standards benchmarks in 2019. Nationally, state-funded pre-K serve only one-third of four-year-olds and six percent of three-year-olds. In the wake of the Great Recession, states sacrificed access to high-quality preschool. A state-by-state analysis provides more detail to round out this sobering picture (see Table 1).

- Of 39 states (including the District of Columbia) with public preschool programs in 2007-08, 25 spent less per child on state funded preschool in 2018-19 than before the Great Recession, after adjusting for inflation. That's almost two-thirds of state programs still struggling to come back.
- Some states that cut spending were already underfunding preschool. Nebraska and Kansas, which had low per child spending rates in 2007-08, now spend 40-50 percent less per child.
- The worst enrollment cuts occurred four years after the Great Recession began (see Figures 1 and 2). In 2011, 12 states served fewer children in pre-K than the previous year. Arkansas, California, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania made the largest enrollment cuts.

What can we learn from this history lesson?

- Recession impacts on state budgets last far beyond a recession's end. Pre-K cuts to access, quality, and funding could persist for four years.
- More than a decade hasn't been long enough for 25 states to bring their per child spending rates for public preschool programs back to pre-Great Recession levels. This, coupled with meager increases in many other states, leaves the US in an ongoing struggle to provide children access to high-quality preschool. Without high-quality pre-K children start kindergarten with lower skills, as a recent study of academic skills at kindergarten entry shows.
- The best way to prevent these long-term problems is to avoid cuts to pre-K programs. States can do this by choosing to make high-quality preschool a public policy priority. Even modest, one-time COVID emergency federal funding for pre-K could prevent short- and long-term cuts.

Sources: NIEER *State Preschool Yearbooks* for 2012, 2019, and 2020. <http://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks> Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Pitts, C., & Burchinal, M. (2020). Trends in Children's Academic Skills at School Entry: 2010 to 2017. *Educational Researcher*.

Table 1: State Pre-K Per Child Spending Comparison of 2007-08 to 2018-19

State	2007-08 State Per Child Spending	2018-19 State Per Child Spending	Change in Spending
Alabama	\$5,612	\$5,116	-\$495
Arkansas	\$6,257	\$5,612	-\$646
Connecticut	\$9,127	\$8,786	-\$341
Delaware	\$8,636	\$7,277	-\$1,359
Florida	\$3,178	\$2,253	-\$925
Georgia	\$5,401	\$4,539	-\$862
Iowa	\$3,863	\$3,375	-\$489
Kansas	\$3,614	\$2,164	-\$1,450
Louisiana	\$7,480	\$4,701	-\$2,778
Maryland	\$4,792	\$4,184	-\$608
Massachusetts	\$3,626	\$2,716	-\$910
Minnesota	\$7,992	\$6,570	-\$1,423
Missouri	\$3,505	\$3,330	-\$175
Nebraska	\$3,549	\$1,828	-\$1,721
Nevada	\$3,978	\$3,669	-\$308
New Jersey	\$13,968	\$13,172	-\$796
North Carolina	\$6,433	\$5,450	-\$983
Ohio	\$9,228	\$4,000	-\$5,228
Oklahoma	\$5,041	\$4,264	-\$777
Oregon	\$10,596	\$9,820	-\$776
Pennsylvania	\$6,932	\$6,563	-\$369
Tennessee	\$5,676	\$4,841	-\$835
Texas	\$4,551	\$3,579	-\$973
Virginia	\$4,544	\$3,967	-\$576
Wisconsin	\$4,017	\$3,402	-\$615

FIGURE 1. ANNUAL CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS SERVED IN STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL

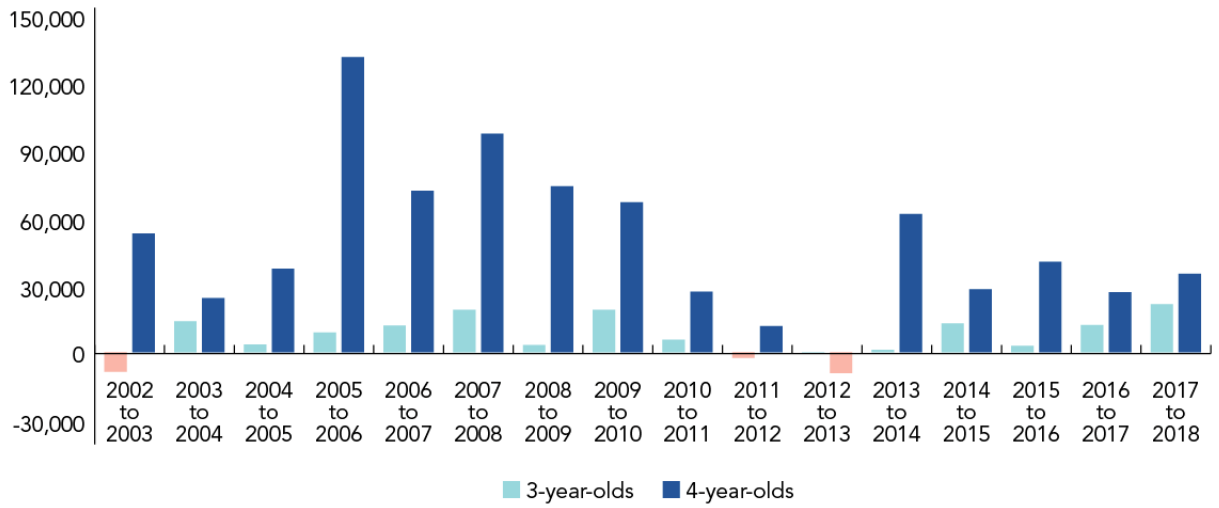


FIGURE 2. ANNUAL CHANGE IN THE TOTAL STATE SPENDING ON PRESCHOOL (IN 2018 DOLLARS, MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)

