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Action Needed to Prevent Long-term Damage to Pre-K Amid COVID-19 Crisis

2019 State of Preschool Report: Pre-K's Bipartisan Support Offers Optimism for Future

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ—A new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) warns of the long-term dangers to pre-K from the current health and economic crisis and points to the potential for bipartisan support to improve pre-K access and quality despite serious challenges.

“Even when the economy has been strong, progress providing pre-K to the nation’s children has been slow and uneven,” said Dr. Steven Barnett, NIEER’s senior co-director and founder. “In hard times, pre-K progress has been rolled back. Yet, a small set of states has demonstrated that when there is political will pre-K can be protected and move ahead rapidly.”

NIEER’s report details the progress and how much is at stake: 44 states and the District of Columbia serve 1.6 million children, which is more than one in three 4-year-olds in the US. Quality standards and spending levels also have advanced, though not as much as enrollment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an economic problem likely to have negative long-term impacts on state budgets. That translates into negative impacts on state-funded pre-K.

“During the last major economic downturn preschool programs suffered because their funding is discretionary and unprotected,” said Barnett. “Preschool spending declined, quality standards slipped, and teacher pay was cut. With another recession likely, extraordinary state and federal action will be needed ensure our youngest learners are not just protected, but better served.”

While the Great Recession’s impact on the overall economy lasted 18 months, its impact on state budgets was much longer. For pre-K education the impact was deep and long-lasting, peaking three years after the recession’s end, and many state programs have yet to fully recover.

The primary goal of state pre-K programs is serving and improving the school readiness of children in poverty, and budget cuts to pre-K will disproportionately harm the children who need pre-K the most.

At the current pace, it will be centuries before the United States reaches preschool attendance levels of other high-income nations. About 40 percent of children in families with annual incomes below \$10,000 do not attend pre-K. For other children in low- and moderate-income families, participation rates are not much better. While some states serve most or all children at age 4, most do not, and there is far more to be done to reach 3-year-olds, who are largely unserved except by a very few states.

The challenge is not limited to increasing enrollment. States must also provide pre-K education at quality levels that produce a meaningful impact on learning and development. Many state pre-K programs fail to reach this level

THE STATE OF PRESCHOOL: 2019 FAST FACTS

Forty-four states, DC, and Guam provide publicly funded preschool to more than 1.6 million children.

Nine states enroll 50 percent or more of their 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-K.

States spent more than \$8.7 billion on pre-K in 2018-19, a 3.5 percent increase from last year (inflation adjusted).

State spending per child enrolled in pre-K was flat since last year.

All reported spending (state + local + federal) for pre-K topped \$10 billion for the first time.

The top four pre-K spenders (CA, TX, NY, NJ) account for more than 50 percent of state pre-K spending; more than 40 percent of children in state pre-K are in these states.

Four states met all 10 quality standards benchmarks; 10 states met fewer than half.

Nearly 40 percent of children are in programs meeting fewer than half; only eight percent are in programs meeting 9 or 10 quality benchmarks.

of quality. Given the demonstrated benefits of high-quality pre-K for children’s long-term school success and the resulting high rates of return, inadequate investment in pre-K is bad for children, families, and taxpayers.

Despite the economic outlook, NIEER’s report is optimistic pre-K can be protected and advance because elected officials from both sides of the aisle and states with very different political leanings have found common ground in offering high quality education to young children.

“States that could not be more different politically, like Michigan and Alabama and Oklahoma and New Jersey, share a commitment to high-quality preschool education,” said Barnett. “While there are more than a few issues dividing the country, our survey finds that quality early childhood education is one where bipartisan agreement is possible.”

The State of Preschool 2019 annual report, based on 2018-19 academic year data, finds eight of ten states with the highest enrollment of 4-year-olds in preschool have Republican governors. States leading in serving 3-year-olds are more likely to be liberal.

Eight of the top ten states for state funding per child are “blue” but of the ten states that invest the most in combined federal, state, and local dollars per preschool student, six are highly conservative.

States with preschool policies meeting all 10 of NIEER’s minimum standards for supporting high-quality preschool education include two states with Republican governors, Alabama and Mississippi, and two states with Democrat governors, Michigan and Rhode Island.

“The ability to work across partisan political divides for young children is critically important because so much remains to be done,” said Barnett.

If bipartisan support is to translate into pre-K progress, extraordinary action of the type relatively few states have taken will be needed from the federal government and state governments. NIEER’s report makes five recommendations for policy actions:

1. Provide funds to help stabilize and expand pre-K programs while they simultaneously work to maintain or enhance enrollment and quality.
2. Improve coordination of Head Start and state pre-K to improve enrollment of children in poverty from birth to 3 without undercutting progress for these children at ages 3 and 4.
3. Support state preschool planning—short- and long-term—in response to the COVID-19 crisis through existing and new federal grants and technical support.
4. Ensure any changes to state regulations in response to the current emergency do not unintentionally create long-term problems for quality and effectiveness.
5. Develop long-term state plans to expand and improve pre-K with realistic timelines and budgets despite the anticipated economic downturn.

The State of Preschool 2019 is the only national report on state-funded preschool programs, tracking enrollment, spending, and policies to support quality since 2002. This year’s report includes a special section on the state administration of state funded preschool programs.

The State of Preschool 2019 yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation. 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.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research. For more information, contact Ernest Landante, Jr. at elandante@nieer.org.

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