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Rhode Island Makes Some Gains Serving Preschool Children, COVID-19 Crisis Looms *Continues to Lead on Quality but Progress Needed to Increase Access*

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in Rhode Island, which enrolls 10 percent of its 4-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

Rhode Island trails the national average in 4-year-old pre-K enrollment. Nationally, pre-K enrollment surpassed 1.6 million in the 2018-2019 academic year.

Rhode Island is one of four states to meet all 10 quality standards benchmarks but the program only reaches a small fraction of children.

NIEER's *The State of Preschool 2019* annual report finds states investing more than \$8.7 billion in pre-K. But progress has been uneven, exacerbating inequality in early education opportunity and widening gaps between the best and worst states for educating young children. The expected recession will make progress more difficult.

"Even when the economy has been strong, progress providing state pre-K has been slow and uneven," said Dr. Steven Barnett, NIEER's senior co-director and founder. "With another recession likely, extraordinary state and federal action will be needed to ensure our youngest learners are not just protected, but better served."

Rhode Island met ten of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$6,675 in state funds per student. Ten states met fewer than half the minimum standards for quality. State spending per child varies by a factor of 10, from more than \$10,000 to less than \$1,000.

"Rhode Island has committed to increasing state funding to sustain progress achieved through its federal Preschool Development Grant," said Barnett. "The state now needs to commit to increasing access towards its goal of universal pre-K by 2023."

Despite the economic outlook, pre-K can be protected and advance because politicians 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 issues dividing the country, our survey finds quality early childhood education is one where bipartisan agreement is possible."

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.

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RHODE ISLAND: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 1,080 children, the same as in 2017-18.

Total state funding was \$7,209,482, an increase of \$746,322 from 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$6,675, compared to \$5,984 in 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

Rhode Island's national rankings:

- 35th in access for 4-year-olds
- 12th in state spending per child