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**Alabama Defies National Trend Toward Declining Support for State Pre-K Says National Report**

***Among Top 4 States in Program Quality But Access is Limited***

*Washington, D.C. —* Across the nation, state funding for pre-K decreased by more than half a billion dollars in 2011-2012, the largest one-year drop ever, says a new study from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), which has tracked state pre-K since 2002.

The *State of Preschool 2012* yearbook cited two other “firsts”: After a decade of growth, enrollment in state pre-K has stalled. And despite stagnant enrollment, state funding per child fell to $3,841 — well below the $5,020 (inflation-adjusted) national average in 2001-2002.

Alabama is a notable exception. It is one of only four states to meet all of NIEER’s 10 benchmarks for quality standards in recent years, a big improvement over 2002 when the state met eight of 10. Yet only six percent of the state’s 4-year-olds attend the program, ranking Alabama 33rd in the nation for access.

The program has done a good job of maintaining funding in difficult times, having improved its ranking on state resources available to 12th in the nation from 16th in 2011. (It also ranked 16th in 2002.) Alabama was one of 12 states to increase funding ($197 per child) when adjusted for inflation. NIEER Director Steve Barnett praised Governor Bentley, with support from the Business Council of Alabama and the Alabama School Readiness Alliance, for calling for $12.5 million in additional funding for the FY 2014 budget for expanding access to the program. The Alabama House of Representatives has approved the increased investments in First Class Pre-K, and the education budget is now in the Senate.

“Even though the nation is emerging from the Great Recession, it is clear that the nation’s youngest learners are still bearing the brunt of the budget cuts,” Barnett said. Reductions were widespread with 27 of 40 states with pre-K programs reporting funding per child declined in 2011-2012.

The adverse consequences of declining funding were manifested in a retrenchment in program quality as well. Seven programs lost ground against benchmarks for quality standards while only three gained. Only 15 states plus the District of Columbia provided enough funding per-child to meet all 10 benchmarks for quality standards. And, only 20 percent of all children enrolled in state-funded pre-K attend those programs. More than half a million children, or 42 percent of nationwide enrollment, were served by programs that met fewer than half of NIEER’s quality standards benchmarks.

Education in the years before kindergarten plays an important role in preparing our youngest citizens for productive lives in the global economy. Yet, our nation’s public investment in their future through pre-K declined during the recent economic downturn at the very time that parents’ financial capacity to invest in their children was hardest hit. America will pay the price of that lapse for decades to come.

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*The National Institute for Early Education Research (*[*www.nieer.org*](http://nieer.org/)*) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.*