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**73 Easton Avenue • New Brunswick, NJ 08901 • Phone 848.932.4350 • Fax 732.932.4360 • www.nieer.org**

*EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE: CONTACT: Jen Fitzgerald*

*April 29, 2013 (848) 932-3138,* [*jfitzgerald@nieer.org*](mailto:jfitzgerald@nieer.org)

**New Jersey Leads the Way in State Pre-K While Support in Other States Declines Says National Report**

***State Ranks 1st in Funding and Quality is High***

*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.

New Jersey is an exception. The state continues to lead the nation in state resources dedicated to pre-K despite a $383 decrease in per-child spending in the 2011-2012 school year. The state continues to be in the top half of states for enrollment and ranks 16th in the nation for enrollment of 4-year-olds. However, enrollment for this age group has slipped from 9th in the nation in 2002 to its current level. The state now ranks 2nd for enrollment of 3-year-olds. Provision of two years of pre-K for disadvantaged children has been shown to double the program’s impacts on school achievement and preventing grade retention.

Quality remains strong as programs meet at least eight of NIEER’s 10 benchmarks for quality standards. New Jersey has maintained its system of monitoring for continuous quality improvement at a time when several states have curtailed their monitoring efforts. The state’s public-private partnership model provides high standards, competition and school choice while serving about two-thirds of children in private programs. NIEER director Steve Barnett commended Governor Christie and the legislature for budget proposals to increase funding for state pre-K.

“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. Barnett also noted that “while the recession greatly exacerbated the decline in funding, there was already a general trend in the states toward declining funding for quality.” In this respect, President Obama’s new universal pre-K proposal is especially timely. “We have studied the President’s plan and find it provides states with strong incentives to raise quality while expanding access to pre-K. The plan will assist states already leading the way, states that lost ground during the recession, and the 10 states that still have no state-funded pre-K,” he said.

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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.*