



Press Release

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

For Immediate Release: May 12, 2016

Contact: Michelle Ramjug, mramjug@nieer.org, 848-932-4350.

ACCESS TO STATE-FUNDED PRE-K IN TENNESSEE LAGS

New Legislation Seeks to Raise Quality

[New York, NY]—Many 3- and 4-year olds still lack access to high-quality preschool education despite modest gains in enrollment, quality, and funding, according to an [annual report](#) by the nonpartisan National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. While several states, including New York, made significant progress through a concerted effort to increase enrollment and funding and improve quality, progress is slow and uneven nationally and quality standards are particularly low in some of the nation's largest states, California, Florida and Texas. Despite the relatively good news this year the rate of progress is so slow that it will take 150 years for the nation to reach 75 percent enrollment in state pre-K even at age 4.

In Tennessee, reported enrollment was 16,274, down by 2,335 children in 2014-2015 to just 19 percent of 4-year-olds. Tennessee maintained its quality standards rating – meeting 9 of NIEER's minimum quality standards benchmarks. Tennessee also reported spending \$2.1 million less in 2014-2015, which was a reduction of 2 percent from the previous year, inflation-adjusted. A notable change is the passage of SB 1899 (2016) which will increase requirements for Voluntary Pre-K in order to raise quality and better coordinate with instruction beyond the pre-K level.

“Tennessee’s economic future depends on early investment in our kids,” said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. “Ensuring that every child has access to high-quality preschool can help to pave the way for their success in school, on the job, and in Tennessee communities. Our children, their families, and our state depend on it.”

“Tennessee’s recognition of the importance of pre-K quality in improving outcomes for children is validated by the legislation passed in 2016,” said Linda O’Neal, executive director of the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. “As quality improves, pre-K needs to be expanded so more Tennessee children have the opportunity to develop cognitive, social and emotional skills essential for success in school and in life.”

The State of Preschool Report for the 2014-2015 school year, which includes objective state-by-state profiles and rankings, indicates that urgent action is needed from lawmakers at all levels of government to ensure that every child – particularly those from low-income families – has access to high-quality early education. For the first year, NIEER also analyzed states’ early education workforce and Dual Language Learner (DLL) policies, which reveal that Tennessee is one of 4 states that require that the K-3 teachers’ salary schedule is used for pre-K teachers in both public school and nonpublic school settings and have

other workforce supports; and the state only regulates DLL services for K-12 students, but home language is used as an eligibility criteria for state pre-K.

The report finds nationally total state spending on pre-K programs increased by 10 percent, or \$553 million, since the previous year, bringing state spending in 2014-2015 to over \$6.2 billion. The number of children served by state-funded pre-K increased by 37,167 in 2014-2015, bringing the total to almost 1.4 million children – the largest number of children ever served by state-funded pre-K. With an average rate of \$4,489, states also made one of the most significant increases in spending per child in recent history.

Despite these gains, the report’s findings underscore that those states like California, Florida, and Texas with the largest populations of young children are falling behind—they were among the states that met the fewest quality standards benchmarks, and Texas and Florida also reduced enrollment and spending in 2014-2015. Nationally, enrollment has risen by just one percentage point for both 4- and 3-year olds over five years. The sluggish pace of change disproportionately impacts low-income families.

“We’re encouraged to see several states increasing in enrollment and improving quality, but access to high-quality pre-K in the United States remains low and highly unequal,” said Barnett. “Expanding access to quality pre-K programs is one of the best investments we can make, and it’s critical that we raise and standardize salaries for early education teachers and have strong Dual Language Learner policies in states with large Hispanic populations. State governments should increase and stabilize funding for pre-K and raise standards for the benefit of all children.”

The State of Preschool Report reviews state-funded pre-K programs on 10 benchmarks of quality standards, including the presence of a qualified instructor, class size, teacher-to-student ratio, presence of an assistant, and length of instruction per day.

For more information on *The State of Preschool 2015* yearbook and detailed state-by-state breakdowns on quality benchmarks, enrollment, and funding, please click [here](#).

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