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## As Colorado's Universal Preschool Program Rolls Out, Quality Standards Expected to Drop

*National Report Says it's a "time to choose," as states have bounced back unevenly from the pandemic when it comes to preschool enrollment and quality*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.** – A new national report ranks Colorado 27<sup>th</sup> in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 16<sup>th</sup> for three-year-olds – rankings likely to improve for 2023-24 and beyond as Colorado has joined the 16 states and the District of Columbia that have committed to universal preschool. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) today released its annual *State of Preschool* report, which tracks preschool enrollment, funding, and quality across states for the 2022-2023 school year.

With the passage of Proposition EE in 2020 and related laws, Colorado established the Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and began rolling out its new statewide universal preschool program in July of 2023. The new program replaces the Colorado Preschool Program, which served 24% of four-year-olds and 8% of three-year-olds in 2022-2023, for a total combined enrollment of 21,340 (an increase of 873 from the prior year). The now-defunct Colorado Preschool Program met 4 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER. Quality standards for the new program raise maximum class size limits and lower teacher qualifications requirements, with the new universal program expected to meet only 2 of 10 benchmarks.

"We applaud Colorado leaders for committing to universal access to preschool for four-year-olds in a mixed-delivery system that includes private providers," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "Yet it is equally important that the state sets, funds, and supports high quality standards, adequate teacher qualifications and pay, and a full school day. New program standards raise serious questions about the program's ability to deliver long-term results. Low standards can jeopardize child development. Other states show that it is possible to provide UPK with high standards, support lead preschool teachers to obtain early childhood degrees regardless of whether they are in a public school or a private provider, and pay all pre-K teachers on par with K-12 educators."

Nationally, the report finds that this is a critical moment for preschool. The nation has emerged, albeit unevenly, from the COVID-19 Pandemic. States are poised to make new progress toward serving more three- and four-year-olds in high-quality, full-day preschool programs. How each state chooses to move forward – and whether the federal government helps – will determine how much real progress is made. Most states have not committed to serving all children and even those states that have often fall short. Most states need to increase funding per child substantially to enable providers to meet minimal standards for a high-quality, effective program.

During the 2022-2023 school year, states enrolled over 1.63 million children in preschool, marking a 7% surge compared to the preceding year. Preschool enrollment reached 35% of 4-year-olds and 7% of 3-year-olds, with state expenditures reaching \$11.73 billion—an 11% increase from 2021-2022 when adjusted for inflation. Notably, state spending per child surpassed \$7,000 for the first time. However, despite this notable progress, most states still fell short of their pre-pandemic preschool enrollment. While several states made strides towards achieving universal preschool access, six states persisted in not allocating any funding for preschool programs.

"With the pandemic in the rear view, it is time for states to choose whether they are going to support high-quality preschool and how," said **Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report's lead author**. "Will states commit to serving three-year-olds in addition to four-year-olds? Will states make the investments needed to ensure that programs are effective? Will states provide a full school-day option for all families who want it? How will states recruit, support, and retain preschool teachers? These decisions will impact millions of children for years to come."

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*The National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research and the translation of research to policy and practice.*