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Maine Leaders Have Choices to Make About How to Expand Preschool While Maintaining Quality Standards

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 released today ranks Maine 11th in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 28th in state spending per child. The state does not yet serve three-year-olds. Like the 16 other states and the District of Columbia committed to universal preschool, Maine leaders have critical choices to make about how to make that goal a reality.

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. The 2023 State of Preschool Yearbook found that, in the 2022-2023 school year:

- Maine preschool enrolled 47% of four-year-olds in state-funded preschool for a total enrollment of 6,237 children, an increase of 646 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$30,121,111, with an additional \$1,894,744 in federal recovery funds to support the program, up \$7,820,830 (32%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$5,133 (including federal recovery funds) in 2022-2023, up \$806 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Maine met 9 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

State lawmakers approved legislation in 2023 that created the Commission to Study the Expansion of Public Preschool and Early Care and Education Commission. Earlier this year, the Commission released its recommendations to the Maine State Legislature, which included providing incentives and increased funding for both start-up and ongoing preschool costs, and improving local pre-k partnerships with private child care providers through local and statewide coordinators. Currently, Maine is offering two grant opportunities to support public preschool expansion, a [Pre-K Partnership Pilot Grant](#) and a [Public Pre-K Expansion Grant](#) using American Rescue Plan funding.

"We applaud Maine leaders for their commitment to universal preschool," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director**. "As state administrators look at increasing private-public preschool partnerships, they can look to New Jersey, New Mexico, and West Virginia as examples of state preschool programs with strong mixed delivery systems. In particular, New Jersey has helped preschool teachers gain the level of education needed to ensure quality in the classroom and earn pay on par with K-12 educators. This can be done for preschool teachers in both public schools and in the broader private child care ecosystem, but it takes careful planning, support and resources."

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 all four-year-olds? Will states serve both three- and four-year-olds? Will states make the investments needed to ensure that programs are effective? Will states support a mixed-delivery model for preschool incorporating both existing child care programs and public schools? 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 2023 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. For more information and detailed state-by-state profiles on quality, access, and funding, please visit www.nieer.org.

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.