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**Contact:**

Ashley Davison, NIEER, [adaviosn@nieer.org](mailto:adaviosn@nieer.org), (848) 932-3142 (o), (609) 969-1587 (m)

Adam Muhendorf, Longleaf Strategies, [adam@longleafstrategies.com](mailto:adam@longleafstrategies.com), (334) 625-0175 (o), (202) 641-6216 (m)

## Oklahoma Ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> Nationally For Preschool Access But Enrollment Still Lower than Before Pandemic

*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 Oklahoma 3rd in the nation for preschool enrollment for 4-year-olds and 21<sup>st</sup> for 3-year-olds.

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:

- Oklahoma served 67% of the state's 4-year-olds and 6% of 3-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 38,982 (a decrease of 258 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$187,024,576, down \$10,092,999 (5%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$4,798 in 2022-2023, down \$226 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Oklahoma met 9 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Oklahoma is conducting a curriculum review that will culminate with a 3-tiered rating for early learning curricula that will help schools and districts make decisions about curricula.

"Oklahoma is a pioneer in providing universal preschool for 4-year-olds and can serve as a model for other states, including its neighbors, for how to implement quality early education," **said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder.** "But the state must work to increase enrollment back to where it was before the pandemic, or higher, so that all children receive a high quality early education experience."

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 3- and 4-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 do 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. 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 make critical choices when it comes to quality preschool," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report's lead author.** "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? Will states support an equitable mixed-delivery model for preschool incorporating both existing child care programs and public schools? Will states serve 3-year-olds in addition to 4-year-olds? 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](http://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.*