



April 18, 2024

**Contact:**

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

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

## South Carolina Preschool Enrollment Still Below Pre-Pandemic Levels as State Moves to Increase Funding

*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 South Carolina 14<sup>th</sup> in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 33<sup>rd</sup> for three-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:

- South Carolina served 44% of four-year-olds and less than 1% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 26,294 (an increase of 1,018 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$101,741,923 and an additional \$809,763 in federal COVID-19 relief funds supported the program, down \$1,127,393 (1%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$3,900 in 2022-2023, down \$202 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- South Carolina met 7 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Recently, South Carolina leaders increased the minimum per child rate for the Child Early Reading Development and Education Program (CERDEP) beginning in the 2023-2024 school year. In 2022-2023, the state ranked near the bottom at 37 of 45 for preschool spending.

"Our report on the 2022-2023 school year found that South Carolina leaders had work to do to improve preschool enrollment, funding, and quality. We applaud the efforts by the state to increase the child reimbursement rates for CERDEP," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "We encourage South Carolina to keep moving forward to adequately fund preschool, improve quality, and expand enrollment, which is still below pre-pandemic levels."

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 an equitable 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](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.*