



April 18, 2024

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## Utah Ranks Last for Enrollment of 4-Year-Olds in Preschool, Near Bottom for Preschool Spending

*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 Utah last for preschool enrollment for 4-year-olds among the 45 states that have state-funded preschool. Utah ranks 28<sup>th</sup> for enrollment 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:

- Utah served 3% of 4-year-olds and 1% of 3-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 1,987 (a decrease of 826 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$6,154,997, down \$467,663 (7%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$3,098 in 2022-2023, down \$743 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Utah met 5 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Preschool enrollment fell in 2022-2023 because of rising costs of providing preschool without any preschool funding increases.

"Our report on the 2022-2023 school year found that Utah leaders have work to do to improve preschool enrollment, funding, and quality. Too many children in Utah are missing out on the opportunity to attend quality early learning programs," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "We urge Utah leaders to make the decision to expand access to full-day, adequately funded early learning opportunities that will help children develop and parents earn a living. This will require an increased investment in preschool, one that can have a large return-on-investment in the long run if the quality of the program is strong."

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. 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 4-year-olds? Will states serve both 3- and 4-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.*