



April 18, 2024

**Contact:**

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

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

## Washington State Offers Little Access to Quality Preschool as Other States Move Ahead

*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 Washington 33<sup>rd</sup> in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 17<sup>th</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, Washington's two state-funded preschool programs served a combined 16 percent of four-year-olds and eight percent of three-year-olds.

Washington's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) enrolled 15,808 children in the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), an increase of 801 children from the prior year.

- State spending for ECEAP totaled \$177,228,389 with an additional \$4,605,000 in federal recovery funding to support the program, up \$8,614,391 (5%) adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child enrolled in ECEAP equaled \$11,503 (including recovery dollars) in 2022-2023, down \$40 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Washington ECEAP met 9 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) also served 5,244 children in a Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program during the 2022-2023 school year, up 2,117 children from the prior year.

- State spending for TK was \$69,532,084, an increase of \$28,345,101 (69%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child on TK was \$13,259, up \$88 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- TK met 6 out of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

In 2023, Washington State lawmakers passed a two-year budget that invests \$80 million to expand and strengthen high-quality pre-K. Although substantial, this new investment is modest compared to the need.

"Washington's preschool program is far short of what the state's leaders in Congress have proposed for the nation. As hope for federal action has faded, a new wave of western states—California, Hawaii, Colorado, and New Mexico—have developed universal preschool initiatives," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director**. "Will leaders in Washington State also step forward with a similar plan to guarantee access to quality preschool for every child in Washington?"

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? How will states recruit, support, and retain preschool teachers? These decisions will impact millions of children for years to come."

###

*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.*