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## Washington's Preschool Access Ranking Stalls As Federal Funding Uncertainty Puts Pressure on State Leaders

*Per-child funding for ECEAP increases, helping that program meet high quality standards*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.** - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Washington still ranks 33<sup>rd</sup> in preschool access for four-year-olds, and 17<sup>th</sup> for three-year-olds, unchanged from the prior year. In 2023-2024, Washington served 17% of its four-year-olds and 8% of three-year-olds across two state-funded pre-k programs. Other western states including California, Colorado, and New Mexico surged far ahead of Washington.

The [National Institute for Early Education Research's 2024 State of Preschool Yearbook](#) presents a critical snapshot of preschool education in America. The 2023-2024 school year set national records for state-funded preschool enrollment and spending. However, the increases in funding and enrollment are skewed by a small number of states making progress— and quality remains highly uneven from state to state.

Currently, 44 states and DC fund preschool programs. Most state pre-K programs continue to primarily or only serve four-year-olds. Nationally, enrollment reached 37% of four-year-olds but only 8% of three-year-olds.

In Washington, the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- Washington's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) enrolled 16,293 children in the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), an increase of 485 children from the prior year.
  - State spending for ECEAP totaled \$207,900,614, up \$26,968,975 (15%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
  - State spending per child on ECEAP averaged \$12,760 in 2023-2024, up \$1,315 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
  - Washington ECEAP met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.
- Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) also served 5,520 children in a Transition to Kindergarten (TK) program during the 2023-2024 school year, an increase of 276 children from the prior year.
  - State spending for TK was \$29,632,532 and an additional \$41,848,000 in federal recovery funds supported the program, an increase of \$2,293,273 (3%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
  - State spending per child on TK was \$12,949 (including recovery funds), down \$244 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
  - TK met 6 out of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

"When states put money into quality preschool programs, they are investing in children's futures and can expect to see strong returns on their investments," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder**.

"Washington leaders should be applauded for raising the per-pupil funding amount for ECEAP to help that program meet 9 of the 10 quality benchmarks that we recommend. And while Washington did add some additional children to its state preschool programs, several other states such as California, Colorado, and New Mexico saw much larger increases in enrollment from 2022-2023 to 2023-2024. Given the continued low enrollment rates in Washington, it seems unlikely that Washington will catch up with leaders without substantial increases in both programs (ECEAP and TK) working together to maximize enrollment in quality preschool."

States spent more than \$13.6 billion on preschool in 2023-2024, including \$257 million in federal COVID-19 relief dollars. This represents an increase of nearly \$2 billion (17%) over the previous year. However, just four states—California, New Jersey, New York, and Texas—accounted for half (51%) of total national preschool spending.

Preschool investments increased in all but five states with existing programs. Six states—California, Colorado, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Texas—each boosted preschool spending by more than \$100 million.

Enrollment grew to 1,751,109 children nationwide, an increase of more than 111,000 from the previous year. Ten states saw enrollment growth exceeding 20%: Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Ohio. California and Colorado alone added more than 30,000 children each, together accounting for over 60% of the national enrollment increase.

Alabama, Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi, and Rhode Island remain the only states nationwide to meet all 10 of NIEER's recommended benchmarks for preschool quality. NIEER's benchmarks measure essential preschool quality indicators, including teacher qualifications, class sizes, early learning standards, and program assessments.

A key question across the country is how the Trump Administration's proposed cuts to the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and other federal agencies will affect Head Start and other programs for children. If Head Start funding for children in low-income families is eliminated, access to public preschool will decline in several states by more than 10 percentage points, and in some, by 20 percentage points.

"Nearly 8,000 three- and four-year-olds in Washington could lose access to Head Start if federal funding for the program is eliminated," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., lead author of the report.** "Increased uncertainty about federal funding underscores the urgency for states to prioritize and expand early childhood investments."

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*The 2024 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the 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.*