



For Immediate Release:

April 29, 2025

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Alabama Highlighted in National Report for Quality Pre-K as State Prioritizes Serving More Children

Alabama is catching up, but still trails Florida and Georgia in percentage of four-year-olds served. Meanwhile, federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close gaps.

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today highlights Alabama as one of only five states in the country to meet 10 of 10 research-based quality benchmarks for preschool programs—an achievement that underscores the state's commitment to effective early childhood education. Alabama continues to make steady progress in expanding access, serving 41% of four-year-olds in state-funded pre-k during the 2023-2024 school year. While there's room for growth in enrollment, especially when compared to states like Florida and Georgia, Alabama's nationally recognized quality sets a strong foundation for continued expansion and long-term success.

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. 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 Alabama, the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- Alabama enrolled 24,640 four-year-olds, an increase of 1,252 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$181,550,866, up \$8,667,284 (5%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$7,368 in 2023-2024, down \$24 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Alabama met 10 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

"Alabama is a national leader in expanding access to preschool while maintaining top quality standards and an exemplar for other states. However, the majority of Alabama's four-year-olds still do not have the opportunity to attend Alabama's First Class Pre-K program, and the program does not serve any three-year-olds," **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder.** "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."

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, Delaware, Colorado, 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.

"Developments at the federal level should be closely monitored as preschool programs often rely on federal funding including child care block grants, the child care food program, and Head Start," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., lead author of the report.** "Nationally, half a million children ages 3- and 4 are served by Head Start. While this is far less than state preschool programs serve nationally, in some states most of the public preschool provision is still by Head Start. Some state preschool programs built their programs relying on Head Start funding, teachers, and classrooms together with other private providers operating as part of state systems under state standards.

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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.

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.