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Neighboring States Like Colorado and New Mexico are Far Outpacing Arizona in Pre-K Access

Federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close preschool gaps

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Arizona fell from 43rd to 44th in preschool access for four-year-olds, ranking almost last and from 24th to 27th in preschool access for three-year-olds. In 2023-2024, Arizona served just 4% of its four-year-olds and 3% of three-year-olds in state-funded pre-K. By contrast, Colorado and New Mexico reached new highs of 70% and 51% of their states' four-year-olds, and 15% and 21% of three-year-olds, respectively. However, Arizona did improve from 26th to 15th in state funding per child as the state increased funding to cover the cost of quality

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 Arizona the report found that in the 2023-2024 school year:

- Arizona preschool (Quality First Scholarships) enrolled 6,323 children, an increase of 369 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$26,892,795 and an additional \$23,511,685 in federal recovery funds supported the program, up \$18,334,868 (57%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) equaled \$7,972 in 2023-2024, up \$2,585 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Arizona met 3 of the 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

Federal COVID-19 relief funds were used to support Quality First (QF) Scholarships by increasing reimbursement rates to the cost of quality, increasing the eligibility threshold to 300% of the federal poverty level, as well as increasing the number of scholarships available. First Things First Board approved the maintenance of the increased reimbursement rate for Quality First Scholarships. While the rate increase is positive, it does negatively impact enrollment in the 2024-2025 program year.

"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.** "How are Arizona lawmakers going to sustain and grow the Quality First Scholarships program as federal recovery funds expire?"

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 12,000 three- and four-year-olds in Arizona 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."

NIEER's Yearbook includes a special pullout section highlighting Alabama, Michigan, New Mexico, and Oklahoma as strong examples that states can replicate— despite having taken different paths to success.

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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.