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California Leads Nation in Pre-K Growth in 2024

California's public preschool programs, including TK, added more than 35,000 students last year. Meanwhile, federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to invest.

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that California leapt from 16th to 13th in preschool access for four-year-olds, yet dropped from 15th to 16th in three-year-old access. The state enrolled 10% of 3-year-olds in the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and 48% of 4-year-olds across Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and CSPP as it works to implement universal preschool access for 4-year-olds through TK by Fall 2025.

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, like California— 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 California, the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- California's two preschool programs together enrolled 252,826 children, an increase of 35,847 from the prior year. This represents the highest year-over-year enrollment increase of any state in the nation.
- State spending for the two programs totaled \$3,787,165,368, with an additional \$53,665,000 in federal recovery funds to support preschool, up \$656,366,415 (21%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) averaged \$15,192 in 2023-2024, up \$515 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- The CSPP met 6 of 10 research-based quality benchmarks recommended by NIEER, and TK met 3 of 10.

"California leaders should be applauded for prioritizing preschool access. The state is getting closer each year to achieving its goal of universal preschool for 4-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. With federal support declining, California must continue to support growth in ECE while funding their programs adequately and setting high standards for quality."

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.

"While California continues to increase state investments in preschool, nearly 50,000 three- and four-year-olds in California could lose access to Head Start if federal funding for that program is eliminated," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., lead author of the report.** "Increased uncertainty about federal funding underscores the urgency for California leaders to continue 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.

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.