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Colorado Soars to 3rd in the Nation in Providing Pre-K to Four-Year-Olds

States like Colorado and New Mexico help boost preschool enrollment and funding to national records as federal uncertainty puts pressure on states to close pre-K gaps

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Colorado skyrocketed from 27th to 3rd in preschool access for four-year-olds and from 16th to 12th in preschool access for three-year-olds. In 2023-2024, the new Colorado Universal Preschool Program served 70% of the state's four-year-olds and 15% of three-year-olds.

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

- Colorado preschool enrolled 52,617 children, an increase of 31,277 from the prior year, more than doubling enrollment.
- State spending totaled \$301,057,683, up \$224,638,777 (294%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$5,722 in 2023-2024, up \$2,141 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Colorado met 2 of 10 quality standards benchmarks but should meet additional benchmarks once their new program's standards are fully in place.

The passage of Proposition EE in November 2020 and related laws (e.g., HB22-1295) in 2022 established the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and the Colorado Universal Preschool program. The new statewide universal preschool program launched July 1, 2023, at which time the Colorado Preschool Program sunsetted. The new program, which is covered in NIEER's report for the first time this year, is administered by the CDEC using a mixed delivery model, and in collaboration with Local Coordinating Organizations rather than local school districts. It is funded primarily by a nicotine and tobacco tax.

"Colorado has joined a new class of leading states expanding access to universal preschool," 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. However, states like Colorado must improve quality standards and per-pupil funding to ensure that pre-k programs support children's development enough to result in the lasting academic and other gains that ultimately deliver savings for taxpayers. Postponing needed improvements in quality delays access to effective programs, undercutting the program's goals."

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. Ominously, several states that have been leaders in universal preschool continued a long-term decline in enrollment, including Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin.

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 7,000 three- and four-year-olds in Colorado 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.

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.