



For Immediate Release:

April 29, 2025

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Georgia is Taking Steps to Invest in Preschool Quality as Federal Uncertainty Looms

New report finds states set national records for preschool enrollment, funding

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Georgia, once a national leader in pre-K, fell from 9th to 10th in access to preschool for four-year-olds. In 2023-2024, Georgia served 55% of its four-year-olds, down from a pre-pandemic high of 60% of four-year-olds. Georgia does not offer state-funded preschool for three-year-olds. However, Georgia rose from 25th to 23rd in state spending per child reflecting an increased commitment to 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 Georgia, the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- Georgia Pre-K enrolled 71,526 children, a decrease of 1,936 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$457,779,908, up \$45,050,454 (11%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$6,400 in 2023-2024, up \$782 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Georgia met 8 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**. "While we are concerned that preschool enrollment has stalled short of universal in Georgia, we applaud state leaders for making a major investment in pre-K quality in the 2024 Georgia Legislative Session. This \$97 million investment, which takes effect in the current school year, reduces class sizes and teacher child ratios to recommended levels and increases salaries for lead and assistant pre-K teachers so that they are on par with K-12 educators. In next year's report, we should see Georgia's Pre-K Program become the largest program in the country to meet all 10 of the 10 quality benchmarks that are known to maximize student outcomes. We encourage Georgia leaders to continue to add pre-K classrooms as quality improvements are phased in, and to commit to a long-term plan to reach all three- and four-year-olds in pre-K."

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, some 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 are currently only states nationwide to meet all 10 of NIEER's recommended benchmarks for preschool quality, although Georgia is poised to join this list for the 2024-2025 school year. 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 16,000 three- and four-year-olds in Georgia 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.