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## Hawaii is a Leader for Preschool Quality But Last in Access Among Pacific States

*Meanwhile, federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close gaps*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.** - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Hawaii is one of only five states in the country to meet 10 of 10 research-based quality benchmarks for preschool quality. However, Hawaii ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> of 45 in preschool access for four-year-olds, and 28<sup>th</sup> for three-year-olds. Hawaii serves just 5% of its four-year-olds and 2% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool programs, dead last among Pacific states for both age ranges, despite plans for universal preschool in the state.

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

- State-funded preschool enrolled 1,026 children, an increase of 322 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$7,590,165, up \$111,201 (1%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$7,398 in 2023-2024, down \$3,226 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Both of Hawaii's state-funded preschool programs met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

"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. While Hawaii ranks at the top in preschool quality, per-child spending dipped significantly in 2023-2024, threatening the ability of Hawaii's programs to meet quality benchmarks in the future," **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder.** "Plus, Hawaii served the lowest percentages of three- and four-year-olds among all Pacific states. Hawaii has intentions of universal preschool and could look to California's TK expansion for inspiration on how to move forward."

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 2,000 three- and four-year-olds in Hawaii could lose access to Head Start if federal funding for the program is eliminated. That's nearly twice as many children as the state enrolls in preschool" **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., lead author of the report.** "Increased uncertainty about federal funding underscores the urgency for Hawaii leaders to prioritize and expand early childhood investments now."

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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](http://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.*