



For Immediate Release:

April 29, 2025

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Other States Outpace Illinois as New National Records for Preschool Enrollment are Set

Illinois still a leader in serving three-year-olds, and expansion is projected in 2024-2025

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Illinois fell from 19th to 20th in preschool access for four-year-olds and remained steady at 3rd in the nation in access for three-year-olds in 2023-2024. Illinois enrolled 35% of its four-year-olds and 24% of three-year-olds in state-funded pre-K in 2023-2024.

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

- Illinois preschool enrolled 82,474 children, an increase of 1,293 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$508,924,188, up \$72,353,983 (17%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$6,171 in 2023-2024, up \$793 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Illinois met 8 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," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder**. "While Illinois fell back slightly in one national pre-K ranking in 2023-2024, the state is poised to bounce back next year. In 2024, Governor Pritzker and the Illinois State Board of Education announced the addition of 5,886 new preschool seats for the current school year. That expansion, a step toward the state's commitment to universal pre-K, should be reflected in our report next year."

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 16,000 three- and four-year-olds in Illinois 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.