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Contact:

Ashley Davison, NIEER, adaviosn@nieer.org, (848) 932-3142 (o), (609) 969-1587 (m)

Allison Muhlenhof, Longleaf Strategies, allison@longleafstrategies.com, (334) 450-1027 (m)

Maryland Increases Pre-K Investments as States Hit New National Records for Preschool Enrollment

DC far outpaces its northern neighbor in providing universal preschool to three- and four-year-olds, as federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close preschool gaps

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Maryland improved in state spending per child, rising from 18th to 9th but fell from 17th to 18th in preschool access for four-year-olds and from 19th to 20th in access for three-year-olds in 2023-2024. By contrast, the District of Columbia ranked 1st in the nation for providing universal preschool to its three- and four-year-olds, with an astonishing 82% of three-year-olds and 95% of four-year-olds enrolled. Maryland served 38% of its four-year-olds and 7% of three-year-olds in 2023-2024 as part of a strategic expansion included in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

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

- The Maryland Prekindergarten Program enrolled 32,972 children, an increase of 1,065 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$358,063,870 and an additional \$3,854,423 in federal recovery funds supported the program, up \$138,649,029 (62%), adjusted for inflation, since the prior year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) equaled \$10,977 in 2023-2024, up \$3,979 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Maryland 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 Maryland significantly increased pre-K investments in 2023-2024, it fell back slightly in national rankings as states hit national records in both enrollment and spending. We applaud Maryland leaders for committing to strong quality standards and per-pupil investments for pre-K and encourage continued progress toward universal access."

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.

"More than 5,000 three- and four-year-olds in Maryland 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."

NIEER's Yearbook includes a special pullout section highlighting Alabama, Michigan, New Mexico, and Oklahoma as strong examples that states can replicate— despite having taken different paths to success.

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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.