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Contact:

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

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

Mississippi Highlighted for Expanding Quality Pre-K in New National Report, But More Children Need Access

Mississippi still lags behind Alabama, Arkansas, and Louisiana in percentage of four-year-olds served. Meanwhile, federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close gaps.

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds Mississippi is one of only five states in the country to meet 10 of 10 research-based quality benchmarks for preschool quality. Mississippi ranks 31st in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds, up from 35th in last year's report. While Mississippi served 20% of its four-year-olds in state-funded pre-k in 2023-2024, Alabama served 41%, Arkansas served 32%, and Louisiana served 34%. Mississippi's pre-K program does not serve 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. 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 Mississippi the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- Mississippi's state-funded pre-K programs enrolled 7,145 children, an increase of 1,816 from the prior year as the state began the State Invested Pre-Kindergarten Program.
- State spending totaled \$30,542,900, and an additional \$1,251,287 in federal recovery funds supported the program, up \$14,395,473 (83%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) equaled \$4,450 in 2023-2024, up \$1,185 from 2022-2023 adjusted for inflation.
- Both of Mississippi's pre-K programs met 10 of 10 research-based quality benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

"Mississippi is emerging as a national leader in expanding access to preschool while maintaining top quality standards. However, the majority of Mississippi's four-year-olds still do not have the opportunity to attend state-funded pre-K programs, and no three-year-olds are served," **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."

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 15,000 3- and 4-year-olds in Mississippi could lose access to Head Start if federal funding for the program is eliminated. State pre-k in Mississippi, particularly the Early Learning Collaboratives which rely on Head Start partnerships, could also be jeopardized," **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.