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## New Jersey Making Progress, But Leaders Must Continue to Prioritize Quality Preschool

*Federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close preschool gaps*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.** - A new [report](#) released today finds that New Jersey maintained its 4<sup>th</sup> in the nation ranking for serving three-year-olds in quality preschool, yet ranks in the middle of the pack in serving four-year-olds. In 2023-2024, New Jersey served 24% of its three-year-olds and 34% of its four-year-olds in state-funded pre-K. New Jersey also fell in spending per child ranking from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>, trailing Oregon for the first time ever.

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

- New Jersey preschool enrolled 61,868 children, an increase of 3,481 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$1,108,123,000, up \$161,011,555 (17%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$17,911 in 2023-2024, up \$1,690 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- New Jersey preschool met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

"We applaud New Jersey leaders for committing to universal, high quality preschool for three- and four-year-olds, but more must be done to make this a reality," 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. NJ has had one of the nation's highest quality, best funded programs with strong results for the children who attended, but progress has slowed. NJ should re-commit to quality and adequate funding while accelerating expansion so that every child can get a strong start."

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 10,000 three- and four-year-olds in New Jersey 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](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.*