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New Mexico Leaps Ahead in National Pre-K Rankings

New Mexico helps boost preschool enrollment and funding to record national highs as federal uncertainty puts pressure on states to close pre-K gaps

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that New Mexico improved from 13th to 6th in preschool access for three-year-olds and from 13th to 12th in preschool access for four-year-olds. In 2023-2024, New Mexico PreK served record highs of 21% of the state's three-year-olds and 51% of four-year-olds. The state also improved from 14th to 5th in state spending per child.

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

- New Mexico PreK enrolled 16,095 children, an increase of 2,868 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$212,888,058, up \$107,488,625 (102%), adjusted for inflation, from the prior year.
- State spending per child equaled \$13,227 in 2023-2024, up \$5,258 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- New Mexico met 9 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

During the 2023 New Mexico legislative session, nearly \$100 million from the Land Grant Permanent Fund was appropriated to the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) to award a total of 279 NM PreK grants to 84 school district programs and 195 community-based programs, family child care providers, Tribal governments (funding 554 new Tribal PreK slots), and Head Start grantees. This was the largest expansion of NM PreK ever and included expanded enrollment of three-year-olds in public schools. The funding, which substantially increased the per child rate, was also used to significantly expand instructional hours, including an extended plus option, to increase salaries for NM PreK teachers, for transportation, and for research-based curricula.

"New Mexico is part of a new class of leading states expanding access to universal preschool," 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. New Mexico leaders have put the right quality standards and per-pupil funding levels in place to ensure that pre-k programs adequately support children's development and result in the lasting gains that ultimately deliver savings for taxpayers."

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. Ominously, several states that have been leaders in universal preschool continued a long-term decline in enrollment, including Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin.

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 5,500 three- and four-year-olds in New Mexico 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.