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North Carolina At Risk of Falling Behind as States Set New National Records for Pre-K Spending, Enrollment

North Carolina lawmakers reject funding increase for NC Pre-K as new federal funding uncertainty looms for Head Start and other programs

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that North Carolina slightly improved from 29th to 28th in the nation in preschool access for four-year-olds in the 2023-2024 school year. However, North Carolina's pre-K program serves no three-year-olds, the recent uptick in four-year-old enrollment was boosted by temporary federal relief funding, and enrollment is still far below pre-pandemic highs.

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 and 8% of three-year-olds.

In North Carolina, the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- The North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program enrolled 27,304 children, an increase of 1,620 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$115,259,501 and \$66,776,585 in TANF funds and \$12,281,934 in federal recovery funds supported the program, bringing total funding up by \$23,807,791 (14%), adjusted for inflation, since the previous year.
- State spending per child (including TANF and federal relief) equaled \$7,117 in 2023-2024, up \$478 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- North Carolina met 9 of the 10 research-based quality benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

"While North Carolina Pre-K has long been known as a leader in quality, recent expansion of the program has been boosted by temporary COVID relief funding," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder**. "The North Carolina General Assembly had the opportunity to approve the Governor's recommended increase of \$197 million for FY 2023-2025 to keep NC Pre-K viable and strong for North Carolina children, but they failed to do so. The funding also would have helped the program retain qualified teachers at competitive salaries and help protect the program if federal funding for pre-k is cut."

The North Carolina 2023-2025 state budget increased class sizes and minimum staff to child ratios for NC Pre-K. Also concerning is that 20% of NC Pre-K teachers were long-term subs, not fully meeting qualifications.

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 13,000 three- and four-year-olds in North Carolina 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.