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As States Hit National Records for Preschool Enrollment, Oklahoma's Ranking Falls Slightly

Meanwhile, federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to prioritize preschool

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Oklahoma fell from 3rd to 6th in the nation for pre-k access for four-year-olds, and from 21st to 22nd in access for three-year-olds. In 2023-2024, Oklahoma served 66% of its four-year-olds in state-funded pre-K, down from the state's high of 76% a decade ago. Just 6% of the state's three-year-olds are served in the program.

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

- Oklahoma preschool enrolled 38,457 children, a decrease of 525 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$197,385,755, up \$11,288,674 (6%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$5,133, in 2023-2024, up \$359 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Oklahoma met 9 of the 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. That has been the case in Oklahoma, where researchers found long-term positive outcomes for children who were enrolled in Tulsa's preschool program. Compared to their peers, the children who attended preschool were more likely to take advanced courses, graduate high school on time, and enroll in a higher education," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder**. "However, preschool enrollment in Oklahoma has eroded ten percentage in recent years, a troubling trend."

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, some 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.

"More than 10,000 three- and four-year-olds in Oklahoma could lose access to Head Start if federal funding for the program is eliminated and additional pre-K slots could 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."

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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.