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Federal Funding Uncertainty Puts Pressure on States to Close Preschool Access, Quality Gaps

New research highlights that despite record state investments in preschool, some states are advancing while others are falling behind

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.—A new analysis of state-funded early childhood education programs for three and four-year-olds shows that preschool investments across the United States are at an all-time high. 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.

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 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.

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.

“Preschool access in the United States continues to be highly dependent on your zip code. While states as different as California, Colorado, Mississippi, and New Mexico have made remarkable progress in expanding preschool, many states are trailing further and further behind,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., lead author of the report.** “With increased uncertainty about federal funding for programs supporting children, including Head Start, states could be left picking up the tab.”

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.

Conversely, 21 state-funded preschool programs meet five or fewer of these quality standards—including three of the nation's four largest programs, California TK, Florida, and Texas. Nationally, more than two-and-a-half times as many children attend lower-quality programs (meeting five or fewer benchmarks) compared to programs meeting nine or all ten benchmarks.

“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,” **said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER’s senior director and founder.** “For those who invest in low quality programs, it may look like they are saving money, but those programs are not likely to support children’s development enough to result in lasting academic and other gains that ultimately deliver savings for taxpayers.”

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 is eliminated, access to public preschool will decline in several states by more than 10 percentage points, and in some, by 20 percentage points.

NIEER’s Yearbook underscores the urgency for states to prioritize and expand early childhood investments proactively. It includes a special pullout section highlighting Alabama, Michigan, New Mexico, and Oklahoma as strong examples that other states can replicate— despite having taken different paths to success.

Additional information about the *State of Preschool Yearbook*, including individual state profiles and interactive maps, graphs, and state rankings, can be found at www.nieer.org.

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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.