



For Immediate Release:

April 29, 2025

Contact:

Ashley Davison, NIEER, adaviosn@nieer.org, (848) 932-3142 (o), (609) 969-1587 (m)

Allison Muhlenhof, Longleaf Strategies, allison@longleafstrategies.com, (334) 450-1027 (m)

Rhode Island Meets Top Pre-K Quality Standards, Falls Behind Other States in Percentage of Children Served

Other states across the Northeast and the nation outpace Rhode Island in providing access to pre-K while federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to act

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Rhode Island fell one spot from 28th to 29th in preschool access for four-year-olds. In 2023-2024, Rhode Island served 22% of its four-year-olds and no three-year-olds in state-funded pre-K.

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 Rhode Island the report found that in the 2023-2024 school year:

- The Rhode Island State Pre-Kindergarten Program enrolled 2,364 children, the same as in 2022-2023.
- State spending totaled \$22,430,859, up \$5,679,404 (34%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$9,489 in 2023-2024 up \$2,402 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Rhode Island met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

Notably, the RI Pre-K program received \$7.1 million in new general revenue for the current 2024-2025 school year, which will be reflected in next year's *State of Preschool* report. The funds are expected to increase pre-k slots, blend with Head Start funding to improve wages and prevent classroom closures, and support existing child care classrooms as part of the state pre-k program.

"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**. "Rhode Island is a national leader in maintaining top pre-K quality standards, but the state trails several of its Northeast neighbors in pre-K access. We are encouraged to see state leaders consider universal pre-K legislation, and we recommend that future investments continue to prioritize quality and ensure salary parity for preschool teachers with K-12 educators."

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 1,500 three- and four-year-olds in Rhode Island could lose access to Head Start if federal funding for the program is eliminated. Loss of Head Start funding could also jeopardize blended pre-k slots," **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."

###

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.