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## South Carolina Lags Behind Other Southern States in Preschool Access and Spending

*Federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to prioritize preschool*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.** - A new national [report](#) released today finds that South Carolina ranks 15<sup>th</sup> in the nation for pre-K access for four-year-olds for 2023-2024, down from 14<sup>th</sup> in the prior year. The state's ranking for serving three-year-olds also dipped from 33<sup>rd</sup> to 35<sup>th</sup> as other states moved forward. In 2023-2024, South Carolina served 45% of its four-year-olds in state-funded pre-K, down from the state's pre-COVID high of 47%. A tiny fraction of the state's three-year-olds (0.2%) attend South Carolina's preschool 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 South Carolina the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- South Carolina preschool enrolled 27,171 children, an increase of 877 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$114,157,651 with an additional \$1,466,656 in federal recovery funds to support the program, up \$13,581,197 (13%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) equaled \$4,255 in 2023-2024, up \$375 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- South Carolina met 7 of the 10 research-based 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," **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder.** "South Carolina's national pre-K rankings have gone down because other states – including several states across the South – are making pre-K a higher priority. South Carolina's preschool decline threatens the economic competitiveness of the state."

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.

"Nearly 8,500 three- and four-year-olds in South 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](http://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.*