![NIEER - National Institute for Early Education Research]

Texas Pre-K Trails the Nation in Quality, Per-Pupil Funding

Leaders in Texas have decisions to make about how to move forward, as federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to prioritize preschool investments

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national report released today finds that Texas ranks 11th in the nation for pre-K access for four-year-olds for 2023-2024, down from 10th the prior year. The state's ranking for serving three-year-olds also dipped from 14th to 15th as other states across the South and the nation improved their rankings. In 2023-2024, Texas served 52% of its four-year-olds in state-funded pre-k and 11% of three-year-olds. However, the program meets few recommended quality standards, and lawmakers eroded quality further in 2023 by eliminating a teacher education requirement. The state trails the national average by more than $3,000 in state spending per child.

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 Texas the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:
- During the 2023-2024 school year, Texas preschool enrolled 248,371 children, an increase of 4,779 children from the prior year.
- State spending totaled $1,059,019,621 and an additional $2,400,000 in federal recovery funds supported the program, up $125,267,307 (13%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) equaled $4,682 in 2023-2024, up $468 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Texas met just 2 of 10 the research-based quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER. The program lost a critical quality benchmark when the Legislature passed a 2023 bill no longer requiring public prekindergarten teachers in nonpublic settings to have a BA or P-6 certification.

"I'm encouraged by the Texas House's decision to prioritize full-day pre-K funding in House Bill 2, their centerpiece school finance legislation," **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder**. "If the Senate and Governor Abbott approve of the bill, Texas could take a meaningful step toward improving the quality of pre-K and securing a brighter future for all children. Yet, when the entire P-12 system is chronically underfunded, particularly teacher salaries, it harms the effectiveness of both pre-K and the education that builds upon pre-K."

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 47,000 three- and four-year-olds in Texas 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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