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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)

Utah Ranks Last in Pre-K Access for 4-Year-Olds as States Hit New National Records for Preschool Enrollment, Spending

States like Colorado and New Mexico are far outpacing Utah as federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close preschool gaps

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Utah remained in last place for preschool access for 4-year-olds among the 44 states and DC that fund pre-K, and fell from 28th to 30th in preschool access for three-year-olds. In 2023-2024, Utah served just 3% of its four-year-olds and 2% of three-year-olds in state-funded pre-K. By contrast, Colorado and New Mexico reached new highs, serving 70% and 51% of their states' four-year-olds, and 15% and 21% of three-year-olds, respectively.

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 Utah the report found that in the 2023-2024 school year:

- Utah preschool programs enrolled 2,011 children, an increase of 24 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$6,688,608, up \$564,135 (9%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$3,326 in 2023-2024, up \$244 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- Utah met 6 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER, an increase as the state newly met the Early Learning and Development Standards benchmark this year.

"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**. "While Utah has made some progress in recent years, state leaders have a long way to go in expanding access to pre-k and for three- and four-year olds. Leaders should also continue to improve quality standards and per-pupil funding to ensure that its program supports children's development enough to result in the lasting gains that ultimately deliver savings for taxpayers."

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 4,000 three- and four-year-olds in Utah 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.

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.