



**For Immediate Release:**

April 29, 2025

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## DC and MD Outpace VA in Pre-K Access for Three- and Four-Year-Olds

*States hit new national records for preschool enrollment, spending as federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close preschool gaps*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.** - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Virginia fell from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> in preschool access for three-year-olds and maintained its ranking of 30<sup>th</sup> in the nation for preschool access for four-year-olds. In 2023-2024, Virginia served 3% of its three-year-olds and 22% of four-year-olds in state-funded pre-k programs. By contrast, Washington, DC ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in the nation for providing universal preschool to its three- and four-year-olds, with an astonishing 82% of three-year-olds and 95% of four-year-olds enrolled. Maryland served 38% of its four-year-olds and 7% of three-year-olds as part of a strategic expansion included in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

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

- Virginia's two preschool programs, the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation Mixed Delivery, enrolled a total of 24,993 preschool-age children, an increase of 824 from the prior year.
- State spending for both programs totaled \$152,943,300 (including \$23,945,122 in federal recovery funds that supported Mixed Delivery), up \$13,223,463 (9%) total, adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) for both programs equaled \$6,119 in 2023-2024, up \$338 from 2022-2023, adjusted for inflation.
- VPI met 5 of 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER, while Mixed Delivery met 4 of 10.

"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 states hit record national highs for pre-K enrollment in 2023-2024, progress in Virginia did not keep pace. The state also rolled back quality standards, getting rid of licensing requirements for VPI teachers in nonpublic schools. We encourage state leaders to continue to invest in expansion while improving quality and per-pupil funding to ensure strong outcomes."

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 9,200 three- and four-year-olds in Virginia 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.*