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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)

Wisconsin a Top 10 State in Pre-K Enrollment for Four-Year-Olds

States hit new national records for preschool enrollment and spending as federal funding uncertainty puts pressure on states to close pre-K gaps

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Wisconsin ranked 8th for preschool access for four-year-olds, yet toward the bottom (36th) in preschool access for three-year-olds. In 2023-2024, Wisconsin served 63% of its four-year-olds and just 0.1% of three-year-olds in state-funded pre-K. Enrollment in Wisconsin's Four-Year-Old Kindergarten (4K) still has not recovered from its pre-pandemic high of 72% of the state's four-year-olds, and the program's quality standards leave room for improvement.

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

- Wisconsin 4K enrolled 44,410 children, a decrease of 491 from the prior year.
- Wisconsin 4K met just 2 of 10 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**. "For those who invest in low quality programs, it may look like they are saving money, but those programs are not likely to support children's development enough to result in lasting academic and other gains that ultimately deliver savings for taxpayers. Wisconsin serves a large percentage of the state's four-year-olds in 4K, but leaders should work to ensure that per-pupil investments are adequate to help the program meet higher quality standards."

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.

Ominously, some states that have been leaders in universal preschool continued a long-term decline in enrollment, including Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin.

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 9,000 three- and four-year-olds in Wisconsin could lose access to Head Start if federal funding for the program is eliminated. These funding cuts could also jeopardize Wisconsin's supplemental Head Start program," **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."

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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.