

THE STATE OF PRESCHOOL SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Respondent Universe

The respondent universe for this study is the state preschool administrators in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, plus the U.S. territories. Data are collected directly from these entities through a web-based survey form. More than one agency supports early childhood education programs in some states. As a result, some states have more than one respondent. Note that in some states, there are no state programs to support publicly provided early childhood education. As such, these states do not have state preschool administrators and they do not report data on the topic. Other administrators in these states, however, are contacted to update and confirm a state narrative on the status of other early childhood programs in the state each year.

Statistical Methodology

This is a universe data collection, employing a survey form. All states with publicly supported early childhood education have responded to the collection effort. Indiana completed a survey about its early childhood education program which is similar to state-funded preschool in other states but includes a parent work or education requirement for eligibility and therefore does not meet NIEER's definition of a state-funded preschool program. Indiana is included in the report but not in national totals or rankings. Similarly, Virginia completed surveys about its Early Childhood Foundation Mixed Delivery program and Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP) which include a parent work or education requirement for eligibility and do not meet NIEER's definition of a state-funded preschool program. In addition, information was sought from territories; Guam is the first territory to operate its own preschool program comparable to state-funded programs. The Virgin Islands also has a preschool program but data are not yet available on that program. Because the data collection is based on a universe of sample members, weighting adjustments and adjustments to variances for statistical test purposes are not necessary. Some statistical adjustments are made to the resulting data, however, to help unduplicate enrollment counts that can arise when the same child is enrolled in more than one publicly funded program. More specifically, when states report that they have included children with disabilities in both the special education counts and the counts of preschool-aged children who are in regular preschool programs, the preschool special education in state preschool count is subtracted from the preschool special education enrollment counts. Similarly, when states reported that they have included Head Start children in counts of children in state preschool and Head Start, the Head Start in state preschool count is subtracted from the Head Start enrollment. Children with disabilities enrolled in Head Start are also subtracted from the preschool special education enrollment count to avoid duplication.

Methods to Maximize Response Rate and Ensure Data Accuracy

Several steps have been taken to maximize the response to this data collection. First, the data are collected through a web-based, computer-assisted interview (CAI) program. This flexibility allows respondents to enter information as time and data availability permit. Further, respondents are offered opportunities to check previous years' data at the beginning of data collection and can view last year's responses to many questions embedded in the current year's web-based survey. They also have multiple opportunities to review the current year's entries before the data are published. The first data check acts as a data quality control step, in terms of reminding respondents what kinds of data will be needed for the current year's collection. Allowing respondents to review current year's data entry before results are published acts as another data quality control check and also provides respondents with confidence that accurate data will be reported from their respective states, further garnering cooperation.

Once surveys are completed, data are checked by NIEER staff for entry errors, consistency with prior year's data, and consistency with information available from public documents (for example, with published state education agency regulations and guidance). Any apparent inconsistencies or errors are discussed with the respondents for resolution. When data have been compiled and summarized for publication in a public use data set and reports, the results are then sent back to the state administrators who provided the information for final verification before publication and dissemination.

Tests of Procedures and Methods

Each year, staff at NIEER review changes to policies that support early childhood education at the state and federal levels. Modifications are then made to the questionnaire and the related web-based CAI instruments to reflect these policy changes as well as new priorities in the field. In addition to the policy review, respondents are sent data from the previous year's data collection, allowing them to correct errors or to update information. NIEER staff actively solicit opinions regarding the clarity, usefulness, and availability of data requested by the survey from the primary respondents. This facilitates NIEER staff learning about new or changing policies from the provider perspective.

The CAI instruments undergo extensive testing prior to the initiation of data collection. Tests are run to verify that logical skips through the instrument are functioning as expected so that respondents are not asked questions that are not meaningful based on responses to prior questions. Prior to publication, respondents are sent current year answers for verification for accuracy and are also given the opportunity to review their state's profile page before the data are released.

All initiatives included in the current report meet the criteria outlined by NIEER, which defines state preschool education programs as initiatives that are funded and directed by the state to support group learning experiences for preschool-age children, usually ages 3 and 4. For more information about these criteria, please see, “What Qualifies as a State Preschool Program?” on page 22. This report covers the same initiatives as the 2024 report with the following exceptions: Virginia’s Early Childhood Foundation Mixed Delivery program now has a parent work or education requirement and no longer meets NIEER’s definition of a state-funded preschool program. Virginia’s Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP) is included in the report for the first time but also has a parent work or education requirement and does not meet NIEER’s definition of a state-funded preschool program. Information about these two programs is included on the last three pages of Virginia’s profile but not included in rankings or national totals.

The survey included yes or no questions, questions that asked state administrators to select which of several choices best described their program, and open-ended questions. The survey included questions on access, program administration, operating schedule, child eligibility and reassessment, program standards, statewide early learning standards, curriculum, preschool child assessments, personnel, resources, structured observations of classroom quality, nature-based and outdoor learning, and important changes to the program since the last survey.

Collection of Non-Survey Data

Although most of the data in this report were collected through the State of Preschool survey there are a few exceptions. Total federal, state, and local expenditures on K–12 education in the 2024-2025 school year were calculated by NIEER based on data from the National Education Association’s report, Rankings of the States 2024 and Estimates of School Statistics 2025. Total K–12 spending for each state includes current operating expenditures plus annual capital outlays and interest on school debt. This provides a more complete picture of the full cost of K–12 education than including only current operating expenditures, which underestimate the full cost. Our estimate of K–12 expenditures is also more comparable to total preschool spending per child because this funding generally must cover all costs, including facilities. Expenditure per child was calculated for each state by dividing total expenditures by the Fall 2024 enrollment. We estimated the breakdown of expenditure per child by source, based on the percentages of revenue receipts from federal, state, and local sources in each state.

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Office of Head Start in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services were the sources of data on federal Head Start spending and enrollment. In addition, some data were obtained from the Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) for the 2024-2025 program year. States were asked about state supplements to Head Start as part of the main survey again this year. OHS reported to NIEER that in some instances Head Start funding and enrollment for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and Migrant Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs were reported in the state in which the program was administered, rather than the state in which children attended Head Start. The Head Start Service Location dataset, which provides the state of administration and service provision, was used correct for this in NIEER’s calculations of Head Start enrollment, funding, and per child funding by state. Adjustments were made to AZ, NM, ND, SD, and UT (AI/AN) and AL, AZ, AR, CO, FL, GA, IN, LA, MI, MN, MO, NV, NJ, NM, NC, ND, OK, PA, SC, TN, TX, UT, VA, WI (MSHS) to align enrollment and funding by state with enrollment by location of service rather than with administrative headquarters. ACF reports the total number of Head Start slots. The number of 3- and 4-year-olds who attended Head Start was estimated using the age-breakdown of the cumulative enrollment information from the PIR. Enrollment in American AI/AN Head Start programs was calculated in a similar way and included in each state’s total. Enrollment in MSHS is based on information provided in the PIR and is also included in each state’s total. Total funding for each state includes Head Start as well as AI/AN and MSHS. Spending per child was calculated for each state by dividing the total Head Start spending by the enrollment. All data in Appendix B include AI/AN and MSHS when applicable. Information included in the report is specific to Head Start and does not include Early Head Start. Head Start data are provided in Appendix B.

Populations of 3- and 4-year-olds in each state were obtained from the Census Bureau’s datasets and are shown in Appendix C. As in the past, NIEER used estimates for the July immediately preceding the program year (e.g., July 2024 for the 2024-2025 program year) to calculate percentages of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in state preschool programs, federal Head Start, and special education. Census estimates are based on the 2020 census.

The U.S. Office of Special Education Programs provided data on special education enrollment in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Preschool Grants program (IDEA Section 619 of Part B) in the 2024-2025 program year. Beginning in the 2022-2023 year, NIEER calculated the number of children receiving special education who were in school- or center-based settings which included the following IDEA categories: Separate Class, Separate School, Other Location Regular Early Childhood Program, and Regular Early Childhood Program. Five-year-olds not yet in kindergarten are included as 4-year-olds. These data are provided in Appendix D.

In the 2025 *Yearbook*, NIEER again attempts to provide a more accurate estimate of unduplicated enrollments, whether in state preschool, Head Start, special education, or other settings, through a series of calculations. Because many children who are counted in special education enrollments are also enrolled in state preschool or Head Start programs, it is important to ensure that those children are not counted twice. This year, for the third time, we include only children in special education

who are in school- or center-based settings to get a better estimate of the children in early childhood education programs. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia reported including children in special education in their state preschool enrollment figures, while two states and Guam do not include these children in their enrollment count (but do include them in their programs). Thirty-five of the 42 states and the District of Columbia were able to provide the number of children in special education who were also counted in their enrollment; another four multi-program states provided breakdown for some, but not all, programs. Those children were subtracted from the special education enrollment figure for the state, but remain in the state preschool enrollment figure in the enrollment pie charts and when calculating total enrollment across both programs. The remaining three states were unable to report special education enrollment numbers, and, therefore, estimates were used based on the average percent of special education students in state preschool and enrollment numbers for each program. Information from the PIR regarding special education students was used for one state-funded Head Start program (See Table 4).

Three- and 4-year-olds enrolled in Head Start with an IEP or IFSP, as reported in the 2024-2025 PIR, were also removed from the special enrollment total used in the enrollment pie charts. As the PIR does not report a breakdown of special education students by age, estimates were based on total special education enrollment and the percentage of all Head Start enrollees who were 3 or 4 years old. Three-year-olds enrolled in Early Head Start programs were not included in this estimate.

Beginning with the 2014-2015 *Yearbook*, 3- and 4-year-olds who were enrolled in both Head Start and state preschool were removed from the Head Start enrollment total used in the enrollment pie charts and Table 4. In 2024-2025, 28 programs were able to report information on the number of children enrolled in state preschool who were also enrolled in Head Start. These children were subtracted from the total Head Start number but remain in the state preschool enrollment number for the enrollment pie charts and when calculating total enrollment across both programs. Eleven programs reported that children were dually enrolled in Head Start and state preschool but could not report the number of children. And eight programs reported that it was unknown if children were dually enrolled. In these states, the number of children in state preschool and Head Start may be an overestimate.

Determination of State Rankings

States are given rankings in four areas: the percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in state preschool (Access Ranking–4-Year-Olds), the percentage of 3-year-olds enrolled in state preschool (Access Ranking–3-Year-Olds), state spending per child enrolled (Resources Ranking–State Spending), and all reported spending per child enrolled (Resources Ranking–All Reported Spending). The measures of access for 3- and 4-year-olds were calculated, as described previously, using state data on enrollment in the preschool programs and Census population data. When a state did not report separate enrollment numbers of 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, the age breakdown was estimated by other means, such as using the average proportion of children enrolled in state preschool at each age in states that served both 3- and 4-year-olds, and provided data by age or prior year data. State per-child spending was calculated by dividing state preschool spending (including TANF spending and federal COVID-19 relief funding directed toward the state preschool initiative) by enrollment. All reported spending per child was calculated by dividing the sum of reported local, state and federal spending by enrollment. Beginning with the 2014-2015 report, we also provide an indicator of whether the state was able to report local and/or federal resources (See Table 7).

All states (and DC) that provided data were ranked, starting with “1” for the state with the highest percentage of its children enrolled in the state preschool education program or the state program that spent the most per child. Indiana and Guam are not included in the state rankings. Only Virginia’s Preschool Initiative (VPI) factored into Virginia’s rankings. States that did not serve children at age 3 receive notations of “None Served” on the ranking of access for 3-year-olds. Throughout this report, the District of Columbia is referred to by the term “state,” creating a list of 45 states for rankings. The five states that did not fund a preschool initiative during the 2024-2025 school year are omitted from all rankings and instead receive notations of “No Program” on their state profile pages.