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Colorado Continues to Climb National Preschool Access Rankings, but Experts Encourage Continued Focus on Quality

States looking to address the child care crisis are expanding access to free pre-K for three- and four-year-olds. However, researchers warn that access without quality isn't enough to improve student outcomes. Meanwhile, Georgia Pre-K sets a new example for the nation.

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. A new [report](#) released today finds that Colorado once again ranked 3rd in the nation in providing pre-K access to four-year-olds. In 2024-2025, the new Colorado Universal Preschool Program, in its second program year, served 70% of the state's four-year-olds and 24% of three-year-olds. The program met 2 of 10 recommended quality standards but may meet additional benchmarks once new program standards are fully in place. As a newly launched program, Colorado Universal Preschool is in the early stages of phased implementation, with quality standards, monitoring, and supports continuing to roll out statewide over the next few program years.

The [National Institute for Early Education Research's 2025 State of Preschool Yearbook](#) presents a critical snapshot of preschool education in America. 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 9% of three-year-olds.

In Colorado, the report found that, in the 2024-2025 school year:

- Colorado preschool enrolled 58,107 children, an increase of 5,490 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$338,023,799, up \$31,380,217 (10%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- Additional local funding supported pre-K in Colorado, including more than \$28 million for nearly 5,000 children in the Denver Preschool Program.
- Colorado ranked 29th in the nation for state spending per child (\$5,817 in 2024-2025, down \$11 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation).

"Colorado is delivering preschool programs where children can learn, grow, and thrive," said Dr. Lisa Roy, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Early Childhood. "Today, in our third year, we continue to serve more than 70% of Colorado children in the year before kindergarten through our Universal Preschool Program. The majority of our children are already in high-quality settings across a mixed delivery system that includes community-based, school-based, and home-based providers, giving parents the ability to choose the program that best fits their needs. We are building on that progress by strengthening our quality standards with input from providers and experts across the state and nationally. Our quality work is focused on improving outcomes for young children while ensuring families feel confident in the care and early learning experiences available to them."

Nationally, state support for preschool education hit record highs in enrollment and funding in 2024-2025, but the pace of growth slowed compared to the

COLORADO: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 3rd (70%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 5th (24%)
- State spending per child: 29th (\$5,817)
- All reported spending per child: 37th (\$5,817)
- Total benchmarks met: 2

previous year— and quality remains highly uneven from state to state.

“When states invest in quality preschool programs that can produce strong outcomes, they invest in a better future for children and taxpayers,” **said NIEER director Steve Barnett**. “Colorado’s commitment to universal preschool should be applauded, and leaders must continue with efforts to improve quality as they implement the Universal Pre-K Standards and develop the Resource Bank if the program is to produce the promised benefits. We look forward to seeing Colorado’s progress towards strengthening program standards, expanding workforce supports, and implementing monitoring in their mixed-delivery model..”

Georgia’s state-funded pre-K program for four-year-olds made history this year. It became the largest state-funded preschool program in the nation to meet all 10 quality benchmarks recommended by NIEER, and the first universal program to do so. Only five additional states meet all 10 of NIEER’s research-based benchmarks for quality — Alabama, Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi, and Rhode Island—in this year’s report. None of those programs have the reach of Georgia’s Pre-K Program. NIEER’s benchmarks measure essential preschool quality indicators, including teacher qualifications, class sizes, early learning standards, and curriculum supports.

“Not only does preschool access vary by which state a child happens to live in, but so does the quality of that preschool experience,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, lead author of the report**. “Only high-quality early care and education programs support children’s development enough to result in lasting academic and other gains that ultimately deliver savings for taxpayers. Children in Colorado are lucky to have access to preschool but the state must continue to work to ensure those children have quality learning experiences”

Colorado leaders have already started this work, with ongoing investments in workforce, curriculum, and program standards designed to strengthen quality as the program matures.

States spent nearly \$14.4 billion on preschool in 2024-2025. Twenty-eight states increased their investments in preschool from the prior year, for a total increase of \$434 million, or 3%, adjusted for inflation. Including federal and local dollars, total spending was almost \$17.7 billion. Three states each spent more than \$1 billion last year: California (\$4.1 billion), New Jersey (\$1.2 billion), and New York (\$1 billion). Together, these three states account for 45% of all state preschool spending. Texas adds almost another \$1 billion.

Additional information about the *2025 State of Preschool Yearbook*, including individual state profiles and maps, graphs, and state rankings, can be found at www.nieer.org.

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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.