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## Georgia Becomes First Universal Pre-K State to Meet 10-of-10 Preschool Quality Benchmarks

*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.*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.**— Georgia's state-funded pre-k program for 4-year-olds was recognized today as the largest state-funded preschool program in the nation to meet all 10 quality benchmarks, and the first universal program to do so.

Georgia's recognition is the top finding in the [National Institute for Early Education Research's](#) new [2025 State of Preschool Yearbook](#). The yearbook provides an annual snapshot of state-funded preschool across the country. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia fund preschool programs.

"Georgia is proud to be a leader in quality early childhood education as we work to ensure all Georgians have the opportunity to succeed, including our youngest learners," **said Georgia Governor Brian P. Kemp**. "Having strategically invested in our Pre-K classrooms, we are both meeting all 10 NIEER benchmarks of excellence and giving Georgia students a strong start on the path of lifelong learning."

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 Pre-K. NIEER's benchmarks measure essential preschool quality indicators, including teacher qualifications, class sizes, early learning standards, and program assessments.

"Other states should take note: Georgia proves that state-funded preschool with well-qualified teachers, pay parity with K-12, small classes, and strong continuous improvement systems can be scaled as a universal program," **said NIEER director Steve Barnett**. "With new initiatives to support quality, Georgia can expect increased enrollment, but leaders should also actively promote increased enrollment."

Nationally, state support for preschool education hit record highs in enrollment and funding in 2024-2025. The pace of growth slowed, however, compared to the prior year, and many states continue to lag behind pre-pandemic enrollment levels.

Preschool enrollment increased by 44,000 children nationally, reaching almost 1.8 million, including 37% of U.S. four-year-olds and 9% of three-year-olds. California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and Missouri contributed the most to increased enrollment, adding more than 52,000 new seats.

States spent nearly \$14.4 billion on preschool in 2024-2025. 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.

Spending increased by \$434 million, or 3%, adjusted for inflation. Twenty-eight states increased preschool funding, including Michigan and New Jersey, which each added more than \$100 million.

“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.”

A record six states met all 10 of NIEER’s recommended quality standards, with Alabama doing so for the 20<sup>th</sup> consecutive year.

Georgia joined this list this year after improving its teacher-to-child ratio from 1:11 to 1:10 and lowering maximum class sizes to 20. Several states met 9 of 10 benchmarks, including New Mexico, which is working toward universal access for both three- and four-year-olds. Once New Mexico requires all lead teachers to have a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, it will be on par with Georgia in terms of both quality and quantity.

Not all states moved forward. Twenty states enrolled fewer preschoolers in 2024-2025 than the prior year, with enrollment dropping by more than 1,000 children in Arizona, Florida, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. Seventeen states spent less on preschool than the prior year, adjusted for inflation, with Arizona, North Carolina, Oregon, and Texas seeing the largest percentage declines.

Additional information about the *State of Preschool Yearbook*, including individual state profiles and maps, graphs, and state rankings, can be found at [www.nieer.org](http://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.*