



**For Immediate Release:**

April 22, 2026

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## Arkansas Increases Per-Pupil Spending but Remains below Pre-Pandemic Levels

*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 Arkansas maintained its rankings as 8<sup>th</sup> in the nation for preschool access for three-year-olds and 24<sup>th</sup> in access for four-year-olds. In 2024-2025, Arkansas served 19% of its three-year-olds and 33% of four-year-olds in state-funded pre-K. Arkansas also improved from 31<sup>st</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> in state spending per child.

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. Nationally, enrollment reached 37% of four-year-olds but only 9% of three-year-olds.

In Arkansas, the report found that, in the 2023-2024 school year:

- Arkansas preschool enrolled 20,327 children, an increase of 16 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$106,072,095 and an additional \$7,500,000 in TANF funds and \$14,045,035 in federal recovery funds supported the program, up \$10,203,845 (9%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including TANF and federal recovery funds) equaled \$6,278 in 2024-2025, up \$497 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- Arkansas met 8 of the 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

"Arkansas is a leader in preschool access for three-year-olds, but a majority of threes and fours still lack access, and quality could be improved to match states like Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi," **said NIEER director Steve Barnett.** "Leaders should be applauded for increasing per-pupil investments in ABC Preschool but a higher level of investment is needed to help meet research-based quality standards and achieve salary parity between pre-K and K-12 teachers."

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.

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

### ARKANSAS: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 24<sup>th</sup> (33%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 8<sup>th</sup> (19%)
- State spending per child: 26<sup>th</sup> (\$6,278)
- All reported spending per child: 19<sup>th</sup> (\$10,637)
- Total benchmarks met: 8

savings for taxpayers.”

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](http://www.nieer.org).

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*The 2025 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Gates Foundation.*

*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.*