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## Experts say California’s State-Funded Preschool Programs Should Prioritize 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 California ranks 14<sup>th</sup> in the nation in preschool access for four-year-olds and 15<sup>th</sup> in three-year-old access. The state enrolled 46% of four-year-olds across Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and the California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and enrolled 11% of three-year-olds in CSPP during the 2024-2025 school year. The state is working to implement universal preschool access for four-year-olds through TK in the current school year during which 188,906 four-year-olds attended TK (based on the TK Census Day Count). The CSPP met 6 of 10 recommended quality standards and TK met 3 of 10.

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

- The California Department of Education’s (CDE) two preschool programs, California State Preschool Program (CSPP) and Transitional Kindergarten (TK), together enrolled 278,273 children, an increase of 25,447 from the prior year.
- State spending for the two programs totaled \$4,148,114,798, down \$21,873,301 (1%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child averaged \$14,907 in 2024-2025, down \$1,587 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation. In 2024-2025, state spending per child was \$19,186 for CSPP and \$12,480 for TK.

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 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**. “California’s public preschool programs need to grow while leaders introduce new policies to require and support high quality. California can look to Georgia as an example of a universal preschool program that meets all of NIEER’s recommended quality benchmarks.”

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.

### CALIFORNIA: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 14<sup>th</sup> (46%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 15<sup>th</sup> (11%)
- State spending per child: 4<sup>th</sup> (\$14,907)
- All reported spending per child: 5<sup>th</sup> (\$15,125)
- Average benchmarks met: 4.1

“California serves more preschoolers than any other state but still has hard work to do to raise quality standards while increasing access,” 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.”

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. California was one of three states that 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 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.*