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The District of Columbia Maintains #1 National Ranking for Pre-K Access for Three- and Four-Year-Olds

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 national [report](#) released today finds that the District of Columbia once again ranked first in the nation for providing universal preschool to three- and four-year-olds, with 76% of three-year-olds and 94% of four-year-olds enrolled in 2024-2025. The District also continued to rank first in preschool 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 the District of Columbia fund preschool programs. Most state pre-K programs continue to primarily or only serve four-year-olds, with the District being an exception. Nationally, enrollment reached 37% of four-year-olds but only 9% of three-year-olds.

In the District of Columbia, the report found that, in the 2024-2025 school year:

- District of Columbia Universal Pre-K enrolled 13,040 children, a slight decrease of 179 from the prior year.
- Spending totaled \$356,697,970, up \$36,444,483 (11%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- Spending per child equaled \$27,354 in 2024-2025, up \$3,127 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- District of Columbia Universal Pre-K met 4 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

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 **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder**. "The District of Columbia's top national ranking for preschool access that is well-funded should be applauded. If every state invested in pre-K like the District, the US would be a world leader in early education instead of an 'also ran'."

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 zip code 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."

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 1st (94%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 1st (76%)
- State spending per child: 1st (\$27,354)
- All reported spending per child: 1st (\$27,354)
- Total benchmarks met: 4

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.