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## Hawai'i is a Leader for Preschool Quality, but More Children Need Access

*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 Hawai'i is one of only six states in the country to meet 10 of 10 research-based quality benchmarks for preschool quality. However, Hawai'i ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> of 45 in preschool access for four-year-olds, and 25<sup>th</sup> of 37 for three-year-olds. Hawai'i serves just 7% of its four-year-olds—far below most other states—and 4% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool programs. Other progressive states from California to Vermont have made great strides towards offering every child a quality, public preschool education. Hawai'i seeks to provide universal access to preschool by expanding public programs while also supporting families' ability to choose the care and education options that best meet their needs through Preschool Open Door and other subsidy programs.

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 Hawai'i, the report found that, in the 2024-2025 school year:

- State-funded preschool enrolled 1,637 children, an increase of 611 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$13,273,747, up \$5,542,752 (72%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$8,109, up \$573 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- Both of Hawai'i's state-funded preschool programs met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

"When states invest in quality preschool programs that can produce strong outcomes, they invest in a better future for children and taxpayers," Hawai'i has intentions of universal preschool and could look to California or Georgia for inspiration on how to move forward," **said NIEER director Steve Barnett.**

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- 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, Hawai'i, 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,

### HAWAI'I: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 43rd (7%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 25th (4%)
- State spending per child: 16th (\$8,109)
- All reported spending per child: 28th (\$8,219)
- Total benchmarks met: 10\*

early learning standards, and curriculum supports.

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 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.*