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Kentucky Lags Behind Other Southern States in Preschool 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 Kentucky fell from 26th to 28th in the nation in preschool access for four-year-olds and 18th to 19th in access for three-year-olds. In 2024-2025, Kentucky served 26% of its four-year-olds and 8% of three-year-olds in state-funded pre-K. Kentucky ranked 33rd in state spending per child but 8th in all-reported spending per child which includes local and federal funds for preschool.

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

- The Kentucky Preschool Program enrolled 18,837 children, a decrease of 900 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$90,767,593, and an additional \$4,924,483 in federal recovery funds supported the program.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery funds) equaled \$5,080 in 2024-2025.
- The Kentucky Preschool Program met 8 of 10 research-based 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," **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder.** "Kentucky has moved in the wrong direction recently with lower preschool enrollment. The state has work to do if they decide to move towards Pre-K for All."

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.

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

KENTUCKY: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 28th (26%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 19th (8%)
- State spending per child: 33rd (\$5,080)
- All reported spending per child: 8th (\$13,685)
- Total benchmarks met: 8

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. 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.