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Other States Outpace Massachusetts in Preschool Enrollment, State Funding Per Child

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 Massachusetts remained 25th in the nation for preschool access for four-year-olds and fell from 9th to 10th in preschool access for three-year-olds. In 2024-2025, Massachusetts served 30% of its four-year-olds and 16% of three-year-olds in state-funded pre-K. Massachusetts also ranked near last in per-pupil state preschool spending.

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 Massachusetts the report found that in the 2024-2025 school year:

- Massachusetts' two state-funded preschool programs enrolled 34,707 children in 2024-2025, a decrease of 447 children from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$105,715,076, up \$3,562,184 (3%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$3,046 in 2024-2025, up \$140 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- Massachusetts' state-funded preschool met an average of 5.2 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**. "Massachusetts has historically been a leader in K-12 education and as the state with the nation's highest median income, it is puzzling that other states from Alabama and Georgia to New Mexico and California provide greater access to quality early education opportunity. Leaders would be wise to invest more in preschool to improve quality while expanding access."

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.

MASSACHUSETTS: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 25th (30%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 10th (16%)
- State spending per child: 43rd (\$3,046)
- All reported spending per child: 34th (\$6,410)
- Average benchmarks met: 5.2

“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 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.