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Contact:

Allison Muhendorf, *Longleaf Strategies*, allison@longleafstrategies.com, (334) 450-1027 (m)

Montana Remains Among Final Five States Without State-Funded Preschool

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 Montana is one of five states that do not provide preschool to three- or four-year-olds. The state did allocate \$12.7 million for early literacy and numeracy programs for children in the year and/or summer prior to kindergarten.

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.

"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**. "Montana needs to invest in preschool access and quality to help more families prepare their three- and four-year-olds for school and life success as the state falls far behind its neighbors in publicly funded early education opportunities."

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-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 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.