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North Carolina Lags Behind as Other States Expand Quality Pre-K

States looking to address the child care crisis are expanding access to free pre-K for 3- and 4-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 North Carolina dropped from 28th to 32nd in the nation in preschool access for four-year-olds. In the 2024-2025 school year, North Carolina Prekindergarten served 21% of the state's four-year-olds and no three-year-olds – below the national average. North Carolina ranked 27th in 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 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 North Carolina, the report found that in the 2024-2025 school year:

- The North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program enrolled 26,707 children, a decrease of 597 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$98,840,868 and \$68,186,143 in TANF funds also supported the program, down \$30,896,434 (16%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including TANF funds) equaled \$6,254 in 2024-2025, down \$995 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- North Carolina met 9 of the 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks recommended by NIEER.

"North Carolina Pre-K has lost its place as a leader in preschool with the state dropping in pre-k access rankings as other states catapult ahead. Georgia, by contrast, has a universal preschool program that newly meets all 10 of our research-based quality standards, showing that quality preschool can be expanded at scale," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior director and founder**.

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.

NORTH CAROLINA: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 32nd (21%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None Served
- State spending per child: 27th (\$6,254)
- All reported spending per child: 26th (\$8,722)
- Total benchmarks met: 9*

“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.