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New Jersey Improves in National Pre-K Rankings

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 New Jersey improved from 4th to 3rd in preschool access for three-year-olds and remained 21st in preschool access for four-year-olds. In 2024-2025, New Jersey served 35% of four-year-olds and 27% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool. New Jersey ranked 2nd in funding per child, up from 3rd last year, and behind only DC.

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.

Additional New Jersey findings for the 2024-2025 school year:

- New Jersey preschool enrolled 65,365 children, an increase of 3,497 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$1,231,974, up \$103,290,612 (9%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$18,848 in 2024-2025, up \$604 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- New Jersey met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

"New Jersey's progress towards universal preschool for both three- and four-year-olds should be applauded, though the state has more work to do to meet that goal," **said NIEER director Steve Barnett**. "In July, the Universal Preschool and Kindergarten Expansion Act was enacted, requiring additional funding for preschool expansion each year. The Governor's proposed budget also includes an increase in state preschool funding of over 9%."

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 5 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.

"New Jersey's preschool program has long served as a model for other states. In addition to meeting 9 out of 10 benchmarks, NJ has a policy in place to pay preschool teachers on par with public school teachers, and children benefit from small class sizes, at least 6 hours per day, and two years of the program," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, the report's lead author**. "As preschool continues to expand, state leaders must prioritize maintaining the high-quality standards the state is famous for."

NEW JERSEY : 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 21st (35%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 3rd (27%)
- State spending per child: 2nd (\$18,848)
- All reported spending per child: 2nd (\$18,848)
- Total benchmarks met: 9

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. New Jersey was one of three states that each spent more than \$1 billion last year: California (\$4.1 billion), New Jersey (\$1.2 billion), and New York (\$1 billion). Together, these 3 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.