



**For Immediate Release:**

April 22, 2026

**Contact:**

Allison Muhlenford, *Longleaf Strategies*, [allison@longleafstrategies.com](mailto:allison@longleafstrategies.com), (334) 450-1027 (m)

## South Carolina Preschool Enrollment Grew, but Per-Child Funding Fell

*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 South Carolina once again ranks 15th in the nation in providing preschool to 4-year-olds and ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> in access for 3-year-olds, up from 35<sup>th</sup> last year. In 2024-2025, South Carolina reached 45% of 4-year-olds and 6% of 3-year-olds in state-funded preschool. South Carolina ranked 38<sup>th</sup> again 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 4-year-olds. Nationally, enrollment reached 37% of 4-year-olds but only 9% of 3-year-olds.

Additional South Carolina findings for the 2024-2025 school year:

- South Carolina preschool enrolled 30,586 children, an increase of 3,415 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$120,727,185 (including federal recovery dollars), up \$2,957,556 (3%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$3,947 in 2024-2025, down \$387 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- South Carolina met 7 of the 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**. "South Carolina should be lauded for increased access and efforts to support teaching quality, but low per-pupil funding that is falling is a major concern. Leaders can look to neighboring Georgia as a state funding a universal pre-K program that meets all 10 of NIEER's recommended quality measures."

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 4-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.

"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

### SOUTH CAROLINA: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 15th (45%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 22nd (6%)
- State spending per child: 38th (\$3,947)
- All reported spending per child: 42nd (\$4,211)
- Total benchmarks met: 7

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 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](http://www.nieer.org).

###

*The 2025 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Gates Foundation.*

*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.*