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Tennessee has Focused on Quality Improvement but Only One-Fifth of Children have Access

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 Tennessee ranks 33rd in preschool access for 4-year-olds, down from 32nd last year. The state ranked 31st in preschool access for 3-year-olds, up from 32nd last year. In 2024-2025 Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) reached 20% of 4-year-olds and just 1% of 3-year-olds. Tennessee ranked 34th in spending per child, down from 33rd last year.

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 Tennessee findings for the 2024-2025 school year:

- Tennessee VPK preschool enrolled 17,501 children, a decrease of 132 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$85,505,733, down \$2,535,487 (3%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$4,886 in 2024-2025, down \$107 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- Tennessee met 9 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. Tennessee should focus on expanding access to Voluntary Pre-K and increasing spending per child to fund a quality program," **said NIEER director Steve Barnett**. "Tennessee should be applauded for efforts to raise quality, but a new evaluation of VPK is needed assess the effects of improved quality standards on children's experiences."

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.

"Tennessee could soon join the list of states meeting all 10 of the research-based quality benchmarks recommended by NIEER. The state's new pathways for assistant teachers to earn a CDA will help them meet this high-quality mark," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, the report's lead author**.

States spent nearly \$14.4 billion on preschool in 2024-2025. Twenty-eight states increased their

TENNESSEE: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 33rd (20%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 31st (1%)
- State spending per child: 34th (\$4,886)
- All reported spending per child: 33rd (\$6,509)
- Total benchmarks met: 9

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.

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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.