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State Funding Cuts Threaten Preschool Access in Washington

States looking to address the child care crisis are expanding access to free pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds. Meanwhile, Georgia Pre-K sets a new example for the nation.

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national [report](#) released today finds that Washington ranks 34th in the nation in providing preschool to four-year-olds and 17th for 3-year-olds, enrolling 19% of 4-year-olds and 9% of 3-year-olds across its two state-funded preschool programs. Washington ranked 7th 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 4-year-olds but only 9% of 3-year-olds.

Additional Washington findings for the 2024-2025 school year:

- Washington preschool enrolled 24,471 children, an increase of 2,658 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$329,963,994, up \$45,399,141 (16%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$13,484 in 2024-2025, up \$438 from 2023-2024, adjusted for inflation.
- Washington's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks and Transition to Kindergarten (TK) met 6 of 10.

"Washington made meaningful progress last year increasing preschool enrollment and funding for both ECEAP and TK as well as serving more children in school-day programs and establishing new TK standards," **said NIEER director Steve Barnett**. "However, state budget cuts to both ECEAP and TK threaten children's access to preschool and will move the state further away from other states progressing rapidly toward universal access to early education."

"Washington is fortunate to have received support from the Ballmer Group Philanthropy to fund an additional 10,000 ECEAP slots for the next ten years and help offset some of the budget cuts," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, the report's lead author**. "Hopefully this gift allows the state time to recommit to funding expanded access to quality preschool."

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.

WASHINGTON: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 34th (19%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 17th (9%)
- State spending per child: 7th (\$13,484)
- All reported spending per child: 6th (\$13,875)
- Average benchmarks met: 8

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.

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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.