



For Immediate Release:

April 22, 2026

Contact:

Allison Muhendorf, *Longleaf Strategies*, allison@longleafstrategies.com, (334) 450-1027 (m)

Wisconsin 4K Moves Further Away from its High Enrollment Mark as Fewer Preschoolers Enroll

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](#) today finds that Wisconsin maintained its ranking of 8th in the nation in providing access to preschool for 4-year-olds. In 2024-2025, Wisconsin served 59% of its 4-year-olds, far below the state's record high of 72% in 2019. Wisconsin ranked near the bottom (41st) in spending per child among all states.

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.

In Wisconsin, the report found that, in the 2024-2025 school year:

- Wisconsin 4K enrolled 42,723 children, a decrease of 1,687 from the prior year.
- Wisconsin met only 1 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," **said NIEER director Steve Barnett**. "Wisconsin's longstanding commitment to universal access should be applauded, but providing a quality program requires more funding and higher standards. Wisconsin should look to neighboring Michigan as an example of a preschool program that meets recommended quality benchmarks and is increasing not decreasing enrollment."

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 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. Wisconsin should prioritize quality as the state launches the new Get Kids Ready program."

WISCONSIN: 2025 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 8th (59%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 37th (0.04%)
- State spending per child: 41st (\$3,882)
- All reported spending per child: 31st (\$7,047)
- Total benchmarks met: 1

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.

###

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.