



Press Release

73 Easton Avenue • New Brunswick, NJ 08901 • Phone 848.932.4350 • Fax 732.932.4360 • www.nieer.org

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CONTACT: *Kirsty Clarke Brown*

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(732) 993-8051, kbrown@nieer.org

ALABAMA MAINTAINS HIGH PRE-K STANDARDS *Expanding State Program Has Support of Governor, Legislature*

Washington, D.C. — State funded preschool education, hard hit by the Great Recession, has turned the corner and in many states is back on an expansion track according to the national survey of the states done annually by the nonpartisan National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. For the second year in a row, NIEER's data show that, nationally speaking, the states have increased funding for pre-K.

Adjusted for inflation, state funding for pre-K increased by nearly \$120 million in 2013-2014 across all 50 states and Washington, DC. Enrollment growth also resumed, albeit modestly, with a total increase of 8,335 slots to reach its highest level recorded over the report's 12-year history. And program quality standards increased as an unprecedented seven states gained ground on NIEER's 10 benchmarks for quality standards.

Alabama is one of only four states (or 5 state programs) to meet all 10 of the NIEER's quality standards benchmarks, a distinction the state has held for nine years. However, relatively few 4-year-olds have access to this high quality state program as Alabama ranks 32nd in the nation in access for 4-year-olds, serving only 9 percent of kids that age in 2013-2014. In 2013-2014, the state met its goal of having at least one pre-K classroom in each of its 67 counties.

In 2014, Alabama was awarded a competitive federal Preschool Development Grant for \$17.5 million. Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley pledged in his 2015 state of the state address to increase funding and access to First Class Pre-K. In April, the Senate passed a \$6B education budget, which includes \$13.5M additional dollars for preschool. The House has yet to take up the Senate-approved budget bill. In the 2014-2015 school year, \$10 million in increased funding is allocated to developing pre-K, opening up places for 1,800 more 4-year-olds. NIEER Director Steve Barnett urged Alabama's leaders to "Quicken the pace of expansion so that every child in Alabama can benefit from excellent early education by 2020."

"A strong economic future is grounded in high quality education, and Alabama's First Class PreK Program provides a great foundation for students to prepare for success in life," Governor Robert Bentley said. "Alabama's voluntary First Class PreK Program boasts standards among the highest quality of any state, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. Our emphasis on quality is paying off in Alabama, and my goal is to continue to expand our

PreK program because it makes a real difference in the lives of Alabama's children.”

“It is heartening to see state funded pre-K, once the fastest growing area in the entire education sector, back on the road to recovery,” said NIEER director Steve Barnett, “but given that the states cut half a billion dollars in funding in 2011-2012 and a number of states have yet to address those cuts, much work remains to be done.”

Joined at the press conference by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Barnett called on all levels of government to dedicate additional resources to preschool education in order to bridge the gap. “Unfortunately, the effects of the recession landed hardest on preschool-age children and our future prosperity depends on their future productivity,” he said.

Barnett said that in addition to adequate funding, state pre-K should have adequate quality and serve all children under 200 percent of poverty. Bold leaders from both major parties are moving some cities and states dramatically ahead, but far too many states have yet to follow. As some cities move to provide preschool for all, most recently New York and Seattle, other areas of their states are left behind. At the same time, quality preschool is becoming a right for every child in some states; other states offer their children no pre-K at all.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.