



Press Release

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May 11, 2015

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State-Funded Pre-K on Slow Road to Recovery Says National Report

New Jersey poised to move ahead after losing ground in 2013-2014

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.

Despite a slight decrease in state funding per child in 2013-2014, New Jersey continues to be a national leader for quality standards and resources dedicated to pre-K education, retaining its ranking of 2nd in the nation behind the District of Columbia for dollars invested per child. Enrollment in New Jersey's state pre-K programs saw no growth in 2013-2014, and the state dropped one position, to rank 18th among 41 states for percentage of children enrolled at age 4, while the state ranks 2nd for 3-year-old enrollment, serving one in five 3-year-olds. Compared to 2002, New Jersey access for 4-year-olds to state pre-K has slipped from 9th place as other states have expanded enrollment. Quality remains strong as programs meet at least 8 of 10 NIEER benchmarks for quality standards.

“While not immune from the Great Recession, New Jersey's pre-K program is poised to move ahead as the state's economy comes back,” said NIEER Director Steven Barnett. “Research shows New Jersey's programs effectively make a lasting difference for its students, and investments from the state with federal grants such as the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge and recent Preschool Development Grant will help more children to benefit in the future. Things look up for New Jersey's young children, especially if the state will build on federal grants to provide the additional investment needed.”

“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 states and cities dramatically ahead, but far too many states have yet to follow. 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. And, as some cities move to provide preschool for all, most recently New York and Seattle, other areas of their states are left behind.

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.