



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: Michelle Ramjug, mramjug@nieer.org, [848-932-4350](tel:848-932-4350)

ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-K IN ARIZONA LAGS BEHIND OTHER STATES

94 percent of 4-year-olds lack access, little support for English Language Learners

New York, NY—Many 3- and 4-year-olds across the nation still lack access to high-quality preschool education despite modest gains in enrollment, quality, and funding, according to an [annual report](#) released today by the nonpartisan National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. While several states, including Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi, and New York made significant progress through a concerted effort to increase enrollment and funding and improve quality, progress is slow and uneven nationally and quality standards are particularly low in some of the nation's largest states such as California, Florida and Texas. Despite the relatively good news this year, the rate of progress is so slow that it will take 150 years for the nation to reach 75 percent enrollment in state pre-K even at age 4.

In Arizona, enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds was largely unchanged in 2014-2015: 1,267 fewer 4-year-olds were served and an almost equal number of 3-year-olds were added. The state's national ranking for access for 4-year-olds dropped one position to 35 among 43 state programs. There was no improvement in terms of quality standards— with the program meeting just five of NIEER's 10 minimum quality standards benchmarks. Arizona's resources ranking improved, going from among the very lowest states (41 or 43) to 32 in 2015. However, the state's apparent increase in per-child spending was not due to additional state resources being spent on preschool. Instead, it was due to more preschools receiving quality ratings that allow them to meet the definition of state funded pre-K and be included in the spending total.

"Arizona's economic future depends on early investment in our kids," said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. "Ensuring that every child has access to high-quality preschool can help pave the way for their success in school, on the job, and in their communities. Arizona made some progress on early education, but much more remains to be done. Arizona's kids, their families, and the state depend on it."

The State of Preschool Report for the 2014-2015 school year, which includes objective state-by-state profiles and rankings, indicates that urgent action is needed from lawmakers at all levels of government to ensure that every child – particularly those from low-income families – have access to high-quality early education. For the first year, NIEER also analyzed states' early education workforce and Dual Language Learner (DLL) policies. In Arizona where 50,000 3- and 4-year-olds, nearly one-third of the state's preschool age population, have a home language other than English, the state could not report how many of these children were served in pre-K and provided little in the way of supportive DLL

services for those it enrolled. The state reported offering professional support in the classroom with coaching and providing incentives for advancing teachers' continued learning and skill development; however, policies do not require pre-K teachers to have the same qualifications or receive the same pay and benefits as elementary school teachers.

The report finds that total state spending on pre-K programs across the nation increased by 10 percent, or \$553 million, since the previous year, bringing state spending in 2014-2015 to over \$6.2 billion. The number of children served by state-funded pre-K served increased by 37,167 in 2014-2015, bringing the total to almost 1.4 million children – the largest number of children ever served by state-funded pre-K. With an average rate of \$4,489, states also made one of the most significant increases in spending per child in recent history.

Despite these gains, the report's findings underscore that those states like California, Florida, and Texas with the largest populations of young children are falling behind—they were among the states that met the fewest quality standards benchmarks, and Texas and Florida also reduced enrollment and spending in 2014-2015. Nationally, enrollment has risen by just one percentage point for both 4- and 3-year olds over five years. The sluggish pace of change disproportionately impacts low-income families.

“We’re encouraged to see many states with both Republican and Democratic leadership increasing enrollment and improving quality, but access to high-quality pre-K in the United States remains low and highly unequal,” said Barnett. “Expanding access to quality pre-K programs is one of the best investments we can make, and it’s critical that we raise and standardize salaries for early education teachers and have strong Dual Language Learner policies in states with large Hispanic populations like Arizona. State governments should increase and stabilize funding for pre-K and raise standards for the benefit of all children.”

The State of Preschool Report reviews state-funded pre-K programs on 10 benchmarks of quality standards, including the presence of a qualified instructor, class size, teacher-to-student ratio, presence of an assistant, and length of instruction per day.

For more information on *The State of Preschool 2015* yearbook and detailed state-by-state breakdowns on quality benchmarks, enrollment, and funding, please click [here](#).

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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.