



Press Release

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2016 STATE OF PRESCHOOL YEARBOOK SHOWS ALABAMA BOOSTING STATE SPENDING AND EXPANDING ACCESS

Alabama meets all quality standards benchmarks, enrollment reaches 20 percent

New Brunswick, NJ — Alabama's pre-kindergarten program is a leader on quality while making significant strides in expanding enrollment, according to the 2016 State of Preschool Yearbook released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

The State of Preschool Yearbook is the only national report on state-funded preschool programs with detailed information on enrollment, funding, teacher qualifications, and other policies related to quality. Decades of research shows that early childhood education can prepare children for greater success in elementary school and beyond, with benefits largest for the most disadvantaged — but only if quality is high.

First Class Pre-K: Alabama's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program enrolled nearly 20 percent of the state's 4-year-olds in 2015-2016, an increase of over 50 percent since 2014-2015. Nationwide, state-funded preschool program enrollment reached an all-time high, serving nearly 1.5 million children, 32 percent of 4-year-olds and five percent of 3-year-olds. State funding for preschool rose eight percent to about \$7.4 billion, a \$550 million increase. State funding per child increased to \$4,967, exceeding pre-recession levels for the first time. Five states met all 10 current quality standards benchmarks. Nine states had programs that met fewer than half; and seven states do not fund preschool at all.

“Early childhood education is a great investment,” said NIEER Director W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D. “We see Alabama maintaining its stature as a leader on quality standards benchmarks, but more work is needed to expand access to the high-quality pre-K that helps children get the best possible start in life.”

In Alabama:

- Total state funding was \$48.5 million in 2015-2016, an increase of \$9.8 million from 2014-2015
- First Class Pre-K enrolled 11,296 4-year-olds, an increase of 4,053 children from 2014-2015
- Alabama ranks 28th out of 44 states in access for 4-year-olds
- State funding per child was \$4,290, ranking 17th nationwide out of 44 states; Funding per child including all reported sources was \$7,299
- Alabama met all 10 of NIEER’s current quality standards benchmarks
- Alabama received Preschool Development Grant funding, totaling \$17.5 million, allowing enrollment of 3,000 additional children and enhancement of Pre-K in high need/high risk areas across the state

Current benchmarks were designed to help states build programs, focusing on resources and policies related to the structural aspects of public pre-K—elements needed for a high-quality program but not fully defining one. This year, NIEER is introducing major revisions to the policy benchmarks for the first time since the Yearbook was launched in 2003. The new benchmarks raise the bar by focusing on policies that more directly support continuous improvement of classroom quality. State profiles in the 2016 Yearbook include both current and new benchmark scores.

Alabama meets all 10 of the new benchmarks, including new requirements for early learning and development standards that are culturally sensitive, supported, and aligned with other state standards and child assessments; supports for curriculum implementation; professional development and coaching for lead and assistant teachers; and a continuous quality improvement system.

“States meeting current benchmarks should be proud of their accomplishments,” Dr. Barnett concluded. “But simply meeting the benchmarks does not guarantee children are receiving a high-quality classroom experience. Research indicates most states need to do more to ensure high quality for every child.”

The State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation while the survey data on which it relies was funded by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The findings, interpretations, and conclusions in this report are solely those of the authors. For more information and detailed state-by-state profiles on quality access, and funding, please visit www.nieer.org.