



Press Release

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2016 STATE OF PRESCHOOL YEARBOOK SHOWS STATE CONTINUES TO BE A LEADER IN HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL

New Jersey maintains high quality, but progress on expanding access needed

New Brunswick, NJ — New Jersey continued to be a leader in preschool investments, increasing state funding six percent to almost \$656 million and enrolling an additional 1,700 children while maintaining quality standards, according to the 2016 State of Preschool Yearbook released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). The New Jersey legislature has promised to expand the program to thousands more across the state, but never funded that commitment.

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.

New Jersey's three state-funded programs--the Former Abbott Preschool Program, Former Non-Abbott Early Childhood Program Aid, and Former Early Launch to Learning Initiative, enrolled a total of 52,770 children, including 29 percent of 4-year-olds and 20 percent of 3-year-olds in the state. In New Jersey, high-quality, full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds is limited to only 35 school districts. The state has the opportunity to add preschool to the school funding formula which would greatly expand access.

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 New Jersey investing resources and maintaining quality standards but more work is needed to expand access to the high-quality pre-K that can help children get the best possible start in life.”

In New Jersey:

- State funding for New Jersey’s three programs was almost \$656 million in 2015-2016, a 6 percent increase of \$34.5 million from 2014-2015, adjusted for inflation
- New Jersey served 52,770 children, including 31,800, 29 percent of 4-year-olds, and 20,970, 20 percent of 3-year-olds. Enrollment increased by 1,737 children from 2014-2015.
- New Jersey ranked 20th in access for 4-year-olds out of 44 states, and 4th in access for 3-year-olds among the 29 states that enrolled 3-year-olds
- State funding per child was \$12,424, an inflation-adjusted increase of \$253 from 2014-2015
- New Jersey ranked 2nd in the nation for state spending
- New Jersey met an average 8.8 of NIEER’s 10 current quality standards benchmarks

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.

New Jersey met nearly all of the new benchmarks. All three programs met the new requirement for early learning and development standards that are culturally sensitive, supported, and aligned with other state standards and child assessments. They all also met the new requirements for supports for curriculum implementation and professional development and coaching for both lead and assistant teachers. However, only the former Abbott program met the requirement for a continuous quality improvement system. State leaders should expand access to high quality pre-K beginning this year by including pre-K in their fix for the school funding formula.

“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.”

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