

DR. ALLISON FRIEDMAN-KRAUSS (0:00.0 – 2:05.0)

(Dr. Allison Friedman-Krauss is an assistant research professor for the National Institute of Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.)

The State of Preschool Yearbook summarizes progress nationally and state by state profiling interstate variation in state pre-K enrollment, spending, and 10 policies that support quality.

The 2019 Yearbook focused on the 2018-19 school year but past surveys go back to 2002. What did we find?

First, year-over-year: enrollment and funding both grew slightly. Spending per child was essentially flat after adjusting for inflation. 44 states and DC have programs that serve more than 1.6 million children with funding now surpassing \$10 billion annually (including state, local, and federal dollars). Some progress was made on quality standards. Mississippi joined Alabama, Michigan, and Rhode Island so that 4 states now meet all 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Disparities among the states continue to be wide. 10 states served 50% of more of 4-year-olds; 17 states serve less than 10% of 4-year-olds, including six states that do not have a state-funded preschool program.

Four states, CA, TX, NY, and NJ accounted for more than 50% of all state spending for preschool. These four states also served 41% of all children enrolled in state pre-K.

Three states meeting fewer than half of the quality standards benchmarks CA, FL, and TX serve the largest numbers of children and the largest numbers of low-income children. Almost 40% of children in state pre-K are enrolled in programs meeting less than half of NIEER's quality standards benchmarks. This is compared to less than 10% who are in programs that meet 9 or 10.

DR. W. STEVEN BARNETT (2:05.0 – 7:04.5)

(Dr. W. Steven Barnett is Board of Governors Professor of Education at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education and senior co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.)

The COVID-19 pandemic and current economic crisis pose a considerable threat to state-funded pre-K. In most states pre-K is discretionary but it needs to grow and improve not just hold on.

- Yearbook data allow us to draw lessons from the Great Recession’s impact on pre-K.
 - Enrollment, spending, and quality standards were cut. Spending impacts continued well after the economic recovery.
 - The impact of those cuts continues. Pre-K’s long-term growth rate remains lower than before the last recession and some standards reductions have not been fully reversed.
 - As pre-K programs tend to serve lower and middle income families, cuts to pre-K exacerbate educational inequality.
- COVID-19 classroom closures have increased interest in so-called on-line preschool. Such programs are cheap but have little impact on learning that matters. Technology is one important tool for early education—but computer programs are not a substitute for real preschool anymore than the wooden puppet Pinocchio was a real boy. Young children learn best through hands on activities engaged with adults and other children.

Hope for a positive response to concerns is that the Yearbook data reveal pre-K is a truly bipartisan issue. As we discuss in the report:

- Preschool leaders include both “Red” and “Blue” states. The top states for state Pre-K access, spending, and quality are a mix of liberal and conservative leaning.
- Seven of the top 10 states for 4-year-old enrollment have Republican governors. Six of the top ten for all-reported spending per child (local, state, and federal) are “Red”.
- The four states that meet all 10 of NIEER’s quality standards benchmarks are evenly split between Republican and Democratic governors.

NIEER has 5 policy recommendations to build on bipartisan support, mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 economic crisis on pre-K (especially to protect disadvantaged children) and support future growth.

- Offer states new federal funding to protect enrollment and quality. No federal program now provides dedicated funding for state pre-K.
- Improve coordination of Head Start and state pre-K to improve enrollment of children in poverty.
- Support state preschool planning—short- and long-term—in response to the COVID-19 crisis through existing and new federal grants and technical support. We anticipate an increase in the number of children eligible due to unemployment and decreased family incomes.

- Ensure that any changes to state regulations in response to the current emergency—are temporary--and do not unintentionally create long-term problems for quality and effectiveness.
- Develop long-term state plans to expand and improve pre-K with realistic timelines and budgets despite the anticipated economic downturn.