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Alaska Makes Progress Serving Preschool Children ***State Moves Up Five Spots in Access for 4-Year-Olds, Needs Greater Focus on Improving Quality***

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in Alaska, which enrolls 10 percent of its 4-year-olds and two percent of its 3-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

Alaska trailed the national average in 4-year-old pre-K enrollment. Nationally, pre-K enrollment surpassed 1.6 million in the 2018-2019 academic year.

Alaska increased spending, adding approximately \$4 million to their Pre-Elementary Programs. Enrollment also increased, partially due to the increase in funding, but also because of improved reporting from local school districts.

NIEER's *The State of Preschool 2019* annual report finds states investing more than \$8.7 billion in pre-K. But progress has been uneven, exacerbating inequality in early education opportunity and widening gaps between the best and worst states for educating young children. The expected recession will make progress more difficult.

"Even when the economy has been strong, progress providing state pre-K has been slow and uneven," said Dr. Steven Barnett, NIEER's senior co-director and founder. "With another recession likely, extraordinary state and federal action will be needed to ensure our youngest learners are not just protected, but better served."

Alaska met one of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent approximately \$5,521 in state funds per student. Ten states met fewer than half the minimum standards for quality. State spending per child varies by a factor of 10, from more than \$10,000 to less than \$1,000.

"Alaska has continued to increase funding to the program despite threats to cut funding, but the state also needs to focus on improving quality," said Barnett. "While expanding access is important, the program must be high-quality to have the intended outcomes on the state's youngest learners."

Despite the economic outlook, pre-K can be protected and advance because politicians from both sides of the aisle and states with very different political leanings have found common ground in offering high quality education to young children.

"States that could not be more different politically, like Michigan and Alabama and Oklahoma and New Jersey, share a commitment to high-quality preschool education," said Barnett. "While there are issues dividing the country, our survey finds quality early childhood education is one where bipartisan agreement is possible."

The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.

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ALASKA: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met one of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 1,304 children, an increase of 989 from 2017-2018.

Total state funding was approximately \$7.2 million, an increase of \$3,885,559 from 2017-2018 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was approximately \$5,521.

Alaska's national rankings:

- 37th in access for 4-year-olds
- 21st in access for 3-year-olds
- 19th in state spending per child