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Arizona Lacks Progress Serving Preschool Children Access and Quality Remain Low

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

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

Arizona spent \$356,383 less on its Quality First Scholarships program this year. Funding reductions resulted in a four percent decrease in per-child spending, with enrollment remaining essentially flat.

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."

Arizona met three of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$4,013 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.

"More needs to be done in Arizona to restore funding to support access and improve quality. Arizona's early childhood programs can deliver high quality but not without adequate financial support and that has never recovered from the last recession. More cuts to early childhood programs in Arizona would be devastating," said Barnett.

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.

The State of Preschool 2019 yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation. 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.

ARIZONA: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met three of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 5,410 children, an increase of 154 from 2017-18.

Total state funding was \$21,712,929, a decrease of \$356,383 from 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$4,013, compared to \$4,199 in 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

Arizona's national rankings:

- 43rd in access for 4-year-olds
- 24th in access for 3-year-olds
- 29th in state spending per child