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New Jersey Makes Progress Providing High-Quality Services for Preschool Children Bipartisan Support Leads To Enrollment and Funding Gains, but COVID-19 Threatens Future Progress

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in New Jersey, which enrolls 30 percent of its 4-year-olds and 20 percent of its 3-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

New Jersey remains below the national average for 4-year-old pre-K enrollment but is among the nation's leaders in 3-year-old pre-K enrollment. Nationally, pre-K enrollment surpassed 1.6 million in the 2018-2019 academic year.

The state continued to provide strong financial support for high-quality pre-K, and made strides to increase enrollment, but potential budget cuts as the state is hard hit by COVID-19 could stall or even undo progress.

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."

New Jersey met eight of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$13,172 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.

"New Jersey's enrollment figures are back on the rise, thanks to a renewed effort to increase state funding for pre-K," said Barnett. "The state stands out as an example of the power of bipartisan support for state pre-K. However, the state needs to recommit to pre-Great Recession levels of program quality."

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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NEW JERSEY: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met eight of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 52,553 children, an increase of 1,869 from 2017-18.

Total state funding was \$692,241,537, an increase of \$8,856,569 from 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$13,172 compared to \$13,483 in 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

New Jersey's national rankings:

- 23rd in access for 4-year-olds
- 4th in access for 3-year-olds
- 2nd in state spending per child