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North Carolina Makes Progress Serving Preschool Children But COVID-19 Threat Looms ***Enrollment Grows By More Than 1,000 Children for Third Consecutive Year***

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in North Carolina, which enrolls 24 percent of its 4-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

North Carolina 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.

North Carolina increased funding in 2018-2019 but not enough to prevent a slight decrease in per-child spending (adjusted for inflation). The state allocated an additional \$9.35 million for pre-K expansion in the 2019-2020 school year.

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."

North Carolina met eight of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$5,450 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.

"North Carolina continues to move in the right direction by allocating additional funding for the pre-K program while simultaneously increasing access," said Barnett. "We are hopeful that this trend will continue in the coming years."

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.

NORTH CAROLINA: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met eight of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 29,509 children, an increase of 1,124 from 2017-2018.

Total state funding was \$160,828,280 (including TANF), an increase of \$1,245,989 from 2017-2018 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$5,450, compared to \$5,622 in 2017-2018 (inflation adjusted).

North Carolina's national rankings:

- 27th in access for 4-year-olds
- 20th in state spending per child