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Pennsylvania Makes Progress Serving Preschool Children but COVID-19 Threatens State Preschool Spending and Enrollment Increased but Budget Cuts Could Rollback Progress

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in Pennsylvania, which enrolls 20 percent of its 4-year-olds and 10 percent of 3-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

Pennsylvania 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.

Pennsylvania increased spending and enrollment in its preschool programs. However, average spending per-child across the state's four programs dropped by \$1,583 (19 percent), adjusted for inflation.

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."

Pennsylvania met an average of 6.6 of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$6,563 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.

"Pennsylvania is moving in the right direction by increasing funding. However, the state needs to commit to improving quality standards for all of its programs and maintain spending per-child levels," 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.

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PENNSYLVANIA: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met an average of 6.6 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 44,756 children, an increase of 14,229 from 2017-18.

Total state funding was \$293,749,908, an increase of \$45,078,547 from 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$6,563, compared to \$8,146 in 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

Pennsylvania's national rankings:

- 30th in access for 4-year-olds
- 9th in access for 3-year-olds
- 16th in state spending per child