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April 22, 2020

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South Carolina Makes Progress Serving Preschool Children, COVID-19 Poses Threat *Increases Spending By \$2.3 Million, Enrolls More Children, but Will Progress Continue?*

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in South Carolina, which enrolls 47 percent of its 4-year-olds and less than one percent of 3-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

South Carolina is among the nation's leaders in 4-year-old pre-K enrollment. Nationally, pre-K enrollment surpassed 1.6 million in the 2018-2019 academic year.

South Carolina has steadily expanded pre-K access, but state spending per-child has been falling and is well below the national average.

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."

South Carolina met seven of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$2,888 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.

"South Carolina is moving in the right direction by serving more children," says Barnett. "Now the state should expand its investment to improve quality standards."

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.

SOUTH CAROLINA: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met seven of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 28,622 children, an increase of 1,103 from 2017-18.

Total state funding was \$82,651,532, an increase of \$2,304,654 from 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$2,888, compared to \$2,920 in 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

South Carolina's national rankings:

- 11th in access for 4-year-olds
- 30th in access for 3-year-olds
- 38th in state spending per child