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Contact: Ernest Landante, Jr.
elandante@nieer.org
848-932-0770

Tennessee Lacks Progress Providing Services for Preschool Children State Earns Additional Benchmark in 2018-2019

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in Tennessee, which enrolls 22 percent of its 4-year-olds and less than one percent of its 3-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

Tennessee 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.

Although the state has remained relatively stagnant in access and spending, Tennessee did gain a quality benchmark in 2018-2019 by strengthening policies for continuous quality improvement.

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."

Tennessee met eight of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$4,841 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.

"It's encouraging to see Tennessee increasing pre-K quality standards," said Barnett. "A renewed focus on continuous quality improvement will have lasting impacts on overall 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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TENNESSEE: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met eight of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 17,879 children, a decrease of 475 from 2017-18.

Total state funding was \$86,552,900 a decrease of \$1,551,601 from 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$4,841 compared to \$4,800 in 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

Tennessee's national rankings:

- 29th in access for 4-year-olds
- 31st in access for 3-year-olds
- 23rd in state spending per child