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## **Too Many Illinois Preschoolers Don't Get a High-Quality Education; the Pandemic Made it Worse**

*Federal/State Partnership Needed to Better Serve Young Children and their Families*

*NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ*—The COVID-19 pandemic set back state preschool enrollment and funding across the country, according to the 2020 edition of *The State of Preschool Yearbook* by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

Pre-pandemic, Illinois saw a large increase in enrollment and met 8 of 10 minimum standards for high-quality preschool education. The state could not report preschool spending for 2019-2020.

Now is the time for a renewed commitment to high-quality pre-K for all, beginning with those in the lowest income families.

Nationally, the report found that:

- Growth in state-funded preschool was slowing before the pandemic.
- The pandemic imposed serious setbacks and reversed recent progress.
- Uneven progress among states is worsening inequality in children's access to high-quality preschool.
- Most states spend too little per child to support high-quality, full-day pre-K and few reach all their 3- and 4-year-olds.

### **ILLINOIS: 2020 FAST FACTS**

Met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 85,183 children, an increase of 4,022 from 2018-19.

Preschool spending was not reported, but Early Childhood Block Grant funding for the 2019-2020 school year totaled \$543,738,100.

Illinois national rankings:

- 20 in access for 4-year-olds
- 3 in access for 3-year-olds

“As program access continues to expand each year, Illinois will need to keep an eye on spending levels to ensure per child spending is enough to support quality,” said Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's founder and senior co-director. “The state stands out for its policies to support preschool Dual Language Learners.”

Nationwide, enrollment in state-funded preschool increased slightly in 2019-2020, but took a hit in 2020-2021 as many programs closed or only offered virtual learning and parents were hesitant to send children to in-person school during the pandemic.

“Illinois must act now to mitigate the pandemic's impacts on young children and pre-K programs, get pre-K back on track for next year, and recommit to long-term progress,” said Barnett. “The federal government should provide support for, and states commit to, high-quality pre-K. While federal rescue and recovery dollars can help, a new federal initiative NIEER has proposed could bring \$254.5 million in federal support to Illinois for preschool during the next four years.”

Across the country the survey reveals bipartisan support for preschool with both "red" and "blue" states among the nation's leaders in high quality pre-K. That offers hope that the nation can move ahead to expand access to high-quality pre-K more rapidly in the future.

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*The National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research and the translation of research to policy and practice.*