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## **New Jersey Expanded Access to High-Quality Preschool Amidst the Pandemic**

### *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 throughout 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.

Prior to the pandemic, New Jersey saw large increases in enrollment and inflation-adjusted spending, and maintained high quality standards. The state committed an additional \$10 million in 2020-2021 to further expand access to high quality preschool.

Other states should follow New Jersey's lead with renewed commitments 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.

"New Jersey emerged as a leader in prioritizing funding to increase access to high-quality preschool, despite the fiscal challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic," said Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's founder and senior co-director. "The state continues to emphasize high quality as it expands access to children in more districts and is one of few states to emphasize serving children beginning at age 3."

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.

"New Jersey must continue to mitigate the pandemic's impacts on young children and pre-K programs while expanding access to high-quality, full-day preschool to 3- and 4-year-olds in more districts across the state," 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 \$162.9 million in federal support to New Jersey 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.*

#### **NEW JERSEY: 2020 FAST FACTS**

Met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 55,413 children, an increase of 2,860 from 2018-19.

Total state funding was \$781,471,254, an increase of \$79,150,473 from 2018-19 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$14,103 compared to \$13,364 in 2018-19 (inflation adjusted).

New Jersey national rankings:

- 22 in access for 4-year-olds
- 4 in access for 3-year-olds
- 2 in state spending per child