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Too Many Tennessee Children Lack Access to High-Quality Pre-K; 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, Tennessee saw a small increase in enrollment but a decrease in inflation-adjusted spending. The state met 9 of 10 minimum standards for high quality preschool, demonstrating progress over the last few years.

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.

“Although Tennessee continues to increase quality standards, current per child spending levels will make them hard to implement,” said Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER’s founder and senior co-director. “Now is the time for the state to increase investments in preschool to expand access and improve quality.”

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.

“Tennessee 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 \$161.2 million in federal support to Tennessee 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.

The 2020 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Cost modeling and funding analyses were supported with funding from the PNC Foundation. For more information and detailed state-by-state profiles on quality, access, and funding, please visit www.nieer.org.

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.

TENNESSEE: 2020 FAST FACTS

Met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 18,465 children, an increase of 586 from 2018-19.

Total state funding was \$85,351,190, a decrease of \$5,461,946 from 2018-19 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$4,460 compared to \$4,912 in 2018-19 (inflation adjusted).

Tennessee national rankings:

- 29 in access for 4-year-olds
- 32 in access for 3-year-olds
- 28 in state spending per child