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Preschool Spending Increases as Alabama Remains a Leader Amid Pandemic

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and intensified existing problems of access to high-quality early childhood education in Alabama, leading to a decline in enrollment during the 2020-2021 school year, according to the *2021 State of Preschool Yearbook*, released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. The state did increase preschool spending amid the pandemic, and hybrid options were provided to continue teaching and learning.

Key findings from the annual survey - focused on the first school year fully impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – are summarized below. In 2020-2021, many states funded preschool to maintain capacity despite unprecedented drops in enrollment due to the pandemic. To account for this, we report both spending per child and spending per child if the program was at capacity (full enrollment equivalent). For some states, the two are the same. States are ranked on the latter.

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool in Alabama was 18,906, a decrease of 1,533;
- State spending for preschool programs in Alabama was \$127,398,077 (including federal pandemic relief), an increase of \$2,293,314 (inflation adjusted);
- Federal pandemic relief funding was used to support preschool;
- Alabama spent \$6,738 per child but spending per child would have equaled \$6,233 for the program at full capacity;
- Alabama met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Alabama is continuing to expand pre-k to get closer to the goal of serving at least 70% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education.

ALABAMA: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 16th (31%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 18th (\$6,233)
- All reported spending per child: 12th (\$8,999)

According to the report, 298,000 fewer children were enrolled in preschool nationally than in the prior year due to [difficulties created by the pandemic](#) such as health risks, closed classrooms, and remote preschool. States across the country served less than 30 percent of 4-year-olds and less than five percent of 3-year-olds in 2020-21. Most states preserved capacity during 2020-2021 allowing enrollments to rebound in the current year, but far too many children still lack access to preschool. Further, total state pre-K spending was \$8.97 billion, an inflation adjusted decrease of nearly \$255 million (3%) from the previous year. Nationally, this is the largest decline since the Great Recession. States also used at least \$440 million in pandemic relief funding to support

preschool, more than offsetting the decline in state spending and preserving pre-K capacity that otherwise would have been lost. However, nationally, state spending per child remains about the same as it was 20 years ago, adjusted for inflation.

“Our country has yet to adequately invest in high-quality preschool programs, while the pandemic has erased a decade of progress and exacerbated inequality,” **said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER’s founder and senior co-director.** “Children and parents in Alabama need access to the state’s high-quality, full-day preschool program that supports early learning and parental employment. The pandemic has made it even clearer that such preschool programs are essential for young children and their families. Alabama and its localities must keep advancing. Alabama has been a leader in providing high quality preschool and the state must continue to serve as a model for other states.”

“Too many children in Alabama and across the country missed out on a year of learning. Alabama must continue to implement best practices that mitigate health risks in order to get children back into classrooms,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “And teachers should be commended for supporting young students amid the challenges of the past year. There is no time to waste. Alabama must continue to fund the Alabama First Class Pre-K Program and provide the resources so that even more children have access to high-quality early learning.”

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The 2021 State of Preschool Yearbook was supported with funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates 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.