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Too Many Arkansas Preschoolers Didn't Receive High-Quality Education Amid Pandemic

State funding for preschool programs declined nationally for the first time since 2014, enrollment decreased in almost every state

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and intensified existing problems of access to high-quality early childhood education in Arkansas, 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.

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 Arkansas was 17,325, a decrease of 2,872;
- State spending for preschool programs in Arkansas was \$147,456,799 (including TANF and federal pandemic relief), an increase of \$31,315,917 (inflation adjusted);
- Federal pandemic relief funding offset decreased state preschool spending in Arkansas;
- Arkansas spent \$8,511 per child but spending per child would have equaled \$7,301 for the program at full capacity;
- Arkansas met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Arkansas is within reach of serving at least 70% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education.

ARKANSAS: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 24th (27%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 6th (16%)
- State spending per child: 12th (\$7,301)
- All reported spending per child: 6th (\$10,748)

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 Arkansas need high-quality, full-day preschool programs that support early learning and parental employment. The pandemic has made it even clearer that such preschool programs are essential for young children and their families. Arkansas and its localities must keep advancing. The state is within reach of universal access for 4-year-olds but the pandemic has set the state back.”

“Arkansas preschools were open and maintained outreach to families, and despite a dip in enrollment, by keeping preschool funding stable during the pandemic, the state is on track to get children back into classrooms,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “The state must work to support the preschool workforce as many teachers are burnt out. There is no time to waste. Arkansas must continue to fund high quality preschool to reduce gaps in 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.