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## **Too Many California Preschoolers Didn't Receive High-Quality Education Amid Pandemic As State Plans for Universal Preschool**

*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 California, leading to drastic declines 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. California's Master Plan for Early Learning and Care lays out the state's plan for achieving universal preschool access for 4-year-olds by the 2025-2026 school year but declines due to the pandemic increased the hurdles that must be overcome to meet this goal.

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 was 157,106, a decrease of 85,665;
- State spending for preschool programs in California was \$1.97 billion, a decrease of \$17.3 million (inflation adjusted);
- Federal pandemic relief funding offset decreased state preschool spending in the California State Preschool Program (CSPP);
- California spent \$12,531 but spending per child would have equaled \$8,109 if programs were at full capacity;
- California CSPP met 6 of 10 quality standards benchmarks and Transitional Kindergarten (TK) met 3;
- California served 46% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education an indication that the state's goal of universal access is within reach but requires a substantial increase in funding.

### **CALIFORNIA: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS**

- Enrollment at age 4: 22<sup>nd</sup> (27%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 19<sup>th</sup> (5%)
- State spending per child: 8<sup>th</sup> (\$8,109)
- All reported spending per child: 18<sup>th</sup> (\$8,116)

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 California 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. California and its localities must strengthen their financial commitments to keep advancing toward the state’s goal of UPK.”

“Too many children in California and across the country missed out on a year of learning. California has committed to UPK for 4-year-olds. To get children back to the classrooms, the state must implement best practices that mitigate health,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “And teachers, who were already underpaid and often did not receive benefits, are burnt out as they’ve worked to provide support and learning to young students amid the challenges of the past year. There is no time to waste. California must increase funding and quality standards as the state expands access in order to provide the resources to address pervasive problems in access to high-quality early learning.”

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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.*