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Montana Preschoolers and their Parents Left Far Behind

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – 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, Montana remains one of the last states not investing in preschool, leaving the state’s young children and their parents without a key support for access to high-quality preschool.

“Children and parents in Montana need high-quality, full-day preschool programs that support early learning and parental employment,” said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER’s founder and senior co-director**. “The pandemic has made it even more clear that such preschool programs are essential for young children and their families. Montana and its localities should step up to meet the need.”

Key findings from the annual survey - focused on the first school year fully impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – are summarized below.

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool dropped for the first time in 20 years due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Total state funding for preschool programs declined for the first time since 2014;
- The problems exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—inadequate funding and limited access—are not new;
- Investments in early childhood education are needed now. Even a modest federal commitment could help greatly.

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.

“Across the country, too many children missed out on a year of learning. But in Montana, preschoolers have been missing out for years,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “There is no time to waste; each year a new group of children in Montana miss out on a year of learning, which cannot be replaced.”

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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.