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## **Pandemic Stalls Pre-K Progress, Leading to Dramatic Enrollment and State Spending Drops**

*Federal funding protected preschool programs from devastating declines*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ** – The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and intensified existing problems of access to high-quality early childhood education, and led to drastic declines in enrollment and state funding 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.

According to the report, 298,000 fewer children were enrolled in preschool than in the prior year due to [difficulties created by the pandemic](#) such as health risks, closed classrooms, and remote preschool. States served less than 30 percent of 4-year-olds and less than five percent of 3-year-olds in 2020-2021. 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 \$8.98 billion, an inflation adjusted decrease of nearly \$254 million (3%) from the previous year. This is the largest decline in funding 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, state spending per child remains about the same as it was 20 years ago, adjusted for inflation.

Key findings from the annual survey – focused on the first school year fully impacted by the pandemic – are summarized below. To account for this, we report both spending per child and spending per child if the program was at capacity (full enrollment equivalent). States are ranked on the latter.

- 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;
- Federal pandemic relief funding offset decreased state preschool spending;
- The problems exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—inadequate funding and limited access—are not new;
- Universal access at age 4 is a reality or within reach in 16 states and DC. Six states and DC serve at least

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Forty-four states, Washington, D.C., and Guam provide publicly-funded preschool to nearly 1.36 million children.

Only seven states enrolled even half and most served less than 1/3 of their 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-K.

Nearly all states served fewer preschoolers in 2020-21 than prior to the pandemic as enrollment fell to the lowest levels in a decade.

States spent \$9 billion on pre-K in 2020-21.

Five state-funded preschool programs met all 10 quality standards benchmarks, 14 states met fewer than half.

70% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education. Ten other states could reach 70% within 5 years by increasing enrollment rates 5 percentage points per year;

- Six states still fund no pre-K program at all;
- Most states need to substantially increase their investments in preschool just to reach all children in low-income families with high quality, full-day programs; and
- Even a modest federal commitment could help greatly to raise quality and decrease cross-state disparities in access.

“As a former preschool teacher, I know just how important pre-K is for our kids’ development. This report hammers home the urgent need to take bold action to get our young kids the quality early education they deserve and finally put preschool within reach for all families across our country,” **said Senator Patty Murray**. “That’s why I’ve put forth a fully paid for plan to lower families’ child care costs, make preschool free, and give parents more high-quality options. We can’t let kids across the country fall further behind during this pandemic—or expect parents to choose between paying for rent or sending their kids to pre-K—and that’s why I’m working around the clock to pass Democrats’ child care and pre-K plan through reconciliation to lower costs for families across the country.”

**Virginia’s Congressman Bobby Scott stated that:** “The COVID-19 pandemic has been a stark reminder of the critical role that affordable and high-quality early care and education plays in not only the development of our nation’s children, but also the stability and health of families and our economy. Unfortunately, as this report confirms, the failure to properly invest in early childhood education is continuing to leave behind our most vulnerable children and families. That is why, as Chair of the House Education and Labor Committee, I moved policy solutions in the Build Back Better Act, and other legislation, to secure the support that our early childhood system needs to serve our communities, The key insights in this report make clear that federal solutions would help accelerate the progress that we made prior to the pandemic. I will continue encouraging the Senate to pass the Build Back Better Act so that we can help ensure that every child in America gets a strong start in life.”

“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 need high-quality, full-day preschool programs that support early learning and parental employment. The pandemic has made it even more clear that such preschool programs are essential for young children and their families. Every level of government should step up. Federal pandemic relief funds helped to protect state pre-K, and even a modest long-term federal investment in preschool could dramatically accelerate progress.”

“Too many children missed out on a year of learning. States must 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, 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. State-funded programs desperately need the resources to address pervasive problems in access to high-quality early learning and to support teachers.”

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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](http://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.*