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Oklahoma 2nd in the Nation for 4-Year-Old Enrollment Despite Preschool Funding and Enrollment Declines Due to the Pandemic

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

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – Oklahoma moved up to second in the U.S. in preschool enrollment for 4-year-olds, 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 report also notes declines in preschool enrollment and state funding during the 2020-2021 school year, all likely results of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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 Oklahoma was 38,450, a decrease of 4,233;
- State spending for preschool programs in Oklahoma was \$178,522,508, a decrease of \$21,917,036 (inflation adjusted);
- Oklahoma state spending per child and spending per full enrollment equivalent was \$4,643;
- Oklahoma met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Oklahoma already serves 70% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education.

OKLAHOMA: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 2nd (64%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 20th (3%)
- State spending per child: 25th (\$4,643)
- All reported spending per child: 7th (\$10,215)

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.

“The pandemic has made it even clearer that preschool programs are essential for young children and their families. Oklahoma is an example for other states for providing universal preschool for 4-year-olds” **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 both early learning and parental employment, and Oklahoma has made great strides despite the pandemic’s effect on enrollment. Oklahoma now has the opportunity to regain the losses as a result of the pandemic, and consider how to expand support to 3-year-olds.”

“Too many children in Oklahoma and across the country missed out on a year of learning, but Oklahoma’s preschool program seems to have weathered the pandemic relatively well,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “While Oklahoma does need to provide more resources to address the pervasive gap in learning, the state is working to implement best practices that will help families and students rebound from the challenges of the past year.”

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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.