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April 26, 2022

CONTACT:

nieer@berlinrosen.com

Too Many Virginia 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 Virginia, 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. Despite the pandemic, Virginia began a pilot preschool program for 3-year-olds and increased funding for preschool.

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 Virginia was 18,056, a decrease of 1,103;
- State spending for preschool programs in Virginia was \$89,005,681 (including TANF), an increase of \$11,834,461 (inflation adjusted);
- Virginia state spending per child and spending per full enrollment equivalent was \$4,929;
- Virginia met 6 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Virginia unified oversight of all early childhood programs under the new Division of Early Childhood Care and Education within the Virginia Department of Education.

VIRGINIA: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 30th (17%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 29th (1%)
- State spending per child: 23rd (\$4,929)
- All reported spending per child: 17th (\$8,314)

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.

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 in Virginia need high-quality, full-day preschool programs that support early learning and parental employment."

"Too many children in Virginia and across the country missed out on a year of learning. Virginia 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 are burnt out as they've worked to provide support and learning to young students amid the challenges of the past year. Virginia should provide additional resources to address these pervasive problems in access and adequately support teachers to provide 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.