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Washington Increased Preschool Enrollment and Spending Amid Pandemic

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

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and intensified existing problems of access to high-quality early childhood education in the nation. Washington was one of only a few states to increase preschool enrollment and spending 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. Washington’s Transitional Kindergarten (TK) is included in the report for the first time, in addition to the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP).

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 Washington was 15,505, an increase of 1,505;
- State spending for preschool programs in Washington was \$150 million, an increase of \$16 million (inflation adjusted);
- Washington state spending per child and spending per full enrollment equivalent was \$9,703;
- Washington ECEAP met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks, meeting the staff professional development benchmark for the first time
- TK, which follows kindergarten standards met 6;
- Universal access to pre-K remains far out of reach in Washington, even taking into account Head Start, and special education.

WASHINGTON: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 36th (10%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 15th (6%)
- State spending per child: 5th (\$9,703)
- All reported spending per child: 9th (\$9,938)

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.

“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.”

“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 Washington 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. Washington must step up and set a firm date to at least serve all income-eligible children.”

“Too many children in Washington and across the country missed out on a year of learning. Washington must 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. Washington ECEAP should be commended for meeting the staff professional development quality standard benchmark for the first time and their commitment to equity in preschool. We look forward to seeing both ECEAP and TK expand access to preschool.”

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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.