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## **West Virginia Remains a Leader in Access to High-Quality Preschool Despite Enrollment Declines Amid Pandemic**

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

**NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ** – West Virginia maintained its status as a leader in early education, one of just 6 states to offer pre-K to all 4-year-olds, despite the COVID-19 pandemic that highlighted and intensified existing problems of access to high-quality early childhood education nationally. West Virginia saw drastic decline in enrollment during the 2020-2021 school year but remains a national exemplar for preschool policy standards and funding as well as access, 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.

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 West Virginia was 11,981, a decrease of 3,161;
- State spending for preschool programs in West Virginia was \$108,979,846 (including TANF and federal pandemic relief), an increase of \$10,349,422 (inflation adjusted);
- West Virginia used federal pandemic relief funding to support preschool;
- West Virginia spent \$9,096 per child but current spending would equal \$7,197 per child if the program was at full capacity;
- West Virginia met 9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- West Virginia already serves 70% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education.

### **WEST VIRGINIA: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS**

- Enrollment at age 4: 6<sup>th</sup> (56%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 18<sup>th</sup> (5%)
- State spending per child: 14<sup>th</sup> (\$7,197)
- All reported spending per child: 8<sup>th</sup> (\$10,032)

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.

“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 West Virginia 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. West Virginia and its localities must remain a leader in providing high quality universal preschool.”

“Too many children in West Virginia and across the country missed out on a year of learning despite everyone’s best efforts. We need to give programs the supports they need to get children back into high-quality classrooms,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “West Virginia’s Universal Pre-K program has demonstrated positive impacts on children and the state should be commended for their commitment to high quality learning and should work to increase enrollment in the next 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](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.*