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Alabama Expands Pre-k Access While Maintaining High Quality and Standards

New Voluntary Preschool for All Efforts Offer Hope to Improve Uneven Access and Quality

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – State-funded preschool was still recovering last year from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Alabama, as it did nationally. In 2021-2022 Alabama remained a leader meeting all 10 benchmarks for quality standards while reaching new highs for enrollment and increasing funding per child. Alabama has continued to focus on their commitment to children and upholding high quality and standards. This is the seventeenth consecutive year Alabama First Class Pre-K has been rated the nation’s highest quality state preschool program.

Elsewhere in the nation, longstanding problems in early education persisted as preschool access remained below pre-pandemic levels, funding was inadequate, and quality standards failed to improve, according to the [2022 State of Preschool Yearbook](#), released today by Rutgers University’s National Institute for Early Education Research ([NIEER](#)).

Key findings from the annual survey, which focused on the 2021-2022 school year, for Alabama First Class Pre-K are summarized below:

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 21,939, an increase of 3,033;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$152,532,676, an increase of \$14,559,556 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$6,953;
- Alabama met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

ALABAMA: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 15th (36%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 17th (\$6,953)
- All-reported spending per child: 17th (\$8,862)

The new [report](#) found substantial year-over-year progress in enrollment nationally with a 13% increase of children in state-funded preschool in 2021-2022 with 180,668 more preschoolers enrolled than in the prior school year, and growth in nearly every state.

Despite this, most children still lack access to high-quality, publicly-funded early childhood education, and preschool enrollment is down by 8% compared to pre-pandemic levels, from the high of 1.66 million in 2019-2020 to 1.53 million in 2021-2022.

States spent an estimated \$9.9 billion on preschool, including more than \$393 million in COVID-19 relief, an inflation adjusted increase of only \$71 million (0.7%) from the prior year. Adjusting for inflation, spending per child has not changed in 20 years and remains too low to support high-quality full-day preschool.

Most state-funded preschool programs reported experiencing a shortage of qualified teachers during the 2021-2022 school year, including Alabama. Few states reported providing incentives for teacher recruitment or retention. Waivers to teacher education requirements were more prevalent than in previous years, raising concerns about preschool quality.

“Alabama has made progress in expanding access to high-quality state-funded preschool over the last two decades and must continue to do so given the proven benefits to children, families and our nation’s economy as a whole,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report’s lead author.** “Alabama leaders should support further expansion of First Class Pre-K to ensure more children have access to the educational opportunities they deserve.”

A handful of states considering voluntary preschool for all offers a bright spot and an opportunity to expand access for nearly half of preschoolers across the country.

“For the first time in decades, new state commitments to voluntary preschool for all give hope that the United States might take a giant step forward in early childhood education. If these states make good on their newly promised investments in preschool for all, they will advance early education opportunities dramatically,” **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER’s senior co-director.** “Alabama should develop plans to offer all children equal access to First Class Pre-K, identifying and removing any barriers while ensuring every community has adequate funding to expand access while keeping quality standards high.”

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The 2022 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.