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Public Preschool Remains Flat Funded in Arkansas

Nationally Uneven Access & Quality Span Two Decades, The Arkansas LEARNS Act Offers Hope

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – In Arkansas and nationally, state-funded preschool partially recovered last year from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While access to early childhood programming in Arkansas has improved over time, not every child who needs it has access to early childhood options, let alone ones of high-quality. Longstanding problems in early education across the country 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](#)). In Arkansas, existing challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the effects of the pandemic hindered access to early childhood services for many children and families.

Key findings from the annual survey, which focused on the 2021-2022 school year, are summarized below for Arkansas:

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 19,097, an increase of 1,772;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$137,535,701 including \$23,535,701 in federal pandemic relief funding, a decrease of \$22,161,173 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$7,202;
- Arkansas met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Arkansas has not committed to working towards universal preschool for four-year-olds;
- The Arkansas LEARNS act will improve preschool access and quality and create a unified early childhood system.

ARKANSAS: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 22nd (29%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 6th (17%)
- State spending per child: 15th (\$7,202)
- All-reported spending per child: 12th (\$11,086)

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. Spending

per child enrolled in preschool was \$6,571. 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 Arkansas, but 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.

“Progress in expanding access to high-quality state-funded preschool over the last two decades has been slow and uneven, despite proven benefits to children, families and our nation’s economy as a whole,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report’s lead author.**

“Arkansas leaders must commit to universal preschool and address issues of teacher retention and pay to ensure that all children have access to the educational opportunities they deserve. The Arkansas LEARNS act can put the state on the right path.”

A handful of states considering universal preschool 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 universal preschool give hope that the USA might take a giant step forward. 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.** “Arkansas should assess its support for preschool against neighbors and other states that provide stronger support for access, teachers, and funding per child. Arkansas’ young children deserve no less.”

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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.