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## **Will California Lead the Nation Toward High-Quality Preschool for All? Enrollment and Quality Standards Must Both Rise**

*Uneven Access & Quality Span Two Decades, New Universal Preschool Efforts Offer Hope*

**NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ** – State-funded preschool partially recovered last year from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in California and nationally. As California embarks on an ambitious new universal program, elsewhere in the country longstanding problems persisted. 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](#)). California’s new initiative to provide universal preschool for all 4-year-olds through transitional kindergarten (TK) responds to all of these problems, but success will depend on leadership to engage families and increase enrollment, especially for those in the lowest income communities, maintain high quality standards such as reduced class size, and ensure adequate funding to reach implementation goals by 2025-2026.

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

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 181,614, an increase of 24,508;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$2,220,877,123, including \$91,647,019 in federal pandemic relief funding, an increase of \$74,622,274 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$12,229;
- California met an average of 4.5 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- California has committed to offering universal preschool through TK for all four-year-olds by 2025-2026;
- California provided incentives for preschool teacher retention and recruitment.

### **CALIFORNIA: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS**

Enrollment at age 4: 18th (31%)

Enrollment at age 3: 16th (7%)

State spending per child: 5th (\$12,229)

All-reported spending per child: 5th (\$12,238)

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. 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, including in California, reported experiencing a shortage of qualified teachers during the 2021-2022 school year. California was one of just a few states to report providing incentives for teacher recruitment and retention.

“Nationally 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.**

“California leaders should remain committed to universal access, adequate funding, and high standards for quality to ensure that all children receive the early educational opportunities they deserve.”

“California will have the largest universal preschool program for 4-year-olds in the U.S. after the implementation and expansion of Transitional Kindergarten. Families will have the opportunity to enroll their children in a free, high-quality preschool option that prepares them for kindergarten and beyond. Now is the time to keep the momentum going to reach full expansion on time to serve the nearly 400,000 4-year-olds in our state,” **said Patricia Lozano, executive director of Early Edge California.**

A handful of major states, including California, 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 California makes good on their newly promised investments in preschool for all, this will advance early education opportunities dramatically and help build a brighter future for the Golden State,” **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER’s senior co-director.** “California must be vigilant to ensure adequate funding, appropriate class size and ratios, well-prepared teachers, and that quality and effectiveness improve as enrollment expands. Both widespread access and quality are needed to realize the promised benefits for California’s children and taxpayers.”

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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](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.*