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Enrollment in Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Partially Rebounds, Standards and Funding Need Improvement

Nationally Uneven Access & Quality Span Two Decades, but New Voluntary Preschool for All Efforts Offer Hope

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – State-funded preschool partially recovered last year from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida and nationally. Yet, enrollment in Florida’s VPK remained far below the pre-pandemic high while quality standards and funding per child remained in need of improvement. Longstanding problems also persisted elsewhere in the nation 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](#)). Florida continues to stand out for the opportunity to support early learning offered by its exceptionally high coverage at age 4, but that opportunity can only be fully realized with higher quality standards and funding per child.

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

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 157,451, an increase of 21,309;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$354,904,063 an increase of \$27,287,816 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$2,254;
- Florida met 2 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Florida has achieved voluntary preschool for all four-year-olds.

FLORIDA: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 2nd (68%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 43rd (\$2,254)
- All-reported spending per child: 45th (\$2,254)

Nationally, the new [report](#) found substantial year-over-year progress in enrollment 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. Thirty-two percent of 4-year-olds and 6% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded preschool. Adding in Head Start and Early Childhood Special Education, public preschool enrollment was 41% at age 4 and 17% at age 3.

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, 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.

“With enrollment rebounding from the pandemic, Florida should act to improve program quality standards including minimum teacher qualifications requirements and supports for teaching quality so that the preschool program can yield the proven benefits associated with higher quality for children, families and the economy,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report’s lead author.**

“Florida could be a true national leader in early education, if it would move forward with the funding needed to adequately pay teachers or to support provider efforts to continuously improve quality,” **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER’s senior co-director.** “With teacher shortages looming virtually everywhere, we expect inadequate pay to pose a serious problem for returning Florida’s pre-K program to pre-pandemic enrollment levels. With funding not much more than \$2,000 per child, it may be difficult to keep classrooms open at all much less offer Florida’s young children the quality education they deserve.”

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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.