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After Nearly 30 Years, Georgia’s “Universal” Pre-K Program Enrolls Just Half of 4-Year-Olds

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 nationally, and in Georgia. Despite 30 years of promising pre-K for all, Georgia serves just 55 percent of the state’s 4-year-olds well below the pre-pandemic peak though even that was far from universal. 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](#)).

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

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 73,177, an increase of 6,623;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$386,946,908, including \$15,988,500 in federal pandemic relief funding, a decrease of \$4,576,209 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$5,288;
- Georgia met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Georgia was the first state to commit to universal voluntary preschool for all four-year-olds, but seems to have given up on this goal;
- Georgia provided incentives for preschool teacher retention and recruitment.

GEORGIA: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 8th (55%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 26th (\$5,288)
- All-reported spending per child: 34th (\$5,288)

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

“Georgia was the first state to have universal state-funded preschool but currently only reaches 55% of 4-year-olds. The state must increase funding, decrease class sizes, and continue to support pay increases for lead and assistant teachers to ensure that all 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 USA might take a giant step forward. If these states and Georgia make good on their promised investments in preschool for all they will advance early education opportunities dramatically,” **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER’s senior co-director.** “Georgia should assess its support for preschool against national leaders that have achieved voluntary preschool for all. Georgia’s 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.