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Illinois Preschool Enrollment Expands, Will Promised Pre-K for All Become a Reality and Make Illinois a National Leader in Early Education?

Nationally Uneven Access & Quality Span Two Decades, but 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 nationally, and in Illinois. Yet, 10 years after the 2012 date the state set to achieve universal coverage, Illinois still has not served more than a small fraction of 3- and 4-year-olds. This year, Illinois Governor Pritzker has promised to make universal preschool a reality by 2027 with his proposed “Smart Start Illinois” plan. Across the nation, longstanding problems in early education have 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 Illinois:

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 76,243, an increase of 9,634;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$411,526,918, a decrease of \$35,737,811 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$5,398;
- Illinois met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Illinois has committed to working towards universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds;
- Illinois did not provide incentives for preschool teacher retention or recruitment.

ILLINOIS: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 20th (31%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 3rd (21%)
- State spending per child: 24th (\$5,398)
- All-reported spending per child: 22nd (\$8,081)

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 Illinois, 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.** “If Illinois leaders move forward with universal preschool plans, all children in Illinois will finally have access to the educational opportunities they deserve.”

A handful of states, including Illinois, 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, including Illinois, 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.** “We applaud the Smart Start Illinois proposal to expand access to high-quality, adequately funded preschool education. We hope that Illinois will follow through to make this proposal a reality. Illinois’ 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.