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CONTACT: nieer@berlinrosen.com,
adavison@nieer.org

Public Preschool in the United States Remains Inadequate in Most States

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, but longstanding problems in early education persisted. Despite enrollment growth, 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](#)).

The new [report](#) found substantial year-over-year progress in enrollment: 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, which is likely higher than what it would have been if enrollment was fully recovered. 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.

“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

THE STATE OF PRESCHOOL: 2022 FAST FACTS

Forty-four states, Washington, D.C., and Guam provide publicly-funded preschool to almost 1.53 million children.

Nine states served more than half of 4-year-olds; Only DC served more than half of 3-year-olds.

Enrollment increased by 13% and increased in nearly every state. However, enrollment was still 8% below pre-pandemic levels.

States spent \$9.9 billion on pre-K in 2021-2022, including \$393 million in federal Covid-19 relief funds.

Spending per child has not changed in 20 years and is too low to support quality full-day preschool

Five states met all 10 quality standards benchmarks; Nine states met fewer than half.

Six states still fund no pre-K program at all

economy as a whole,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report’s lead author.** “To reverse this trend, leaders at the state and federal levels must address this ongoing lack of access, lackluster quality and related issues of teacher retention and pay to ensure that all children across the country have access to the educational opportunities they deserve.”

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 states such as New Jersey, Michigan, Illinois, and California—the biggest of all—make good on their newly promised investments in preschool for all they will advance early education opportunities dramatically nationwide,” **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER’s senior co-director.** “Governors in every state should assess their state’s support for preschool against the leading states in our report for enrollment, quality standards, and funding. This is our best shot at building upon recent progress in this post-pandemic environment and finally providing access to quality preschool for all children and families.”

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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.