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North Carolina Preschool Enrollment Expands but Remains Well Below Pre-Pandemic Levels as Funding Declines

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

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – Although state-funded preschool enrollment partially recovered last year from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in North Carolina, the state did not serve even 1 in 5 children at age 4. Adjusted for inflation, North Carolina’s funding for preschool declined in 2022. A past national leader, North Carolina ranked 30th for access for 4-year-olds. Longstanding problems across the country include not just preschool access which remained below pre-pandemic levels, but inadequate funding and quality standards that 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 North Carolina:

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 23,679, an increase of 3,742;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$174,200,979, including \$2,549,993 in federal pandemic relief funding, a decrease of \$26,578,760 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$7,357;
- North Carolina met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- North Carolina has not committed to voluntary preschool for all four-year-olds;
- North Carolina did not provide incentives for preschool teacher retention or recruitment.

NORTH CAROLINA: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 30th (19%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 13th (\$7,357)
- All-reported spending per child: 13th (\$11,073)

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 North Carolina, 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.** “North Carolina leaders must address this ongoing lack of access and related issues of teacher retention and pay 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 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.** “North Carolina should assess its support for preschool against neighbors and other states that provide stronger early learning opportunities. North Carolina’s young children deserve no less than others.”

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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.