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Pennsylvania Should Invest More in High Quality Preschool for Equity and Adequacy in Public Education

Nationally Uneven Access & Quality Span Two Decades, but New Universal Preschool Efforts Offer Hope

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – Despite some progress, Pennsylvania remains far from offering children throughout the state the early education they need. Just 1 in 5 children enrolled in state funded preschool in 2021-2022. Expansion of access to the state’s Pre-K Counts program could be one meaningful response to the recent Commonwealth Court ruling that Pennsylvania’s allocation of resources to public schools is unconstitutional.

Although state-funded preschool partially recovered last year from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pennsylvania and nationally, longstanding problems in early education across the country persisted. 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 Pennsylvania:

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 45,164, an increase of 4,602;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$351,710,037, an increase of \$7,038,439 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$7,787;
- Pennsylvania met an average of 6.9 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Pennsylvania has not committed to universal preschool for four-year-olds;
- Pennsylvania did not provide incentives for preschool teacher retention or recruitment.

PENNSYLVANIA: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 28th (20%)
- Enrollment at age 3: 11th (10%)
- State spending per child: 11th (\$7,787)
- All-reported spending per child: 24th (\$7,787)

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, 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, including Pennsylvania, 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.** “Pennsylvania leaders should address this ongoing lack of access, lackluster quality and related issues of teacher retention and pay to ensure that all children have access to the educational opportunities they deserve.”

A handful of new 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. As it designs remedies for unfair, unconstitutional school funding, Pennsylvania should join other states working to provide high-quality pre-K to all young children beginning with those in the lowest income communities,” **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER’s senior co-director.**

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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.