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Rhode Island Expands Pre-K Enrollment, Sets High Standards for Quality *Nationally Uneven Access & Quality Span Two Decades, but New Universal Preschool Efforts Offer Hope*

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – In Rhode Island and nationally, state-funded preschool partially recovered last year from the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. 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](#)). In Rhode Island, preschool enrollment has increased steadily, reaching a high of 21% of 4-year-olds in 2021-2022. The state is one of five to meet all 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Governor Dan McKee has included a \$7 million increase in state general revenue to sustain all of the seats in the RI Pre-K program in his proposed FY24 budget. Advocates are supporting this increase and also pushing for a [legislative proposal](#) sponsored by Senator Hanna Gallo and Representative Joseph McNamara that would fund RI Pre-K and provide an additional \$6.5 million in state general revenue to provide competitive compensation to help attract and retain qualified teachers so that the 30 Head Start preschool classrooms and 11 Early Head Start infant toddler classrooms that are currently closed due to the staffing crisis can be reopened for the 2022-2023 school year.

Rhode Island has a strong foundation of very high-quality preschool and infant/toddler programs that primarily serve low-income children. Resource are needed to sustain these classrooms so Rhode Island can continue to make progress toward providing high-quality preschool for all three and four year olds, [a plan that the state estimates would cost approximately \\$94 million per year](#).

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

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool was 2,364, an increase of 516;
- State spending for preschool programs was \$16,405,754, including \$2,084,63 in federal pandemic relief funding, an increase of \$811,32 (inflation adjusted);
- State spending per child enrolled in preschool was \$6,940;
- Rhode Island met 10 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- Rhode Island has not committed to universal preschool for four-year-olds;
- Rhode Island did not provide incentives for preschool teacher retention or recruitment.

RHODE ISLAND: 2022 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 27th (21%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 18th (\$6,940)
- All-reported spending per child: 18th (\$8,786)

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, 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.

“Nationally, 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.** “Rhode Island has steadily increased preschool access to 4-year-olds while meeting all 10 quality standards benchmarks. The state should commit to universal preschool and accelerate expansion to ensure that all children 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 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.** “We praise the work being done in Rhode Island to expand preschool access while maintaining high standards for quality and salary parity for teachers. The state should assess its support for preschool against neighbors and other states that provide much universal access. Rhode Island’s young children deserve no.”

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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.