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Alabama Leaders Have Choices to Make About How to Expand Pre-K While Maintaining Top Quality Standards

National report says it's a "time to choose," as states have bounced back unevenly from the pandemic when it comes to preschool enrollment and quality

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. - A new national report released today finds Alabama is one of only five states in the country to meet 10 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality for pre-kindergarten programs. However, the report finds the state ranks 15th the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and serves no three-year-olds.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) today released its annual *State of Preschool* report, which tracks preschool enrollment, funding, and quality across states. The 2023 State of Preschool Yearbook found that, in the 2022-2023 school year:

- Alabama enrolled 39% (23,388) of four-year-olds, an increase of 1,449 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$173,745,222, up \$10,988,477 (7%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$7,429 in 2022-2023, up \$10 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Alabama met 10 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

"Alabama is a national leader in expanding access to preschool while maintaining top quality standards. However, most four-year-olds in Alabama still do not have the opportunity to enroll in Alabama's First Class Pre-K program," **said W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director.** "In order to reach all four-year-olds, leaders must devise strategies to help more local child care providers become First Class Pre-K providers, in addition to public schools. This will require funding for startup and capital costs, ensuring that per-pupil funding is adequate to support quality classrooms, and supporting lead and assistant teachers in earning their required credentials."

Nationally, the report finds that this is a critical moment for preschool. The nation has emerged, albeit unevenly, from the COVID-19 Pandemic. States are poised to make new progress toward serving more three- and four-year-olds in high-quality, full-day preschool programs. How each state chooses to move forward – and whether the federal government helps – will determine how much real progress is made. Most states have not committed to serving all children, and even those states that have often fall short. Most states need to increase funding per child substantially to enable providers to meet minimal standards for a high-quality, effective program.

During the 2022-2023 school year, states enrolled over 1.63 million children in preschool, marking a 7% surge compared to the preceding year. Preschool enrollment reached 35% of 4-year-olds and 7% of 3-year-olds, with state expenditures reaching \$11.73 billion—an 11% increase from 2021-2022 when adjusted for inflation. Notably, state spending per child surpassed \$7,000 for the first time. However, despite this notable progress, most states still fell short of their pre-pandemic preschool enrollment. While several states made strides towards achieving universal preschool access, six states persisted in not allocating any funding for preschool programs.

"With the pandemic in the rear view, it is time for states to choose whether they are going to support high-quality preschool and how," **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report's lead author.** "Will states commit to serving all four-year-olds? Will states serve both three- and four-year-olds? Will states make the investments needed to ensure that programs are effective? Will states support a mixed-delivery model for preschool incorporating both existing child care programs and public schools? How will states recruit, support, and retain preschool teachers? These decisions will impact millions of children for years to come."

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The 2023 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.