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District of Columbia Leads Nation for Preschool Enrollment, Spending

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 ranks the District of Columbia first in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and first for three-year-olds. The District also ranks first for preschool spending but has room for improvement on implementing high quality standards across all sectors.

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:

- The District of Columbia served 88% of the District's four-year-olds and 79% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 12,789 (an increase of 463 from the prior year).
- Preschool spending totaled \$284,007,157, up \$15,143,727 (6%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$22,207 in 2022-2023, up \$394 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- The District of Columbia met 4 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

"The District of Columbia has universal access to preschool for both 3- and 4-year-olds and should be commended for this achievement," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "The District far surpasses all states by enrolling nearly all 3- and 4-year-olds, demonstrating what a truly universal preschool program can look like. District leaders must now work towards raising quality standards across all sectors of the preschool program, which will improve equity and ensure all children in the city have early education experiences that support their learning."

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. 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 make critical choices when it comes to quality preschool," said **Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., the report's lead author**. "Will states make the investments needed to ensure that programs are effective? Will states support an equitable mixed-delivery model for preschool incorporating both existing child care programs and public schools, and establishing the same high standards for all settings? 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.