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## Iowa, Near The Top Nationally in Preschool Access for Four-Year-Olds, Has Choices To Make

*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 Iowa 5<sup>th</sup> in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 22<sup>nd</sup> for three-year-olds across two preschool programs: Shared Visions and Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program.

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:

- Iowa served 67% of the state's four-year-olds and 6% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 28,194 (an increase of 1,116 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$94,650,334 and \$1,687,987 in federal COVID-19 relief funds also supported preschool, down \$3,246,970 (3%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child, including federal COVID-19 relief funds, equaled \$3,705 in 2022-2023, up \$27 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Iowa met an average of 8 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Although Iowa is a national leader for preschool access for four-year-olds, the state lags behind in access for three-year-olds and preschool spending where it ranks near the bottom.

"Iowa is one of only a handful of states nationally close to achieving universal preschool for four-year-olds," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "Now is time for the state to provide adequate funding for preschool to support quality and ensure all teachers receive higher compensation. These are necessary steps to ensure children in Iowa receive early education experiences that support their learning and maximize their outcomes."

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 commit to enrolling 3-year-olds as well as 4-year-olds? Will states provide a

full school-day option for all families who want it? Will states support an equitable 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](http://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.*