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Contact:

Ashley Davison, NIEER, adaviosn@nieer.org, (848) 932-3142 (o), (609) 969-1587 (m)

Adam Muhlendorf, Longleaf Strategies, adam@longleafstrategies.com, (334) 625-0175 (o), (202) 641-6216 (m)

Kentucky Has a Long Way to Go To Meet Goal of Providing Universal Preschool

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 Kentucky 25th in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 18th for 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:

- Kentucky served 27% of four-year-olds and 7% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 19,523 (an increase of 1,912 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$87,194,951 with an additional \$25,358,944 in federal COVID-19 relief funds to support the program, down \$15,298,045 (12%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal relief funds) equaled \$5,765 in 2022-2023, down \$1,495 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Kentucky met 8 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Governor Beshear's Education First Plan recommends universal preschool for all four-year-olds in the state, but Kentucky is far away from this goal and enrollment has not yet rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.

"Our report on the 2022-2023 school year found that Kentucky leaders had work to do to improve preschool enrollment, funding, and quality. We applaud Governor Beshear's support for universal preschool in the commonwealth, but the legislature needs to act to make this a reality for Kentucky's children and families," **said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder.** "We encourage Kentucky to be playful while expanding preschool to ensure adequate funding for quality and teacher compensation."

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 an equitable mixed-delivery model for preschool incorporating both existing child care programs and public schools? Will states provide a full school-day option for all families who want it? 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.