



April 18, 2024

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)

New Jersey Should Fully Fund Quality while Expanding Preschool Access for 3- & 4-Year-Olds

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 New Jersey 21st in the nation for preschool enrollment for 4-year-olds and 4th for 3-year-olds - rankings that are likely to improve as New Jersey joins 15 other states and the District of Columbia committed to universal preschool.

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 for the 2022-2023 school year. The 2023 *State of Preschool* found that, in the 2022-2023 school year:

- New Jersey served 33% of 4-year-olds and 22% of 3-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 58,387 (an increase of 5,094 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$951,831,781, up \$600,409 adjusted for inflation, from 2021-2022.
- State spending per child equaled \$16,302 in 2022-2023, down \$1,547 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- New Jersey met 9 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER, including newly meeting the staff professional development benchmark.

"Access to early childhood education helps set the tone for the rest of a child's educational career by providing innumerable benefits that will follow young learners throughout their lives," **said Governor Phil Murphy**. "From advanced literacy skills to enhanced social and emotional development, access to high-quality preschool programs has a tangible impact on our children."

"We applaud New Jersey leaders for committing to universal, high quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in a system that incorporates private providers to meet the needs of all families," **said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "It is important for New Jersey to ensure the program is adequately funded, all eligible children can be enrolled, quality stays high, and every teacher is fairly paid for their qualifications regardless of whether they are in a public school or private provider."

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 3- and 4-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 do 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 3- and 4-year-olds? Will states support an equitable mixed-delivery model for preschool incorporating both existing child care programs and public schools? Will states make the investments needed to ensure that programs are effective? How will states recruit, support, and retain preschool teachers? These decisions will impact millions of children for years to come."

###

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.