



April 18, 2024

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Pennsylvania Leaders Have Choices to Make When it Comes to Quality 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 Pennsylvania 26th in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 11th for three-year-olds.

The National Institute for Early Education Research 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:

- Pennsylvania served 25% of four-year-olds and 12% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 52,962 children, an increase of 7,798 from the prior year. State spending totaled \$446,622,741, up \$71,337,963 (19%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$8,433 in 2022-2023, up \$124 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Pennsylvania's four preschool programs met an average of 6.7 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

The State of Preschool Yearbook looks at four qualifying state-funded preschool programs in Pennsylvania: The Ready to Learn Block Grant, Pennsylvania Kindergarten for Four-Year-Olds/School-Based Pre-K, Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, and the Pennsylvania Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. Pennsylvania lawmakers are currently considering a \$33 million proposal by Governor Josh Shapiro that would improve funding formulas and raise wages for teachers in the Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental programs.

"The research is clear when it comes to preschool. Programs must maintain a high level of quality to foster the teacher-child interactions that lead to long-term results," said **W. Steven Barnett, NIEER's senior co-director**. "Attracting and retaining quality teachers is one of the most important implementation challenges facing state preschool programs, and we see this challenge in Pennsylvania. Programs cannot expand to serve more children unless they have the qualified teachers needed to do so. We encourage leaders to ensure that preschool programs have the funding they need to meet quality standards and pay teachers on par with other public educators."

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? 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.