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Vermont, Near the Top Nationally in Preschool Access for Three- and Four-Year-Olds, Has Key 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 Vermont sixth in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and second 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:

- Vermont served 71% of the state's three-year-olds and 64% of four-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total combined enrollment of 8,334 (an increase of 793 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$68,702,087, up \$9,832,410 (17%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$8,244 in 2022-2023, up \$437 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Vermont met 7 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

A new statewide committee was created by legislation in 2023 to study the implementation of Vermont's universal preschool program and make recommendations for increasing equitable access and quality. The committee is expected to report to the Legislature later this year.

"This report highlights the critical role of early education in Vermont," said **Vermont Secretary of Education Zoie Saunders**. "Vermont is committed to early education, and we are proud that our universal prekindergarten program is preparing Vermont's youngest learners for success in school. Our goal is to continue to strengthen our cradle-to-career education system."

"Vermont is one of only a handful of states nationally committed to universal preschool and close to achieving it for both 3- and 4-year-olds," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "Vermont ranks second nationally in serving three-year-olds, which is critically important since research finds that two years of preschool have a greater impact than one. Like other states, Vermont must continue to improve its preschool program. It can do this by providing additional resources to help more Vermont preschool teachers obtain the higher qualifications and compensation needed to deliver the highest-quality instruction and maximize student 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 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. 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 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.

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.