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Too Many North Carolina Preschoolers Didn't Receive High-Quality Education Amid Pandemic

State funding for preschool programs declined nationally for the first time since 2014, enrollment decreased in almost every state

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and intensified existing problems of access to high-quality early childhood education in North Carolina, leading to drastic declines in enrollment during the 2020-2021 school year, according to the [2021 State of Preschool Yearbook](#), released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

Key findings from the annual survey - focused on the first school year fully impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – are summarized below. In 2020-2021, many states funded preschool to maintain capacity despite unprecedented drops in enrollment due to the pandemic. To account for this, we report both spending per child and spending per child if the program was at capacity (full enrollment equivalent). For some states, the two are the same. States are ranked on the latter.

- Enrollment in state-funded preschool in North Carolina was 23,718, a decrease of 7,341;
- State spending for preschool programs in North Carolina was \$185 million (including TANF and federal pandemic relief), an increase of \$16 million (inflation adjusted);
- North Carolina used federal pandemic relief funding to support preschool;
- North Carolina spent \$7,816 per child but spending per child equaled \$6,149 for the program at full capacity;
- North Carolina met 8 of 10 quality standards benchmarks;
- North Carolina is not within reach of serving at least 70% of 4-year-olds across state preschool, Head Start, and special education.

NORTH CAROLINA: 2021 NATIONAL RANKINGS

- Enrollment at age 4: 27th (19%)
- Enrollment at age 3: None served
- State spending per child: 19th (\$6,149)
- All reported spending per child: 15th (\$8,468)

According to the report, 298,000 fewer children were enrolled in preschool nationally than in the prior year due to [difficulties created by the pandemic](#) such as health risks, closed classrooms, and remote preschool. States across the country served less than 30 percent of 4-year-olds and less than five percent of 3-year-olds in 2020-21. Most states preserved capacity during 2020-2021 allowing enrollments to rebound in the current year, but far too many children still lack access to preschool. Further, total state pre-K spending was \$8.97 billion, an inflation adjusted decrease of nearly \$255 million (3%) from the previous year. Nationally, this is the largest decline since the

Great Recession. States also used at least \$440 million in pandemic relief funding to support preschool, more than offsetting the decline in state spending and preserving pre-K capacity that otherwise would have been lost. However, nationally, state spending per child remains about the same as it was 20 years ago, adjusted for inflation.

“Our country has yet to adequately invest in high-quality preschool programs, while the pandemic has erased a decade of progress and exacerbated inequality,” **said W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER’s founder and senior co-director.** “Children and parents in North Carolina need high-quality, full-day preschool programs that support early learning and parental employment. The pandemic has made it even clearer that such preschool programs are essential for young children and their families. North Carolina and its localities must keep advancing.”

“Too many children in North Carolina and across the country missed out on a year of learning. North Carolina must implement best practices that mitigate health risks in order to get children back into classrooms,” **said Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., NIEER assistant research professor.** “And teachers are burnt out as they’ve worked to provide support and learning to young students amid the challenges of the past year. There is no time to waste. North Carolina must address the pervasive gaps in access to high-quality early learning in the state.”

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The 2021 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.