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West Virginia Ranks 4th Nationally For Preschool Access, Has Choices To Make on Quality, Teacher Pay

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 West Virginia fourth in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 20th 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:

- West Virginia served 67% of the state's four-year-olds and 7% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 13,731 (an increase of 463 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$96,556,175 and an additional \$289,520 in federal COVID-19 relief supported the program, up \$4,097,211 (4%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal COVID-19 recovery funds) equaled \$7,053 in 2022-2023, up \$63 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- West Virginia met 9 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

"West Virginia is a leader in providing universal preschool for 4-year-olds. The state also serves as an exemplar to others for creating a mixed-delivery preschool program but must ensure quality standards and teacher pay are equal across settings," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "We would now like to see West Virginia expand preschool access to three-year-olds. The evidence is clear that two years of preschool have a greater impact than one. West Virginia must also be careful to adequately fund preschool."

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 serve 3-year-olds in addition to 4-year-olds? 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.