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## Leaders In Arkansas Have Choices to Make When it Comes to Expanding Preschool, Ensuring Quality in the Classroom

*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 Arkansas 22<sup>nd</sup> in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and sixth 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:

- Arkansas served 32% of four-year-olds and 18% of three-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total combined enrollment of 19,248 (an increase of 151 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$114,000,000 and an additional \$45,389,941 in federal recovery funds supported the program, an increase of \$12,635,372 (9%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including TANF and federal recovery funds) equaled \$8,281 in 2022-2023, up \$596 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Arkansas met 8 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

"Arkansas has a strong state-funded pre-k program, but it serves too small a fraction of the state's young children," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "Efforts to raise student achievement in Arkansas must begin with helping more families access quality preschool. As leaders look to expand preschool services, they should also ensure that the per-pupil funding remains adequate to meet quality standards. The teacher in the classroom is a strong determinant of student outcomes. Arkansas leaders should support preschool teachers in obtaining the education needed to foster young children's learning - and pay them on par with K-12 educators."

Fifty for the Future, a non-profit organization whose members are CEOs of Central Arkansas businesses, has added preschool as a priority. For over sixty years, Fifty has focused on economic development, education, and public safety initiatives to improve the quality of life of those residing in Central Arkansas.

"Our members recognize the crisis in early childhood education which significantly impacts Arkansas families and businesses," said **Lisa Ferrell, Chair of Fifty for the Future's Task Force on Early Childhood Education**. "People who are vital to our state's workforce and the economy are unable to work and support their families due to the lack of affordable quality early care and education. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce conducted a study of this nationwide problem and determined that it costs Arkansas over \$700 million a year. Fifty for the Future is committed to working with the Governor and Legislature alongside families and early care and education professionals to remedy this issue."

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? 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](http://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.*