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Illinois' Smart Start Initiative Puts State on Track for Universal 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 Illinois 19th in the nation for preschool enrollment for 4-year-olds and third for 3-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:

- Illinois served 34% of the state's 4-year-olds and 23% of 3-year-olds in state-funded preschool, for a total enrollment of 81,181 (an increase of 4,938 from the prior year).
- State spending totaled \$438,746,040, essentially flat, adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child equaled \$5,405 in 2022-2023, down \$355 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Illinois met 8 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Preschool for All in Illinois began almost two decades ago but has never been sufficiently funded to truly be a universal preschool program. Recently Governor Pritzker has committed to universal preschool in the state and increased the state's Early Childhood Block Grant funding, putting the state on track to add 20,000 seats. The Smart Start Illinois plan will also improve teacher compensation and preschool quality.

"Illinois is poised to become a preschool leader if the state can make Smart Start Illinois a reality, and truly have Preschool for All 3- and 4-year-olds," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "Illinois ranks 3rd in enrollment of 3-year-olds which is critically important since research finds that two years of preschool have a greater impact than one. However, the state only enrolled one-quarter of 3-year-olds and one-third of 4-year-olds. As the state rolls out universal preschool, it must maintain a commitment to quality and adequate teacher compensation."

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 3- and 4-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. 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 commit to serving all 3- and 4-year-olds?"

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.