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Montana's Children Still Lack Access to State-Funded 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 finds that Montana is one of six states that still lack a state-funded preschool program. By contrast, a record-high 16 states and the District of Columbia are now committed to providing universal preschool.

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 new report offers a roadmap for policy makers, including research-based recommendations for ensuring preschool quality and examples of exemplary preschool policies in red and blue states across the country.

"Access to quality preschool should not be dependent on which state a child lives in," said **W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director and founder**. "Children who attend preschool are more likely to be ready for kindergarten, become proficient readers, and have successful long-term outcomes. Montana families should have the opportunity to enroll their three- and four-year-olds in a quality pre-k, no matter where they live or their economic situation."

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.

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 when adjusted for inflation from 2021-2022. 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.

"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? Will states support a mixed-delivery model for preschool incorporating both existing child care programs and public schools? Will states provide a full school-day option for all families who want it? 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 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.