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## Texas Pre-K Serves the Highest Number of Children in the US, Yet Needs Quality Improvement, Expansion

*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 Texas serves the largest number of preschool children in the country in state-funded preschool, yet still ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the nation for preschool enrollment for four-year-olds and 14<sup>th</sup> 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:

- The Texas Public School Pre-Kindergarten Program enrolled 52% of 4-year-olds and 11% of 3-year-olds, for a total enrollment of 243,592 children, an increase of 21,168 from the prior year.
- State spending totaled \$938,418,031 and an additional \$2,400,000 in federal recovery funds supported the program, up \$11,039,712 (1%), adjusted for inflation, since last year.
- State spending per child (including federal recovery dollars) equaled \$4,235 in 2022-2023, up \$54 from 2021-2022, adjusted for inflation.
- Texas met 4 of 10 research-based quality standards benchmarks for minimum quality recommended by NIEER.

Texas is likely to meet fewer quality standard benchmarks in next year's report, as the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 2729 in 2023, which allows lead teachers to operate with associate degrees or bachelor's degrees in early childhood education or a related field, where previously all pre-K teachers were required to have at least a bachelor's degree.

"Texas serves the largest number of children in state-funded preschool in the nation, yet the program has not updated its quality standards or per-pupil funding structure for years, which poses real challenges for the program and raises questions about the outcomes that can be expected," said **W. Steven Barnett Ph.D., NIEER's senior co-director**. "As leaders in Texas look to help more families access pre-k programs, they should make sure that per child spending is adequate to cover the cost of a quality program. While assuring mechanisms are in place to help expand state-funded pre-k classrooms through private child care partners, the state must also ensure that all teachers are paid on par with K-12 educators and can access the degrees and training needed to maximize student outcomes."

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? Will states support a 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](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.*