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**73 Easton Avenue • New Brunswick, NJ 08901 • Phone 848.932.4350 • Fax 732.932.4360 • www.nieer.org**

*EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE: CONTACT: Jen Fitzgerald*

*April 29, 2013 (848) 932-3138,* *jfitzgerald@nieer.org*

**Virginia State Pre-K Held Fairly Steady During Recession Says National Report**

***Resources Rankings Are Down from a Decade Ago***

 ***But Quality Takes a Hit***

*Washington, D.C. —* Across the nation, state funding for pre-K decreased by more than half a billion dollars in 2011-2012, the largest one-year drop ever, says a new study from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), which has tracked state pre-K since 2002.

The *State of Preschool 2012* yearbook cited two other “firsts”: After a decade of growth, enrollment in state pre-K has stalled. And despite stagnant enrollment, state funding per child fell to $3,841 — well below the $5,020 (inflation-adjusted) national average in 2001-2002.

Virginia state pre-K enrollment has increased 10 percent since 2002, although only 16 percent of the state’s children were served by the program in the 2011-2012 school year. Enrollment grew one percent between 2011 and 2012, raising the state’s ranking for access from 26th in the nation in 2011 to 25th in 2012. The state improved its ranking for resources dedicated to pre-K by two positions, moving from 21st in 2011 to 19th in 2012— largely because many other states imposed more severe reductions. Virginia’s improved ranking occurred despite a year-to-year reduction in per-child spending of nearly $150.

Virginia lost ground for its quality ranking for the first time since 2006, dropping from achieving seven of NIEER’s benchmarks for quality standards to six. This is due to discontinuation of regular site visits for program monitoring, something that is critical to ensuring quality at the classroom level. NIEER director Steve Barnett said he is encouraged by an increase of $3 million proposed for pre-K in the state’s 2013 budget.

“Even though the nation is emerging from the Great Recession, it is clear that the nation’s youngest learners are still bearing the brunt of the budget cuts,” Barnett said. Reductions were widespread with 27 of 40 states with pre-K programs reporting funding per child declined in 2011-2012.

The adverse consequences of declining funding were manifested in a retrenchment in program quality as well. Seven programs lost ground against benchmarks for quality standards while only three gained. Only 15 states plus the District of Columbia provided enough funding per-child to meet all 10 benchmarks for quality standards. And, only 20 percent of all children enrolled in state-funded pre-K attend those programs. More than half a million children, or 42 percent of nationwide enrollment, were served by programs that met fewer than half of NIEER’s quality standards benchmarks.

Education in the years before kindergarten plays an important role in preparing our youngest citizens for productive lives in the global economy. Yet, our nation’s public investment in their future through pre-K declined during the recent economic downturn at the very time that parents’ financial capacity to invest in their children was hardest hit. America will pay the price of that lapse for decades to come. Barnett also noted that “while the recession greatly exacerbated the decline in funding, there was already a general trend in the states toward declining funding for quality.” In this respect, President Obama’s new universal pre-K proposal is especially timely. “We have studied the President’s plan and find it provides states with strong incentives to raise quality while expanding access to pre-K. The plan will assist states already leading the way, states that lost ground during the recession, and the 10 states that still have no state-funded pre-K,” he said.

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*The National Institute for Early Education Research (*[*www.nieer.org*](http://nieer.org/)*) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.*