



Press Release

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ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-K IN NEW JERSEY DECLINES

Will Efforts to Expand Quality Preschool Education in New Jersey Move Forward?

[NEW YORK, NY]—Many 3- and 4-year olds still lack access to high-quality preschool education despite modest gains in enrollment, quality, and funding, according to an [annual report](#) by the nonpartisan National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. While several states, including New York, made significant progress through a concerted effort to increase enrollment and funding and improve quality, progress is slow and uneven nationally and quality standards are particularly low for some of the nation’s largest states like California, Florida and Texas. Despite the relatively good news this year, the rate of progress is so slow that it will take 150 years for the nation to reach 75 percent enrollment in state pre-K even at age 4.

In New Jersey, enrollment fell slightly while quality standards remained unchanged in 2014-2015. The state meets 8 of NIEER’s 10 minimum quality standards benchmarks for the ECPA and ELLI programs and 9 benchmarks in the Abbott program. In total, New Jersey serves about 24 percent of 3-and 4-year-olds. The state ranks second in the nation in both overall funding and state spending per child, but funding declined in 2014-2015, eroding support for quality. The state is looking into options to continue to expand its early childhood programs through several initiatives. Recently, the Senate Education Committee passed a package of bills aimed to improve early childhood education by expanding state-funded preschool to nearly 100 more districts, expanding full-day kindergarten, establishing a new cabinet-level department of early childhood, tax credits for child care expenses, and tax credits for childcare facilities.

“New Jersey’s economic future depends on early investment in our kids,” said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. “Ensuring that every child has access to high-quality preschool can help pave the way for their success in school, on the job, and in New Jersey communities. New Jersey’s pre-K program in the former Abbott districts remains among the nation’s best but most children in the state can not access similar services.”

The State of Preschool Report for the 2014-2015 school year, which includes objective state-by-state profiles and rankings, indicates that urgent action is needed from lawmakers at all levels of government to ensure that every child – particularly those from low-income families – have access to high-quality early education. For the first year, NIEER also analyzed states’ early education workforce and Dual Language Learner policies, which reveal that New Jersey has salary parity with K-3 education for its workforce, and has relatively strong supports for dual language learners.

The report finds that for the nation as a whole, total state spending on pre-K programs increased by 10 percent, or \$553 million, since the previous year, bringing state spending in 2014-2015 to over \$6.2 billion. The number of children served by state-funded pre-K served increased by 37,167 in 2014-2015, bringing the total to almost 1.4 million children – the largest number of children ever served by state-funded pre-K. With an average rate of \$4,489, states also made one of the most significant increases in spending per child in recent history.

Despite these gains, the report’s findings underscore that those states like California, Florida, and Texas with the largest populations of young children are falling behind—they were among the states that met the fewest quality standards benchmarks, and Texas and Florida also reduced enrollment and spending in 2014-2015. Nationally, enrollment has risen by just one percentage point for both 4- and 3-year olds over five years. The sluggish pace of change disproportionately impacts low-income families.

“We’re encouraged to see several states increasing in enrollment and improving quality, but access to high-quality pre-K in the United States remains low and highly unequal,” said Barnett. “Expanding access to quality pre-K programs is one of the best investments we can make, and it’s critical that we raise and standardize salaries for early education teachers and have strong Dual language Learner policies in states with large Hispanic populations. State governments should increase and stabilize funding for pre-K and raise standards for the benefit of all children.”

The State of Preschool Report reviews state-funded pre-K programs on 10 benchmarks of quality standards, including the presence of a qualified instructor, class size, teacher-to-student ratio, presence of an assistant, and length of instruction per day.

For more information on *The State of Preschool 2015* yearbook and detailed state-by-state breakdowns on quality benchmarks, enrollment, and funding, please click [here](#).

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