

Pandemic erased a decade of progress for public pre-K programs, report finds ^[1]

Author: Strauss, Valerie

Source: The Washington Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Apr 2022

AVAILABILITY

[Access article](#) ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Every year the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education releases data on the state of public preschool programs — and the 2021 is out on Tuesday with devastating news.

According to the research, progress made in public preschool programs over the past decade was wiped out during the coronavirus pandemic that began in March 2020. Drastic declines in enrollment were reported during the 2020-21 school year, with 298,000 fewer children enrolled in preschool than in the previous year.

More details from the report are below in this piece by W. Steven Barnett, professor and senior co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research.

By W. Steven Barnett

We now have data on the coronavirus pandemic's impact on state-funded preschool — and it is dire. A decade of progress was lost and existing inequality within the early-childhood education system was exacerbated. Due to issues such as health risks, closed classrooms and remote pre-K during the 2020-21 school year, the first to be fully affected by the pandemic, nearly 300,000 fewer children enrolled in state-funded preschool programs — the first decline in enrollment in 20 years.

States served less than 30 percent of 4-year-olds and less than 5 percent of 3-year-olds, and the number of children enrolled in preschool special education dropped by 16 percent. Not surprisingly, state funding for pre-K also dropped — the largest decline since the Great Recession.

The pandemic confirmed that providing quality preschool programs that benefit children and families is not easy. Programs that support children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development, particularly amid challenges like a pandemic, require well-prepared teachers.

Yet, public preschool programs often skimp on quality and the funding necessary to hire and support them. Teacher shortages have increased across the nation, and many preschool programs are not able to compete with K-12 programs for the best teachers, given the lower pay and lack of benefits. In fact, only five states — Alabama, Hawaii, Michigan, Mississippi and Rhode Island — had programs that met all 10 benchmarks for minimum quality standards to support preschool quality, including college-educated teachers with specialized early childhood training, small classes that support individualization, and rigorous continuous improvement systems.

To be sure, the lack of access we saw at the height of the pandemic will undoubtedly have a negative impact on children and their chances for success in school and beyond, but these gaps are not new. Before the pandemic, half of all 3- and 4-year-olds living in poverty did not attend preschool. State pre-K programs had capacity for only a third of 4-year-olds and just six percent of 3-year-olds. Some notable exceptions exist.

If you live in the nation's capital, your children can go to publicly funded preschool starting at age 3. In six states, most if not all children can start at age 4. In Florida, Iowa, Oklahoma, Vermont, West Virginia and Wisconsin, more than 70 percent of children were enrolled in a publicly funded program at age 4 before the pandemic. Three other states — Georgia, Maine, and New York — have committed to providing access to preschool for all at age 4, though they are not yet there. California and Colorado recently joined them. However, six states offer no preschool program at all.

This is not because of lack of demand. In the spring of 2021, 81 percent of parents whose children would have been eligible said they would be likely to send their children to a free, universal preschool program for children ages 3 and 4 if it became available in fall 2021.

Looking back across the 20 years we have surveyed states about their preschool programs, we find essentially no change in state funding per child, adjusted for inflation. Two decades ago, it was below \$6,000 per child. When adjusted for inflation, this remains the same. That simply is not enough to pay for a high-quality, full-day program.

There is some good news. Several states — and not just those with high incomes — spent well above the average last year, including Arkansas and West Virginia as well as New Jersey and Oregon, along with Washington, D.C.

But others spent far less. Florida spent just \$2,222 per child with no formal mechanism to make up the difference, as other low-spending states do. With such inadequate funding, it is hardly surprising that Florida requires little more than a high school diploma for teachers. Where parents or local public agencies cannot add their own funds to make up the difference in cost, high-quality early learning remains out of reach.

With the last school year's challenges in mind, Americans should consider the value of what we lost in preschool education as well as recognize what too many never had. Even if enrollment fully rebounds and we return to pre-pandemic rates of expansion, America will not provide access to preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds this century. Now is the time to invest the necessary resources to give every child — regardless of their Zip code — access to high-quality, affordable preschool.

The last time Congress was on the verge of approving similar support for young children and their parents (and failed) was a half-century ago. We cannot continue to accept this inequality. The House of Representatives has passed legislation that would support every state in making high-quality, full-day preschool available to all children beginning with the most disadvantaged. The Senate should pass that legislation as well.

As our findings make clear, this is not a partisan issue for the American people — both red and blue states invest in offering high-quality, full-day pre-K. If Congress wants to help children and families thrive following the burdens of the pandemic, it should follow their lead.

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