

State-funded preschool enrollment passes one million mark, yet most 3- and 4-year-olds are denied access to public preschool programs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

State-funded preschools served over one million children last year, yet public pre-K was unavailable for most 3- and 4-year-olds, according to the annual survey released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, The State of Preschool 2007 ranks all 50 states on the percentage of children served and spending per child. It also compares the number of quality benchmarks each state meets for the 2006-2007 school year. The survey found that enrollment, quality and state spending per child increased.

Yet, 12 states offered no state-funded preschool education and others faltered in their commitment to the quality of their early education programs. The report showed that nationally less than half of all 4-year-olds were enrolled in government-supported preschool education programs and one quarter received no preschool. For 3-year-olds the situation was worse, with only 15 percent enrolled in public programs and 50 percent receiving no early education.

Children from wealthy families can attend expensive private preschools while the federal Head Start program and most state-funded preschool education is targeted at lower income families.

"The children left out are disproportionately from middle-income families that can't afford private schools," said W. Steven Barnett, director of NIEER, of Rutgers University. "Failing to provide high-quality early education opportunities for these children compromises their ability to succeed in school and in life and has grave consequences for our society and our economy," Barnett said.

"States must decide whether education of young children will continue to be a welfare program for the poor or an essential investment in all Americans," Barnett said.

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Research shows that high-quality preschool education for disadvantaged children improves later high school graduation rates and college attendance, employment opportunities and earnings, even marriage rates. It lessens future crime, delinquency and teenage pregnancy. In economic terms, high-quality preschool education returns to the individual and the public up to \$17 for each \$1 invested. New studies find educational benefits for middle-income children as well.

"The nation made progress this year, but when you dig deep into the data, the picture is not so rosy," Barnett said. "It is most grim in the states -- Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming -- with no state-funded programs. But serious problems also exist in four states -- California, Texas, Florida and Ohio -- that are home to one-third of all American preschoolers."

California, Texas, Florida and Ohio are among only seven states that meet less than half of NIEER's quality benchmarks. All four spend less than the national average per child. Texas and California do not limit class size. Ohio, Florida and California do not require preschool teachers to have education comparable to public school teachers. Ohio serves not even 5,000 of its nearly 150,000 4-year-olds.

On a more positive note, the yearbook reported that in 2006-2007:

-- Average state spending per child was \$3,642, halting a trend of declining per-child commitments that had persisted since at least the 2002-2003 school year.

-- More than one million 3- and 4-year-old children attended state-funded preschool education programs.

-- Thirty states increased enrollment. Nationally, enrollment was up by 80,000.

-- Eight states met higher quality standards. Yet, some states still require preschool education teachers to have little more than a high school diploma.

-- Of the 26 states that served 3-year-olds, enrollment increased in all but five states. Overall enrollment of 3-year-olds was up 10 percent, mostly due to increases in Illinois, which became the first state to commit to serving all 3-year-olds.

Barnett hailed the increase in per-child funding as the end of "a troubling trend." However, he expressed serious concern that "in the tough budget year ahead there will be more pressure to reduce enrollments and inadequately fund state preschool education."

"Many economically-advanced countries provide free preschool for all children," said Watson. "But in the U.S., most preschoolers are not guaranteed any education at all, much less a high-quality education. If the United States is to remain competitive in a global economy, we cannot lose a single child. We must invest in preschool education that will help put every child on the right track to succeed."

Barnett said taxpayers and children's champions should ensure that investments in early education have priority over less productive spending that promises taxpayers no long-term benefits.

Pre-K funding could be attached to state funding formulas for K-12 education to ensure that funds increase proportionally with enrollment as it expands and that funding per child is more dependable, Barnett said. He also said the federal government could play a vital role by providing an inducement to states to expand enrollment, particularly at age 3, by offering matching funds.

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Other key findings in the yearbook include:

Access:

-- Enrollment increases in most states tended to be modest, but some states made large gains. Enrollment increased by 52 percent in Tennessee, 33 percent in Pennsylvania, and 17 percent in Illinois, Florida and New York.

-- State pre-K programs served 22 percent of 4-year-olds and 3 percent of 3-year-olds nationwide.

-- Three states with "Pre-K for All" served more than half of their 4-year-olds: Oklahoma (68 percent), Florida (58 percent), and Georgia (53 percent). When Head Start and preschool special education enrollments are taken into account, Oklahoma served 90 percent of all 4-year-olds; Florida, 71 percent; and Georgia, 65 percent.

Quality:

-- North Carolina and Alabama once again met all 10 of the NIEER quality standard benchmarks. Eight additional states -- Arkansas, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington -- had a state-funded pre-K initiative meeting nine of the 10 benchmarks.

-- Of the 38 states with preschool education programs, Kansas met the fewest benchmarks, three. Arizona, California, Florida, Maine, Ohio and Texas met only four.

-- Fewer than half the 38 pre-K states required all lead teachers in their programs to hold a bachelor's degree. Eight states did not require any state preschool teachers to have bachelor's degrees -- Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Minnesota, Ohio, and Washington.

Resources:

-- The average state spending per child enrolled was \$3,642. Compared to the previous year, this is an increase of \$175 per child before adjusting for inflation (and an increase of \$32 after adjusting for inflation).

-- Of the 38 states with preschool education programs, state pre-K spending ranged from just over \$3 million in Nevada, a state with about 72,000 3- and 4-year-olds, to \$533 million in Texas, which has about 758,000 3- and 4-year-olds.

-- States still spent much less per child on pre-K than on K-12.

-- States continued to vary greatly in their per-child spending. New Jersey was the top ranked state, spending \$10,494 per child. Twelve states continued to spend nothing on state pre-K.

- reprinted from The Earth Times

Region: United States ^[2]

Tags: quality ^[3]

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