

# Hard times derail growth of state-funded preschool <sup>[1]</sup>

Financial Crisis, Education Week

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## EXCERPTS

Early-education programs are struggling to serve all the children who qualify for them, as the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression has caused states to slash budgets and reduce spending, according to an annual survey of state-funded programs by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University.

Expansion of state-funded preschool was slower in 2009 and more uneven than in previous years, even though total enrollment and spending increased overall, the institute found. With more parents relying on publicly funded preschool as their incomes fell, enrollment declined in nine states, while other states limited enrollment. Twelve states, including Idaho and New Hampshire, provide no state-funded preschool.

"Last year, we saw continued rapid progress but threats of cuts," said W. Steven Barnett, a co-director of the institute, based in New Brunswick, N.J. "This year [2008-09] we saw the pace of growth in enrollment slow and real spending per child decrease after two years of increases."

The NIEER survey ranks all states for the 2008-09 school year on enrollment in state-funded preschool programs, along with the amount states spend per child and how they meet the institute's quality benchmarks. Oklahoma is on top, based on enrollment, quality standards, funding, and the effectiveness of its program, followed by Arkansas, West Virginia, New Jersey, Maryland, Georgia, North Carolina, Illinois, Louisiana, and Tennessee.

The institute uncovered instances of large budget cuts and even the elimination of several programs, underscoring the difficulty of keeping early-childhood education at the top of policymakers' agendas in tough economic times. More than 1.2 million children attend state-funded prekindergarten.

"As family incomes fall, more children become eligible for and in need of state preschool programs," Mr. Barnett said. "Yet, in the face of rising demand, state pre-K budgets are being squeezed, making it nearly impossible for them to meet the need."

The findings follow two years in which states saw large boosts in enrollment and more than doubled their spending on preschool, to \$4.6 billion, in 2008. The increases largely stalled during the recession; state funding rose only to \$5 billion in 2009.

The average amount states spent, when adjusted for inflation, declined \$36 per child between 2008 and 2009, to \$4,143. Spending per child declined in 24 of the 38 states with programs, the survey found.

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#### Demand Intensifies

While it's no surprise that the global economic crisis has derailed U.S. gains in preschool expansion, the trends are made more worrisome because states are continuing to scale back long-planned prekindergarten expansions or debating further cuts, said Mr. Barnett.

In addition, one out of seven children has an unemployed parent, meaning more families now qualify for programs whose eligibility is determined by income, he said.

"Even a state that is flat [in its spending] or has a small increase may not be keeping pace," Mr. Barnett said.

The findings come as hope for a new federal investment in early-childhood education suffered a setback. Money for President Barack Obama's proposed Early Learning Challenge Fund did not come through in the remaking of the health-care system and an overhaul of the federal student-loan program in March. The fund would have provided competitive grants to help states both create and improve the quality of services for children from birth to age 5 who are deemed at risk.

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The survey also found:

- Twenty-three of 38 states with state-funded preschool failed to meet NIEER benchmarks for teacher qualifications, and 26 failed to meet the benchmark for assistant teacher qualifications.
- Six states have programs that meet fewer than half the benchmarks for quality standards. States failing to meet most benchmarks include California, Florida, and Texas, three of the four states with the largest numbers of children enrolled.
- Oklahoma is the only state that offers a high-quality preschool education to every child by age 4.
- Illinois, Vermont, and New Jersey lead the nation in serving children at age 3.

- reprinted from Education Week

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