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### **ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-K IN ARKANSAS OUTPACES OTHER STATES BUT LOSING GROUND**

*Gains Countered by Largest Reduction of State Resources In Nation*

**New York, NY**—Many 3- and 4-year olds across the nation 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 Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi, and 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 in some of the nation's largest states such as 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 Arkansas, enrollment was up by 3,400 children in 2014-2015, including 3,300 3-year-olds, while maintaining standards – meeting nine of NIEER's 10 minimum quality standards benchmarks. Adjusted for inflation, state spending for pre-K fell by \$1.67M in 2014-2015, resulting in a decrease of more than \$1,250 per child. This decrease in funding resulted in the program slipping nine positions in its national ranking for state pre-K resources from 13<sup>th</sup> position to 22<sup>nd</sup>. The preschool program has not had a permanent increase in funding since 2008.

"Arkansas' economic future depends on early investment in its kids," said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. "Ensuring that every child has access to high-quality preschool can help to pave the way for their success in school, on the job, and in communities across the state. We've witnessed both progress and setbacks for early education in Arkansas, and more remains to be done. Arkansas' kids, their families, and the state depend on it."

*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. In Arkansas, where nearly half of preschoolers identified as DLL attend pre-K, the state reported several policies to address DLL such as providing information to families in their home language and supporting teachers' professional learning with other support services determined locally. Information on pre-K teacher salary and benefits was not available to determine compensation parity between pre-K and kindergarten teachers who earn \$48,017 on average.

The report finds that total state spending on pre-K programs across the country 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 others improving quality, but access to high-quality pre-K in the United States remains low and highly unequal," said NIEER Director Steve Barnett. "With so many families in Arkansas unable to afford high quality early care and education on their own, expanding access to quality pre-K programs is one of the best investments the state can make. Rigorous research in Arkansas shows that its preschool programs have promise, but failure to adequately fund them will reduce effectiveness."

*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](http://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.*