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120 Albany Street, Suite 500 • New Brunswick, NJ 08901 • Phone 732.932.4350 Fax 732.932.4360 • [www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org)

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CONTACT: Steve Barnett: 732-221-8002 (c)  
Carol Shipp: 732-672-5292 (c)

## **Survey Finds States Are Failing Nation's Children With Inadequate Preschool Programs**

### **First-Ever Preschool Yearbook Calls for Increased State and Federal Funding**

Washington, Feb. 19—A landmark survey of state preschool programs found that the states are “failing our nation’s children” with ten states spending nothing at all and the level of funding “embarrassingly low in many, perhaps most other states.”

The *2003 State Preschool Yearbook* released today also found that the quality standards of many state-funded preschool programs are “far too low.” The *Yearbook* is the first evaluation that ranks the preschool commitments of all 50 states.

“The research demonstrates conclusively the need for greater state and federal investments in high quality preschool programs,” said W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, which conducted the research.

“Low quality standards and funding levels in most states means too many kids will start school ill-prepared to succeed or even to behave,” Barnett said. “That hurts those kids and all the other kids in their classrooms. States need to do more. And, since many states do not have the resources to fully fund good preschool, the federal government also needs to make a major new investment.”

Most children attend a preschool program prior to kindergarten, yet, they do so in a “system that is highly uneven in access, educational quality, and the financial burdens imposed on families,” according to the *Yearbook*.

“Even the disadvantaged children targeted by most state preschool programs are not assured of access to high-quality programs. Most children and their families receive even less help. Children’s learning and development suffers as a result.”

The *Yearbook* cited numerous studies showing that high-quality preschool programs increase test scores and decrease grade repetition and special education placements of economically disadvantaged children. Long-term, follow-up studies showed high quality preschool programs resulted in higher high school graduation rates, increased college attendance, decreased crime and delinquency, and improved employment and earnings.

“No other public expenditure can reasonably claim to produce higher economic returns,” Barnett said.

The *Yearbook* credited Georgia and Oklahoma with providing far more access to preschool programs than any other states, and noted that Oklahoma also requires that all its preschool teachers be certified. New Jersey’s “Abbott District” preschool program set the highest quality standards in the nation and is required to provide preschool free to all children, beginning at age three, in 30 of the state’s largest and most disadvantaged school districts.

At the other end of the scale were ten states that provided no preschool funding. They were Alaska, Idaho, Indiana, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming. Two states—Florida and Rhode Island—failed to provide sufficient data for evaluation by the researchers.

The *Yearbook* focused exclusively on state-financed preschool programs during the 2001-2002 school year. Not included were evaluations of private programs that receive no state funds.

Head Start serves more than 900,000 children nationally. It is so under-funded, however, it leaves out four out of ten 3- and 4-year-olds from families below the poverty line, and it doesn’t serve any significant number of children from other low- and moderate- income families. Moreover, the *Yearbook* said, Head Start’s standards fall far short of what is required to insure that programs are highly effective, particularly its teacher qualifications and compensation.

The 180-page *Yearbook*, which will be issued annually, ranked the states on three criteria: percentage of 4-year-old children served, percentage of 3-year-olds served and resources committed to preschool education. Each state also received a quality score. The major findings of the research were:

#### **ACCESS**

- State-funded preschool programs serve 700,000 children nationally, but enrollment in the states varies widely—from just 432 children in Nevada to more than 147,000 children in Texas. This variation is not simply a factor of size of the state. For example, West Virginia has a similar population of three and four year olds as Nebraska, but its prekindergarten program served 14 times as many children.

- Georgia and Oklahoma sought to provide universal access to preschool. They enrolled more than half of their four-year-olds in state programs. Seven other states enrolled more than 20 percent of their four year olds, eight states enrolled 10-20 percent, and 20 states enrolled less than 10 percent.
- Oklahoma ranked first in percentage of children served, 56 percent of eligible four year olds. Rounding out the top five states were Georgia, 53 percent; Texas, 39 percent; South Carolina, 29 percent; and New York, 25 percent.
- Among the states that have prekindergarten programs, five states served fewer than two percent of four-year-olds. They were Pennsylvania, Nebraska, Alabama, North Carolina and Nevada.
- Only Massachusetts and New Jersey enrolled more than 10 percent of their three year olds.

### QUALITY

When it came to quality, states were measured against a checklist of ten standards covering such matters as degree and training requirements for teachers and assistants, curriculum, class size, staff-child ratio, family support services and meals. The findings:

- No state met all ten benchmarks for quality standards. Three state programs met nine out of ten: Arkansas, Illinois and the New Jersey “Abbott District” program.
- Among the states that provided state-funded prekindergarten, Kansas, New Mexico, and Texas ranked lowest, meeting only two of the ten standards.
- Only 18 states required preschool teachers in all of the programs they funded to have the four-year degree that every state requires of kindergarten teachers, and that has been recommended by the National Research Council.

### RESOURCES

Researchers totaled each state’s spending on all preschool programs and related activities (including some federal government funds that states administer, but not federal Head Start funds) and divided the result by the number of children served. The findings:

- States contributed about \$2.4 billion to preschool programs.
- Although many state programs depend on added funding from local schools, how much cannot be determined from available data.
- Only two states spent at least as much per child enrolled as Head Start: New Jersey, \$10,088, and Oregon, \$7,463. Head Start spent \$6,934 per child..
- Besides the ten states that fund no state preschool, the states that spent less than \$2,000 per child were Maryland, \$1,751; South Carolina, \$1,473; Vermont, \$1,379; New Mexico, \$782; and Maine, \$451.

The *Yearbook* contains detailed descriptions and evaluations of each state’s preschool programs and is available at [www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org)



The National Institute for Early Education Research ([www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org)), a unit of Rutgers University, supports early childhood education policy by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research.