

At this rate, it will take 150 years to enroll 75 percent of U.S. kids in quality preschool

Answer Sheet
By Valerie Strauss
May 12 2016

Universal quality pre-kindergarten has been gaining support around the country for years now, with solid research showing that it has real and lasting benefits for children — despite what critics argue. But, according to a new report, there is a real problem — while states are making real progress, others are moving at a snail's pace.

The National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University just released its “The State of Preschool 2015,” which details national and state-level data on preschool access and other issues. (You can read it in full [here](#) or [below](#).) In this post, W. Steven Barnett, a Board of Governors professor and director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, writes about the report's findings. You can also see key findings at the bottom of the post.

At this rate, it will take 150 years to enroll 75 percent of U.S. kids in quality preschool

By W. Steven Barnett

At a time of particularly divisive politics in our country, there's widespread bipartisan agreement about at least one thing: smart early investments in our kids pay off for their future, our communities, and our economy. But with quality preschool still out of reach for millions of children, it's clear that we have a long way to go. Preschool enrollment in the United States falls well below that of other developed countries, and those who need these services most — children from low-income families — have the least access to strong early education programs.

In New York, lawmakers have taken decisive action to ensure that every child has the opportunity to enroll in a high-quality preschool program that will pave the way for future success. New York has opened new classrooms across the state and dramatically expanded access to full-day services in New York City. New York City's Pre-K for All now serves 68,647 children, or 70 percent of the city's 4-year-olds in full-day prekindergarten, an increase of more than 250 percent in just two years while improving program quality. In early education, quality is just as important as quantity, and the city's commitment to use data to continuously improve quality is equally remarkable.

It's time for other states to follow New York's lead.

A new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University finds that gains in enrollment and efforts to improve quality aren't keeping pace with the pressing need for these services. Though total state spending on pre-K programs has risen by

10 percent since the 2013-2014 school year, New York alone accounted for two-thirds of this increase.

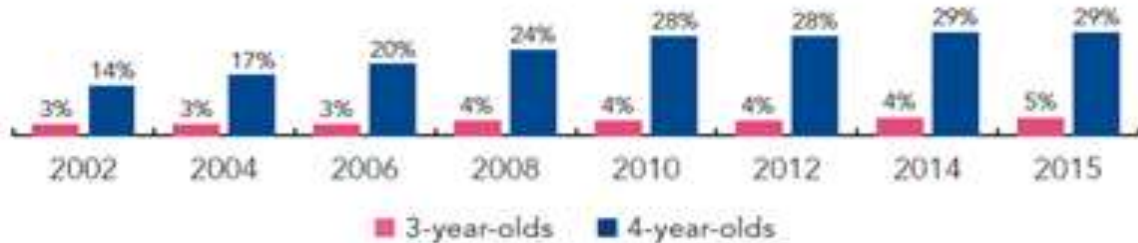
Meanwhile, states with the largest populations of young children are falling behind. California, Florida, and Texas are home to nearly 40 percent of all children served by pre-K, but the report finds these three states were also among the lowest in terms of quality standards. Texas and Florida also reduced enrollment and spending while California showed signs of improvement.

A closer look at the national picture is even more troubling. Enrollment for 3- and 4-year-olds crept up during the 2014-2015 school year, but an increase of less than 1 percentage point each year just isn't going to cut it – especially not for the low-income families who benefit most from these programs. At the current pace, it will take the nation 150 years to reach 75 percent enrollment, a rate New York City approaches after just two years of expansion.

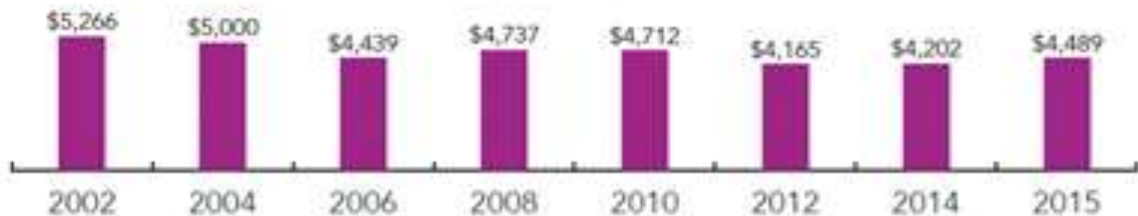
There are pockets of hope throughout the country. Six states – Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Mississippi, and West Virginia – and one program in Louisiana met all 10 of NIEER's benchmarks for minimum quality standards, up from four states in the previous school year. And, growth in quality pre-K has been led by a bipartisan group of governors, from Alabama to New Mexico. Republican governors lead six of the 10 leading states for enrollment.

Change is coming for America's children, but in too many states this is at a glacial pace. The nation pays a high price for this delay. It's hard to believe, but a kindergartner's math and reading skills often predict his or her success throughout school. Early childhood is the worst time to fall behind. Our failure to make quality preschool accessible to every child helps explain why achievement gaps have stubbornly persisted since the 1960's. Young children and their families need immediate action from elected officials at all levels of government to make early education a real priority.

PERCENT OF NATIONAL POPULATION ENROLLED



AVERAGE STATE SPENDING PER CHILD ENROLLED (2015 DOLLARS)



The good news is that the solution is within our reach. New York City is only the latest success story with high-quality, preschool for all. Just across the Hudson River in New Jersey, Union City has implemented high-quality pre-K for all for over a decade with impressive results: even though 90 percent of students are economically disadvantaged, the district scores well above the national average in reading and math.

A recent report from the Center for American Progress estimates that access to these programs would significantly reduce the achievement gap between low- and high-income children beginning kindergarten nationwide. For African American and Latino kindergartners, access to high-quality pre-K has the potential to close the achievement gap in reading entirely and lessen the gap in math by large percentages. In addition to improving performance in school, research indicates that access to early education for low-income children increases productivity when they enter the workforce – further strengthening their chance of finding a good job and boosting American businesses in the process.

Every child deserves a level playing field when they start school, and that’s exactly what access to high-quality preschool promises to children. To see that it’s possible to make dramatic progress toward that goal in a short amount of time, just look at New York.

REPORT: The State of Preschool Yearbook 2015

FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT:

Resources:

- Total state funding for pre-K programs increased to \$6.2 billion, an increase of more than \$553 million across the 42 states plus D.C. that offered pre-K in the 2014-2015 year, a 10 percent increase in real dollars. Two thirds of this increase comes from New York, up \$358 million (inflation-adjusted) from the previous year, due largely to new investments in quality full-day preschool in New York City.
- State pre-K funding per child increased by \$287 (inflation-adjusted) from the previous year to \$4,489. New York again had a noticeable impact on the national average from its large increase in funding per child to raise quality and provide a full day program
- In addition to New York, Michigan increased funding by \$62 million, and 8 other states reported increases of more than \$10 million. On the other side, 4 states reported reductions in spending of more than \$10 million each.

Enrollment:

- Nearly 1.4 million children attended state-funded pre-K, nearly 1.2 million at age 4. Almost five percent of 3-year-olds and 29 percent of 4-year-olds were served in state-funded pre-K.
- Across all public programs—Pre-K general and special education enrollments plus federally funded Head Start—41 percent of 4-year-olds and 16 percent of 3-year-olds were served. Since 2010, total enrollment in these programs at age 4 has risen by just one percentage point and enrollment at age 3 by one percentage point as well
- Enrollment has grown little in recent years because unstable funding in many states does not support growth year after year. Instead, each year some states increased enrollment, while others made cuts. In 2014-15, 13 states (15 looking at just 3- and 4-year-olds) reduced enrollment with Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin cutting enrollment by more than 2,000 children each

Quality:

- Six programs improved against NIEER's Quality Standards Benchmarks checklist and six states plus one program in Louisiana now meet all 10 benchmarks for minimum state pre-K quality standards. West Virginia and Mississippi are the newest states to earn all 10 benchmarks.
- Also on the plus side, the states meeting all 10 minimums for quality standards include some with the highest percentages of children in poverty (e.g., AL, MS, LA, NC, and WV).

- On the downside, California, Texas, and Florida have the highest numbers of children in poverty, serve the largest numbers of children, and have some of the lowest quality standards in the nation.

Major Developments:

- Hawaii and Mississippi joined the vast majority of states in offering state-funded pre-K. Indiana began serving students in state-funded pre-K through two pilot initiatives in 2014. Although Indiana is not included in the rankings because these are small pilot programs, it is a noteworthy addition.

- New York's accelerated policy development sets an example for other states. In one year they added over 13,000 new paces, greatly expanded access to full-day services, and put in place new policies and practices to support high quality. To do this, the state invested an additional \$358 million dollars and raised funding per child by 70 percent.

- The District of Columbia served more 3- and 4-year-olds than ever in 2014-2015, but the percentage of the population served nevertheless fell. Census data reveal that the number of preschool-age children (but not older children) in the District has increased since the District introduced new policies to support high quality pre-K for all. It appears families are voting with their feet (and housing choices) for high-quality, full-day, universal pre-K in the District of Columbia.

- Also good news is the continued expansion of California's Transitional Kindergarten, though not counted as state pre-K it serves children who are too young to enter kindergarten. By itself this program would add 77,274 children to the pre-K rolls, raising the national percentage served to 31 percent of 4-year-olds and adding \$604 million to funding for a grand total of \$6.8 billion nationally.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/05/12/at-this-rate-it-will-take-150-years-to-enroll-75-percent-of-u-s-kids-in-quality-preschool/?wpmm=1&wpisrc=nl_answer