



THE PANDEMIC'S PERNICIOUS EFFECT ON PRESCHOOL



The pandemic ravaged early childhood education in the United States, exacerbating preexisting problems and erasing a decade of progress.

So finds *The State of Preschool 2021*, an annual report released in April by the National Institute for Early Education Research, which is co-directed by NEPC Fellow [W. Steven Barnett](#) of Rutgers. The report, which Barnett co-authored, examines the first full school year of the pandemic, 2020-21.

Among the report's notable findings:

- **Enrollment declined.** Enrollment in state preschool programs is down 18 percent, to 1.36 million children. Twenty-nine percent of 4-year-olds and 5 percent of 3-year-olds attended preschool in 2020-21, down from 34 percent and 6 percent, respectively. Head Start enrollment declined by a third. “Even if states recuperate from losses due to the pandemic and return to prior enrollment growth rates,” the upward trends of recent years will take a while to catch up, according to the report. “[S]tates are likely to enroll just 40 percent of 4-year-olds and 8 percent of 3-year-olds ten years from now.”
- **State spending declined** by \$254 million, adjusted for inflation. Federal COVID relief funding of \$440 million more than made up for this decline, leading to a net gain of \$186 million. However, the federal monies were one-time funds, raising questions about what will occur down the road.
- **Quality declined.** Preschool quality is a longstanding concern, and the pandemic made it worse. Strong programs provide lasting benefits, but weak programs can be

harmful to children. Staffing shortages and policy waivers disrupted programs and impeded the application of best practices.

Although the picture it paints is not pretty, the report does conclude with recommendations for helping preschool programs get back on track. These include:

- **More federal funding.** “A five-year commitment of just \$1 billion in Year 1 with another \$1 billion added each year up to \$5 billion in Year 5, could increase enrollment in high-quality programs by one million children within five years,” the report explains.
- **Federally funded research.** The report proposes:

The federal government should invest in two streams of preschool research: best practices to mitigate health risks from COVID-19; and best practices to support children’s learning and development, school readiness and success, and to prevent any negative impacts, however rare.
- **Address equity.** States should expand access to high-quality preschool, especially for children and people of color, according to the report. In addition, the 40 percent of states that do not report enrollment by family income and ethnicity/race should start doing so.
- **Remove funding caps** from preschool programs in states that have committed to high-quality programs, the report recommends.
- **Expand preschool programming.** States without preschool programs—or with very limited programs—should increase their commitment to high-quality early childhood education, by, at the very least, aiming to serve children from low-income families, the report states.

As bleak as the current picture may seem, the report notes that it could have been worse. “Were it not for the use of federal COVID-19 relief funds and the willingness of some states to sustain preschool spending despite the enrollment declines, the pandemic’s impact on funding would have been much worse.”

NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education

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