



THE PANDEMIC HAS WREAKED HAVOC ON PRESCHOOLERS. THIS PLAN COULD HELP REVERSE THE EFFECTS.



Even before the pandemic created chaos in schools around the world, the United States had a preschool problem. Fewer than one in three three- and four-year-olds were served by publicly funded programs, too many of which failed to meet research-based standards for high-quality approaches. Then, as with so many aspects of education, COVID made things worse.

A recent [report](#) by NEPC Fellow [W. Steven Barnett](#) and Kwanghee Jung of The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) quantifies some of these ill effects based on the results of a nationally representative survey in December of 1,000 preschool parents of children ages three to five and not yet in kindergarten. Given that research has [extensively demonstrated](#) the positive, long-term impact of high-quality preschool programs, these pandemic-related setbacks have the potential to harm a generation of children if not immediately addressed. Here are seven of the most serious challenges:

- 1. Participation has plunged:** In December 2020, 39 percent of three-year-olds attended preschool, down from 51 percent prior to the pandemic. The share of four-year-olds in pre-K also decreased from 71 percent to 54 percent. The declines were even steeper for children in poverty.

- 2. Support for students with disabilities has suffered:** The share of these preschool-age children with Individualized Education Programs declined 22 percent between spring and fall of 2020.
- 3. More preschool-age children face social and emotional challenges** as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, which detected levels of challenge well above “normal.”
- 4. Low-income children may be missing meals:** One quarter of families with preschool-age children and earning \$25,000 or less annually say their children are participating in a preschool program but that they are not receiving meals there.
- 5. Parents prefer in-person preschool to remote instruction:** The percent of parents very satisfied with their children’s preschool programs is only 42 percent for remote instruction, compared to 80 percent for in-person learning.
- 6. Parents of preschoolers face pandemic-related hardships at work:** For example, nearly one in three employed preschool parents say they are getting less done at work because of responsibilities with pandemic education and childcare.
- 7. Reading time has been reduced:** The share of parents who read to their children three or more times per week fell from 85 percent to 71 percent during the pandemic.

As the pandemic hopefully ends, meeting the need for preschool will be at least as important as pre-pandemic, as many three-year-olds missed out in 2020-2021. To address these challenges NIEER published a [plan](#) to provide high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds by 2050. The plan would expand the number of children served by public preschools from 1.8 to five million while also increasing program quality. During the first four years, the plan would focus on enrolling children from low-income families and would cost \$13.3 billion in additional funding for state and local governments and \$7.7 billion at the federal level.

“At its current pace and without federal government leadership, the United States won’t reach all children with free preschool before 2100,” [Barnett said](#). “This proposed cost-sharing partnership provides a measured and predictable path to universal high-quality preschool within a reasonable time frame.”

NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education

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