The State of Preschool 2012: State Preschool Yearbook Press Conference

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Remarks and presentation by NIEER Director W. Steven Barnett at the release of The State of Preschool 2012: State Preschool Yearbook in Washington, DC.

The state of preschool in America is a state of emergency, devastated by the Great Recession and the failure of our leaders to prioritize early educational opportunity.

2012 was a year of firsts, most of them bad. Adjusted for inflation, state pre-K funding fell $550 million. That decrease amounts to nearly $450 per child. Real spending per child is now at its lowest level since we began our survey in 2002, $1,000 below its level a decade ago.

This bad news on funding was widespread. State pre-K spending per child declined in 27 of 40 states with programs. In 13 states spending per child fell by 10 percent or more from the previous year. Only 12 states and the District of Columbia increased spending per child in 2012.

The State of Preschool Yearbook tracks enrollment and quality standards as well as funding. For the first time, we saw no increase in the percentage of children served. In the 2011-12 school year, 28 percent of 4-year-olds and just 4 percent of 3-year-olds enrolled in state pre-K, the same as in the previous year. 16 states had enrollment declines, 7 more had no growth. Only 17 states — fewer than half — and Washington D.C. increased enrollments.

Looking at a state by state map of state pre-K enrollment you can see that in America today access to quality pre-K largely depends on where a child lives. In Oklahoma and West Virginia school essentially begins at age 4. Other states have made tremendous progress toward serving all children, or for some, all low-income children. Yet, 10 states provided no pre-K at all.

Of course, state funded pre-K is not the only option for preschool. Head Start and special education bring the total in public programs to 42 percent at age 4 and 15 percent at age 3. In addition, some children attend private preschools and family day care homes, but these are rarely high quality and too often poor quality.

Quality is also an issue for state pre-K. Some programs with high levels of enrollment do little to ensure that children receive a good preschool education. Yet, access only matters if pre-K is good enough to enhance children’s learning and development. That is why NIEER compiles each state’s policies against 10 benchmarks for quality standards.

A perfect 10 was achieved by Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. Close on their heels for their standards were Louisiana, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Tennessee. Also good news, 3 programs improved against the benchmarks in 2012. However, 7 lost ground including 5 that discontinued regular site visits to monitor program quality. State capacity to monitor quality is essential to ensure that state pre-K produces results even with high standards.

And this brings us back to the beginning. The 2012 outbacks in quality standards were directly related to short falls in state funding. Only 15 states and the District of Columbia could be verified as providing sufficient funds to meet all 10 benchmarks for quality standards. We estimate that as many as 8 or 10 children in state pre-K attend programs where funding is inadequate to provide a quality education.

Despite all this dismal news for 2012, we do see signs that a turnaround is possible. Just this month MS became the latest state to sign pre-K into law, leaving only 9 with no program. Several governors have proposed major new commitments—Governors Snyder of Michigan and Patrick of Massachusetts have proposed large multi-year funding increases demonstrating that public pre-K is not a partisan issue.

Other states need to step up, not just to repair recent damage but to significantly expand the provision of pre-K, raise standards, and build state capacity to monitor and evaluate quality.

Recognizing the need for states to do just this, the President has proposed a federal-state partnership to provide high quality preschool to every American child. The cost of this giant step for young children is small, ¼ of 1 percent of all government spending — not much more than rounding error in the federal budget.

And the benefits would far exceed the cost. Good preschool education provides children with a stronger foundation for life-long success — reducing school failure, raising test scores, and increasing educational attainment.

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