NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

Thursday, August 20, 2026

Newsletter

Pre-K's Growth Spurt: Five Things to Know Now

Since the dawn of the 21st century, preschool enrollment in America has experienced a growth spurt. During that period, the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers has annually collected data on early childhood education programs run by states, which have been the primary drivers of the expansion.

In a new working paper published by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, National Institute for Early Education Research founder and NEPC Fellow W. Steven Barnett and his seven coauthors draw upon this archive, pairing it with other sources of information to paint a picture of how this unprecedented expansion has played out. Here are five take-aways from their exploration.

1. **Expansion has not led to dilution**: Between 2002 and 2024, the number of children enrolled in state-funded pre-kindergarten increased threefold (200%). An early concern was that, as states scaled up, they would accommodate additional students by re-

ducing per-pupil funding, potentially diluting quality. This turned out not to be the case. As states have enrolled more children, their spending increased from $4.8 billion in 2002 to $13.6 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars. On a per-pupil basis, that equates to an increase of $667 to $2,054 per pupil—an increase of 208%. Overall, the researchers found that a one-percentage-point increase in Pre-K enrollment rate was associated with a $19 increase in per-pupil spending, "indicating no trade-off between access and quality investment."

2. **Growth has been uneven**: Growth in pre-K spending and enrollment was concentrated in a subset of 18 states: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia. In 11 additional states (Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky. Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin), enrollment grew more slowly, but per-pupil investment rose. Thirteen states (Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, Hawaii, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, and Virginia) experienced low growth and low levels of investment. And eight states (Idaho, Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming) did not fund pre-K during the study period.

3. **It's hard to explain why some states increased their investments in pre-K more than others**: If you're having trouble finding clear patterns in the results of #2, you're not alone. Researchers explored a host of observable factors—from state gross domestic product to the political affiliation of the governor—to try to determine whether states might be more likely to increase their pre-K investments under certain conditions as opposed to others. "Our results suggest that one cannot easily characterize pre-K expansion as a phenomenon driven by states that meet a particular political or demographic criterion," the researchers wrote. "This finding does not imply that state characteristics are irrelevant to pre-K investment, but rather highlights that expansion might have been idiosyncratically shaped by varied political, economic, and institutional

processes in individual states."

4. **Universal access does not penalize poor kids**: The researchers found no significant differences between the percentage of four-year-olds from low-income families enrolled in pre-K in states that offered universal access to all-comers versus states that restricted access to lower-income families. They also found that states that offered universal access enrolled a larger share of four-year-olds overall than did those with targeted programs for families living in poverty. The researchers wrote:

   > Across policy domains such as health insurance, nutrition assistance, and income support, scholars have emphasized that take-up of services among eligible populations remains a significant barrier to program success, with many arguing that universality may reduce stigma, administrative burden, and informational barriers that often suppress take-up among eligible low-income families. . . . In this sense, state pre-K offers a useful case through which to examine how eligibility rules interact with investment decisions to shape both reach and equity, contributing descriptive evidence about how best to structure public programs.

5. **Universal programs have not yet created universal access**: Universal programs aim to ensure all children can attend preschool. However, on average, just 60% of four-year-olds in universal access states attended any type of pre-K—including state-funded, federally funded and private-pay programs.

NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: http://www.greatlakescenter.org

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