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Wisconsin Made Limited Progress for Preschool Children, COVID-19 Threatens Worse State Remains a Leader in Access but Quality Is Undermined by Weak Standards and Funding

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — The COVID-19 pandemic is putting pre-K education at greater risk, including in Wisconsin, which enrolls 72 percent of its 4-year-olds and one percent of its 3-year-olds in pre-K, according to a new report from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

Wisconsin is among the nation's leaders in 4-year-old pre-K enrollment. Nationally, pre-K enrollment surpassed 1.6 million in the 2018-2019 academic year.

Pre-k funding per child is well below the national average. Quality measures averaged across both the state's programs remain among the nation's lowest. COVID-19's budget impacts could further reduce supports for quality without strong political will to hold the line

NIEER's *The State of Preschool 2019* annual report finds states investing more than \$8.7 billion in pre-K. But progress has been uneven, exacerbating inequality in early education opportunity and widening gaps between the best and worst states for educating young children. The expected recession will make progress more difficult.

"Even when the economy has been strong, progress providing state pre-K has been slow and uneven," said Dr. Steven Barnett, NIEER's senior co-director and founder. "With another recession likely, extraordinary state and federal action will be needed to ensure our youngest learners are not just protected, but better served."

Wisconsin met three of ten minimum standards for high-quality preschool education and spent \$3,402 in state funds per student. Ten states met fewer than half the minimum standards for quality. State spending per child varies by a factor of 10, from more than \$10,000 to less than \$1,000.

"Wisconsin is a leader in pre-K access, further increasing enrollment this year," said Barnett. "But spending and quality are low and additional resources must be invested to improve program quality across the state."

Despite the economic outlook, pre-K can be protected and advance because politicians from both sides of the aisle and states with very different political leanings have found common ground in offering high quality education to young children.

"States that could not be more different politically, like Michigan and Alabama and Oklahoma and New Jersey, share a commitment to high-quality preschool education," said Barnett. "While there are issues dividing the country, our survey finds quality early childhood education is one where bipartisan agreement is possible."

The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.

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WISCONSIN: 2018-19 FAST FACTS

Met three of 10 quality standards benchmarks.

Enrolled 51,618 children, an increase of 2,831 from 2017-18.

Total state funding was \$175,620,801, a decrease of \$22,488,770 from 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

State spending-per-child was \$3,402, compared to \$4,061 in 2017-18 (inflation adjusted).

Wisconsin's national rankings:

- 5th in access for 4-year-olds
- 29th in access for 3-year-olds
- 35th in state spending per child