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California State Preschool Program Ranks Low on Enrollment Quality Standards among the Lowest

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ, March 19 – State-funded preschools served over one million children last year, yet public pre-K was unavailable for most 3- and 4-year-olds, according to *The State of Preschool 2007: State Preschool Yearbook* released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

The report ranks all 50 states on the percentage of children served and spending per child. It also compares the number of quality benchmarks each state meets. The survey found nationally that enrollment, quality and state spending increased in the 2006-2007 school year.

California's state-funded preschool program ranks poorly compared to other states, serving only 11 percent of the state's 4-year-olds, placing 24th out of 38 states that fund preschool education. It failed to meet even half of NIEER's 10 quality standard benchmarks, one of only eight state programs to do so. The state's \$3,486 in per-child spending ranked it 18th.

Children from wealthy families can attend expensive private preschools while the federal Head Start program and most state-funded preschool education is targeted at lower income families.

"The children left out are disproportionately from middle-income families that can't afford private schools," said W. Steven Barnett, NIEER's executive director. "Failing to provide high-quality early education opportunities for these children compromises their ability to succeed in school and in life and has grave consequences for our society and economy."

"States must decide whether education of young children will continue to be a welfare program for the poor or an essential investment in all Americans," he said.

On a more positive note, the yearbook reported that in 2006-2007:

- Average state spending per child was \$3,642, halting a trend of declining per-child commitments that had persisted since at least the 2002-2003 school year.
- More than one million 3- and 4-year-old children attended state-funded preschool education programs.
- Thirty states increased enrollment. Nationally, enrollment was up by 80,000.
- Eight states met higher quality standards. Yet, some states still require preschool education teachers to have little more than a high school diploma.

- Of the 26 states that served 3-year-olds, enrollment increased in all but five states. Overall enrollment of 3-year-olds was up 10 percent, mostly due to increases in Illinois, which became the first state to commit to serving all 3-year-olds.

Barnett hailed the increase in per-child funding as the end of “a troubling trend.” However, he expressed serious concern that “in the tough budget year ahead there will be more pressure to reduce enrollments and inadequately fund state preschool education.” Barnett said taxpayers and children’s champions should ensure that investments in early education have priority over less productive spending that promises taxpayers no long-term benefits.

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The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org), a unit of the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. NIEER is supported through grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts and others.

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