



Report: Preschool programs lagging

State ranks last in access for 3-year-olds

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By Sally Kalson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Where they exist at all, state-run preschool programs in this country are mostly underfunded, inaccessible and lacking quality -- and Pennsylvania is at or near the bottom of the heap by most measures.

So says a new report to be released today, the first to assess what kind of education states are providing for children 3 and 4 years old.

The State Preschool Yearbook, a project of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, aims to become an annual "checkup" on how state governments are doing in their efforts to educate young children.

The yardstick is needed, its authors say, because the nation is changing the way it educates young children.

Most spend time in some kind of preschool before they enter kindergarten, but the programs are highly uneven, with quality often based on how much parents can afford to pay.

With mountains of evidence showing that a good preschool education improves a child's chances for the future, especially in the cases of low-income children, states are beginning to step up to that role. But, the report shows, they still have a long way to go.

The report ranks all 50 states on a series of benchmarks, including enrollment, curriculum standards, teacher education and training, class size and spending.

New Jersey, for example, ranked near the top in most categories. It enrolled 24 percent of 4-year-olds in state preschool programs in 2002-03, spent \$11,000 per child and met nine out of 10 quality standards.

Pennsylvania, by contrast, enrolled 2 percent of 4-year-olds, for a ranking of 33rd. With no 3-year-olds enrolled, it came in dead last for access in that category.

State spending per child is not ranked because the few state programs that exist are funded by private money, local taxes or federal grants. And those programs met only three of the 10

Online graphic

[See a chart](#) showing how Pennsylvania ranks in early childhood program enrollment.

quality standards -- a bachelor's degree requirement for teachers, in-service training, and screening of children in vision, hearing and health.

But the state does not require teachers to have any specialized early childhood training, nor does it have curriculum standards, limits on class size, staff-child ratios, family support services or meal requirements.

This situation could change, however.

While Gov. Ed Rendell did not get the \$550 million he sought last year for early childhood programs, the state Legislature did allocate \$175 million in block grants for 2004-05.

Schools can, however, use that money any way they choose.

"Pennsylvania is down toward the bottom of the pack, but it is a state to watch because of the proposal for block grant money," said W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research.

"School districts don't have to put that money into pre-K, but it would be one of the best investments they could make. It will be up to local citizens to make sure that they do, and our report gives them the information to back up that demand."

Joan Benso, of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, said that if the economy improves, the money allocated for preschool programs could go up to \$250 million. But even then, she said, progress could be limited.

"The proposal we're advancing builds pre-K on top of a crumbling public education system," Benso said. "School districts that are strapped for money might want to put the block grant money elsewhere."

"Until we deal with the baseline of education funding, enhancements on top of this system are not likely to change what schools are doing for children, except in very isolated cases."

The institute's complete report can be found at www.nieer.org.

Preparing for kindergarten

Pennsylvania has one of the lowest percentages of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in state-funded preschool programs:

	3-year-olds	4-year-olds
No program	89%	83%
Head Start	7%	10%
Special education program	4%	5%
Pre-kindergarten	0	2%

How does Pa. rank?

Here's how Pennsylvania compares with other states in the region:



	% districts with pre-K program	early childhood courses required for teachers?	support programs for families?
Pennsylvania	6%	No	No
New Jersey	25%	Yes**	Yes
Ohio	18%*	Yes	Yes
West Virginia	62%	Yes	No
Maryland	100%	Yes	No
Virginia	57%	Yes	Yes
New York	36%	Yes**	Yes

* does not include Head Start

** required for some, depending on program

Source: National Institute for Early Education Research

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[Back](#)

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