Research Protocol for CityHealth: High-Quality, Accessible Pre-Kindergarten

Prepared by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) & Center for Public Health Law Research (CPHLR)

October 2025

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Research Protocol

I. **Date of Protocol:** October 10, 2025

II. **Scope:** Compile data on state and local pre-kindergarten (pre-K) efforts for the 75 largest U.S. cities. The purpose of the CityHealth project is to collect important public health policies and determine what makes a healthy city. For a particular policy, the goal is to display the state, county, and city laws, policies, or data involved in shaping this policy at the city level. A cross-sectional dataset capturing currently available data valid through October 10, 2025, was used. This dataset includes an analysis of state- and locally-funded pre-K programs by evaluating programs against the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) 2024 Yearbook[1] benchmarks that covers the 2023-2024 school year and funded enrollment up to the 2025-2026 school year.

NIEER conducts academic research to inform policy supporting high-quality, early education for all young children through independent, research-based analysis and technical assistance to policymakers, journalists, researchers, and educators.

Annually, the NIEER State of Preschool Yearbook analyzes state-funded preschool programs' policies on a set of 10 benchmarks that are consistent with what research suggests as minimums for highly effective programs. In the 2024 Yearbook, four of the 10 standards involve teacher credentials and training. In order to meet these teacher benchmarks, programs must require teachers to have at least a bachelor's degree; specialization in preschool education; assistant teachers must be required to have at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent credential based on coursework; and teachers and assistant teachers are required to have at least 15 hours of annual in-service training each, participate in coaching, and have individualized professional development plans. Class sizes must be limited to 20 children and have a teacher-to-child ratio of no more than 1 staff member to 10 children. The State's Early Learning Standards must be comprehensive, covering the five areas identified by the National Education Goals Panel: children's physical well-being and motor development, social/emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge, aligned with required child assessments and have state- or city-level support to implement. Evidence of curriculum support includes both guidance or approval for selecting one as well as training or ongoing technical support to implement. Programs must also require vision, hearing, health and developmental screenings and referrals. Finally, the last benchmark requires programs to implement a system of continued quality improvement, which includes regular onsite visits to measure classroom quality and the required use of data collected through these structured observations.

III. **Primary Data Collection**

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[1] Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Hodges, K. S., Garver, K. A., Duer, J., Weisenfeld, G., & Siegel, J. (2025). *The State of Preschool 2024: State Preschool Yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

1. **Original project dates:** June 1, 2025 – September 30, 2025.

2. **Data collection methods:** Data were collected through examining public online records including websites, documents such as program guidelines and legislation, and city and school district budgets; the 2024 NIEER Yearbook; as well as interviews with city and/or state pre-K administrators; and any external program evaluations if available as a public record.

3. **Databases used**: The 2024 NIEER Yearbook (2023-2024 school year) and the 2023 American Community Survey Under 5 Years of Age population data set from the U.S. Census Bureau. When available, state datasets that included pre-K programs at the city level and/or city pre-K database sets were used.

4. **Search terms:** Names of each city and: state funded pre-K, state funded preschool, city funded pre-K, city funded preschool, locally funded pre-K, locally funded preschool, public school pre-K, public school preschool, names of each city's largest public school district.

5. **Information about additional inclusion or exclusion criteria:**
   I.   For cities with multiple programs operating in 2023-2024, the program that operated solely in the city with local dollars was used first, if none was available, then the CityHealth ranking was based on the state-funded program with the greatest enrollment.
   II. Programs that were primarily funded with federal funds such as Head Start and the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) which is funded through the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) were not included.
   III. Only programs that were primarily center-based (e.g., child care centers, Head Start programs, or public schools) were included.
   IV. For cities with multiple school districts, the school district with the greatest number of students enrolled was selected.

6. **Inclusion or exclusion criteria by question**
   I.   For the Enrollment variable, "high" enrollment means at least 30% of the city's 4-year-old population served. "Low" enrollment means less than 30% of the city's 4-year-old population served.
   II. For the Equity Data variable, "met" means that ethnicity and/or race data are collected for students and/or teachers at the city level and are able to be reported. "Not met" means the data are not collected, or that the ethnicity and/or race data are collected but not able to be reported at the city level.
   III. For the Local Funding variable, "met" means the city (or county) adds local dollars to support preschoolers or early childhood education such as creating a separate preschool program, increasing access to the state program, enhancing the quality of the program (meeting more benchmarks than the state), funding an ECE contact person/lead in the city, or funding a required local match for the state program (i.e., school funding formula). "Not met" means the city does not fund or add local dollars to support preschool or early childhood education.

IV.   Process

After the number of programs was identified in each city, information about each of

the programs was gathered through website review; document review, including program guidelines and legislation; the 2024 NIEER Yearbook; and any external evaluations if available. After data were gathered, contacts for each program were emailed and/or called (August and September 2025) to verify descriptions of the program. These data were then evaluated to assess if the program's policies met the 10 NIEER benchmarks. After the benchmark assessments were made, primary contacts from each program were asked to verify the determinations and were given the opportunity to provide additional evidence if it was thought that the program met additional benchmarks, the enrollment threshold, the collection and reporting of equity data, and/or local preschool/early childhood education funding (September and October 2025).

To determine the percentage of children served, the 2023 American Community Survey census data on the total number of children under five by city was divided by five to estimate the number of four-year-olds in the population. Enrollment data for 2023-2024, 2024-2025, or 2025-2026 or funded slots for these years were used to calculate the number of 4-year-olds in all city- or state- funded programs that operated within the city. Data from the most recent year were used, however, if the city was not able to report this information, then slots were estimated based on the number of classrooms (# of classrooms X 20 children (or maximum class size)). If the city could not report this number, then the percentage of 4-year-olds served in the state as reported in the 2024 NIEER Yearbook was used.

1. **Quality control:** Two researchers from NIEER reviewed the data and coded independently. Discrepant items were researched, reviewed by a third NIEER researcher, and corrected if necessary.

   Between August 18 and August 20, 2025, emails were sent to the 74[2] city pre-K leads which contained: the name of the pre-K program evaluated for the CityHealth 2025 medals; a summary of the NIEER benchmarks the city pre-K program met during the 2023-2024 school year; whether or not the city met the 30% enrollment threshold; whether or not the city met the equity data criteria; and whether or not the city adds funds to support early childhood education. If emails were returned undeliverable, they were sent to a new lead within one month. Recipients were instructed to review the summary and if there were any discrepancies or questions, to email with information, including evidence of meeting missed benchmarks by August 27, 2025. Follow-up emails were sent over the first three weeks of September to cities that had not responded to earlier emails.

   All 75 city pre-K leads (or those involved or knowledgeable about the city's early learning efforts) were invited to an invitation-only webinar on September 25, 2025. If a city lead RSVP'd for the event, an updated, if necessary, summary of the NIEER benchmarks the city pre-K program met during the 2023-2024 school year; whether or not the city met the 30% enrollment threshold; whether or not the city met the equity data criteria; and whether or not the city adds funds to support early childhood education was sent to the city. Recipients were instructed to review the summary and if there were any discrepancies or questions to email with information, including evidence of meeting missed

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[2] Indianapolis was not sent a verification table since the city does not operate a state- or city-funded program that meets the pre-K program definition. However, city contacts were emailed to confirm that a program did not currently exist within the city.

benchmarks by October 1, 2025.

In response to the analysis sent to the 75 city contacts:
- 7 cities confirmed without changes,
- 34 cities confirmed and provided additional information,
  - 18 cities confirmed and there were several follow-up conversations with NIEER via email and/or phone/zoom calls,
- 26 cities had "no response" following at least two emails,
- 7 cities received the verification table but had "no response, but 5 of these did attend the invite-only webinar (9/25/25), and
- 1 city did not have a program and confirmed this.

Following the city pre-K leads' review of the verification table(s) and the submission of additional information, 31 cities pre-K benchmark determinations and/or criteria were updated.

V.   Importation into the MonQcle

1. On October 10, 2025, the data pages were turned over to the research group at the Center for Public Health Law Research who worked on importing the data into the MonQcle software for rendering on the CityHealth website. The teams met to explain the variables and results as necessary.

VI.   Scoring Criteria

1. Scoring was primarily based upon the number of benchmarks met by the city's program. To earn a medal, the city had to meet nine of the following benchmarks for gold; eight for silver; and at least four for bronze:
   I. Comprehensive, aligned, and supported early learning and development standards
   II. Lead teacher has a B.A.
   III. Lead teacher has specialized training in pre-K
   IV. Assistant teacher has a CDA or equivalent
   V. At least 15 hours/year of teacher in service professional development for lead and assistant teachers; coaching; professional development plans
   VI. Maximum class size of 20 children
   VII. Staff to child ratio of 1:10 or lower
   VIII. Vision, hearing, health screening and referral
   IX. Supports for curriculum implementation
   X. System of continuous quality improvement

2. In addition to satisfying the above-mentioned benchmarks, cities had to satisfy two out of three additional criteria: moderate to high enrollment, as previously defined; collection and ability to report ethnicity/race data of students or teachers; or local early learning funding.

3. This scoring criteria are depicted by the chart below:

HIGH-QUALITY, ACCESSIBLE PRE-K MEDAL CRITERIA	Bronze	Silver	Gold
1. Policy meets 2 out of 3 criteria* (access, local funding, and equity data) and meets at least 4 quality benchmarks**	✓	✓	✓
2. Policy meets 8 out of 10 NIEER quality benchmarks	✗	✓	✓
3. Policy meets 9 out of 10 NIEER quality benchmarks	✗	✗	✓

VII.   2025 Results

During the 2023-2024 school year, 26 city pre-K programs met nine or ten NIEER benchmarks; 10 met eight NIEER benchmarks; and 35 met four to seven NIEER benchmarks. One city does not have a program; and 3 cities met fewer than 3 NIEER benchmarks. As already mentioned, 1 city did not have a pre-K program and was not evaluated. In terms of the additional criteria, 58 cities enrolled at least 30% of four-year-olds in a city/county/state-funded preschool program; 74 cities collected ethnicity/race data and were able to report that information; and 71 cities funded early learning. As a result of this data collection and analysis, it was determined that 26 cities earned a CityHealth gold medal for Pre-K; 10 earned a silver medal; 35 earned a bronze medal; and 4 did not earn a medal for pre-K. The valid through date for this data is October 10, 2025.