

Study: Texas tops in state-funded preschool

Associated Press

AUSTIN -- About 176,000 Texas children participated in state-funded preschool last year, more than in any other state, but the program met just four of 10 quality benchmarks in a study released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Texas children accounted for more than 20 percent of the roughly 802,000 children enrolled in state-funded preschool in 38 states last year, according to the study by the Rutgers University-based group.

Children qualify for Texas' half-day program if they are homeless, eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or cannot speak and understand English.

Texas spent \$478 million on preschool programs, again more than any other state. But its \$2,700 per-pupil spending ranked 27th.

The institute gave Texas high marks for its comprehensive early learning standards and for requiring teachers to have a specialized bachelor's degree and to undergo in-service training.

But Texas does not limit class sizes or staff-child ratios as the group suggests and does not require assistant teachers to have a child development credential. Instead, those teachers only must have a high school diploma or GED. The other benchmarks Texas didn't meet involve support services, meals and site visits.

Programs in 27 states met more benchmarks than Texas. Only Arkansas met all 10.

Research shows children that graduate from high-quality preschools perform better on standardized tests and are less likely to drop out of school, according to the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition.

"High quality early childhood education is a proven solution," coalition executive director Kaitlin Guthrow said in a statement. "If we do not act now, the future of our state will include a less educated work force and an economy that cannot sustain itself."