

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

# Ask the Researchers: Access to Public Pre-K

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*The "Ask the Researchers" series uses a question and answer format to present research-based information that is relevant and useful for state and territory child care and early education (CCEE)[a] leaders. A team with expertise in CCEE research gathers questions of importance and relevance to this audience and writes short summaries of the research to answer the questions, noting what we know (and don't know yet) from research.*

## 1. What does "access" to early care and education (ECE) really mean, and why is it so important?

Many families seek out pre-K and other types of ECE for their children, but they can experience a lot of challenges finding—or accessing—ECE. Access to ECE means that families, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports their child's development and meets the families' needs. When all families have the same level of access regardless of their demographic characteristics and the communities in which they live, then there is *equitable* access.[1,2]

Often, people talk about access to ECE based on local "supply and demand," where the "supply" is the number of ECE slots, and the "demand" is the number of children ages birth to five in a given area. This approach can overestimate families' access because the existence of a slot does not mean that it is actually accessible to a family based on their needs and preferences. For example, does the ECE setting with an available slot have staff who speak the family's primary language? Are the fees reasonable for the family's budget? How far away is it, and does the family have transportation to get there?[3,4]

Access to ECE is important for many reasons. When children participate in ECE, it makes it easier for parents to work (and therefore supports the U.S. economy).[5-7] Participating in ECE can also benefit children's short- and long-term development.[8,9]

[a] Child care and early education (CCEE) refers to caregiving and educational services for children from birth to age 13. CCEE includes center- and home-based settings for infants, toddlers, preschool- and school-aged children. CCEE refers to services for a larger age group than early care and education (ECE), which consists of services provided only for young children (birth to age 5 who are not yet in kindergarten). ECE programs are included within the definition of CCEE. Because this product focuses on public pre-K, the term ECE is used throughout.

## 2. What is public pre-K? And how accessible is it?

Public pre-K is a type of ECE. People define public pre-K in different ways, but they're usually talking about a voluntary, publicly-funded state, local, or tribal ECE program for 3- and/or 4-year-old children that focuses on preparing children for school.[10] These programs are distinct from the states' systems for subsidized child care and the federal Head Start program, though they may be coordinated.

Most public pre-K programs use a mixed delivery system—meaning that children are served in a variety of settings, like public and private schools and community-based child care centers, Head Start agencies, and family child care homes. This mixed delivery approach can improve access because it can increase the number of public pre-K programs and, in turn, increase the number of slots available for children. This also gives families more options to choose from to meet their individual preferences.[11]

The accessibility of pre-K varies across states and cities. Some states and cities have **universal pre-K** policies, which means that all children of a certain age (usually 4 years old) are *eligible* to enroll, though not all families may choose to enroll their children. Some states or cities may not have sufficient funding in place to provide pre-K to *all* eligible children in their community. Therefore, even in places with universal pre-K, access and enrollment can still be an issue.[12] More commonly, states or cities offer **targeted pre-K** to a subset of eligible children; the eligibility requirements vary but often include family income, housing status, and child disability status.[13,14]

## 3. What factors affect access to public pre-K? And for whom?

Equity is a lens through which we can evaluate *who* has access to ECE and *why* certain barriers and inequities exist.[15] There are four factors, or dimensions, of access that are important to consider when examining equitable access to public pre-K. These are: reasonable effort, supports child's development, meets families' needs, and affordability. Each of these can help build an understanding of who has access to public pre-K and why certain barriers and inequities might exist. There's more research for some of these dimensions than others. Across all of them, it's important to examine access for key populations, like families with lower incomes, families of color, families in rural areas, families of children with disabilities, and/or families whose primary language is not English. For targeted pre-K programs with eligibility requirements, it's also important to understand who is included and excluded based on those requirements. These kinds of analyses can reveal where there are inequalities in access for certain families.[16]

**Reasonable effort.** One aspect of reasonable effort is having public pre-K close to where families live. Research has looked at where pre-K programs are located to help understand who can—and cannot—easily access pre-K. Studies from two cities found that higher-quality centers were more commonly found in higher-income areas and areas with a larger White population.[17,18] In a 2021 parent survey, about half of parents in rural areas reported having public pre-K in their community.[19] This suggests that not all families who may want to use public pre-K can find one nearby.

Some pre-K leaders are trying to address this challenge. In Chicago, for example, enrollment in public pre-K was lowest among Black students and low-income students, and full-day classrooms were concentrated in mostly-White neighborhoods. In 2013, pre-K leaders increased the number of full-day public pre-K classrooms in low-income and majority Black neighborhoods to increase access for those families with a history of low enrollment.[20]

**Supports children's development.** Public pre-K programs focus on children's development and preparing them for school. Research shows that children who participate in pre-K make improvements in the skills they need for K-12 education—including academic skills, such as early literacy and mathematics, and social-emotional skills, such as self-control.[21] Children are more likely to show strong benefits when their pre-K programs provide a high-quality learning environment. There is no one way to measure quality, but there is general agreement that it involves responsive adults, an effective curriculum, and engaging, organized classrooms.[22,23]

High-quality pre-K settings are helpful for young children in general, but certain groups experience bigger benefits than others. Children from families with low incomes, dual language learners, and children with disabilities tend to especially benefit from pre-K.[24,25] Unfortunately, the quality of pre-K programs varies, and some groups have limited access to high-quality pre-K. For example, studies show that Black children have less access to high-quality pre-K than their peers from other racial/ethnic groups.[26,27]

**Meets families' needs.** Families also need access to public pre-K that meets their needs and works for them logistically. For example, many families need pre-K that provides care during parents' working hours, provides transportation, and/or has staff who speak their language.

One common issue is whether public pre-K programs' hours and schedules align with what families need. Some programs provide full-day pre-K, and others only part-day. Some public pre-K programs are open year-round, while others close during the summer. As one example of this challenge, the universal pre-K program in Vermont provides 10 free hours per week, and families who need more care have to pay for the rest of the week, either in the same program or another setting.[28] There is evidence that full-day pre-K has higher attendance rates than partial-day pre-K.[29] As another example, New York City has a policy that allows families free choice to attend any universal pre-K program across the city, which might help ensure that families can find a program that meets their needs. A 2022 evaluation of New York City's pre-K reported that programs were racially segregated and discussed possible reasons why (e.g., segregated neighborhoods).[30]

**Affordability.** Affordability may not seem like an issue when pre-K is free for families, which is the case for states and cities with universal pre-K and for children eligible for targeted pre-K. However, many children are left out because their area does not have a public pre-K option, they do not meet the eligibility criteria for the public pre-K program, there are not enough slots for all eligible children, or the program schedule does not align with families' needs. Many families must pay for pre-K out of pocket, which can be costly. Some definitions of *affordable* note that families should pay no more than seven percent of their income for ECE; using that definition, many families lack an affordable (and otherwise accessible) pre-K option.[31-33] Even when children enroll in public pre-K, working families may still have out-of-pocket costs such as summer care, after school care, and transportation.

## 4. What other research is still needed on equitable access to public pre-K?

More research is needed about how key populations fare on the four dimensions of access. For example, it is important to understand if families of children with disabilities can access public pre-K that supports their developmental needs, or whether families who recently immigrated to the U.S. are able to access public pre-K. Also, more needs to be learned about whether families from tribal communities are able to access culturally affirming public pre-K within a reasonable distance of their homes, and whether families living in rural areas are able to access the type of public pre-K that they prefer. These are just a few examples of the types of questions to ask using this four-part access framework with key populations.

Also, more research is needed about other potential barriers to access. These include the relative pros and cons of different eligibility criteria and selection methods, such as lottery systems, where

children are randomly selected for slots.[34] Another potential barrier is expulsion, or the permanent removal of a child from the school or program. Children with access to public pre-K can lose access if programs allow expulsions.[35] The true rates of expulsion are not well known because centers may underreport expulsions, especially if they violate policy regulations.[36]

Finally, it's important to note that all local and state public pre-K systems are designed differently and take place in different contexts across the country. It's impossible to represent all the variation that exists in a single summary. Potential differences in research findings about public pre-K access and outcomes across sites can provide hints about what is and is not working.[37] Evaluations of public pre-K need to continue to gather information to help understand more about who has access to public pre-K, who benefits from public pre-K, and how they benefit. Evaluations can also help identify specific aspects of public pre-K programs that make them effective and accessible to families.

In sum, there is more to learn about equitable access to public pre-K. As public pre-K programs continue to expand across the country, this growth must be matched by a commitment to ensuring equitable access for all young children.

## References

The studies referenced in this product are linked in the endnotes. Research Connections was the primary source of relevant studies for this product. Two Research Connections annotated bibliographies related to this topic were particularly useful:

Early care and education research resources: Access to early care and education

Early care and education research resources: Equity in early care and education


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