

Few Preschool Slots for Latino Children

Scarce access in Illinois drives learning gaps, even before starting school

Latino Children Benefit from Quality Preschool

Many children experience lasting benefits from attending quality preschools, evident in stronger pre-literacy and social skills at school entry.¹ These gains are larger for children raised in low-income homes, as well as for Latino youngsters from middle-class homes. This is likely due to exposure to rich language and engaging learning tasks in preschool classrooms, and to children's gains in self-confidence—especially for those from non-English speaking families.²

Yet, cognitive and language development slows for many Latino children by age three, relative to (non-Latino) White peers. The resulting gaps are firmly in place between the two groups as they enter kindergarten, setting them on diverging paths through school and, eventually, in the job market.³

Access to quality preschool could help to prevent these early – and persisting – gaps in the learning and development of Latino children. This brief details how Latino families in Illinois face limited access to preschool, compared to families in other ethnic communities.

Diverse Illinois Families

A recent survey conducted in Illinois allows us to compare children's family characteristics and their access to early childhood programs. Mothers with newborns in 380 Illinois households were interviewed repeatedly over the past decade, participating in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, a national effort tracking the forces that

advance or impede the development of young children.⁴ We analyzed these data to learn more about Illinois families and their engagement with preschool programs.

Families vary greatly across Illinois in terms of ethnicity and preschool enrollment, especially in the Chicago metro area. Map 1 (on page 3) displays where study families lived across the state, broken down by the mother's ethnicity. The families indicated by circles rather than triangles enrolled their four-year-olds in preschool centers. This sample of 380 families was drawn as part of the study's national sampling procedure and is not necessarily representative of all Illinois families, statistically speaking.

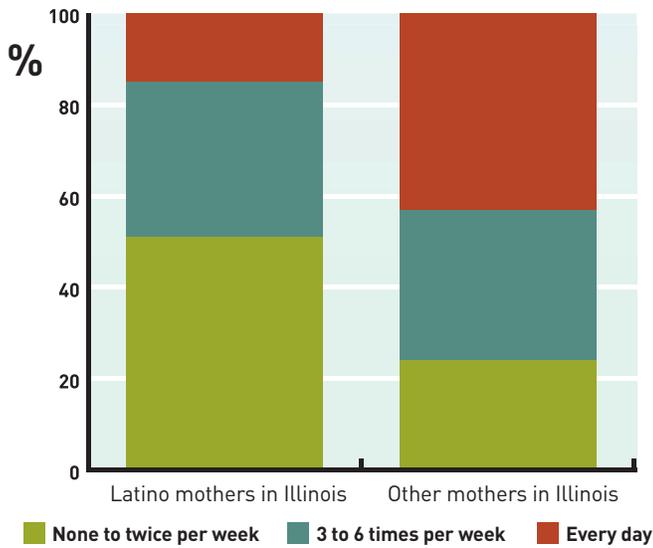
These families differ in ways that hold direct implications for young children's early learning, like maternal education levels and home book-reading. Almost two-thirds of Latina mothers in the Illinois sample had, at most, completed high school; just one-third had completed some college courses or gained a degree. In contrast, three-fourths of all other Illinois mothers (including African American, Asian, and White mothers) had completed some college courses or a degree.

In turn, maternal education levels affect the early learning practices observed in homes. Half of the Latina mothers reported that they never read to their preschooler or read infrequently—just twice a week; only 14% read every day. In contrast, 40% of all other mothers reported reading with their preschooler every day (see Figure 1, on page 2).

New Journalism on Latino Children offers fresh viewpoints and evidence on Latino child development and schooling. The project is based at the Institute of Human Development at UC Berkeley, in collaboration with the Education Writers Association and the Latino Policy Forum, and funded by the McCormick Foundation. For additional stories and new research, go to: www.ewa.org.

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Figure 1. Latina mothers read with their preschool-age child less frequently than other mothers



Unequal Participation in Preschool

Together, differences in family practices and scarce preschool access take a toll on the early learning of Latino children. When Illinois children, in late infancy, were given a basic assessment of responsiveness to their mother’s cues and rudimentary communication skills, Latino children were quite robust, showing no differences, relative to middle-class White children. But by two or three years of age, their basic cognitive proficiencies, including language development in Spanish or English (depending on their home language), had fallen by about two-thirds of a standard deviation behind White peers. This gap equals the growth shown by most children over six months of learning in kindergarten. And the disparity between Latino and White children persisted when early literacy skills were assessed again at about four years of age.

Map 1 reveals that fewer Latino four-year-olds were attending preschool, compared with children from all other ethnic groups. Figure 2 details the severity of this disparity in preschool access: just 35% of Latino four-year-olds were attending a preschool center, compared with 54% and 66% of African American and White children, respectively.

Sharp Gaps in Preschool Supply

Family demand for preschool programs is shaped in part by differences in maternal employment rates among ethnic groups, as well as the role of mothers or kin in the daily care of young children. Latina mothers enter the wage labor force at lower rates, compared with their African American and White peers. In many Latino families, grandmothers are tacitly expected to help care for young children.⁵ Yet, as shown in Map 2 (on page 4), the basic supply of preschool centers remains much lower in Cook County zip codes populated more heavily by Latino families, compared with African American or White neighborhoods.⁶ While cultural differences may play a role, the low enrollment rate of Latino children appears to stem in part from constrained supply.

Policy Action to Equalize Preschool Access

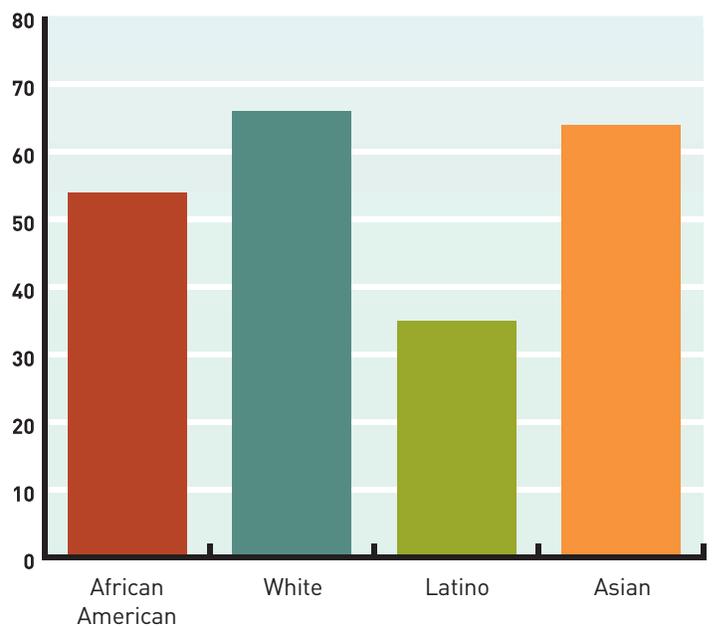
Illinois is taking significant steps to give Latino families a fair shot at benefiting from quality preschool: The Illinois Facilities Fund has begun to build new, and expand existing, preschool facilities, and the state recently earmarked \$45 million for the construction of facilities.

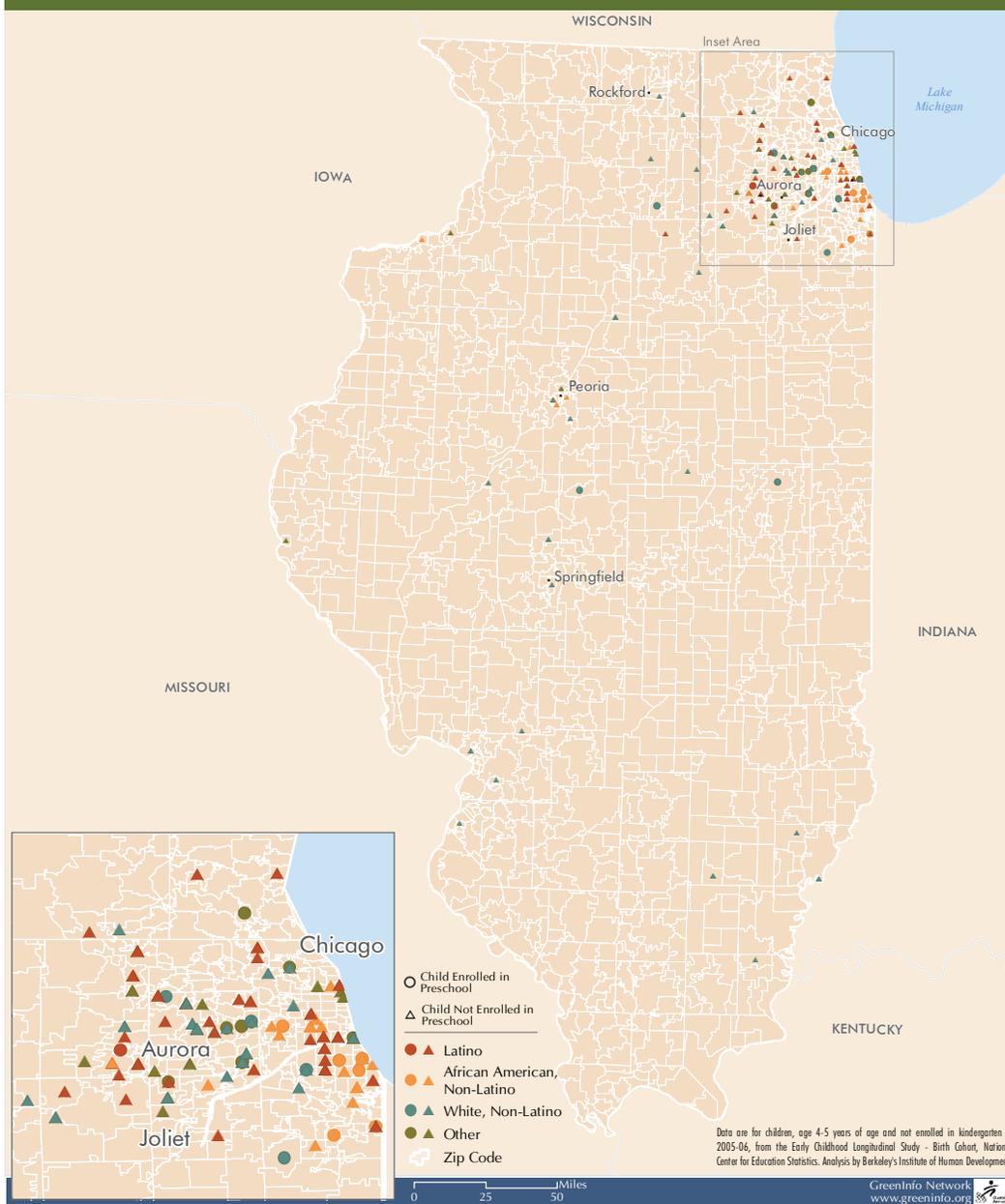
Beginning in 2014, Illinois will be the nation’s leader in implementing quality bilingual programs at the preschool level. This initiative offers the chance to expose young learners to bilingual and dual-language immersion models, yielding evidence for what works with differing groups of children.

In light of these policy successes, more assertive action may be required to narrow the early learning gaps that we have detailed. State budget cuts and late payments to local agencies threaten the success of new initiatives, as well as the day-to-day operations of preschools in Latino communities. Looming closures and cut-backs in services will only widen the cognitive and language disparities between Latino children and their peers, even before they enter school.

Public dollars can be progressively focused on the children who benefit the most. The recent commitments to our youngest learners are encouraging, given the returns on investment. We know that these returns are most robust for children from low-income and Latino families. Narrowing achievement gaps—before they emerge—benefits everyone.

Figure 2. Latino-4 year-olds are less likely to be attending preschool, compared with peers from other ethnic groups

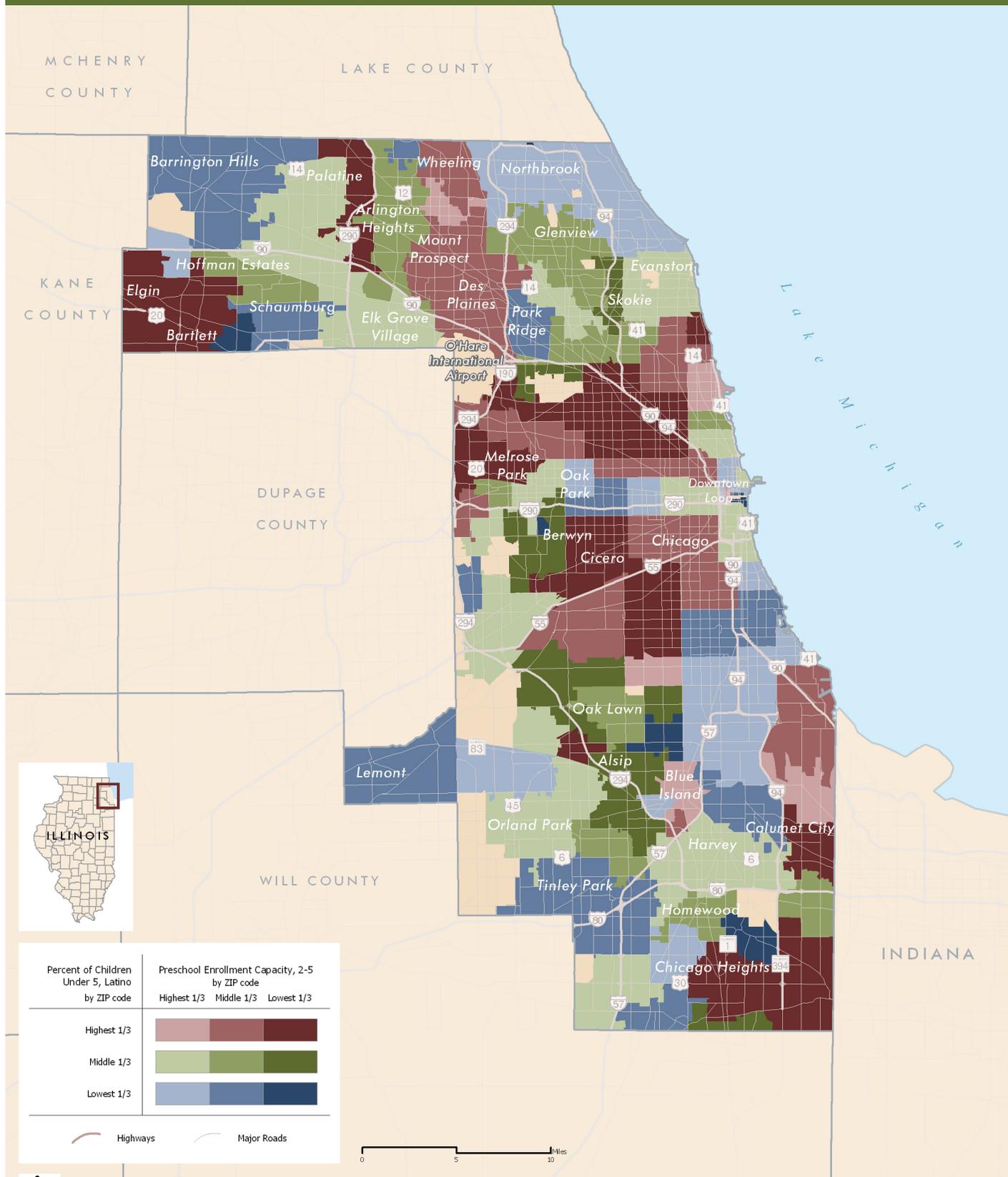




- Recent reviews of the cognitive and social gains resulting from quality preschool, experienced primarily by children from low-income families, include: Canon, J.S. & Karoly, L.A. (2007). Who is ahead and who is behind? Gaps in school readiness and student achievement in the early grades for California's children. *RAND Report, TR-537-PF/WKKF/PEW/NIEER/WCJVSF/LAUP*. Santa Monica, CA.: RAND Corporation; Heckman, J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science, 312* (5782), 1900-1902; and Fuller, B. (2007). *Standardized childhood*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
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- For review of this earlier anthropological research, see Holloway, S., & Fuller, B. (1997). *Through my own eyes: Single mothers and the cultures of poverty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
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Cook County Preschool Enrollment Capacity for Children 2-5 and Percent of Children Under 5, Latino



Percent of Children Under 5, Latino by ZIP code	Preschool Enrollment Capacity, 2-5 by ZIP code		
	Highest 1/3	Middle 1/3	Lowest 1/3
Highest 1/3			
Middle 1/3			
Lowest 1/3			

Highways Major Roads

