



# STRONG FOUNDATIONS: PROMOTING DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL SETTINGS

ISSUE BRIEF

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*A report from The Hunt Institute, The Education Trust, The Century Foundation, and Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center with support from Trust for Learning.*

High-quality preschool holds the power to shape young children's success in school and in life. For this reason, public investment enjoys widespread support among advocates and policymakers at the local, state, and national levels – with [44 states, the District of Columbia, and Guam](#) all funding preschool programs during the 2020-2021 school year. With additional investment being considered in all jurisdictions, publicly-funded preschool programming is poised for continued growth over the coming years.

To capitalize on this momentum, policymakers must first promote equitable and inclusive preschool settings as a critical prerequisite to students' academic and social success. Equitable access provides every student with the opportunity to engage in high-quality learning experiences - regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, cultural preferences, or ability. Further, it promotes diversity within classrooms, recognizing and valuing the unique identities and experiences of all students.

*In this report, the term diversity is used to depict a range of identities, including children's socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and ablistic identities.*

An analysis of available demographic data on preschool enrollment, however, reveals that while preschoolers themselves are increasingly diverse, the programs they attend are often more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically segregated than programs serving older students. The data often fail to represent students from certain marginalized groups, such as dual language learners.

Furthermore, this de facto segregation has concerning implications for both access to - and the quality of - preschool programs for children from marginalized backgrounds.

The research is clear: diversity in preschool classrooms is beneficial for *all* students. The evidence consistently demonstrates the academic, cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of inclusive preschool settings. Yet, many programs fail to support classroom diversity, with preschool eligibility criteria, curricula, and quality measures continuing to benefit privileged groups.



This reality presents policymakers and advocates an opportunity to change the script. Practitioners in the field who have prioritized preschool diversity, such as the Omaha Learning Communities in Nebraska and Educational Alliance’s Manny Cantor Center in New York city, are highlighted in this brief to demonstrate how preschool programs can create more diverse, inclusive and equitable learning environments for young children. Additionally, this paper offers the following recommendations to promote diversity in preschool settings:

- **Support increased and innovative funding.** Advocate for greater investments and provide opportunities for innovative funding solutions to diversify preschool classrooms.
- **Promote mixed-delivery systems.** Increase choice and engagement by allowing families to choose preschool settings that reflect cultural and linguistic diversity.
- **Expand inclusive preschool programs.** Create programs and enact policies that encourage the expansion of inclusive enrollment.
- **Provide robust wrap-around services.** Develop out-of-school supports that meet families where they are and enhance inclusive classroom experiences.
- **Promote equitable recruitment within the early childhood workforce.** Diversify the workforce and provide professional development on diversity and inclusion in the classroom.
- **Develop comprehensive training and professional development.** Develop educational opportunities to prepare early educators to work in inclusive preschool settings.
- **Address the compensation needs of the early childhood workforce.** Recognize the important role the workforce plays and create systems that properly value its work.
- **Revise early learning standards.** Ensure curriculum, quality standards and assessment benchmarks used to measure children’s success reflect the diversity of enrolled students.
- **Increase the research base.** Continue to support public and private efforts to expand the research available regarding classroom diversity.
- **Require disaggregated and transparent data.** Integrate data systems with disaggregated data to provide comprehensive information.





## INTRODUCTION

Children's early learning experiences lay the foundation for their success in school and life. Over the past decade, research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences for the social, emotional, and cognitive development of young children. [Science](#) tells us that young children's brains develop more rapidly during the years prior to kindergarten entry than at any other time. Additionally, research has revealed the importance of high-quality early education for children's short- and long-term academic, social, and professional success. [Economists](#) have also found early childhood investments demonstrated education's greatest return on investment, further strengthening the argument for high-quality early childhood experiences.

As such, the years of early childhood serve as a critical opportunity not only to support the academic, physical, and social-emotional development of young children, but to demonstrate and reinforce America's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Young children benefit greatly from exposure to racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity during this crucial and formative period, yet many existing policies may inadvertently deter classroom diversity and inclusion.

Promoting diversity and inclusion within the classroom is a catalyst for meeting developmental milestones and promoting greater social understanding and equity. This brief seeks to address the importance of promoting diverse and inclusive settings by presenting the current state of preschool, highlighting the benefits of preschool diversity, and identifying policies, institutional factors, and initiatives that foster diversity. The brief concludes with a list of policy recommendations designed to support policymakers and leaders in reevaluating current policies to ensure children have access to diverse preschool experiences.

As policymakers at all levels continue to push for the expansion of 3- and 4-year-old prekindergarten, there has never been a more important time for this conversation. This brief takes the stance that now is the time to invest in creating preschool experiences that are not only accessible, affordable, and high-quality, but also representative of the full diversity of American society.

## CURRENT STATE OF PRESCHOOL

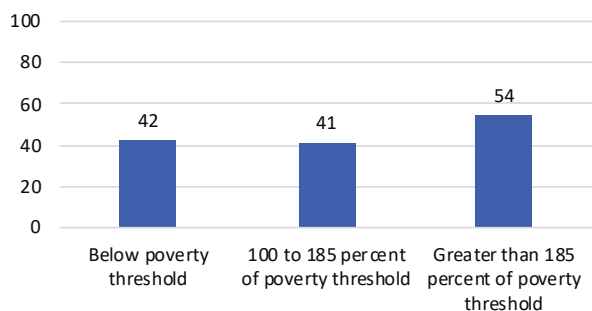
In the United States, roughly [50 percent](#) of all three- and four-year-old children currently attend preschool. Preschool education occurs in a variety of settings, including public schools, Head Start, and private, faith-based, and family-based child care. In 2021 approximately [1.3 million](#) children were served in state-funded preschool programs, with another [612,000](#) children enrolled in Head Start, out of almost [8 million](#) three- and four-year-olds nationwide. Regardless of where children are attending, it is clear that there is a need to expand preschool programming.

Efforts at the local, state, and federal levels are exploring expanded preschool programming for three- and four-year-old children. The following data analyzes diversity across and within preschool classrooms as it currently exists, with the understanding that future efforts to expand preschool are likely to cause significant change to the American early education landscape.

### Diversity in Preschool Enrollment

[Data](#) suggests that family income, parental education, and race/ethnicity are all directly related to children’s enrollment in preschool programs. In 2019, enrollment was lowest (if just slightly) among three- and four-year-old children from working families between 100% - 185% of the federal poverty definition – with greater enrollment among both higher and lower income peers.

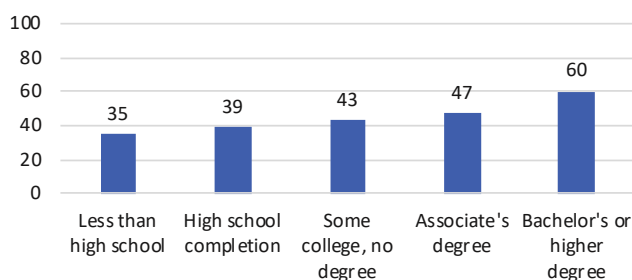
**PERCENTAGE OF 3-TO 4-YEAR-OLDS IN SCHOOL, BY HOUSEHOLD POVERTY STATUS: 2019**



Adapted from: [NCES](#)

The data also reveals that preschool enrollment rates are higher for children whose parents have higher levels of educational attainment. Enrollment rates of preschoolers ranged from 35 percent for those whose parents had not completed high school to 60 percent among those whose parents had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher. A similar pattern emerged for kindergarten enrollment rates, but to a lesser extent, indicating that preschool enrollment is more dependent on parental educational attainment.

**PERCENTAGE OF 3- TO 4-YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED IN SCHOOL, BY PARENTS’ HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: 2019**



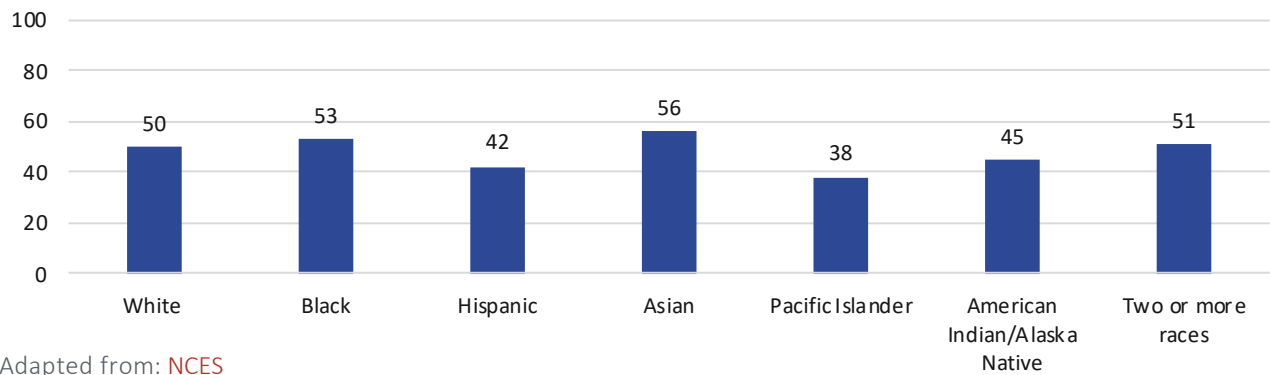
Adapted from: [NCES](#)

Enrollment rates among three- and four-year-old children were highest among Asian children, with participation among Black children, white children, and those identifying two or more races also comparatively higher than that within American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander communities in 2019.

Enrollment data on dual-language learners is less widely available. Only 26 state-funded preschool programs collect data on home languages; however, an estimated [29 percent](#) of enrolled children are dual-language learners.

Statistics on preschool enrollment not only illustrate variations in access, but also highlight significant opportunity gaps. Although enrollment of marginalized children is typically lower, [research](#) has consistently demonstrated that high-quality preschool programming can effectively prevent and close achievement gaps among these students. [Studies](#) often find greater academic growth during preschool for economically disadvantaged and dual language learners when

## PERCENTAGE OF 3- TO 4-YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED IN SCHOOL, BY RACE/ETHNICITY: 2019



Adapted from: [NCES](#)

compared to their more affluent and English-speaking peers. Together, these data suggest that the children who could benefit most from high-quality preschool remain least likely to be enrolled.

### Diversity within Preschool Classrooms

Diversity among preschool-aged children often does not translate into diversity within their individual classrooms. [The Urban Institute](#) found racial segregation in early childhood classrooms is more pronounced than in any other elementary or secondary setting. Even while enrolling a similar number of students; early childhood programs are twice as likely than kindergarten or first grade classrooms to be nearly 100 percent Black or Hispanic. As a result of well-intended policies designed to expand access among low income children, preschool classrooms are often segregated by socioeconomic status as well; according to a study of state preschool programs, only [one in five children](#) was enrolled in a classroom that was both racially and socioeconomically diverse.

Classroom segregation also contributes to restrictions in which children have access to high-quality programs. [Research](#) has repeatedly demonstrated that access to high-quality preschool is crucial for children's short- and long-term success. Yet, children of color more often have access to - and are therefore enrolled in - lower-quality programs, causing these children to start behind and stay behind.

In an analysis by [The Education Trust](#) of 26 states, among three- and four-year-old children only one percent of Hispanic and four percent of Black children

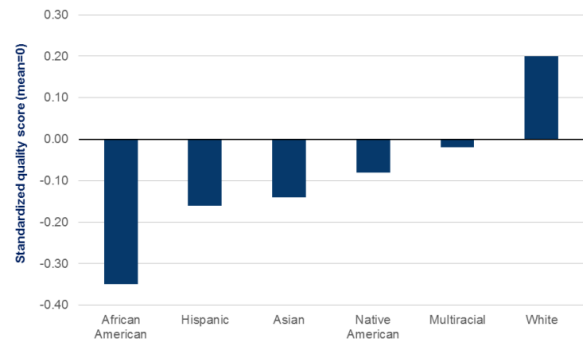


were enrolled in state preschool programs defined as high-quality by the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#). An analysis by the [Brookings Institute](#) likewise indicated that the average Black preschool student is enrolled in a classroom that, in terms of measured quality, is .55 standard deviations below that of the average white student, meaning that roughly 70 percent of Black preschoolers are enrolled in a lower-quality preschool than the average white preschooler.

Similarly, socioeconomic status affects children’s chances of accessing high-quality preschool programs. According to research by [The Century Foundation](#), low- and middle-income children are less likely than their high-income peers to be in high-quality programs.

Together, these data indicate the immense gaps that exist in preschool classroom diversity. Preschoolers remain very likely to be enrolled in racially and socioeconomically homogenous classrooms, and among students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, their classrooms are more likely to be of lower quality. This lack of diversity in preschool classrooms fails to reflect the children and families of America today, and in doing so miss out on the immense benefits exposure to diverse peers affords young children.

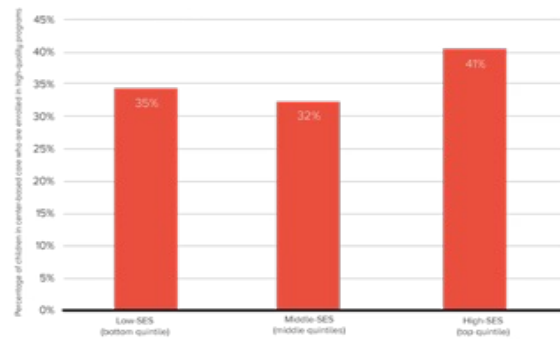
## RACE GAPS IN PRE-K QUALITY



Source: Analysis of data from the National Center for Early Development and Learning. BROOKINGS

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## ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAMS AMONG FOUR-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOL, BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2016, Table 202.60, [http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/digest/ipeds\\_datacenter/ipeds\\_datacenter.asp?table=202.60](http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/digest/ipeds_datacenter/ipeds_datacenter.asp?table=202.60) esp. Cells 6 for the 2009–08 school year.

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

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## PROMOTING DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

Early childhood is an essential time for children to begin learning about themselves and others in relation to their environment and social settings. The early learning and classroom settings children experience during the first five years of life have important implications across the lifespan. Research shows that diverse settings can lead to positive life-long outcomes and benefits for children, schools, and communities from all backgrounds. When environments and organizations are more diverse it has [powerful effects for children](#), leading to better decision making and outcomes.

When defining the concept and embracing diversity many aspects of life should be considered. While perhaps most commonly associated with race and ethnicity, policymakers are wise to take a more expansive view of the concept, considering socioeconomic status, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, abilities, and an array of other differences.

### Benefits of Classroom Diversity and Inclusion

To ensure children have access to diverse settings from an early age, educational systems are wise to acknowledge the demonstrable benefits of inclusive settings for children's short- and long-term outcomes, as well as for society. The benefits of diversity and inclusion within the classroom are

plentiful, with research reporting on the promotion of a variety of life skills for children. Specifically, research has found that [diverse and inclusive settings](#) positively impact children development across multiple domains including their social, emotional, and cognitive development.

[Research](#) indicates that when children are exposed to diversity at an early age, they acquire stronger social and emotional skills and increase their awareness and understanding of diverse perspectives and cultures. Inclusive settings can encourage greater acceptance of others and help prepare children to navigate and succeed in an increasingly diverse world. Promoting diverse and inclusive preschool settings, positively [impacts children's relationships](#) with others, builds their self-confidence, and supports their understanding of similarities and differences among their peers and within their communities.

Young children's social interactions begin to shape their attitudes and judgements toward others - which influences social behaviors, perceptions, and beliefs. Specifically, racial awareness begins to form during infancy with babies as young as three months old looking at faces that match their caregivers more often. These can manifest as [biases](#), which have been found to be expressed even as early as the preschool years. [Exposure to racial and ethnic differences](#), however, promotes cooperative learning, reduces anxiety around differences, provides children with meaningful cross-racial relationships and can prevent prejudice and limit [implicit biases](#) later in life.

Social & Emotional Benefits	Cognitive & Academic Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>More empathic</li><li>Open-mindedness &amp; acceptance of others</li><li>Better social understanding</li><li>Greater confidence and sense of self</li><li>Greater emotional &amp; social competence</li><li>Less prejudice and implicit bias</li><li>Better communication skills</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Promotes<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>children's language and literacy skills</li><li>creativity</li></ul></li><li>Improves<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>critical thinking skills</li><li>decision-making</li><li>problem-solving skills</li></ul></li></ul>
Source: <a href="#">Drexel University</a> ; <a href="#">American University</a>	



In regard to cognitive development, diverse classrooms expose children to new ideas and challenges - influencing their problem-solving skills, motivation, and critical thinking. **Economically diverse classrooms** help bridge achievement gaps and stimulate cognitive and social growth for all children in the classroom. In [economically integrated](#) classrooms, preschool children with both lower and higher socio-economic statuses gained greater language skills. Similarly, early exposure to multilingual environments likewise impacts both bilingual and monolingual children. When environments support the use of multiple languages, it [promotes effective communication](#) and increases executive functioning, such as following simple rules.

Additionally, [research](#) indicates that when **multiple languages** are encouraged in the classroom, it has a positive effect on children's sense of self and identity, increases vocabulary, supports the acquisition of new languages, and cultivates greater interactions between children, families, and schools. [Research](#) with school-aged children has found that when children are in integrated and diverse settings, they show growth in test scores, are more likely to enroll in college, and are more creative and innovative in their thinking.

Furthermore, beyond children's cognitive development, diverse educational settings also [have economic and societal benefits](#). Various studies have shown children in diverse classrooms are prepared to be global citizens and succeed in a global economy, have access to more equitable resources, and are likely to earn more as adults and have improved quality of life. Economically diverse and integrated settings produce a high return on investment, can be an effective academic intervention, and allows students to create more productive and effective teams in school and the workplace.

When **children with disabilities** are in inclusive classrooms rather than self-contained classrooms, they are more likely to engage in peer interaction. They are also likely to make significant gains in their early academic, social, and cognitive development outcomes. [Different studies](#) have found that when children with both mild and more severe disabilities are in inclusive settings, their language and literacy outcomes are positively impacted, leading to greater communication and social interaction.

Inclusive classrooms have also been associated with better cognitive outcomes for children with disabilities upon entry to elementary school. When reporting on the effect of inclusive settings for typically developing children, [research](#) has found that children have more positive attitudes towards children with disabilities and that they have greater emotional understanding than children who have only been in self-contained classrooms.

Finally, **teacher diversity** is a critical component within preschool settings and can greatly influence children's experiences within the classroom. Specifically, the early childhood workforce is comprised of nearly [5 million educators](#), with the majority of them women, specifically women of color. Teacher diversity can play a significant role in promoting diversity within the classroom by way of knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. [Research](#) suggests that demographically similar teachers support increases in student attendance, family engagement, better perception and expectations of children, and can lower discipline rates.

While the racial and linguistic diversity of the early childhood workforce provides greater alignment with the increasingly diverse child population, it is essential to work towards supporting and sustaining a diverse teacher workforce. The recruiting and retaining of diverse teachers in terms of their racial, linguistic, and ablistic identities is a vital piece of the puzzle when creating inclusive preschool settings and can benefit all children.

## INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING DIVERSITY

While research has demonstrated the positive effects of diverse classrooms, surprisingly few preschoolers experience this diversity. The de facto segregation of preschool children is in part attributable to residential segregation. Specifically, [public policies and industry practices](#) create and maintain a high degree of racial and socio-economic segregation in American neighborhoods. As such, local, easily accessible preschool programs inevitably attract families that reflect the homogenous composition of their neighborhoods.

While residential segregation undoubtedly impacts the diversity within preschool classrooms, there are also many existing policies that tend to limit inclusiveness. Factors such as eligibility requirements for preschool programs, curriculum design and standards, and quality improvement rating systems all influence the diversity and inclusion of young children in the classroom.

### Preschool Eligibility

Currently, the preschool landscape includes a [wide array of public and private programs](#), each with its own eligibility criteria. Publicly funded programs – including state and federal preschool initiatives – typically restrict their eligibility to low-income children. [Head Start](#), for example, is a federally funded program intentionally designed to target children at or below the federal poverty definition. While Head Start programs are allowed to enroll up to 10 percent of children from families above this threshold, this is not always the case. Given limited program capacity and resources, these programs understandably prioritize service to lowest-income children first. Similarly, [all but six states](#) have state-funded preschool programs. However, virtually all of these programs have income-based eligibility requirements that specifically target low-income children. Within both program types, demand for preschool tends to be higher than the supply of slots, meaning not even all low-income children are served.

Tuition-based preschool programs also exist in most communities, increasing the number of slots available, but are unaffordable to many American families. As a result, many preschoolers attend programs with peers from a similar socioeconomic status; in many cases, this also means classrooms are racially homogeneous.

Universal preschool programs (open to all children regardless of income) offer the opportunity for improved access and greater diversity. Such programs usually support full-day preschool options, especially in marginalized communities. Many universal programs prioritize mixed-delivery systems through which services are provided by both public and private sector providers.

[Mixed-delivery systems](#) support parental choice and provide flexibility, ensure high-quality care experiences, and protect the economic viability of diverse program providers. A mixed-delivery system allows parents to access preschool options that meet their preferences and needs, with private sector providers more likely than many school districts to provide before- and after-school care required by working parents. In this way, mixed delivery not only supports the continuity of care, but also provides essential financial supports for private businesses that are predominately operated by women of color, thus encouraging the inclusion of diverse and culturally relevant early care and education options.

However, mixed-delivery programs often need support to create opportunities for integration within classrooms, even when such programs have universal eligibility, since they inherit the segregated structures of a system that was originally built around a private market that sorts based on who can afford to pay and public programs that sort based on who meets income thresholds and other eligibility criteria.

### WHAT IS MIXED-DELIVERY SYSTEM?

- *A mixed-delivery system is a system of early childhood programs, providers, and settings (including licensed center- and family-based child care programs, Head Start, public schools, and community-based organizations) that are supported with a combination of public and private funds.*
- *When implementing a well-funded mixed-delivery system, communities have the ability to provide a diverse range of early childhood settings and increase the number of programs serving children and families.*

## Curriculum and Standards

For children enrolled in preschool, the curriculum and standards implemented across provider types also impact the degree of inclusion for diverse students. [Research](#) on brain science indicates that background knowledge shapes comprehension, meaning children learn best when the information is linked to something they already know. Furthermore, data shows that instructional materials, assignments, and texts that reflect students' lived experiences are more likely to foster deep, meaningful engagement and learning. [Learning](#) is a [social process](#) profoundly shaped by culture, social interactions, and language.

Yet, [research](#) indicates that many early childhood practices (including both curriculum materials and assessments) are still primarily based on monocultural (White) assumptions. Such normative assumptions in pedagogy, quality, and assessment can privilege certain children while compromising the success of children from minoritized cultures. Similarly, [data](#) on behavior expectations and disciplinary practices in schools has been repeatedly shown to disproportionately negatively affect students of color and students with disabilities. In sum, these frameworks may inadvertently serve to amplify the negative academic and social consequences experienced by minoritized students.

In response, many multicultural, culturally responsive, and anti-bias curricula have been proposed for use by teachers. This is critical, as [research](#) has demonstrated the implicit biases many educators hold. These may manifest in lower expectations for students of color, directly effecting both students' academic success and self-image. An [analysis](#) of teaching standards in all 50 states found that while all states incorporate culturally responsive teaching practices in their professional teaching standards, the majority do not provide clear or comprehensive support to teachers to overcome their biases and develop culturally responsive practices.

## Quality Ratings

Measurements of program quality also can fail to recognize or encourage diversity with preschool settings. To measure quality, many states have implemented [Quality Rating Improvement Systems](#) (QRIS) to create a unified vision of quality, defined as a “systemic approach to assess, improve,

and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs.” These systems work in tandem with state licensing and accreditation services to classify programs along a continuum of quality, providing critical information to parents. Participation in a state's QRIS may or may not be mandatory, but access to funding is often tied to participation.

However, QRIS may also unintentionally create barriers rather than promoting diversity for both students and providers. In a study by the [Migration Policy Institute](#), it was found that many QRIS rating documents referenced language, culture, and/or diversity, yet provided little or vague guidance regarding evidence necessary to receive points. Additionally, standard QRIS instruments may not appropriately measure quality for all children. For example, class size guidelines are based on native English speakers and may not reflect the specific needs of English language learners. Furthermore, these systems often presume a level of linguistic, financial, and systems-knowledge resources that not all providers have, particularly those in low-income communities, and may lead to unfairly penalizing such educators for challenges unrelated to quality.

To address these challenges, leaders in the field have created new quality measurements that center equity. For example, the Principles of Ideal Learning, developed by [Trust for Learning](#), draws from multiple pedagogical models and approaches and takes into account the varied contexts which providers serve children. This framework embeds equity is what is measured, how quality is measured, and how the information is used to ensure quality ratings are equitable and inclusive.

## PRESCHOOL DIVERSITY INITIATIVES IN THE FIELD

While diversity in preschool classrooms remains limited in many programs, the issue is becoming more recognized by leaders in the field. Most notably, the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) (NAEYC), a national organization that provides guidance on early childhood practice, policy, and research, has continually promoted preschool diversity through position statements, resources, and toolkits. In 2019, NAEYC published a position statement, [Advancing Equity in Early Childhood](#), highlighting that all children have the right to equitable learning opportunities. The report provided recommendations for early childhood educators, administration, and policy makers, calling to action the need for supporting equitable and diverse practices and policies in the field of early childhood education.

*“Recognize the value of serving a diverse group of children and strive to increase the range of diversity among those served. Race, ethnicity, language, and social and economic status are some dimensions by which early childhood education settings have historically been segregated.”*

- NAEYC [Advancing Equity in Early Childhood](#)

Furthermore, the integration of preschool settings is directly affected by the funding, eligibility, and recruitment processes that providers and parents experience. Included here are two examples which demonstrate diversity in preschool classrooms is achievable with strong outcomes for all students involved.

## LEARNING COMMUNITY OF DOUGLAS & SARPY COUNTIES

In [2007](#), the Omaha Nebraska metropolitan area pursued diversity in their school districts and created the Learning Community Coordinating Council to create partnerships and connection throughout the region. Through state legislation, leaders in the city of Omaha created a socioeconomic-based inter-district desegregation (transfer) program across eleven districts to promote diversity and created elementary learning centers to provide enhanced early childhood and after-school opportunities for children and families. The creation of programs aimed at increasing school diversity and deconcentrating poverty throughout the metro area with the goal to achieve equal distribution of low-income students through all eleven districts so that all schools could have the same proportion of low-income students as the metro-wide average. The Learning Community’s mission has been to promote better opportunities and outcomes within the homes, schools, and communities within the region.

[The Learning Community](#) created community programs and school hubs focused on family learning and education, intensive early childhood education, teacher training and instructional coaching. The programs have been successful in terms of school readiness and achievement, student reading, parents learning English, parent stress reduction and instructional coaching. Although data indicates less progress toward creating greater diversity within participating schools, this initiative demonstrates how a state, through strategic planning and connecting regional partnerships, can work to achieve diversity on a larger scale to positively impact the outcomes of young children and their families.

## MANNY CANTOR CENTER

Educational Alliance’s [Manny Cantor Center](#) (MCC) is a community center on New York City’s Lower East Side. MCC has been serving families for over [130 years](#), and early childhood has been part of its community-based programming since inception. For many years, MCC hosted two separate early childhood programs: a tuition-based program and a Head Start program. Each program had separate budgets, leadership teams, and educational philosophies, with placement fully decided according to family’s ability to pay.

In 2018, MCC began to integrate the two programs to ensure all children served had the same access to high-quality experiences, regardless of socioeconomic status. To achieve such integration, the Center developed a braided funding model, incorporating funding from multiple streams: Head Start, New York City Department of Education funding for universal pre-, private tuition, and state-funded child care. Blending and braiding funds is an essential financing approach to support high-quality, diverse preschool settings.

The integrated program serves roughly 250 families and has proven to be a success thus far. Students have formed close bonds regardless of socioeconomic status. Teachers have encouraged the use of students' home languages, including Chinese, Hebrew, and Spanish, in addition to English. Additionally, parents surveyed reported a strong sense of community and the belief that diversity enhanced the quality of their experiences.

**Blending funding** refers to funds from two separate funding sources wrapped together within one full-workday, full-year program budget to pay for a unified set of program services to a group of children. When blending funds, costs are not necessarily allocated or tracked by individual funding sources.

**Braiding funding** refers to funds from two or more funding sources coordinated to support the cost of services for children, however costs are required to be allocated and tracked to ensure each funding source is charged its share of program and administrative costs.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The promotion of inclusive preschool settings is critical for the continued growth and sustainability of early care and education systems throughout the country. As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the early learning services and opportunities provided must be reflective of the families and children being served. From the information presented in this brief, it is clear diverse preschool settings are beneficial and greatly needed to ensure current and future success for the country's youngest learners.

Policymakers should consider establishing policies and practices that prioritize inclusivity in preschool classrooms. The following recommendations are offered to encourage and ultimately achieve preschool diversity.

### Support Increased and Innovative Funding

While historic federal attention is being paid to early childhood, states still must consider financing options to support comprehensive preschool programming. To this end, policymakers have the opportunity to both advocate for continued investments to promote preschool diversity and support innovative funding solutions in the field.

- Require or incentivize government agencies at the federal, state, or local level to take on the administrative work of blending or braiding funds so that individual early education programs can use the funds to enroll a diverse group of students, meeting different eligibility criteria, in integrated classrooms, without the administrative burden of managing multiple funding requirements on their own.
- Create local or statewide networks of shared services, allowing providers to lower administrative costs by sharing organizational or specialized staff.
- Advocate for increased public and private state and federal funding dedicated to expanding eligibility, streamlining enrollment, and improving quality of preschool classrooms. This could include adopting subsidy rates that align with the true cost of care, making child care more affordable, and providing adequate compensation for the workforce.
- Leverage [Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five](#) funding, which aims to strengthen states' integrated early childhood education systems to support low-income and disadvantaged children, to promote preschool diversity.
- Earmark a portion of federal funding for states to spend on activities that help to promote racial and socioeconomic integration in early childhood programs. These funds could support activities such as outreach to enroll families of diverse backgrounds and grants or training for early childhood programs to encourage and facilitate blended funding.
- Increase fiscal allocations to Head Start designed specifically to allow providers to take advantage of the existing option of enrolling up to 10 percent of students from families with incomes above the poverty line without interrupting services to low-income students.

### Promote Mixed-Delivery Systems

The current preschool system typically results in homogenous preschool classrooms, with public programs often limited by income-eligibility requirements and private programs unaffordable to the majority of families. With early learning programs leaning towards becoming more universal via mixed-delivery systems, local and state programs should also explore how to administer their programs in via mixed-delivery models, which tap the resources of both public and private providers. When taking into consideration the importance of promoting diversity in classrooms and providing children and families the early learning experiences in the settings that they need, mixed-delivery systems are ideal.

- States should ensure funding streams are equitably distributed among school districts, Head Start programs, and licensed child care providers to promote sustainable mixed-delivery systems.
- State licensing offices should create and support opportunities for diverse providers to become licensed according to state guidelines.
- Offer technical support and grant funding for individual providers or community partnerships interested in diversifying classrooms through intentional enrollment policies (such as policies to reserve seats for students of different income tiers) as well as through program design and recruitment.

- Conduct outreach to – and create online portals for – families to inform them of the multitude of preschool options available in their community.
- Create incentives at the state and federal level for programs to reserve slots for both publicly funded and privately funded children.

### Expand Inclusive Preschool Programs

Offering inclusive preschool settings not only impacts early childhood experiences but the entire educational continuum. Ideally, exposure to diversity and positive experiences within inclusive preschool settings will increase the likelihood that families will seek out inclusive learning environments moving forward. This is especially important to consider in urban areas where families likely have a multitude of public and private K-12 options.

- Create programs within preschools – such as dual language and arts programs – that attract racially, ethnically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse families and reserve seats for student groups, such as students from Spanish-speaking families. Seek input from families and community members to ensure these programs are relevant and accessible to underserved families.
- Expand the number of classrooms that serve children with and without disabilities in the same classroom. Federal investments should be coupled with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding, and more robust requirements should be put in place for states to services children with disabilities in integrated settings.
- Place new programs on the boundaries of neighborhoods that might attract families with various SES and racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Locate programs in or near large employers, such as hospitals, universities, and corporate offices, where employees with children may come from diverse socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Provide financial support for transportation to parents who choose a program that is not within walking distance, to lessen the impact that housing segregation has on segregation in early childhood education settings

### Provide Robust Wrap-Around Services

Robust wraparound services are a significant factor in contributing to the perceived benefits of diversity

within classrooms. Strong out-of-school supports, like those required by Head Start funding, combined with inclusive classroom environments, maximize outcomes for children and families.

- Engage families as partners to meet their needs. Encourage families to take an active role in the decision-making process to ensure ownership and buy-in.
- Express cultural competence when engaging families, cultivating a respect and appreciation for differences in beliefs or cultures.
- Adopt a strengths-based approach when working with families. Recognize the value a diverse set of voices brings to the situation.
- Develop systems to support the training of staff to effectively coordinate and implement services for families.

### Promote Equitable Recruitment to the Early Childhood Workforce

Research indicates that all students benefit from teachers who bring diverse experiences, knowledge, and perspectives into the classroom. To effectively promote diverse settings, the early learning workforce must reflect the diverse children and families entering classrooms. To provide equitable and diverse learning experiences for all children, policies must be in place to sustain and build diversity within the workforce.

- Promote recruitment and retention efforts of diverse educators (racially, culturally, linguistically) and include more accessible, equitable paths to increasing qualifications and credentials.
- Federally fund apprenticeship programs, Grow Your Own programs, T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood and other comprehensive scholarship models for early childhood educators, including early childhood special educators and early interventionists, with an emphasis on including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) to increase diversity in the educator workforce.
- Federal and state policymakers should provide equitable and accessible pathways to obtaining early childhood special education qualifications in order to strengthen the workforce; providing service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs

for special education trainees to increase incentives to enter the profession; and most importantly, providing adequate compensation for the entire ECE workforce including special education teachers.

## Develop Comprehensive Training and Professional Development

Educators must develop the skills necessary to successfully promote and work in integrated preschool settings. Revising the training and professional development available to early childhood educators to include information on diversity and inclusion is important for both individual's professional success and for the field as a whole.

- Support professional development that prepares early educators to work in integrated settings, including research on socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and abilistic differences.
- Reform higher education and postgraduation curriculum to prepare early educators to work in integrated settings. Such reform could include requiring prospective teachers to complete a course on diversity in early childhood.
- Amend state certification requirements for new and continuing education to incorporate knowledge of diversity and classroom integration.
- The state should provide accessible resources in a multitude of languages and modes to promote professional development opportunities to providers across the early childhood workforce.

## Support the Early Childhood Workforce

More than ever before, the compensation and workplace challenges the early childhood workforce experience have become part of the public dialogue. Early educators must be given the support needed to successfully foster the growth and development of young children.

- Provide state preschool teachers, including assistant teachers and paraeducators, with at least full compensation parity – both across the mixed delivery system and with K-3 counterparts in their district.
- Federal scholarships and loan forgiveness programs should be available to early childhood educators from any early learning setting, including school-based, home-based, and center-based settings.

- Ensure providers have the necessary funding to operate and provide high-quality care for children.
- The state should establish a research-based mental health program to both improve providers' mental health and help providers support the mental health of the children they serve.

## Revise Early Learning Standards

Diversity in preschool classrooms must not only be reflected in the students but also in the curricula with which they engage. Research has demonstrated the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy to promote engagement and academic success in students, yet multiple assumptions are still embedded in early childhood practices, negatively affecting children's success.

- Reevaluate early childhood curricula and learning standards to ensure inclusivity for all students; ensure curricula and learning standards are supported by research that considers and accounts for cultural and linguistic differences.
- State leaders must analyze and revise quality and improvement rating systems to maintain high quality standards while also reflecting a diversity of early childhood experiences and provider types.
- Solicit continuous feedback from stakeholders experiencing the system (i.e., educators, parents), particularly early childhood professionals of color and multilingual early childhood professionals, to ensure standards are reflective of participants' lived experiences.
- Programs should allot time to allow educators and parents to discuss the curriculum as it relates to their individual children. These conversations could happen via in-person meetings, phone, or video calls.

## Increase the Research Base

To advance inclusivity and diversity in preschool classrooms, it is critical to cultivate an understanding of current practices. Research on inclusive preschool settings must be prioritized to allow for more effective investments in the field and inform public policy decisions.

- States and districts should gather data and perspectives from current preschool teachers, educators, families, and content experts to learn more about the root causes that negatively impact classroom and school diversity.



- Create clear methods of dissemination across multiple forms of media to ensure all stakeholders have access to high-quality research and data on preschool diversity.

### **Require Disaggregated and Transparent Data**

In complement to expanded research on inclusive preschool settings, it is necessary to provide transparent and disaggregated data. Collecting, analyzing, and publicly reporting preschool demographic data provides accurate and accessible information that parents, providers, and policymakers can use moving forward.

- Further knowledge on diversity within preschool classrooms by requiring state and federal data to be disaggregated by racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural characteristics and IDEA status.
- Support the continued development and improvement of Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems (ECIDS) and Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS), and connections between them to follow children over time, as well as across agencies and systems.
- Provide additional funding for training all stakeholders who provide ECE-related data.
- Identify biases in the system by analyzing disaggregated data in relation to disciplinary reports and adherence to Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements.

### **CONCLUSION**

Research consistently demonstrates the positive effects children experience when learning among diverse peers. For preschool students, this critical period of cognitive, social, and emotional development is enhanced when early learning experiences include exposure to greater diversity.

With preschool currently positioned as a central focus of public investment, policymakers have the opportunity to promote diversity in preschool classrooms. By fostering increased awareness and enacting practical policy solutions, inclusive classrooms ensure both educational equity and a strong start for all children. The time is now to invest -- not only in the accessibility and quality of preschool but also the diversity, ensuring preschool classrooms reflect the children and families of America.

