

## Access to High-Quality Early Education and Racial Equity

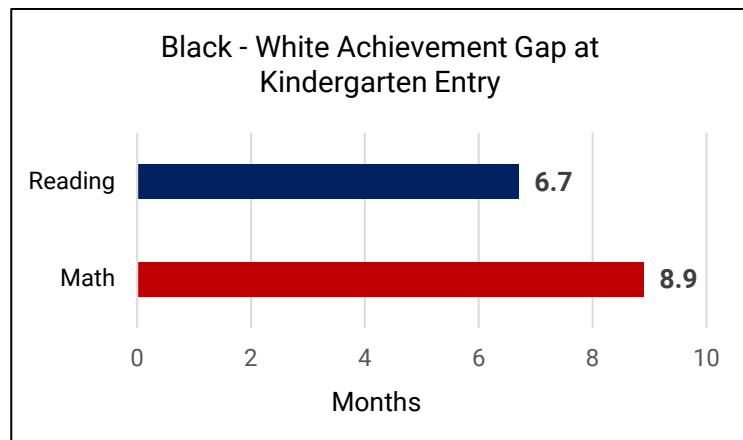
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The death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers has focused the nation's attention on the unequal treatment of Black Americans. Black children experience unequal treatment beginning at an early age, which contributes to inequalities in learning and development.

By the time they enter kindergarten, Black children are on average nearly nine months behind in math and almost seven months behind in reading compared to their White non-Hispanic peers (See Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Math and reading abilities at kindergarten entry are powerful predictors of later school success, and children who enter kindergarten behind are unlikely to catch up.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Estimated Black – White Achievement Gaps at Kindergarten Entry (in months)**

Source: Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). How much can high-quality universal pre-k reduce achievement gaps? Center for American Progress: Washington, DC. Based on Nores, M., & Barnett, W. S. (2014). Access to high quality early care and education: Readiness and opportunity gaps in American. Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and National Institute for Early Education Research: New Brunswick, NJ.



High quality early childhood education (ECE) programs can help all children enter kindergarten with the foundational academic and social-emotional skills they need to succeed.<sup>3</sup> However, access to high quality ECE in the U.S. is low and unequal. While Black children enroll in center-based ECE at about the same rate as their White Non-Hispanic peers with higher rates of enrollment in publicly funded programs, the quality of their preschool experiences differs. The quality of ECE programs Black children attend are—on average—lower than that of programs attended by White non-Hispanic children (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Only high-quality programs can be

<sup>1</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). How much can high-quality universal pre-k reduce achievement gaps? Center for American Progress: Washington, DC. Based on Nores, M., & Barnett, W. S. (2014). Access to high quality early care and education: Readiness and opportunity gaps in American. Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and National Institute for Early Education Research: New Brunswick, NJ.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Duncan, G. J. et al. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 43, 1428-1446.

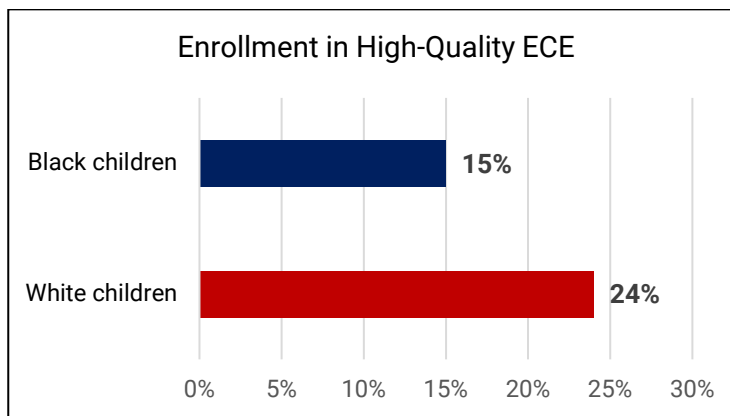
<sup>3</sup> e.g. Yoshikawa et al. (2013). Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education. Society for Research in Child Development and Foundation for Child Development: Ann Arbor, MI and New York, NY.

<sup>4</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). How much can high-quality universal pre-k reduce achievement gaps? Center for American Progress: Washington, DC. Based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) (U.S.

expected to substantially reduce inequalities in learning and development. Low-quality programs, on the other hand, likely exacerbate inequality.

**Figure 2: Black children are less likely to attend high-quality ECE**

Source: Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). How much can high-quality universal pre-k reduce achievement gaps? Center for American Progress: Washington, DC. Based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) (U.S. Department of Education, 2009); National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011 (ECLS-K: 2011) (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).



To investigate the effects of quality preschool on racial inequality, we estimated the extent to which universal participation in high quality ECE could reduce Black-White achievement gaps at kindergarten entry.<sup>5</sup> Our estimation was based on two high-quality ECE programs—one in Boston<sup>6</sup> and one in Tulsa<sup>7</sup>—that were found to produce greater impacts on math and reading for Black than White non-Hispanic children. Our estimates assume an increase in access as well as quality, with 100% enrollment in high-quality ECE for all children.

Essentially, we sought to answer a simple question: What would happen if all children attend pre-K programs that are of uniformly high quality?

The answer is one year of universal high-quality pre-K could practically eliminate the Black-White reading skills gap at kindergarten entry—from nearly seven months to almost zero—and cut the math skills gap almost in half—from about nine months to five months.

**Table 1: Estimated reductions in Black-White kindergarten entry achievement gaps after implementing high-quality universal pre-K (UPK).**

	Current gap	Gap after UPK	Reduction in months	Percent reduction
<b>Math</b>	8.9	4.9	4.0	45%
<b>Reading</b>	6.7	0.1	6.6	98%

Source: Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). How much can high-quality universal pre-k reduce achievement gaps? Center for American Progress: Washington, DC.

Department of Education, 2009); National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011 (ECLS-K: 2011) (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A., Barnett, W. S., & Nores, M. (2016). How much can high-quality universal pre-k reduce achievement gaps? Center for American Progress: Washington, DC.

<sup>6</sup> Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J. (2016). When does preschool matter? *Future of Children*, 26, 21-35.

<sup>7</sup> Gormley, W. T., Gayer, T., Phillips, D., & Dawson, B. (2005). The effects of universal pre-k on cognitive development. *Developmental Psychology*, 41, 872-884.

A recent analysis of preschool access and 4<sup>th</sup> grade National Assessment of Educational Progress scores provides further evidence that greater access to high-quality preschool can substantially reduce racial inequality. Bartik and Hershbein<sup>8</sup> found little association between preschool enrollment in the public schools and 4<sup>th</sup> grade test scores. However, when estimating results for states identified in a separate policy analysis as having high-quality pre-K programs Bartik and Hershbein found significant positive “effects” on achievement. Moreover, they found these “effects” were larger in districts with a high Black student population. In majority Black districts, Bartik and Hershbein found a nearly 6 percentile increase in math and nearly 4 percentile increase in reading. These increases are statistically significant and “substantively important”.

Despite evidence high-quality ECE can reduce inequality, the nation is hamstrung by limited public funding to increase access to ECE and by the differentially low quality of pre-K provided to Black children. The most recent nationally representative observational assessment of quality is from the 2005-2006 ECLS-B study. It found Black children were more likely to be in low-quality center-based ECE than White children and less likely to be in high-quality ECE.<sup>9</sup> An analysis of observed quality data from 11 states collected between 2001 and 2004 also found Black children attended lower quality programs.<sup>10</sup> More recent studies, though not national, indicate these ECE quality disparities continue.<sup>11</sup>

Public preschool programs tend to have higher quality but still far short of what is needed. Head Start offers better quality than many other programs, but instructional quality is still far too low on average, particularly in states with large numbers of African-American children.<sup>12</sup> NIEER’s 2019 *State of Preschool*<sup>13</sup> report found that few states have high standards, and states with the largest populations meet less than half of 10 minimal benchmarks for policies to support quality. Interestingly, states with large percentages of Black children may have stronger than average pre-K policies for quality. However, two states with large Black populations—Florida and Texas—have very weak quality standards.

Providing all Black children access to high-quality preschool will not be a small task. It will require raising quality standards, expanding enrollment, and, of course, more funding. The budget problems states currently face could well lead to the exact opposite: lower standards, decreased enrollment, and less spending. We saw this happen in the Great Recession.

If we again roll back progress in ECE program access and quality, racial inequalities will worsen as surely as strengthening public ECE programs will reduce them.

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<sup>8</sup> Bartik, T. J., & Hershbein, B. (2017). Pre-k in the public schools: Evidence from with all states. Institute for Research on Poverty: Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>9</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) (U.S. Department of Education, 2009); National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011 (ECLS-K: 2011) (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18\\_202.60.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_202.60.asp)

<sup>10</sup> Valentino, R. (2018). Will public pre-k really close achievement gaps? Gaps in prekindergarten quality between students and across states. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55, 79-116.

<sup>11</sup> Bassok, D., & Galdo, E. (2016). Inequality in preschool quality? Community-level disparities in access to high-quality learning environments. *Early Education and Development*, 27(1), 128-144.; Dorman, R. L., Anthony, E., Osborne-Fears, B., & Fischer, R. L. (2017). Investing in high quality preschool: lessons from an urban setting. *Early Years*, 37(1), 91-107.

<sup>12</sup> Barnett, W. S., & Friedman-Krauss, A. H. (2016). State(s) of Head Start. National Institute for Early Education Research: New Brunswick, NJ

<sup>13</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G. G., & Gardiner, B. A. (2020). *State of Preschool 2019*. National Institute for Early Education Research: New Brunswick, NJ