



# Equitable Access to Universal Prekindergarten in Washington, DC

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Public preschool has emerged as a leading policy for reducing inequities among young children. The District of Columbia has a strong reputation in early education, particularly in its access to prekindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds. To ensure these early learning opportunities are equitable, the District of Columbia must consider the implications of who wins and loses the prekindergarten lottery.

In 2008, the District of Columbia passed DC Law 17-202, the Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Amendment Act. The law was meant to increase the availability of prekindergarten seats for 3- and 4-year-olds in public schools, charter schools, and community-based organizations across the District. DC public prekindergarten is known as universal, but that label is misleading. Seventy-one percent of 3-year-olds and 87 percent of 4-year-olds participate in the program (Friedman-Krauss et al. 2020). Program expansion has focused on the District's most disadvantaged communities, and seats for 3-year-olds are still concentrated in these communities.

My School DC leads intensive outreach in the months leading up to the lottery. Their efforts include hosting a district-wide school fair, advertising on public transportation and in the media, workshops and training in city agencies and schools, canvassing, targeted phone banking, and partnering with local nonprofits on community outreach. Phone banking and outreach efforts focus on families in Wards 1, 4, 7, and 8; families of rising prekindergarten students; transient youth; and families speaking languages other than English at home, with translation available in Spanish, Amharic, French, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Families can also sign up on the My School DC website to receive emails and text notifications about the submission process. Community-based walk-in centers and a help line are available to support families in completing their applications, and My School DC calls all families with open applications before the submission deadline. These efforts are meant to inform parents from all backgrounds of the options available for their children and increase informed participation in the lottery.

## Matched Applicants Mirror the Population, while Wait-Listed Applicants Appear More Advantaged

To better understand patterns of prekindergarten applications and lottery outcomes, ideal analyses would draw on a rich set of background data on children and families and explore variation in participation and match rates across demographic and socioeconomic groups. But the DC prekindergarten lottery collects minimal background data because of its primary mission to support a streamlined and accessible application system. Instead, we use families' listed addresses, geocoded and linked to American Community Survey five-year microdata on community characteristics at the Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) level, to proxy for the individual characteristics of prekindergarten applicants and matched and wait-listed applicants. Although this approach has limitations, it provides the best opportunity to learn about applicants and their families before school enrollment. Additional details on methods and limitations can be found in our report, *Who Wins the Preschool Lottery?* (Greenberg et al. 2020). Table 1 describes the characteristics of 3-year-olds in the District of Columbia, prekindergarten applicants, and matched and wait-listed applicants. Columns 2, 3, and 4 describe the average community characteristics of DC prekindergarten applicants, those matched by the lottery, and those wait-listed, respectively. Comparisons with column 1 show striking similarity: applicants and children matched to prekindergarten look nearly identical across all characteristics examined, differing from all young children by 3 percentage points, at most.

Larger differences appear in comparing wait-listed applicants and the population as a whole. Communities of children wait-listed into public prekindergarten for 3-year-olds (PK3) contain, on average, lower shares of Black families and higher shares of Hispanic<sup>1</sup> and white families. Their communities have lower shares of families with one parent and higher shares of families with two or no parents. Wait-listed applicants come from communities with higher shares of families with at least one immigrant parent and lower shares of families speaking only English at home. Their communities are also more socioeconomically advantaged: they have higher shares of two-parent full-time working households, families with higher incomes, and families with four-year college degrees or more, along with lower shares of families receiving food stamps. Given that these comparisons rely on data from only five PUMAs, the number and magnitude of these differences is remarkable. Patterns look similar for public prekindergarten for 4-year-olds (PK4).

These findings suggest that wait-listed applicants disproportionately come from socioeconomically advantaged communities. Findings also suggest disparities in lottery outcomes for immigrant families that warrant further consideration, especially as public preschool has been shown to improve access and school readiness for children of immigrants in other contexts (Greenberg, Michie, and Adams 2018; Greenberg, Rosenboom, and Adams 2019).

TABLE 1

## Select Characteristics of Children in Washington, DC

	Community characteristics of			
	Pre-K-eligible children (1)	All applicants (N = 5,669) (2)	Matched students (N = 4,897) (3)	Wait-listed students (N = 772) (4)
<b>Child's race or ethnicity</b>				
Black	54%	52%	55%	40%
Hispanic	14%	16%	15%	19%
White	22%	22%	20%	29%
Asian	4%	4%	4%	5%
Other race or multiracial	6%	6%	6%	7%
<b>Family composition</b>				
One parent	43%	40%	43%	29%
Two parents	52%	54%	51%	65%
No parents	5%	6%	6%	6%
At least one parent is an immigrant	24%	26%	25%	32%
<b>Language spoken at home<sup>a</sup></b>				
English only	69%	66%	68%	59%
Spanish	12%	13%	12%	15%
Other languages	14%	15%	14%	19%
Poverty, family income below 100% of FPL	24%	22%	24%	15%
Low income, family income below 200% of FPL	36%	34%	37%	24%
Not low income, family income at or above 200% of FPL	63%	66%	63%	76%
<b>Highest educational attainment of parents</b>				
Less than high school	12%	12%	13%	10%
High school diploma or some college	45%	44%	46%	34%
Four-year college degree or more	43%	44%	41%	55%
Family has access to at least one vehicle	74%	76%	74%	83%

**Source:** Estimates using 2013–17 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Samples downloaded from IPUMS-USA.

**Notes:** Percentage totals may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding and nonresponse. Only select categories are presented. Children eligible for PK3 (children age 3, born January through September, and children age 4, born October through December) are included in the table. The table does not include demographic data for children living outside, but attending prekindergarten within, the District of Columbia (195 children over five years in our study). The table does not present data from the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education but uses students' lottery outcomes to describe average community characteristics of matched and wait-listed students, respectively.

<sup>a</sup>This variable reflects parents' primary language; if one parent speaks a non-English language, we use that language.

## From Equality to Equity

It is encouraging that applicants and matched applicants closely resemble the overall population of prekindergarten-age students in the District of Columbia, especially compared with findings from Boston and other cities suggesting that lotteries create barriers to prekindergarten access (Shapiro et al. 2019). Yet, equality may be insufficient to overcome historical and ongoing advantages wealthy and white families have in accessing high-quality preschool. To advance equitable outcomes, application and match rates may need to be higher for students with low incomes and students of color, especially Black

and Hispanic students. A current proposal to include an “at risk” preference in the My School DC lottery (Bill 23-717) would reshape the patterns described in this brief. The DC Policy Center estimates that that this new preference would increase socioeconomic diversity in PK3 and PK4 programs (Coffin 2020). Students experiencing poverty, homelessness, or foster care would make up a larger share of prekindergarten programs, as this preference would improve their chances of a lottery match. Similarly, family priorities may play a role in defining equity. Families in Wards 7 and 8 ranked five schools when applying to PK3, on average, while those in Wards 3 and 6 ranked an average of seven. PK4 applicants in Ward 8 ranked four schools, on average, while those in Wards 1, 2, 5, and 6 ranked six. Families in these wards likely face additional challenges and barriers to accessing opportunities for their children. The poverty rates in Wards 7 and 8 were 27 and 34 percent, respectively. This is much higher than the poverty rates in the other six wards, which range from 8 to 16 percent.

Increasing the match and enrollment rates of children from communities marginalized from traditional education systems will lead to a more equitable prekindergarten system in the District, but it will not be sufficient to ensure all children enter the K–12 system prepared for school. It is essential that all children attend high-quality, effective, and accessible programs. Nationally, even though Black children and white children enroll in prekindergarten at similar rates, Black children are more likely to experience low-quality programs (Friedman-Krauss and Barnett 2020; Latham et al. 2020; Valentino 2017). Prekindergarten can set children and families on the path to success in school and beyond. But access to quality, and later child outcomes, can help define equity in the prekindergarten lottery.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> We follow the racial and ethnic categories included in the American Community Survey while acknowledging that they may not be families’ preferred identifiers, and we remain committed to employing inclusive language whenever possible.

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