

The New American Elementary School? Prekindergarten in Public Schools and Implications for the Build Back Better Framework

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Michael Little
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A central feature of President Biden’s Build Back Better framework is a proposal to ensure that every child in the United States, if their family chooses to, can attend a public prekindergarten program starting at age 3.¹ Prekindergarten can be offered in various settings—including public schools, private child care centers, or Head Start schools—but in the 2018–19 academic year, about 80 percent of state-funded prekindergarten enrollees attended prekindergarten in a public elementary school building,² and more than 50 percent of public elementary schools housed a prekindergarten grade.

School-based prekindergarten programs tend to be located in schools that are less economically advantaged and serve higher proportions of students of color than the US average. In public elementary schools in 2019–20, student-level enrollment in prekindergarten is 37 percent of kindergarten enrollment.

In light of the shifts in the scope of public education the Build Back Better framework proposes and the resulting changes to the education system’s structure, I take stock of past and present early childhood programming provided in public elementary schools. School-based prekindergarten has implications for both the quality and alignment of early educational experiences, so understanding the landscape will provide policymakers and advocates critical context to inform their decisionmaking.

The Evolving Elementary School

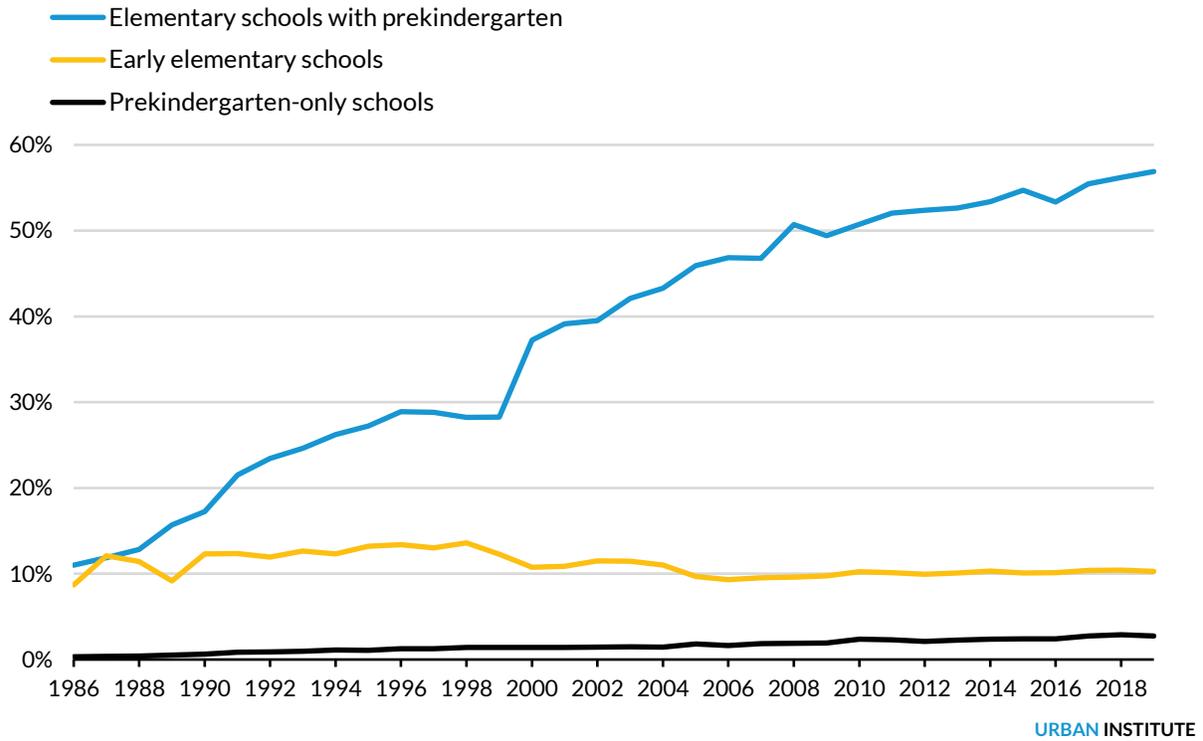
Data from the 2019–20 academic year indicate that approximately 57 percent of public elementary schools have a prekindergarten grade (figure 1). This percentage has risen steadily, increasing an average of 1.5 percentage points each year since 1986, when the US Department of Education began collecting the data.

¹ “FACT SHEET: The American Families Plan,” White House, April 28, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>.

² Other early childhood programs are not included in this figure, including Head Start and subsidized child care. Here, I report on state-funded prekindergarten only.

FIGURE 1

Share of Public Elementary Schools with Early Childhood Education Features



Source: School CCD Directory, School CCD Enrollment, via Education Data Portal v. 0.10.0, Urban Institute, under ODC Attribution License.

Figure 1 also shows the trend for early elementary schools and prekindergarten-only schools. Early elementary schools, which have only prekindergarten through third grade (P-3), have composed about 10 percent of all public elementary schools since 1986. Prekindergarten-only schools are rare but increasing in number. These schools have grown from essentially 0 percent of all public elementary schools in 1986 to 3 percent today.

With a large influx of new students into the educational system via the proposed Build Back Better framework, states and districts may consider expanding prekindergarten-only and P-3 schools in addition to siting prekindergarten into more traditional elementary school structures. These alternative school grade structures may be particularly appealing, given that the Build Back Better framework adds two new early grades, and current school buildings may not be able to accommodate that enrollment.

Student Enrollment in School-Based Prekindergarten

A school having a prekindergarten grade can obscure the actual number of students served because some schools might serve only a handful of students through specialized programs (e.g., Title I) while others might include several prekindergarten classrooms. To explore this, I analyzed changes in student-level enrollment in school-based prekindergarten programs between 1988 and 2019. In the

2019–20 academic year, prekindergarten enrollment as a share of kindergarten enrollment was 37 percent, and 1.36 million students were served.³ This share has risen steadily, up about 1 percentage point per year since 1988. The current level of prekindergarten enrollment in public elementary schools, though having increased, is not even half of kindergarten enrollment. Additionally, although the Common Core of Data does not distinguish between prekindergarten for 3-year-olds or prekindergarten for 4-year-olds, it is likely that the vast majority of these students are 4-year-olds. Data from the National Institute for Early Education Research shows that state prekindergarten programs serve only 6 percent of 3-year-olds, and 19 states do not include any 3-year-olds in their programs.⁴

Who Attends School-Based Prekindergarten?

Geography of School-Based Prekindergarten

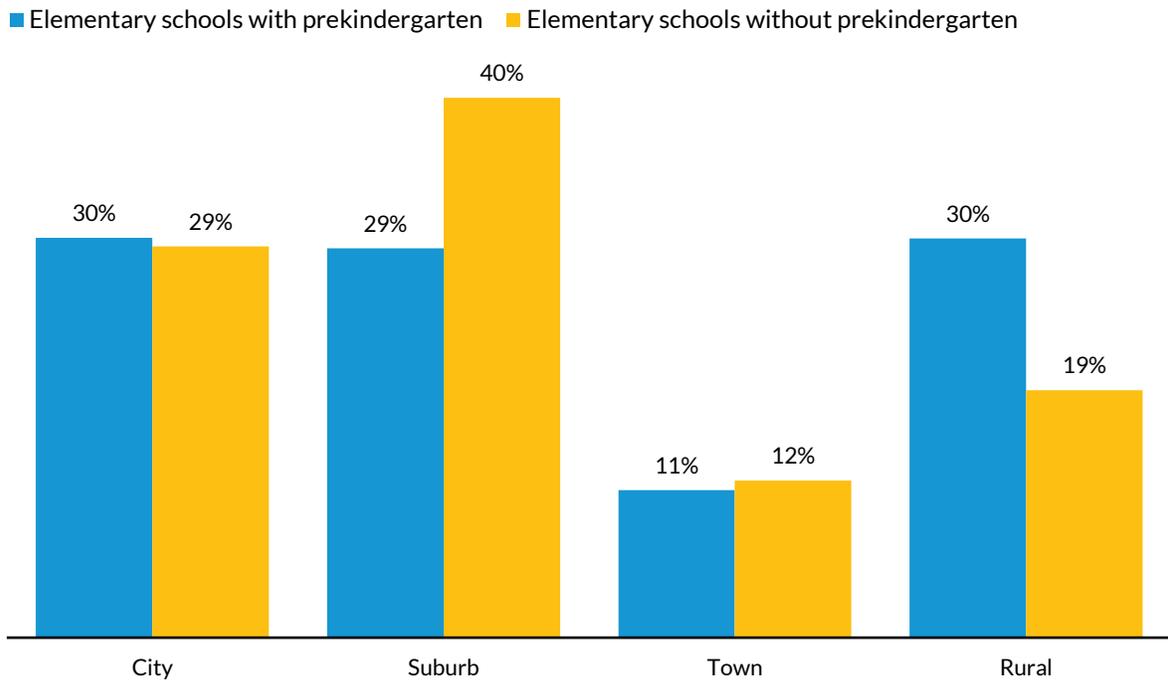
Schools with and without prekindergarten programs are roughly equally distributed across cities and towns (figure 2). School-based programs are less common in suburban areas and more common in rural areas. It makes sense that there are fewer prekindergarten programs in wealthier suburban areas because prekindergarten programs are often designed to target students whose families have lower incomes. A move to a more universal approach to prekindergarten delivery, as proposed by the Build Back Better framework, would likely equalize these differences.

³ Results were consistent when comparing prekindergarten student enrollment with first-grade enrollment.

⁴ Allison H. Friedman-Krauss, W. Steven Barnett, Karin A. Garver, Katherine S. Hodges, G. G. Weisenfeld, and Beth Ann Gardiner, *The State of Preschool 2019* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, 2020).

FIGURE 2

Prekindergarten Program Shares, by Locale Type



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Source: School CCD Directory, School CCD Enrollment, via Education Data Portal v. 0.10.0, Urban Institute, under ODC Attribution License.

Note: Values sum to 100 percent within each school type and across geographic locale types.

Economic Composition of School-Based Prekindergarten

In terms of the economic composition of schools, prekindergarten programs are more prevalent in Title I schools than in non-Title I schools. Eighty-one percent of elementary schools with prekindergarten programs are Title I schools, and 76 percent of elementary schools without prekindergarten programs are Title I schools (figure 3).

Though this observed difference makes sense given that many state prekindergarten programs target low-income families, it highlights important opportunities for policymakers to consider when expanding prekindergarten programs. Seventy-six percent of schools without prekindergarten programs are Title I eligible. Targeting these schools for high-priority expansion may help ensure prekindergarten programs are located in communities with populations most likely to benefit from them.

FIGURE 3

Title I Schools with and without Prekindergarten



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School-Based Prekindergarten and Racial and Ethnic Demographics

I also examined the racial and ethnic composition of prekindergarten attendees relative to that of kindergarten attendees. I find that the racial and ethnic composition of school-based prekindergarten attendees is generally consistent with that of kindergarten students. There are 3 percentage points fewer white students and 4 percentage points more Black students in school-based prekindergarten. Differences for other racial or ethnic groups are all no more than 1 percentage point.

TABLE 1

Prekindergarten and Kindergarten Enrollment, by Race or Ethnicity

	Prekindergarten enrollment	Share of total	Kindergarten enrollment	Share of total
American Indian or Alaska Native	15,423	1%	37,761	1%
Asian	50,769	4%	197,996	5%
Black	246,445	18%	534,326	14%
Hispanic	395,250	29%	1,042,138	28%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	3,663	0%	15,417	0%
Two or more races	60,152	4%	199,102	5%
White	588,793	43%	1,710,823	46%

Source: School CCD Enrollment, via Education Data Portal v. 0.10.0, Urban Institute, under ODC Attribution License.

Though overall national-level enrollment appears to indicate school-based prekindergarten attendees are similar to kindergarten students in terms of race or ethnicity, variation can exist among schools. In fact, research has found that segregation in prekindergarten programs is more pronounced than segregation in K–12 classrooms.⁵ I extended this research by exploring how segregation in school-based prekindergarten programs compares with prekindergarten programs overall as well as with segregation in kindergarten.

⁵ Erica Greenberg and Tomas Monarrez, “Segregated from the Start: Comparing Segregation in Early Childhood and K–12 Education,” Urban Institute, October 1, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/features/segregated-start>.

For each of these groups, I calculated the dissimilarity index, which measures racial and ethnic imbalance. Higher values indicate more segregation, and lower levels indicate less segregation. I find that school-based prekindergarten programs are 10 percent less segregated than prekindergarten programs overall, but school-based prekindergarten programs are still 3 percent more segregated than kindergarten programs (figure 4). As we move from a targeted system of early childhood education to a universal approach as proposed in the Build Back Better framework, this moment is an opportunity to design policies that foster more integrated early learning environments. Students benefit from attending diverse early childhood programs.⁶ One potential policy design feature that could be incorporated into the Build Back Better framework is targeting programs in diverse communities where there is greater potential for integrated programs.

FIGURE 4
Dissimilarity Measures of Segregation



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Source: School CCD Enrollment, via Education Data Portal v. 0.10.0, Urban Institute, under ODC Attribution License.

Note: Higher values represent more segregation.

Why Siting Prekindergarten in Elementary Schools Matters

The experiences of children in prekindergarten and their subsequent educational experiences can vary based on whether they attend prekindergarten in an elementary school or in a stand-alone center. Recent research on differences between prekindergarten programs sited in elementary school buildings and stand-alone centers revealed key differences (table 2).⁷

⁶ Jeanne L. Reid and Sharon Lynn Kagan, *A Better Start: Why Classroom Diversity Matters in Early Education* (New York: The Century Foundation; Washington, DC: Poverty and Race Research Action Council, 2015).

⁷ Michael Little, "Educators' Views on the Location of Pre-K Programs and Its Relation to Features of P-3 Alignment: An Exploratory Study," *Children and Youth Services Review* 118 (November 2020): 105455. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105455>.

TABLE 2

Potential Pros and Cons of School-Based Prekindergarten

Potential pros	Potential cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Greater access to educational resources (e.g., library, art space) ▪ Teachers with higher educational credentials ▪ Children experience “what school is like” a year early, which eases the transition into kindergarten ▪ Potential for greater alignment with early grades and consistency in educational experiences, especially when students stay in the same school. ▪ Ability for prekindergarten-aged children to attend the same school as older siblings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Academicization of prekindergarten via pushdown pressures from the higher grade ▪ Lack of full-day care, wraparound services ▪ Less choice for parents if they have younger children (some centers are birth to age 5) ▪ School facilities may lack appropriate facilities for 3- and 4-year-olds

I have shown that prekindergarten programs are a common feature in public elementary schools, but student enrollment in these programs is still only 37 percent of kindergarten enrollment. Prekindergarten expansions proposed in the Build Back Better framework could drastically alter the status quo. Elementary schools and stand-alone centers are potential sites for new prekindergarten classrooms, so critical decisions will need to be made about where and how to place new programs so that the pros in table 2 are maximized and the cons are minimized. Policymakers and program administrators should keep the following considerations in mind when engaging in this work:

- There is a tension between aligning prekindergarten and K–12 in the context of elementary school buildings and a desire to keep prekindergarten as a separate entity where developmentally appropriate practices are assured.
- There are multiple ways to add grades to the educational system. These include prekindergarten-only centers and schools, early childhood (P–3) schools, and traditional elementary schools (serving prekindergarten through fifth grade).
- Prekindergarten programs have traditionally been targeted to serve low-income and racially and ethnically diverse populations. Expansion to a universal approach will alter the demographics of students served but open the door to more diverse programs.

The factors explored in this brief should be included in program monitoring for the Build Back Better framework so the trends moving forward can be studied and subsequent policy changes can be made to assure a more just and equitable early childhood education system.

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