

# Many US preschoolers remain racially segregated at school

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Young children can benefit greatly from exposure to racial and ethnic diversity during a crucial formative period in their lives, according to a

Penn State education professor. However, recent research indicates that a high degree of segregation in American preschools could be hindering students from forming those valuable cross-racial connections.

Erica Frankenberg, professor of education (educational leadership) in the College of Education, is in the midst of a multi-year project intended to help facilitate a discussion of the importance of diversity in [early childhood](#) and support professional development of early childhood educators for diverse settings.

"I'm thinking of ways of incentivizing integration," said Frankenberg, co-director and founder of the Center for Education and Civil Rights (CECR) in the College of Education. "Part of it has to be changing attitudes of policymakers and parents alike."

Frankenberg and colleague Peter Piazza co-authored "Segregation at an Early Age: 2019 Update," which presents data illustrating the current [segregation](#) of preschool children. Drawing on 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), the report analyzes 1.58 million children in 29,186 public educational institutions enrolling at least one preschool student.

Comprising nearly 20 percent of all three- and four-year-old children in the country, CRDC data "illustrate the varied racial composition of preschool students between states as a result of demographic differences and state policies supporting public preschool opportunities."

Piazza, who completed a postdoctoral fellowship at CECR in summer 2019, writes about race and school integration in CECR's blog, the School Diversity Notebook. He is now the director of school quality measures at Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA), a project that aims to develop a more holistic alternative to test-based school measurement.

Frankenberg and Piazza originally shared findings about the extent to which preschool students are in racially diverse educational settings in a 2016 report titled "Segregation at an Early Age," released through CECR in conjunction with The National Coalition on School Diversity. The report drew on CRDC from 2013-14, analyzing 27,957 public schools that enrolled 1.43 million preschool students.

Similar to the 2013-14 report, the 2015-16 data reflect an overall decrease in U.S. preschoolers who attend highly segregated schools. Collectively, however, the rates of racial isolation remain high. While Asian students generally are well-integrated, white preschool students, on average, attend a school in which the majority of other students are white in almost all 50 states. Also, in nearly half of all states, black preschoolers, on average, attend a school in which 25 percent or less of the students are white.

An additional highlight of the report is evidence of limited exposure for black and Hispanic children to both white students and to one another. They found no state where the average Hispanic preschool [student](#) attends a school in which most of the students are black, and discovered that black preschoolers, on average, attend a school in which a majority of students are Hispanic in only two states: California and New Mexico.

"Instead, nearly 20 percent of Hispanic students go to preschools where 90 percent or more students are of their same race/ethnicity," the researchers wrote in the report.

CECR's collective work, according to the report, is "intended to promote equity across the educational pipeline by supporting efforts that facilitate integration through an interdisciplinary approach. Overall, CECR aims to bring racial integration into the center of a nationwide conversation about using public funds to expand access to preschool."

Frankenberg's interest in pre-K segregation, she said, stems from both her research background and personal circumstances.

"I've long studied k-12 segregation and research has pretty consistently shown that some of the strongest benefits of integration comes from cross-racial exposure at early ages," she said. "I'd always been curious about pre-K integration but a combination of burgeoning policy efforts to expand pre-K, Penn State bringing its early childcare centers in-house, and being the parent of preschoolers made me actually start this work."

In recent years, Frankenberg said, there has been widespread support of the expansion of publicly funded early education. According to the pre-K segregation report, state-level funding for early education programs more than tripled from \$2.4 billion in 2002 to more than \$7.6 billion in 2017. While there are fewer students overall in pre-K programs, gathering information on those students is challenging because of both public and private educational models.

"No one has really looked at this issue of racial segregation in pre-K," Frankenberg said. "Understanding the extent to which pre-K students could be in diverse settings which could expose them to children from different backgrounds and therefore reduce the formation of stereotypes could be useful."

Racially integrating preschool classrooms provides a number of benefits for individual students as well as society, Frankenberg said. By interacting and making friends with classmates from different backgrounds, students can learn about other cultures as well as build their capacity for empathy and develop leadership skills.

"Ultimately, I think all early child education programs should consider diversity and inclusion in their teaching and in composition of their educators," she said. "For diverse settings, you'd want educators and

their teaching to reflect the children. But in homogeneous settings too, like mostly white spaces, you'd also want educators to be exposing children to diverse literature, etc., as a way to help support the development of children for our diverse country."

In addition to preschool children missing out on the benefits of broadening their social and cultural horizons, she said, preschool segregation typically results in minority groups receiving a subpar educational experience. Her research has found that public preschool programs in states with higher rates of residential segregation have greater variation in quality, while programs in low-income communities are more likely to operate with fewer resources and consequently rated as low quality.

"Historically, we've never given the same kind of resources to schools who serve high shares of students of color," Frankenberg said.

In preschool expansion, Frankenberg and Piazza wrote in their report, there is an "opportunity to provide our youngest students with the types of learning environments that contribute to reduced racial prejudice and increased inter-group friendships in the K–12 setting."

One of the factors that contribute to increased segregation in U.S. preschools, Frankenberg said, is that parents prefer to send their kids to preschools that are relatively close to their homes. She added that it is vital for parents and legislators to recognize that "being educated in spaces that reflect the diversity of our country is really important, too."

In their report, Frankenberg and Piazza outline several short-term and long-term strategies for fostering integration in preschools. A couple of possible solutions, Frankenberg said, could be locating new preschool programs at sites that serve students from diverse neighborhoods or creating inter-district partnerships that promote integration. The federal

government can drive state level integration by providing matching funds to expand preschool integration; while the federal government and individual states can provide incentives for low-income parents to send their children to preschools in middle- and upper-income neighborhoods.

The CECR plans to release at least one more report on preschool segregation, Frankenberg said. However, in September 2019, the Trump administration proposed plans to end the disaggregation of public preschool data based on race. If this rule goes into effect, she added, it will be much harder to track any changes—positive or negative—in the data.

"It will be a real challenge," she said. "There are other data sources, but none that are national in scope. The National Center for Education Services (NCES) is starting to add pre-K to some of its data sources, so it will likely be a matter of pulling from different data to see what we can learn."

Despite the potential obstacles, Frankenberg said she is still optimistic about the value of the research on pre-K segregation.

"Because it is an area of growth, there are exciting possibilities, if we take the importance of carefully designing preschool to consider integration and educating kids about diversity and inclusion."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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