

# Black children in Pennsylvania have unequal access to quality preschool

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Black children in Pennsylvania are far less likely than their white peers

to have access to quality preschool providers, according to Penn State College of Education researchers.

"Gaps in educational resources at a young age are a problem because children's early learning experiences lay the foundation for future learning," said Karen Babbs Hollett, a doctoral candidate in educational leadership. "When children aren't given a fair start, it can hold them back for years to come."

In a new report published by the Center for Education and Civil Rights, Babbs Hollett and Erica Frankenberg, professor of education (educational leadership and demography), analyzed racial disparities in preschool enrollment and quality in Pennsylvania. The report is based on [a larger study](#) of early childhood education in Pennsylvania, for which Babbs Hollett and Frankenberg received a Research and Evaluation Scholar Award from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Babbs Hollett and Frankenberg compared enrollment composition and quality access within and between two large publicly funded programs that support [preschool education](#), Child Care Works (CCW) and Pre-K Counts (PKC). CCW is Pennsylvania's childcare subsidy program and provides year-round preschool to [low-income parents](#) who are able to meet work requirements and pay co-payments. PKC is Pennsylvania's state-funded pre-kindergarten program, which also targets families with low incomes. PKC offers 180 days of free half- or full-day preschool to any eligible child, regardless of parents' employment status.

In their analysis, Babbs Hollett and Frankenberg found substantially more Black preschoolers were enrolled in CCW than PKC. In contrast, white preschoolers made up a much larger share of program participants in PKC compared to CCW. Within CCW, white preschoolers were much more likely than Black preschoolers to be enrolled with a provider that met high quality standards, a pattern that persisted across

community contexts. Patterns in access to quality preschool for Latinx children varied by geography and other community characteristics.

"This work contributes to understanding how educational policies that are not explicitly race-conscious have effects that have disparate racial impacts," said Frankenberg. "This is especially important to identify if we are to close racial opportunity gaps in education."

PKC and CCW have programmatic differences that have a major impact on children and families in Pennsylvania, according to the researchers. For example, the state requires preschool providers that participate in PKC to meet certain quality standards, while CCW providers are incentivized but not required to meet those standards. Pennsylvania has also significantly increased [state funding](#) for PKC in recent years, while funding levels for CCW haven't changed.

"These differences in quality mandates and funding mean that children participating in PKC are probably more likely to be enrolled with a preschool provider that has more resources, compared to children in CCW," Babbs Hollett said.

According to Babbs Hollett, preschool has a significant impact on children's academic and social outcomes. For example, she said, children who attend quality preschool programs demonstrate greater kindergarten readiness, are less likely to experience grade retention, are more likely to take Advanced Placement classes in high school, and are more likely to graduate [high school](#) and complete postsecondary education programs. In addition, they're more likely to have higher incomes as adults, have improved physical health and are less likely to experience involvement with the criminal legal system.

"Given all these benefits, it's clearly a huge problem when some children have less access to quality, well-resourced preschool providers than

others," Babbs Hollett said.

The researchers discovered that the disparities in access to quality preschool providers are related to geography. They found that children in [rural areas](#) made up a much larger share of PKC participants compared to children living in cities. In fact, between 2014 and 2019, participation in PKC increased by 74% for rural children while it decreased by 38% for urban children.

While Black preschoolers experienced the least growth in enrollment with quality providers between 2014 and 2019 across all locales, Babbs Hollett said she and Frankenberg discovered a different pattern among Latinx preschoolers. For example, in the suburbs, Latinx children in CCW and PKC were more likely than their white peers to be enrolled with high-quality preschool providers.

"That Latinx preschoolers' enrollment patterns tended to be more similar to white preschoolers than Black preschoolers was surprising, given that Black and Latinx families are both racialized groups that we know experience discrimination," she said. "What I think these findings highlight, then, is the unique, durable and significant influence of anti-Black racism when it comes to educational opportunity."

Since Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services has explicitly named racial equality as a goal for their public programs, including preschool, Babbs Hollett said the study she conducted with Frankenberg provides information that can help them achieve that goal. Their top recommendation for making the Pennsylvania preschool system more equitable is increasing base funding for all providers. While Pennsylvania recently raised CCW subsidy reimbursement rates and increased funding for PKC, funding is still below recommended levels.

In addition, Frankenberg said, the way reimbursements for preschool

providers are calculated needs to change. Currently, reimbursement rates are based on tuition rates, not on the actual cost associated with tending to the educational needs of children.

"The current funding system disfavors providers that serve families with lower incomes, who often keep tuition rates lower so they're affordable," said Frankenberg. "That's clearly not an equitable system."

Babbs Hollett said a major area for the researchers to focus on in the future is learning more about how children and families are experiencing preschool in Pennsylvania through qualitative research. She added that their current study describes enrollment numbers and identifies certain gaps but doesn't explain why those gaps are present or how they affect [children](#) and families.

"Such findings could further inform changes that would make existing preschool policy more equitable in Pennsylvania," Frankenberg added.

**More information:** Racial Disparities in Preschool Access: Differences in Enrollment and Quality Within and Between Two State Programs in Pennsylvania. [cecr.ed.psu.edu/sites/default/ ... eport\\_2.14\\_FINAL.pdf](https://cecr.ed.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-04/cecr-report-2.14_FINAL.pdf)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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