

Latino Access to Preschool Stalls after Earlier Gains

Certain to harden achievement gaps, erode workforce quality

We know that quality preschool can boost children's early literacy and social agility, skills valued highly by employers. The returns to preschool appear to be stronger for Latino children, especially those from non-English speaking families, compared with other populations.

But newly available data reveal that preschool enrollment rates – already low for Latino youngsters – have stalled after climbing steadily since the 1980s. Key findings:

- About one-third of Latino 4 year-olds were enrolled in preschool in 1991, rising to 53% in 2005. Yet this share lagged far behind African American 4 year-olds (69%) and non-Latino Whites (70%) in 2005.
- Latino preschool enrollments appear to have declined between 2005 and 2009, while attendance rates remained steady for African American and White 4 year-olds.
- Preschools serving Latino children range lower on certain quality indicators, yet the share attending academically enriched programs equals the slice of White peers entering such programs.

Given these persisting disparities in preschool access, narrowing early achievement gaps in the public schools will be difficult. These numbers do exhibit good news: equalizing preschool opportunities for Black children. Still, shortfalls in preschool quality may constrain benefits for Black and Latino children.

Over the next two generations, by 2050, one-third of all Americans will be of Latino heritage. This population will be young and perhaps weakly schooled – all retirees will depend upon the productivity of Latino workers to finance pensions, staff medical clinics, and serve the elderly. We all hold a stake in lifting the growth of Latino children, advancing their early education.

We also know that quality preschool helps lift the early achievement and eventual job skills for young children from poor households. These benefits can be especially robust for young children raised in non-English speaking families. ¹

But national surveys, going back three decades, reveal that Latino children have been less likely to attend preschool – limited by fewer neighborhood slots, lower maternal employment rates, and heavier reliance on kin for child care – relative to African American and White families.

To equalize children's access to preschool every U.S. president since George H. W. Bush has pushed to expand Head Start and other early-education options. State leaders steadily raised their investment as well, until the recession depressed budget revenues. Families and Government, together, now spend over \$47 billion on child care and preschool each year. ²

So, are young Latino families gaining wider access to quality preschool, thanks to this steady investment?

Early Gains, Stalled Progress

The answer is, yes, if we take the long view. Figure 1 shows rapid growth in family demand for preschool from 1982 forward, for all ethnic groups as results of nationwide surveys first became available. In 1982, just 15% of 3-4 year-olds were attending a preschool center, rising to 43% by 1990. Analysts reported ethnic-group differences by 1991 for children 3-5, showing that just 24% of Latino children attended preschool, compared with 37% of Whites and 42% of Blacks.

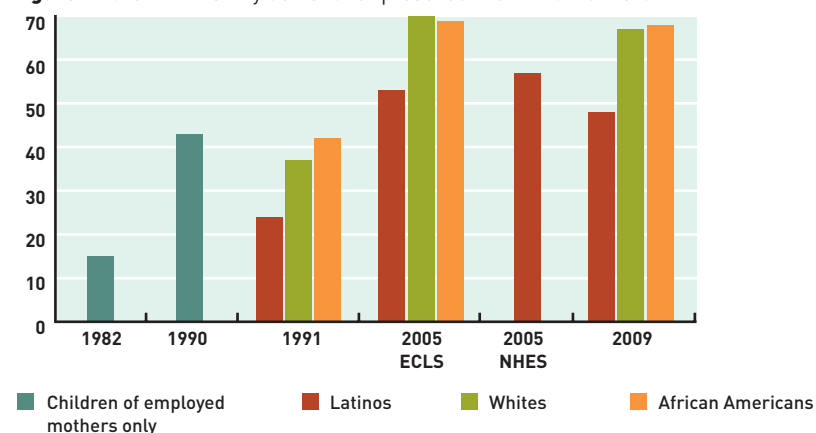
More recent data allow us to focus on 4 year-olds. We see that 53% of Latino children attended preschool in 2005, according to one study (estimated at 57% for non-immigrant children), compared with 70% of Whites and 69% of Blacks.

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Figure 1. Growth in family demand for preschool from 1982 forward



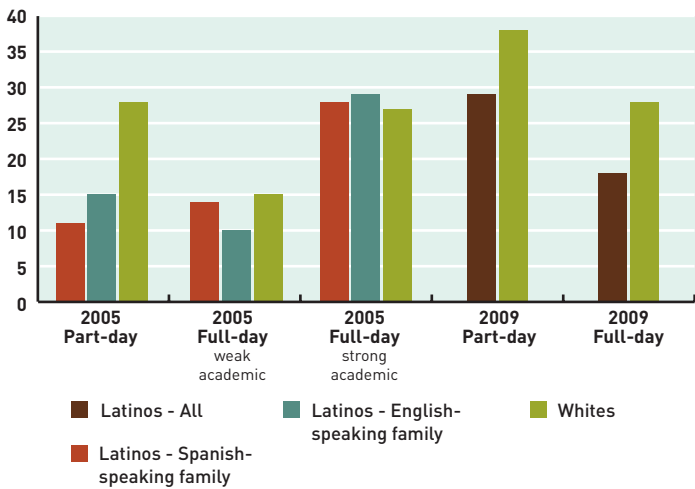
Notes: The 1982 and 1990 estimates are for children, age 3-4, with an employed mother (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982; Willer et al., 1991). The 1991 estimate by ethnic group is for children, age 3-5, not yet enrolled in kindergarten (West, Wright, & Hausken, 1995; Fuller et al., 1996). The 2005 and 2009 estimates pertain to 4 year-olds (4.4 and 4.5 years, respectively; Karoly & Gonzales, 2011; analysis of Current Population Survey data by A. Kim at the Institute of Human Development, Berkeley). The 2005 NHES estimate is for children of non-immigrant Latino parents.

The most recent gauge in 2009 shows that Latino preschool enrollments have fallen to 48% of 4 year-olds. The questions asked of parents differ slightly across surveys, yet the 2005 and 2009 enrollment-rate estimates are close to identical for both White and Black children. ³ Estimates of means are true plus or minus 1%, given the large national samples.

Varying Doses of Preschool

A related question is whether Latino children – when entering preschool – experience differing kinds of quality, relative to other groups. The initial three clusters of bars in Figure 2 show that Latino children were much less likely to attend a part-time program, but just slightly less likely to attend a full-day program in 2005 (the omitted share is children not attending preschool). The pattern differs only slightly for children from Spanish- versus English-speaking families.

Figure 2. Part-time and full-day preschool attendance



To differentiate types of preschools, we sorted those with teachers reporting more time spent on preliteracy activities, from those not structured with this emphasis. Similar shares of Latino and White children attended the more academically intensive programs.

The 2009 survey data show that Latino children are now less likely to attend preschool part-day or full-day than White peers.

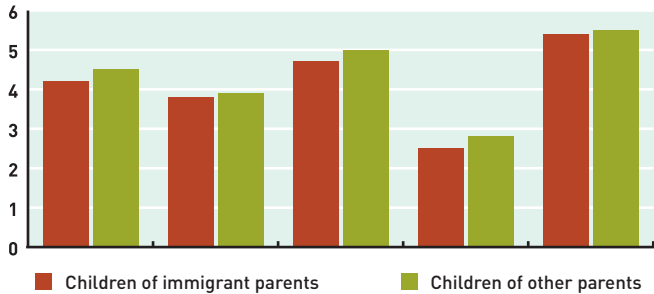
Equal Access to Quality Programs?

We know that preschools vary widely in quality, from the count of kids in classrooms to the responsive and stimulating skills of

teachers.⁴ We saw how Latino children enroll in academically focused preschools at about the same rate as Whites. But along other indicators Latino children are exposed to lower quality.

Figure 3 reports disparities in quality among 615 California preschools serving children of immigrant and non-immigrant parents. The gap is cast as a fraction of a standard deviation for each indicator. The between-group difference in observed adequacy of classroom space and the quality of materials equals 0.26 SD (first pair of bars), about equal to the short-term effect of attending preschool (of average quality) for the average child from a poor family. The gap for instructional support between children of immigrant versus non-immigrant parents equals 0.29 SD (second pair from the right).

Figure 3. Disparities in quality among 615 California preschools serving children of immigrant and non-immigrant parents



Note: Quality indicators based on classroom observations with scores pegged to a 7-point scale (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011).

Implications – Caring and Productive Youths

Over the next two generations, by 2050, one-third of all Americans will be of Latino heritage. This population will be young and often weakly schooled – all retirees will depend upon their caring and productive qualities to finance pensions and serve the elderly. ⁵

Preschool alone, of course, will not ensure that Latino graduates acquire the literacy skills and social competencies required of a vibrant workforce and invigorating civil society. But we know that quality early education is among the most effective public initiatives to arise over the past half century.

Until Latino children gain equal access to preschools that display robust quality it's difficult to see how early achievement gaps can be narrowed, or how educators can stem the alienating effects of schooling felt by many children and youths.



1 Studies that detail benefits for Latino children: Bassok, D. (2010). Do Black and Hispanic children benefit more from preschool? Understanding differences in preschool effects across racial groups. *Child Development*, 81, 1828-1845. Currie, J. (1999). Does Head Start help Hispanic children? *Journal of Public Economics*, 74, 235-262. Gormley Jr., W., Gayer, T., Phillips, D., & Dawson, B. (2005). The effects of universal pre-k on cognitive development. *Developmental Psychology*, 41, 872-884. Loeb, S., Bridges, M., Bassok, D., Fuller, B., & Rumberger, R. (2007). How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 52-66.

2 For details, see: Fuller, B. (2007). *Standardized childhood*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

3 The 1982 and 1990 estimates stem from census data and original national survey results (Willer et al. (1991). *The demand and supply of child care in 1990, joint findings*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy and Planning, Department of Health and Human Services). The 1991

and 2005-NHES estimates are from the periodic National Household Education Survey (West, J., Wright, & Hausken, G. (1996). *Statistics in brief: Child care and early education program participation of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics; Fuller, B. et al. (1996). Rich culture, poor markets: Why do Latino parents forgo preschooling? *Teachers College Record*, 97, 400-418; Karoly, L., & Gonzalez, G. (2011). Early care and education for children in immigrant families. *Future of Children*, 21, 71-101). The 2005-ECLS and 2009-CPS estimates are by Anthony Kim and Yoonjeon Kim, Institute of Human Development, Berkeley.

4 Review of the preschool quality literature appears in: Zigler, E., Gilliam, W., & Barnett, W. (eds., 2011). *The pre-k debates: Current controversies and issues*. Baltimore: Brookes Pub.

5 Basic demographic figures appear in: Catanzarite, L. & Trimble, L. (2007). *The Latino workforce at mid-decade*. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Urban Institute (2009). *50+ Hispanic workers: Growing segment of the U.S. workforce*. Washington, DC.