

Enrollment rates of children in universal prekindergarten programs in Vermont in 2016/17

Vermont passed universal prekindergarten (preK) legislation in 2014 (Act 166) in an effort to increase access to high-quality preK programs for all young children in the state. Act 166 provides state funded preK to all 3- and 4-year-olds (and to 5-year-olds who are not eligible for kindergarten). Families can enroll their children at no cost in any prequalified preK program across the state regardless of location. To better understand implementation of Act 166, Vermont requested a study that describes the relationship between the characteristics and location of preK children and their enrollment by type of preK program (public school program within or outside the boundaries of a child's local education agency and private childcare center or family childcare home within or outside the boundaries of a child's local education agency) and state-assessed program quality. The study found that in 2016/17, the first year of full implementation, preK children with an individualized education program and children eligible for the national school lunch program were more likely than their counterparts to be enrolled in a public school program and in a program with a higher quality rating. While most children were enrolled in a program within the boundaries of their local education agency, that was more likely for children with an individualized education program and children eligible for the national school lunch program.

Why this study?

Vermont passed universal prekindergarten (preK) legislation (Act 166) in 2014 in an effort to increase access to high-quality preK programs for all young children in the state. Act 166 provides state-funded access to prequalified preK programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds (and to 5-year-olds who are not eligible for kindergarten). Under Vermont's mixed-delivery system of public and private providers, families can enroll their children at no cost in any prequalified preK program across the state regardless of location. There are four types of preK programs: public school programs within the boundaries of a child's local education agency, public school programs outside the boundaries, private childcare centers or private family childcare homes within the boundaries of a child's local education agency, and private childcare centers or private family childcare homes outside the boundaries. To become a prequalified provider of universal preK, a program must obtain a rating of at least three out of five stars on the STep Ahead Recognition System (STARS), the state's quality rating and improvement system.¹

What was studied and how?

The Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands partnered with the Vermont Agency of Education and the Agency of Human Services to address questions about enrollment rates in universal preK. This study used data from 2016/17, the first year of full implementation of universal preK, to identify the characteristics of children in different types of preK programs, whether they were enrolled within or outside the geographic boundaries of their local education agency, and the factors related to enrollment in particular program options. The study sample included 5,622

1. Vermont General Assembly Act No. 166. (2014). An act relating to providing access to publicly funded prekindergarten education. Retrieved February 25, 2017, from <https://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2014/Docs/ACTS/ACT166/ACT166%20As%20Enacted.pdf>.

children enrolled in 282 preK programs in 2016/17 out of approximately 8,600 children enrolled that school year in 383 prequalified preK programs. Descriptive and regression analyses were used to examine the children’s characteristics.

Findings

In the first year of implementation prekindergarten children were enrolled in public school programs (49 percent) and private programs (51 percent) at similar rates

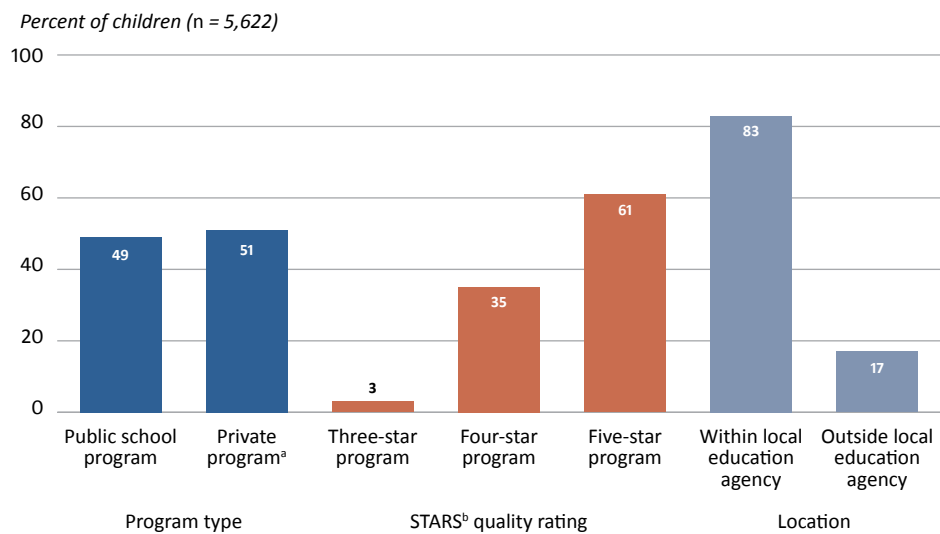
Overall, preK enrollment was approximately evenly split between public school programs and private programs (figure 1). In terms of program quality, a majority of preK children (61 percent) were enrolled in a five-star program, the highest STARS rating.

On average, enrolled preK children had nine prequalified preK programs available within the geographic boundaries of their local education agency of residence, though the average number varied by program type, STARS rating, and location of the program they enrolled in (figure 2). PreK children who were enrolled in a three-star program had an average of two fewer prequalified programs available to them within the boundaries of their local education agency than did preK children enrolled in a four- or five-star program.

Prekindergarten children with an individualized education program, children eligible for the national school lunch program, 4- and 5-year-old children, and children with fewer prequalified programs within the boundaries of their local education agency were more likely than their counterparts to be enrolled in a public school program

Enrollment in a public school preK program was higher for children with an individualized education program (64 percent) than for children without one (47 percent; figure 3). Similarly, children who were eligible for the

Figure 1. While prekindergarten enrollment in Vermont was approximately evenly split between public school programs and private programs, enrollment was higher in programs with the highest quality rating and in programs within a child’s local education agency boundaries, 2016/17



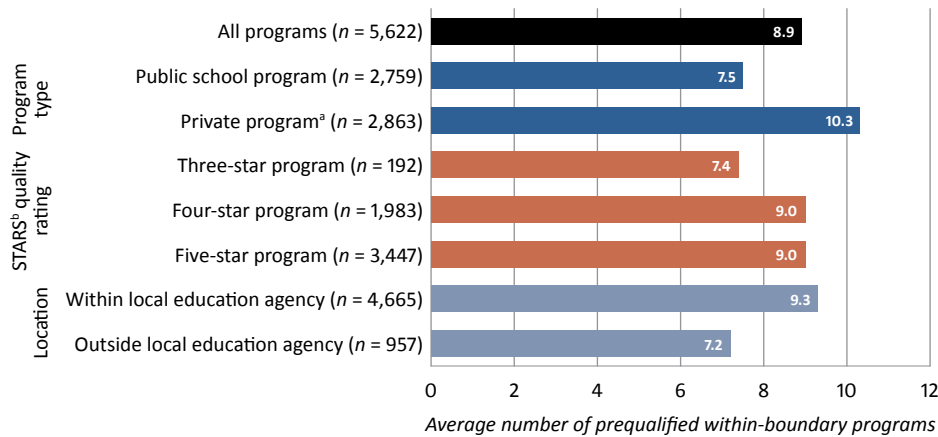
a. Includes private childcare centers and family childcare homes.

b. STARS is Vermont’s SStep Ahead Recognition System quality rating and improvement system.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Source: Authors’ analysis of Vermont Agency of Education data for 2016/17.

Figure 2. Prekindergarten children in Vermont who were enrolled in a public school program, a three-star program, or a program outside the boundaries of their local education agency had fewer programs within the boundaries of their local education agency, 2016/17



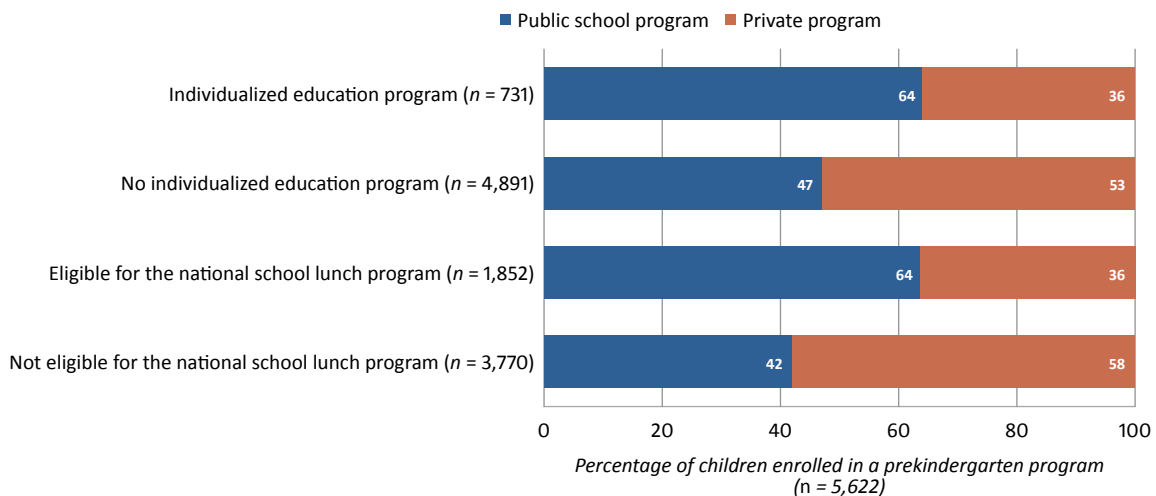
a. Includes private childcare centers and family childcare homes.

b. STARS is Vermont's STep Ahead Recognition System quality rating and improvement system.

Note: All of the comparisons, except between four- and five-star programs, were statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Source: Authors' analysis of Vermont Agency of Education data for 2016/17.

Figure 3. Compared with their counterparts, prekindergarten children in Vermont with an individualized education program and children eligible for the national school lunch program were more likely to be enrolled in a public school program, 2016/17



Note: Because the number of children enrolled in certain program types was small, some categories were collapsed for this analysis. Public school programs include programs within and outside the boundaries of the local education agency. Private programs include private childcare centers and family childcare homes within and outside the boundaries of the local education agency. There was a statistically significant difference (at $p < .05$) in enrollment in public school programs compared with private programs between children with an individualized education program and those without one and between children eligible for the national school lunch program and those not eligible.

Source: Authors' analysis of Vermont Agency of Education data for 2016/17.

national school lunch program were enrolled in a public school preK program at a higher rate (64 percent) than children who were not eligible (42 percent). Regression analysis showed that children with an individualized education program, children eligible for the national school lunch program, children who were 4 or 5 years old, and children with fewer prequalified programs within the boundaries of their local education agency were more likely than their counterparts to be enrolled in a public school program.

Prekindergarten children with an individualized education program were more likely than children without one to be enrolled in a five-star program

Enrollment in a five-star program was higher for preK children with an individualized education program (69 percent) than for children without one (60 percent). Regression analysis confirmed that children with an individualized education program were more likely than children without one to be enrolled in a five-star program.

Prekindergarten children with an individualized education program, children eligible for the national school lunch program, and children with more prequalified programs within the boundaries of their local education agency were more likely than their counterparts to be enrolled in a program within the boundaries of their local education agency

Most children with an individualized education program (90 percent) and children eligible for the national school lunch program (94 percent) were enrolled in a program within the boundaries of their local education agency. Regression analysis confirmed these findings: children with an individualized education program, children eligible for the national school lunch program, and children with more prequalified preK programs within the boundaries of their local education agency were statistically significantly more likely to be enrolled in a program within the boundaries of their local education agency than in a program outside the boundaries.

Limitations

The associations found are correlational, so it cannot be assumed that a child's characteristics cause a family to enroll a child in a particular preK program. Furthermore, Vermont does not collect data on all child characteristics that may be related to enrollment or on the reasons that families make particular enrollment decisions. Finally, the study sample did not include all 3- to 5-year-olds in Vermont or all children enrolled in state-funded preK in 2016/17. Compared with the population of children attending preK, the sample had small but statistically significantly higher percentages of children who were White (97 percent versus 96 percent) and children eligible for the national school lunch program (33 percent versus 31 percent). The study sample also had a lower percentage of three-star programs and a higher percentage of five-star programs than did the population of all prequalified programs.

Implications

The results from this study tell a story about the relationship between preK children's characteristics and location and the type of preK program they are enrolled in. Act 166 aims to provide children with access to high-quality preK environments, and this study shows that goal is generally being met. Additional efforts to increase the number of high-quality preK programs in areas with few or no prequalified programs may improve access and equity. Children enrolling in lower quality programs and programs outside their local education agencies seemed to have fewer choices nearby; however, more research is needed on how families choose where to enroll their preK children.

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DeMeo Cook, K., Irwin, C. W., & Gallo, A. (2020). *Enrollment rates of children in universal prekindergarten programs in Vermont in 2016/17* (REL 2020–015). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.