

## CHAPTER NINE

# A Survey of Chicago’s “Preschool for All” Universal Preschool Program and Policy Recommendations for Improvement

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Free and accessible early childhood education has long been an enticing public benefit for Chicago parents. In fact, during his hotly contested reelection campaign in 2018, former mayor Rahm Emanuel made universal preschool a part of his platform, promising that by 2021, all of Chicago’s four-year olds would be able to attend full-day preschool, free of cost to their parents.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Case for Early Childhood Education**

Just how have the youngest Chicago citizens become central to the city’s politics? The answer lies in the vast potential social gains that increased access, enrollment, and attendance of preschool can yield for cities. Receiving a high-quality preschool education correlates with sustained positive educational outcomes throughout a child’s educational career.<sup>2</sup> Years down the road, students who were enrolled in preschool programs tend to attend school more regularly, exhibit fewer disciplinary issues, and score higher on standardized state exams than do children who did not attend preschool.<sup>3</sup> Other advantages of preschool that manifest years later include improved social skills, enhanced understandings of social norms, and more positive perceptions of school.<sup>4</sup> Building social skills and an understanding of social norms at an early age improves self-awareness, self-confidence, and relationship-

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<sup>1</sup>Vevea, Becky. “Emanuel Promises Free Preschool as Race for Mayor Heats Up.” WBEZ Chicago. WBEZ Chicago, May 30, 2018. <https://www.wbez.org/stories/emanuel-promises-free-preschool-as-race-for-mayor-heats-up/a9f24956-5007-40d7-90de-6d713e694237> .

<sup>2</sup> Linda Bakken, Nola Brown & Barry Downing (2017) Early Childhood Education: The Long-Term Benefits, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31:2, 255-269, DOI: 10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285

<sup>3</sup> Linda Bakken, Nola Brown & Barry Downing (2017) Early Childhood Education: The Long-Term Benefits, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31:2, 255-269, DOI: 10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285

<sup>4</sup> Linda Bakken, Nola Brown & Barry Downing (2017) Early Childhood Education: The Long-Term Benefits, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31:2, 255-269, DOI: 10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285

building and decision-making skills,<sup>5</sup> allowing students to navigate the adversities they may face as they move through their education and allowing them to build impactful relationships with their teachers and peers.

The positive impacts of early childhood education reach beyond the classroom. Children who receive high quality early childhood education are less likely to enter the criminal justice system later in life, and their families are less likely to be in need of interventions from Child Protective Services.<sup>6</sup> Children who receive quality preschool education are also more likely to enter the workforce as adults in comparison to those who do not attend preschool.<sup>7</sup> For students coming from disadvantaged families and communities, quality preschool has even shown to be associated with positive family-wide and generational impacts: having just one student in a household enrolled in a quality early education program is strongly associated with improved educational outcomes for their siblings, and the children of adults who received a quality preschool education are less likely to grow up in poverty and more likely to have positive educational outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

These benefits appear to arise from the improved quality of family and community life seen in the households of children who attend early education programs, and do not simply reflect pre-existing family affluence.<sup>9</sup> The substantial, compounded, long-term benefits to individuals, families, and societies that is correlated with a child's enrollment in and attendance of a quality early childhood

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<sup>5</sup> Linda Bakken, Nola Brown & Barry Downing (2017) Early Childhood Education: The Long-Term Benefits, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31:2, 255-269, DOI: 10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285 and "What Is Social-Emotional Learning and Why Is It Important?," ViewSonic Library (ViewSonic Library, October 14, 2021), <https://www.viewsonic.com/library/education/what-is-social-emotional-learning-and-why-is-it-important/>.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Lynch and Kavya Vaghul, "The Benefits and Costs of Investing in Early Childhood Education," The Washington Center for Equitable Growth (The Washington Center for Equitable Growth, September 11, 2018), <https://equitablegrowth.org/research-paper/the-benefits-and-costs-of-investing-in-early-childhood-education/>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Lynch and Kavya Vaghul, "The Benefits and Costs of Investing in Early Childhood Education," The Washington Center for Equitable Growth (The Washington Center for Equitable Growth, September 11, 2018), <https://equitablegrowth.org/research-paper/the-benefits-and-costs-of-investing-in-early-childhood-education/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Schimke, "Preschool Has Enduring Benefits for Disadvantaged Children - and Their Children, New Research Finds," Chalkbeat Colorado (Chalkbeat Colorado, May 14, 2019), <https://co.chalkbeat.org/2019/5/13/21108132/preschool-has-enduring-benefits-for-disadvantaged-children-and-their-children-new-research-finds>.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Schimke, "Preschool Has Enduring Benefits for Disadvantaged Children - and Their Children, New Research Finds," Chalkbeat Colorado (Chalkbeat Colorado, May 14, 2019), <https://co.chalkbeat.org/2019/5/13/21108132/preschool-has-enduring-benefits-for-disadvantaged-children-and-their-children-new-research-finds>.

education program means that the large upfront cost of providing high-quality universal preschool ultimately pays for itself due to the associated decline in use of other social services later in life.<sup>10</sup>

## **History of Early Childhood Education in Chicago**

Chicago's history with early childhood education programs began in 1967 with the creation of the Child-Parent Center (CPC) Program. This program, funded by the federal government's 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, became the second federally-funded early childhood intervention in the United States. The CPC program opened 24 centers throughout the Chicago Public School system, with the goal of serving low-income school districts and creating accessible avenues for parent involvement in their child's education from an early age. In response to activism and successful coalition-building by advocates of early childhood education in the 1980's, Chicago established its first state-funded public preschool for children considered to be at-risk due to their socioeconomic status. Throughout the early 2000's, advocates of universal preschool lobbied for free, high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-olds, arguing that funding such programs should be a priority for Illinois, despite the state's struggles with a budget deficit. Coalitions such as the Day Care Action Council of Illinois, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Parents United for Responsible Education, and Voices of Illinois Children drew on the results of a long-term study that showed "that every dollar spent on preschool saves \$7 down the line on special education, welfare and criminal justice,"<sup>11</sup> advocating for the idea that, in the long run, investing in early childhood education ultimately saves money for Illinois. As a result of this advocacy, former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich signed the "Preschool for All" bill in May of 2006. This bill budgeted for the allotment of 10,000 preschool seats for 3 and 4 year olds in Illinois, free of cost, and included plans to expand both the funding and number of seats available in the program each fiscal year. Priority for getting a seat through Preschool for All was given to children in poverty and children

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Lynch and Kavya Vaghul, "The Benefits and Costs of Investing in Early Childhood Education," The Washington Center for Equitable Growth (The Washington Center for Equitable Growth, September 11, 2018), <https://equitablegrowth.org/research-paper/the-benefits-and-costs-of-investing-in-early-childhood-education/>, and Cassie Walker Burke, "Big Day for Preschool: Illinois Governor Says State Universal Pre-K Coming in 4 Years; Chicago Invests \$77 Million in Early Learning," Chalkbeat Chicago (Chalkbeat Chicago, March 22, 2019), <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2019/3/22/21107167/big-day-for-preschool-illinois-governor-says-state-universal-pre-k-coming-in-4-years-chicago-invests>.

<sup>11</sup> Debra Williams, "Demand, but no money, for universal preschool," *The Chicago Reporter*, August 22, 2005, <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/demand-no-money-universal-preschool/>.

facing language barriers or developmental disabilities. The program’s budget expanded year after year, and by 2009, the state of Illinois was serving 95,000 three- and four-year olds with a budget of \$380 million. However, the nation-wide economic distress caused by the Great Recession led to Illinois’s education budget being slashed, and by 2014, Preschool for All’s state budget had shrunk by 25%, and the program was only able to serve 70,000 students.<sup>12</sup>

In response to slow economic recovery from the Great Recession, former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel expanded the availability of free preschool seats through the use of a controversial “pay-for-performance” financing scheme called a “social impact bond” in 2014. Under this financing plan, a \$17 million social impact bond, financed by the Goldman Sachs Social Impact Fund, Northern Trust, and the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation, was invested into existing Chicago Public School preschool programs in order to increase the number of free half-day preschool seats to 2,600 over the course of four years.<sup>13</sup> This system operated using a sliding scale payment method, meaning low-income families were able to enroll their children in preschool for free, while middle- and high-income families paid for preschool on a sliding scale based on household income. However, as a result of the sliding scale payment scheme, many middle-income families still faced financial barriers to enrollment, as the price tag on paid preschool was still too steep for many. In addition, the social impact bond’s focus on half-day preschool programs turned out to be a barrier to enrollment for many families, who could not coordinate the logistics of picking up a child from preschool in the middle of the day due to their work schedules.

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### **Sidebar on Social Impact Bonds**

Social impact bonds are a type of financing tool that has proliferated since the 2008 financial crisis. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines a social impact bond:

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<sup>12</sup> Advance Illinois, *The State We’re In 2014: A Report Card on Public Education in Illinois*, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573252.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Melissa Sanchez, “For the Record: Paying for preschool with social impact bonds,” *The Chicago Reporter*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/record-paying-preschool-social-impact-bonds/>.

A bond-issuing organization raises funds from private-sector investors, charities or foundations. These funds are distributed to service providers to cover their operating costs. If the measurable outcomes agreed upfront are achieved, the government or the commissioner proceeds with payments to the bond-issuing organization or the investors.<sup>14</sup>

Under this framework, social impact bonds operate by aligning profits with outcomes; in other words, private investors only get a return on their investment based on if or how well the program they invested in achieves specific, measured outcomes that are agreed upon by the parties involved when the deal is crafted.<sup>15</sup> This takes financial risk of new social programs away from governments, and instead places the burden on private investors, in turn motivating investors to aid in crafting effective programs while allowing governments to pilot new policies without spending taxpayer dollars.<sup>16</sup>

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In 2018, following payouts to the organizations that invested in the social impact bond and a rising demand for full-day preschool programs over half-day programs, former Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced that Chicago would offer full-day universal preschool for every 4-year-old in the city by the 2021-2022 school year.<sup>17</sup> In order to accommodate more free full-day preschool seats for 4-year-olds, Chicago would only offer free half-day seats for 3-year-olds, and would slowly phase out the sliding-scale payment method. In the fall of 2019, Chicago Public Schools added 100 preschool classrooms across 28 community areas, amounting to an additional 3,700 full-day seats becoming available to 4-year-olds. While Chicago Public Schools faced setbacks to completing the implementation of universal preschool due to the

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<sup>14</sup> “Understanding Social Impact Bonds - OECD,” OECD L.E.E.D. Programme (OECD, 2016), <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/UnderstandingSIBsLux-WorkingPaper.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> “Impact Bonds,” The Government Outcomes Lab (University of Oxford, 2022), <https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/the-basics/impact-bonds/>.

<sup>16</sup> Albertson, Kevin, Chris Fox, Chris O’Leary, and Gary Painter. “Social Impact Bonds: More Than One Approach.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.48558/0A7P-HK87>.

<sup>17</sup> Vevea, Becky. “Emanuel Promises Free Preschool as Race for Mayor Heats Up.” WBEZ Chicago. WBEZ Chicago, May 30, 2018. <https://www.wbez.org/stories/emanuel-promises-free-preschool-as-race-for-mayor-heats-up/a9f24956-5007-40d7-90de-6d713e694237>.

COVID-19 pandemic, universal full-day preschool for four-year olds became available in 64 of 77 Chicago community areas in the 2022-2023 school year, with plans for universal preschool to become available for all 77 community areas by the 2023-2024 school year. In an effort to further increase preschool accessibility to Chicago's neediest families, the greatest increases in available preschool seats occurred in community areas with lower average household incomes on the West and South Sides.<sup>18</sup>

### **Preschool for All Curriculum**

Preschools that are a part of Chicago's universal pre-k program follow broad curriculum guidelines that were set by the Illinois State Board of Education in 2013 called the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards (IELDS). Developed with the expertise of childhood development researchers and professionals, the revised guidelines were created to aid in aligning the universal preschool curriculum with the Illinois K-12 curriculum, with the goal of preparing Preschool for All students for their future years in school. The IELDS detail early childhood development benchmarks for seven school subjects: Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Physical Development & Health, the Arts, and Social/Emotional Development. The IELDS are "broad statements that provide teachers with reasonable expectations for children's development in the preschool years" meant to provide a "developmentally appropriate set of goals and objectives for young children."<sup>19</sup> The Illinois State Board of Education explicitly states that these guidelines are not to be used as a curriculum or assessment tool, but rather, as a decision-making tool for teachers to determine the appropriate curriculum for their own specific classrooms.

In conjunction with the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, Chicago Public Schools primarily utilize the Creative Curriculum for Preschool, a curriculum developed by a company called Teaching Strategies.<sup>20</sup> This curriculum is

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<sup>18</sup> "Pre-K Enrollment Policy & Access in Chicago," Start Early (Start Early, September 21, 2021), <https://www.startearly.org/resource/pre-k-enrollment-policy-access-chicago/>.

<sup>19</sup> Illinois State Board of Education. Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, September 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Cassie Walker Burke, "Here Are 12 Things Chicago Parents Want to Know about Universal Pre-K," Chalkbeat Chicago (Chalkbeat Chicago, May 30, 2019), <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2019/5/30/21108243/here-are-12-things-chicago-parents-want-to-know-about-universal-pre-k>.

considered a “whole-child” curriculum, which research has linked to improved classroom cultures.<sup>21</sup>

## **Financing**

In March 2019, Illinois Action for Children and Chicago Early Learning published the paper “Chicago’s roadmap for implementing universal pre-K: A plan for investment in Chicago’s early learning system.” This plan details how the city of Chicago plans to go about scaling the funding of its universal preschool program to reach full implementation of guaranteed access to full-day preschool seats for all of Chicago’s four-year-olds. As the baseline funding for universal preschool expansion, Chicago used \$22.2 million, or 60%, of the Early Childhood Block Grant that Chicago was allocated by the state of Illinois for fiscal year 2019-2020.<sup>22</sup> Also beginning in fiscal year 2019-2020, Chicago Public Schools used “increased” funding from the city’s Evidence Based Funding Formula to expand preschool classrooms based in public schools.<sup>23</sup> In order to support its expansion of universal preschool programs in Community-Based Organizations, Chicago used the remaining 40% of its Early Childhood Block Grant allocation in conjunction with \$35 million in funding from the federal Head Start program. Over time, preschool programs located in Community-Based Organizations will have funding schemes and funding increases determined through partnerships between each Community-Based Organization and the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services.<sup>24</sup>

## **Barriers to Efficacy of Chicago’s Preschool for All Program**

### ***Enrollment***

Despite Chicago’s steady, significant steps forward in making early child education *accessible* for every four-year-old in Chicago, actual *engagement* in universal

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<sup>21</sup> Jade M. Jenkins, Greg J. Duncan, Anamarie Auger, Marianne Bitler, Thurston Domina, Margaret Burchinal, Boosting school readiness: Should preschool teachers target skills or the whole child?, *Economics of Education Review*, Volume 65, 2018, Pages 107-125, ISSN 0272-7757, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.05.001>.

<sup>22</sup> City of Chicago Office of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Chicago’s Roadmap for Implementing Universal Pre-K: A Plan For Investment in Chicago’s Early Learning System, March 2019.

<sup>23</sup> City of Chicago Office of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Chicago’s Roadmap for Implementing Universal Pre-K: A Plan For Investment in Chicago’s Early Learning System, March 2019.

<sup>24</sup> City of Chicago Office of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Chicago’s Roadmap for Implementing Universal Pre-K: A Plan For Investment in Chicago’s Early Learning System, March 2019.

preschool programs has consistently fallen short among the city’s most disadvantaged communities. Without sustained engagement in preschool programs, the benefits of universal preschool access are far less likely to be achieved.

Enrollment rates in universal preschool programs have been an issue throughout Chicago’s efforts to expand its preschool programs. In 2013, when the city of Chicago began preparing to enact universal preschool, researchers were enlisted to identify the areas of Chicago that were most in need of more accessible preschool in order to determine where free preschool programs should be added first. These “high-priority” groups were deemed to be groups for which preschool would provide the greatest benefit and included students of color, students speaking a language other than English, and students residing in low-income neighborhoods with high rates of unemployment. Full-day preschool programs were opened and half-day programs were converted to full-day programs in close proximity to where high-priority groups reside.

Researchers theorized that the increase in full-day programs and closer proximity of preschools to high-priority groups were the key factors that would drive an increase in enrollment.<sup>25</sup> At first, this approach fulfilled its goal. High-priority groups were more likely to enroll in preschool programs by the 2015-2016 school year;<sup>26</sup> however, as universal preschool rolled out across Chicago, classrooms struggled to fill their newly available seats. Enrollment in Chicago Public Schools steeply declined across all Pre-k and K-12 grades during the COVID-19 pandemic. Low-income community areas and community areas with populations that are majority Black and/or Hispanic have been slower to recover their enrollment rates.<sup>27</sup> In fact, many preschools on the south and west sides of Chicago have filled less than 60% of their available seats, with some individual schools reporting enrollment to be

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<sup>25</sup> Stacy B Ehrlich et al., “Closer to Home: More Equitable Pre-K Access and Enrollment in Chicago” (Chicago, Illinois: UChicago Consortium on School Research, 2020), pp. 1-50.

<sup>26</sup> Stacy B Ehrlich et al., “Closer to Home: More Equitable Pre-K Access and Enrollment in Chicago” (Chicago, Illinois: UChicago Consortium on School Research, 2020), pp. 1-50.

<sup>27</sup> Nereida Moreno, “Why Aren't More Chicago Parents Going for Free Universal Preschool?,” Chicago Sun-Times (Chicago Sun-Times, September 2, 2022), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2022/8/27/23324104/universal-preschool-prek-cps-free-chicago-public-schools-cofi-community-organizing-family-issues>. and Sarah Karp, “Enrollment in Chicago Public Schools Could Drop by as Much as 15,000 Students This Fall,” WBEZ Chicago (WBEZ Chicago, August 12, 2022), <https://www.wbez.org/stories/k-12-enrollment-in-chicago-public-schools-could-drop-by-as-much-as-15000-students-this-fall/3a82b081-9f16-4560-ad8f-584c52d7499e>.



as low as 31% of capacity.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, in more affluent community areas such as Central Chicago and Chicago’s North Side neighborhoods, preschool enrollment rates are at or above 70%, with the Northwest Side reporting their preschool enrollment rate to be 78%.<sup>29</sup>

To combat low enrollment rates in specific community areas, CPS launched a new preschool enrollment portal during its spring enrollment period for the 2022-2023 school year. The portal was developed to streamline access to all of the city’s family and child programs, including Preschool for All, and to create a central location for parents to see all childcare and early education programs they have access to.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the city has launched marketing campaigns for its Preschool for All programs, placing ads on TV, websites, CTA, and on billboards. These campaigns also promoted preschool enrollment through back-to-school events staged by aldermen and city agencies where families were given access to tablets to enroll their children in preschool on the enrollment portal. Chicago Public Schools were also given funding to partner with community organizations that work to increase preschool enrollment by conducting door-to-door outreach in neighborhoods that struggle with enrollment.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Parent Perceptions of Safety***

One barrier to parents enrolling their children in Chicago’s preschools are parents’ perceptions of school safety.<sup>32</sup> Since children are not required to be enrolled in school in the state of Illinois until they are six years old, parents who perceive their

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<sup>28</sup> Nereida Moreno, “Why Aren’t More Chicago Parents Going for Free Universal Preschool?,” Chicago Sun-Times (Chicago Sun-Times, September 2, 2022), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2022/8/27/23324104/universal-preschool-prek-cps-free-chicago-public-schools-cofi-community-organizing-family-issues>.

<sup>29</sup> Nereida Moreno, “Why Aren’t More Chicago Parents Going for Free Universal Preschool?,” Chicago Sun-Times (Chicago Sun-Times, September 2, 2022), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2022/8/27/23324104/universal-preschool-prek-cps-free-chicago-public-schools-cofi-community-organizing-family-issues>.

<sup>30</sup> Koumpilova, Mila. “Chicago Hopes New Portal Will Boost Preschool Enrollment - despite First-Day Glitches.” Chalkbeat Chicago. Chalkbeat Chicago, April 19, 2022. <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2022/4/19/23032736/chicago-public-schools-pre-kindergarten-applications-enrollment>.

<sup>31</sup> Nereida Moreno, “Why Aren’t More Chicago Parents Going for Free Universal Preschool?,” Chicago Sun-Times (Chicago Sun-Times, September 2, 2022), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2022/8/27/23324104/universal-preschool-prek-cps-free-chicago-public-schools-cofi-community-organizing-family-issues>.

<sup>32</sup> Nereida Moreno, “Why Aren’t More Chicago Parents Going for Free Universal Preschool?,” Chicago Sun-Times (Chicago Sun-Times, September 2, 2022), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2022/8/27/23324104/universal-preschool-prek-cps-free-chicago-public-schools-cofi-community-organizing-family-issues>.

would-be preschool as an unsafe environment often prefer to keep their children at home rather than send their child to a preschool program. In general, parents perceive their child's schools to be safe when they have positive relationships with caring adults in the school, when they believe that their child will be protected from the negative behaviors of their peers, and when they perceive the school environment as a place that prioritizes their child's education.<sup>33</sup> Further, actual school safety is improved when these parameters are met. In a study that investigated the factors that most contributed to student safety in Chicago schools, the quality of relationships between school staff and parents and between school staff and students was what most strongly defined the safety of any particular school.<sup>34</sup> Student perceptions of safety increased based on the extent to which adults they trusted were present,<sup>35</sup> indicating the need for sufficient numbers of school staff and teachers in order for other staff and teachers to feel less overwhelmed.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Parent Perceptions of Early Childhood Education***

A parent's decision to enroll their child in an early education program such as preschool is also strongly influenced by the parent's existing perceptions of early childhood education.<sup>37</sup> Parents who believe that their investment in early childhood education has an impact on their child's development were more likely to enroll their children in preschool. A parent's socioeconomic background greatly influences whether they believe that their investment in early childhood education will help to create positive outcomes in their child's development, with parents who come from high socioeconomic status being most likely to believe in this connection. However, parents' beliefs surrounding early childhood education were found to be malleable, as

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<sup>33</sup> Shumow, Lee, and Richard Lomax. "Predicting Perceptions of School Safety." *National Institute of Mental Health*, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Matthew P Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth, and David W Johnson, "Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools" (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Matthew P Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth, and David W Johnson, "Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools" (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Matthew P Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth, and David W Johnson, "Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools" (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Jing Tang, Rena A. Hallam & Ginnie Sawyer-Morris (2021) Preschool Parents'

Perceptions of Early Care and Education Arrangements: A Latent Profile Analysis, *Early Education and Development*, 32:3, 480-500, DOI: 10.1080/10409289.2020.1774280

one study showed that parent beliefs in the importance of preschool were able to be altered with intensive interventions that taught parents about the impact of early education.<sup>38</sup>

## **Universal Preschool Case Study: Washington, D.C.**

### ***History***

Washington, D.C. is the only city in the United States that has successfully implemented universal, full-day preschool for all three- and four-year-olds. Advocacy campaigns to make preschool free and accessible to all of D.C.'s citizens began in 2006, and the legislative framework for what eventually become the Pre-K for All DC began being drafted in 2007 through the partnership of DC Council Chair Vincent Gray and the Pre-K for All DC Campaign. Upon the completion of the draft legislation in 2008, Pre-K for All DC organized a public hearing where over 50 stakeholders— including advocates, parents, and early childhood education experts— had their testimonies heard. Ultimately, in May of 2008, the DC Council unanimously passed the Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Act of 2008.<sup>39</sup>

Initially, D.C.'s primary universal preschool advocates, an organization called the Pre-K for All DC Campaign, debated whether to advocate for a policy that focuses on providing preschool access for four-year-olds or for a policy that aims to provide access for all three and four year olds, and also debated whether the bill should prioritize the enrollment of children from families with low income. The campaign chose to advocate for a program that was inclusive of both three and four year olds and decided against advocating for a bill that prioritized the enrollment of low-income children. The advocates believed that this strategy would allow for the broadest public support of the bill possible, despite the fact that it would take longer to bring a more income- and age-inclusive policy to scale.<sup>40</sup> The strategy proved successful: the 2007-2008 school year enrolled 68% of D.C.'s four-year-old population and 33% of the city's 3-year-old population, and by the 2016-2017 school year, 88%

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<sup>38</sup> John List, Julie Pernaudet, and Dana Suskind, "It All Starts with Beliefs: Addressing the Roots of Educational Inequities by Shifting Parental Beliefs," 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w29394>.

<sup>39</sup> Bernardine Watson, "A Case Study of Preschool for All DC Campaign," *Foundation for Child Development*, November 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Courtney Rozen, "On Its Tenth Anniversary, Here's Where D.C.'s Free Preschool Program Stands," DCist (DCist, March 15, 2019), <https://dcist.com/story/19/03/15/on-its-tenth-anniversary-heres-where-d-c-s-free-preschool-program-stands/>.

of all four year olds and 66% of all three year olds in D.C. were enrolled in preschool services.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Pre-K for All DC: The Program***

In crafting its universal preschool legislation, the District of Columbia placed great care in maintaining high quality standards across its mixed-delivery system of providing early childhood education. Community-Based Organizations, District of Columbia Public Schools, and public charter schools that offer universal preschool are required to meet certain quality standards that include: 1. Compliance with adult-to-child ratios in classrooms, 2. Consistent use of a curriculum model that complies with D.C. Early Learning Standards, 3. Accreditation of the program by an acceditor approved by D.C.’s Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 4. Utilization of assessment tools that align with the school’s chosen curriculum, 5. Hiring teachers that hold a bachelor’s degree and have taken courses in early childhood education, 6. Paying teachers wages that are equivalent to D.C. K-12 public school teachers based on their years of teaching experience, 7. Implementation of professional development and training plans for teachers and assistant teachers, 8. Provide ample opportunities for parent involvement, 9. Develop a plan for the inclusion of children with disabilities that meets the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent standards and is in accordance with federal law, 10. Provide safe, secure, and developmentally appropriate classroom spaces, 11. Ensure at least 2 hours of play time, including 45 minutes of outdoor play time, 12. Maintain a process for continuous classroom assessments and improvements, 13. Provide comprehensive health and supportive services for all children enrolled in the preschool program.<sup>42</sup>

Washington, D.C.’s preschools utilize the Creative Curriculum for Preschool at the majority of their school sites.<sup>43</sup> Creative Curriculum for Preschool describes itself as “an early childhood curriculum that focuses on project-based investigations as a means for children to apply skills and addresses four areas of development:

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<sup>41</sup> Allison Friedman-Krauss, W. Stephen Barnett, and Karin A. Garver, “The State of Preschool 2018” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Funding High-Quality Designation Application, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> “Early Childhood Academic Programs,” Early Childhood Academic Programs (OSSE, 2022), <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/early-childhood-academic-programs>.

social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and language.”<sup>44</sup> The curriculum is centered on group activities that address these developmental areas. This curriculum also provides teachers with progress assessment tools, teaching strategies, family engagement techniques, classroom organization tools, and information on child development.<sup>45</sup> In addition to this more standard curriculum, the District of Columbia has three schools that offer Montessori preschool classrooms with curriculum set by the American Montessori Society and has eight schools that have adopted a Spanish/English Dual Language model in addition to the standard Creative Curriculum.<sup>46</sup>

Officially, the District of Columbia utilizes a mixed-delivery service for its universal preschool program—programs can be based out of Community Based Organizations, D.C. Public Schools, or D.C. public charter schools. However, 94.6% of the District’s preschool seats were located within D.C. public schools or public charter schools.<sup>47</sup> This, in conjunction with D.C.’s pre-k curriculum that is designed to align with and prepare students for the District’s K-12 standards, allows students to become well-acquainted with the school environment that they are likely to matriculate into upon their completion of preschool.<sup>48</sup>

Washington, D.C. finances its universal preschool programs through a mixture of several funding streams, with a paradigm that focuses on maintaining the quality of all available preschool programs. First, similar to the majority of other states with universal preschool programs, the District of Columbia allocates general revenue funding derived from taxes and fees levied by the state government towards its preschool programming.<sup>49</sup> This type of funding, however, requires frequent re-authorization and is susceptible to budget cuts during the annual state budget allocation process. To combat budget uncertainty, Washington D.C. has elected to

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<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences. The Creative Curriculum for Preschool, March 2013. [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc\\_creativecurriculum\\_081109.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_creativecurriculum_081109.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences. The Creative Curriculum for Preschool, March 2013. [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc\\_creativecurriculum\\_081109.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_creativecurriculum_081109.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> “Early Childhood Academic Programs,” Early Childhood Academic Programs (OSSE, 2022), <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/early-childhood-academic-programs>.

<sup>47</sup> D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Fiscal Year 2017 Pre-K Report, December 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Conor P Williams, “When Public School Starts at Age 3,” The New York Times (The New York Times, July 9, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/opinion/free-pre-k-washington.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Stone, Diana. “Funding the Future: States’ Approaches to Pre-K Finance 2008 Update.” *Washington Appleseed*, February 2008.

expand the district’s Kindergarten through 12th grade school funding formula to include preschool, thus allowing preschools access to the district’s funding for public education. Tying public preschool budgets to public K-12 budgets allows D.C.’s preschools to benefit from the strong popular and political support for funding that the K-12 budget enjoys, ensuring that preschool funding will only decline if all general education funding declines.<sup>50</sup>

Notably, Washington, D.C. has also elected to combine the federal funding it receives through Head Start with the District’s own local funding. The unified budget helps assure sufficient funds for preschool, while also contributing to enhanced integration of low-income families – the demographic that Head Start targets – with the wider school community.<sup>51</sup> This integration is desirable, as it has been shown to be strongly correlated with improved learning outcomes for low-income children.<sup>52</sup>

Another funding strategy employed by the District of Columbia to ensure consistent quality of its preschool programs is the Pre-Kindergarten Enhancement and Expansion Funding program (PKEEP). PKEEP was designed to provide another source of funding for preschool programs that are based in Community Based Organizations, or CBOs, rather than those that are based in D.C.’s public schools. In order to access these funds, CBOs must meet the District of Columbia’s standards for being a “high-quality” preschool program,<sup>53</sup> which incentivizes CBOs to maintain high program standards. As of 2018, these funding streams allowed the District of Columbia to spend \$18,580 per child enrolled in preschool, an amount that far exceeded the national average expenditure of \$5,943 per child enrolled in preschool.<sup>54</sup>

Washington, D.C.’s three and four year olds gain enrollment in a preschool program through the District’s unified school placement lottery system called

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<sup>50</sup> Stone, Diana. “Funding the Future: States’ Approaches to Pre-K Finance 2008 Update.” *Washington Appleseed*, February 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Conor Williams, “Laboratories of Democracy: Washington, DC, Showed How to Do Universal Pre-K Right,” *Vox* (Vox, August 5, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/8/5/20748833/washington-dc-pre-k-free-public-universal>.

<sup>52</sup> “The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms,” The Century Foundation (The Century Foundation, April 14, 2021), <https://tcf.org/content/facts/the-benefits-of-socioeconomically-and-racially-integrated-schools-and-classrooms/>.

<sup>53</sup> D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Funding High-Quality Designation Application. 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Allison Friedman-Krauss, W. Stephen Barnett, and Karin A. Garver, “The State of Prescholl 2018” (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2019).

MySchoolDC, where parents can rank up to 12 preferred schools.<sup>55</sup> The majority of the DC Public Schools that host universal preschool programs give preference to students who live in close proximity to the school,<sup>56</sup> providing guaranteed access for 3 and 4 year old students that apply to in-boundary schools.<sup>57</sup> Through the MySchoolDC lottery system, 65% of applicants are placed with one of the 12 schools they listed, and more than 50% of applicants were placed with a school that they ranked as one of their top three choices.<sup>58</sup> A study by the Urban Institute found that both the participants in the school lottery system and the classroom demographics that are created by the lottery system parallel the demographics of all three and four year old in the District of Columbia, indicating that the school lottery system provides equal access to preschool programs for D.C.'s families.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Observed Impacts of Preschool for All DC***

#### **A. Increase in maternal work force participation**

A study by the Center for American Progress found that as a result of the rollout of Preschool for All DC's guaranteed two years of universal preschool, labor force participation among mothers of preschool children has increased by 10%.<sup>60</sup> Pre-policy, D.C.'s maternal labor force participation rate was about 65%; post-policy

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<sup>55</sup> Martin Austerhuhle, "What You Need to Know about the D.C. School Lottery," WAMU (WAMU, October 18, 2021), <https://wamu.org/story/19/03/28/after-five-years-is-d-c-s-school-lottery-working-for-families/>.

<sup>56</sup> Conor Williams, "As D.C. Feels Gentrification Pressures, New Study Finds Its Pre-K Lottery Provides Equal - but Not Necessary Equitable - Access," The 74 Million (The74Million, September 8, 2020), <https://www.the74million.org/article/as-dc-feels-gentrification-pressures-new-study-finds-its-pre-k-lottery-provides-equal-but-not-necessary-equitable-access/>.

<sup>57</sup> "Early Childhood Academic Programs," Early Childhood Academic Programs (OSSE, 2022), <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/early-childhood-academic-programs>.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Austerhuhle, "What You Need to Know about the D.C. School Lottery," WAMU (WAMU, October 18, 2021), <https://wamu.org/story/19/03/28/after-five-years-is-d-c-s-school-lottery-working-for-families/>.

<sup>59</sup> Conor Williams, "As D.C. Feels Gentrification Pressures, New Study Finds Its Pre-K Lottery Provides Equal - but Not Necessary Equitable - Access," The 74 Million (The74Million, September 8, 2020), <https://www.the74million.org/article/as-dc-feels-gentrification-pressures-new-study-finds-its-pre-k-lottery-provides-equal-but-not-necessary-equitable-access/>.

<sup>60</sup> Rasheed Malik, "The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.," Center for American Progress (Center for American Progress, September 26, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>.

implementation, that number had grown to 76.4% participation in 2016.<sup>61</sup> At present, mothers of preschool-aged children in the District of Columbia now show similar labor force participation rates as mothers with children enrolled in elementary school.<sup>62</sup> Percentage increases of maternal labor force participation rate varied across income groups:

Women in families with incomes below the federal poverty level saw the biggest overall increases in labor force participation; rates for this group climbed 15 percentage points to 55 percent. Meanwhile, families with incomes above the federal poverty threshold but lower than 500 percent of the poverty level—about \$125,000 for a family of four in Washington, D.C.—did not exhibit increases in maternal labor forces participation. These families have consistently had high rates of maternal labor force participation in recent years, with about 75 percent participating in the labor force. However, at the top of the income distribution, mothers in families earning more than 500 percent of the poverty level are now participating in the labor force at rates comparable to their male counterparts—at roughly 88 percent. Between 2008 and 2016, the maternal labor force participation rate for these high-income women increased by 13 percentage points.<sup>63</sup>

Increases in maternal labor force participation rates improve the economic health of families, especially that of families consisting of a single mother with young children.<sup>64</sup> This change in employment patterns also demonstrates one way that a high-quality universal preschool program can pay for itself, as it shows that “when

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<sup>61</sup> Rasheed Malik, “The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.,” Center for American Progress (Center for American Progress, September 26, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>.

<sup>62</sup> Rasheed Malik, “The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.,” Center for American Progress (Center for American Progress, September 26, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>.

<sup>63</sup> Rasheed Malik, “The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.,” Center for American Progress (Center for American Progress, September 26, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>.

<sup>64</sup> Rasheed Malik, “The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.,” Center for American Progress (Center for American Progress, September 26, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>.



policy supports the employment choices of parents with young children, the benefits almost always outweigh the costs in the form of higher earnings, a larger tax base, and better long-term outcomes for children.”<sup>65</sup>

## B. Learning Outcomes of Preschool for All DC students

Though Preschool for All DC has not yet been in place long enough for the long term impacts of the program to be sufficiently measured, the short term impacts of universal preschool on Washington, D.C.’s students are readily apparent. For example, in 2018, a report by the D.C. school district showed that less than half of 3 year olds entering D.C. preschool programs were able to meet benchmarks for early literacy. Two years later, when these same preschool students were about to enter kindergarten, the majority of students met kindergarten-ready benchmarks: 86% met cognition benchmarks, 83% met language metric benchmarks, and over 75% met benchmarks regarding the sound-to-letter matching skills that enable children to gain literacy during kindergarten.<sup>66</sup> For comparison, about 75% of Illinois kindergarteners fail to meet similar benchmarks upon their entry to kindergarten.<sup>67</sup>

## **Comparative Case Study Discussion: Chicago and Washington, D.C. Universal Preschool Programs**

In this chapter thus far, I have given a brief history of early education programs in Chicago, Illinois and Washington, D.C. I have also provided key program details of each city’s universal preschool program, including topics such as financing, curriculum, teachers, and student eligibility & enrollment. In this section, I will directly compare and contrast these aspects of each city’s universal preschool program, which will provide context for the overall findings and policy recommendations I will set forth in later sections.

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<sup>65</sup> Rasheed Malik, “The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.,” Center for American Progress (Center for American Progress, September 26, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>.

<sup>66</sup> Conor P Williams, “When Public School Starts at Age 3,” The New York Times (The New York Times, July 9, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/opinion/free-pre-k-washington.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Catherine Henderson, “In the Second Year of Statewide Assessment, Three out of Four Illinois Children Still Aren’t Kindergarten Ready,” Chalkbeat Chicago (Chalkbeat Chicago, June 25, 2019), <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2019/6/25/21121057/in-the-second-year-of-statewide-assessment-three-out-of-four-illinois-children-still-aren-t-kinderga>.

## A. Financing

Chicago, IL and Washington, D.C. utilize similar methods to fund their universal preschool programs. Both cities expanded the evidence-based school funding formulas that they already used to finance their K-12 public schools to include preschool. This is an essential step towards ensuring the continued quality and existence of each city's universal preschool program, as this financing method is far less likely to be subject to budget cuts than other areas of city budgets, as K-12, and in this case, PreK-12 funding enjoys consistent, strong bipartisan support. In addition, Chicago and D.C. have both elected to incorporate their federal Head Start funds into their universal preschool financing by using Head Start to provide the funding needed to run universal preschool programs in Community-Based Organizations. Integrating Head Start programs with universal preschool programs allows both cities to provide parents with streamlined access to early education options. This common-sense policy move expedites and simplifies the otherwise complicated process of enrolling a child in universal preschool, which is a major barrier to enrollment faced by parents.

Although universal preschool financing methods between the two cities are similar, Washington, D.C. and Chicago diverge greatly in the amount of funding their programs receive. The District of Columbia spent a total of \$18,580 per child enrolled in preschool during the 2017-2018 school year; in the same report and school year, Illinois spent about \$5,219 per child enrolled in preschool.<sup>68</sup>

## B. Curriculum

A significant way in which Washington, D.C. ensures the high quality of its early education programs is through its curriculum. The District of Columbia's preschools craft their curriculum with the guidance of the Creative Curriculum for Preschool, a curriculum that is highly popular across the country for its holistic approach and comprehensive guidelines for creating academic activities, building positive relationships between students and teachers, and constructing a classroom environment that is highly conducive to learning and stimulating students' interests.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Allison Friedman-Krauss, W. Stephen Barnett, and Karin A. Garver, "The State of Prescholl 2018" (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2019).

<sup>69</sup> "Early Childhood Academic Programs," Early Childhood Academic Programs (OSSE, 2022), <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/early-childhood-academic-programs>.

<sup>70</sup> Chicago Public Schools have widely adopted the Creative Curriculum for Preschool as well, although preschools within its universal preschool programs are only officially required to use curriculum that aligns with the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards.<sup>71</sup>

### C. Teachers

Washington, D.C. requires each preschool classroom to employ at least one teacher and one assistant teacher.<sup>72</sup> Washington, D.C. preschool teachers in district and charter schools are required to hold a bachelor's degree with significant coursework or a major in early childhood development and/or closely related topics such as family studies and special education.<sup>73</sup> If a candidate for a preschool teacher position holds a bachelor degree in a different field, they must successfully complete D.C.'s Early Childhood Praxis Exams. Assistant teachers are required to hold at least an associate's degree in early childhood education or a closely related field, or must hold an associate's degree in an unrelated field along with completing nine school credits in early education courses.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Chicago Public School early educators must hold at least a bachelor's degree with significant coursework in early childhood education.<sup>75</sup>

The District of Columbia has expanded their K-12 teacher pay scale to include preschool teachers; in other words, D.C.'s preschool teachers can expect to earn the

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<sup>70</sup> "The Creative Curriculum," The Creative Curriculum | Child Care Center | Marquette University (Marquette University, 2022), <https://www.marquette.edu/child-care-center/curriculum.shtml>.

<sup>71</sup> Cassie Walker Burke, "Here Are 12 Things Chicago Parents Want to Know about Universal Pre-K," Chalkbeat Chicago (Chalkbeat Chicago, May 30, 2019), <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2019/5/30/21108243/here-are-12-things-chicago-parents-want-to-know-about-universal-pre-k>.

<sup>72</sup> D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Funding High-Quality Designation Application. 2019.

<sup>73</sup> D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Funding High-Quality Designation Application. 2019.

<sup>74</sup> D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Funding High-Quality Designation Application. 2019.

<sup>75</sup> "Early Childhood Education Jobs and Degree Requirements in the Illinois: How to Become a Preschool Teacher in Il: Job Description," Requirements for Early Childhood Education Jobs in Illinois (PreschoolTeacher.Org, November 23, 2021), <https://www.preschoolteacher.org/illinois/>.

same amount of money as their grade school counterparts.<sup>76</sup> In addition to preschool teachers' base salaries, the District of Columbia recently began the Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund, through which the city's early childhood educators can apply for additional payment of up to \$14,000.<sup>77</sup> The city of Chicago has not made preschool teacher pay information available to the public.

#### D. Eligibility & Enrollment

In Washington, D.C., all three- and four-year-olds are eligible to enroll in full-day universal preschool programs.<sup>78</sup> The vast majority of three- and four-year-olds in D.C. elect to enroll in preschool: in 2015, 64% of D.C.'s three-year-olds and 86% of D.C.'s four-year-olds were enrolled in the city's universal preschool program.<sup>79</sup>

In Chicago, four-year-olds are guaranteed access to full-day preschool programs, while three year olds are not guaranteed full-day preschool seats, but are offered half-day seats as they become available.<sup>80</sup> In comparison to Washington, D.C., Chicago's universal preschool program has relatively low enrollment rates: about 61% of Chicago's four-year-olds were enrolled in preschool in spring of 2020.<sup>81</sup> No data is available regarding the percentage of Chicago three-year-olds that are enrolled in preschool, as universal preschool is not guaranteed to the Chicago's three-year-olds.

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<sup>76</sup> Conor Williams, "Laboratories of Democracy: Washington, DC, Showed How to Do Universal Pre-K Right," Vox (Vox, August 5, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/8/5/20748833/washington-dc-pre-k-free-public-universal>.

<sup>77</sup>"OSSE Invites Early Childhood Educators in DC to Apply for Pay Equity Funds," OSSE Invites Early Childhood Educators in DC to Apply for Pay Equity Funds (OSSE, August 23, 2022), <https://osse.dc.gov/release/osse-invites-early-childhood-educators-dc-apply-pay-equity-funds>.

<sup>78</sup> Courtney Rozen, "On Its Tenth Anniversary, Here's Where D.C.'s Free Preschool Program Stands," DCist (DCist, March 15, 2019), <https://dcist.com/story/19/03/15/on-its-tenth-anniversary-heres-where-d-c-s-free-preschool-program-stands/>.

<sup>79</sup> Carolyn Phenicie, "Washington, D.C. - the Pre-K Capital Where Nearly All 4-Year-Olds (and Most 3-Year-Olds!) Go to School," The 74 Million (The74Million, May 22, 2016), <https://www.the74million.org/article/washington-dc-the-pre-k-capital-where-nearly-all-4-year-olds-and-most-3-year-olds-go-to-school/>.

<sup>80</sup> Nereida Moreno, "Why Aren't More Chicago Parents Going for Free Universal Preschool?," Chicago Sun-Times (Chicago Sun-Times, September 2, 2022), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2022/8/27/23324104/universal-preschool-prek-cps-free-chicago-public-schools-cofi-community-organizing-family-issues>.

<sup>81</sup> Linda Jacobson, "New Study Finds Expanding Full-Day Pre-k Boosts Enrollment, Attendance," The 74 Million (The74Million, February 23, 2022), <https://www.the74million.org/article/new-study-finds-expanding-full-day-pre-k-boosts-enrollment-attendance/>.

## **Policy Recommendations for Chicago’s Preschool for All Program**

The mere implementation of a universal preschool program is not enough to produce the improved academic outcomes, broad positive societal impacts, and other long-term benefits that outweigh the costs that universal preschool programs promise. According to a study by the Upjohn Institute, “a 1-percentile increase in 4th grade test scores raises lifetime earnings by about \$4,000,” thus, “if pre-K boosts average test scores by just 1.4 percentiles, the expected future earnings gains are enough to pay for the cost” of a universal preschool program.<sup>82</sup> In keeping with the patterns and impacts we have observed in Chicago and Washington D.C.’s universal preschool programs, and with the consideration that the quality of a universal preschool program is the primary factor in achieving the desired program outcomes, in this section, I will put forward policy recommendations with the goal of improving the quality of Chicago’s universal preschool program.

### Expand access to full-day programs to three year olds

Currently, Chicago only guarantees full-day preschool seats to four-year-olds; three-year-olds are not guaranteed a seat, and typically, they are offered half-day seats in response to their request.

Whether a parent is able to enroll their child in a full-day or half-day program is a significant factor when thinking about the accessibility of universal preschool programs. From the perspective of working parents – who are most likely to benefit from universal preschool and who have thus far been the target population of Chicago’s universal preschool program – the logistics of coordinating childcare is complicated by sending their child to a half-day preschool program. In Chicago, half-day programs are offered for approximately 2.5 to 3 hours at the beginning of the typical school day; this means that if enrolled in such a program, parents would have to pick up their child from school in the middle of the day, then coordinate care for their child for the remainder of the day or for the remainder of the time that the parent is at work. Facing such complications as a result of participating in Preschool for All programs may disincentivize parents from participating in the program at all, and may even disincentivize them from enrolling their child once they are four years old (and guaranteed a full-day seat) due to past negative experiences with the program.

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<sup>82</sup> Bartik, Timothy J. and Brad J. Hershbein. 2018. "Pre-K Effectiveness at a Large Scale." Policy Brief. Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. <https://doi.org/10.17848/pb2018-2>

Studies that compare the impacts of full-day versus half-day preschool programs on future academic performance have also yielded results that suggest that full-day programs are associated with stronger positive impacts on school performance in comparison to half-day programs.<sup>83</sup> Teachers reported positive effects of full-day preschool on students' cognition, literacy, math, and physical development, and evidence suggests that these effects are still present upon a child's entry to kindergarten.<sup>84</sup>

Due to the evidence that suggests that students see significantly improved academic outcomes when they are enrolled in full-day preschool programs, and due to the fact that parents are more likely to see their needs met by full-day preschool programs, Chicago Public Schools should direct resources towards increasing full-day program capacity for both three- and four-year olds.

### Increase Teacher Pay

The quality of a specific preschool program is strongly related to the amount of compensation that the teachers within that program receive. According to the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

Low earnings and insufficient resources for professional development can fuel turnover, which increases program costs... Evidence shows that when children are enrolled in centers where there is lower turnover and where providers earn higher wages, they spend more time engaged in positive interactions and developmentally appropriate activities with peers and teachers, which contributes to healthy development and school readiness. Staff turnover also undermines continuity of care, such that when providers leave, children's secure attachments and relationships are interrupted, which can influence their social-emotional and behavioral development.

The national median salary for preschool teachers in 2015 was \$28,570, while the median salaries for kindergarten and elementary school teachers were \$51,640 and

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<sup>83</sup> Atteberry, Allison, Daphna Bassok, and Vivian C. Wong. (2019). The Effects of Full-day Pre-kindergarten: Experimental Evidence of Impacts on Children's School Readiness. (EdWorkingPaper: 19-79). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <http://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai19-79>

<sup>84</sup> Atteberry, Allison, Daphna Bassok, and Vivian C. Wong. (2019). The Effects of Full-day Pre-kindergarten: Experimental Evidence of Impacts on Children's School Readiness. (EdWorkingPaper: 19-79). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <http://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai19-79>

\$54,890, respectively. In Illinois, preschool teachers made a median salary of \$28,670, while their elementary school counterparts made \$55,320. In our case comparison city, Washington, D.C., preschool teachers were paid \$39,940 while elementary school teachers made \$67,090.<sup>85</sup> The District of Columbia pays their preschool teachers using the same payscale that is used for K-12 teachers,<sup>86</sup> which aids in curbing teacher turnover rates, thus improving the overall quality of their universal preschool program. In order to boost program quality, Chicago Public Schools should follow in D.C.'s footsteps and align the compensation of their preschool teachers with that of their K-12 teachers.

### Implement quality standards for pre-k classrooms

In the case study of Washington, D.C.'s universal preschool program, we saw that the district had implemented quality standards that each publicly funded preschool must adhere to quality standards that include parameters for teacher qualifications, preschool curriculum, use of class time, and requirements for parent involvement and professional development for teachers. Through my research, I was unable to identify or locate comparable quality standards within Chicago's Preschool for All policy. As such, I recommend that Chicago Public Schools implement quality standards to ensure that students in all preschool centers have access to high-quality care. In addition, I recommend that Chicago Public Schools make these standards well-known to parents, such that they can recognize when/if the preschool their child attends fails to meet quality standards.

### **Conclusion**

High-quality early childhood education programs have the potential to create both short-term and long-term positive impacts on an academic, individual, and societal level. Accessing such impacts, however, requires universal preschool programs to maintain high levels of quality through multiple avenues. Ultimately, though Chicago has made strides towards providing universal access to full-day preschool programs for four-year-olds, the city needs to continue to work to expand

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<sup>85</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. High-Quality Early Learning Settings Depend on a High-Quality Workforce, June 2016. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/initiatives/earlylearning/files/ece-low-compensation-undermines-quality-report-2016.pdf>.

<sup>86</sup> Conor Williams, "Laboratories of Democracy: Washington, DC, Showed How to Do Universal Pre-K Right," Vox (Vox, August 5, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/8/5/20748833/washington-dc-pre-k-free-public-universal>.

program access to three-year-olds, as well as take steps to improve and ensure the quality of all of the city's preschool classrooms.

*Editorial note:* For a related op-ed in the *Chicago Policy Review*, please see <https://chicagopolicyreview.org/2023/04/25/educating-the-future-not-reinventing-the-wheel/>.