



Creating Integrated Early Childhood Education in New York City

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New York City has never taken systemwide action to desegregate its schools, even though decades have passed since the landmark *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision. As historian Matt Delmont summarizes in his history of the reactions to “busing” in northern cities, “New York’s school officials praised the *Brown* decision but wondered if it applied to them.”¹ As it turns out, those officials should have paid heed: in 2014, a study by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA found that New York State had the most segregated schools in the country, more segregated than the school systems in the deep south—a shameful distinction.²

In recent years, however, attention to and action on school integration in New York has grown. Through groups such as Teens Take Charge, IntegrateNYC, and the Alliance for School Integration and Desegregation, students and parents have been speaking up in support of integration. New integration plans have been successfully implemented in several community school districts. And earlier this year, the New York City School Diversity Advisory Group, a high-level panel of experts and community members convened by the mayor, issued two reports with sweeping recommendations for changes to the city’s school policies and practices that, if enacted, would represent the most robust desegregation efforts ever undertaken in New York City.³

At the same time, the past few years have also seen growing attention to investments in early childhood education in the city. Mayor de Blasio made Pre-K for All, and subsequently 3-K for All, signature policies of his administration, expanding free, full-day public preschool to serve thousands of children and families. In recent months, two historic labor agreements raised wages for unionized early childhood teachers in community-based programs, marking a crucial investment in the early childhood workforce.⁴ And earlier this year, New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer announced a proposal that would dramatically expand funding in early care and education and triple the number of children served in public programs.⁵

Although the work on school integration and early education both have equity and opportunity as their core concerns, these two initiatives have been largely separate thus far. They should not be. The segregation seen in K–12 schools is fueled by a segregated pipeline of early education programs. And the goal of expanding access to high-quality early childhood programs necessarily requires thinking about diversity as an element of quality. If New York City wants to work toward lasting and meaningful school integration, it needs to begin its efforts where children begin their education.

This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/creating-integrated-early-childhood-education-new-york-city/>

The good news is that New York City already has many of the building blocks for a more integrated early education system in place. But it will take considerable problem-solving and intentional work—from policymakers and providers—to capitalize on existing opportunities for integration as well as open additional opportunities. This report attempts to give direction for some of that work, beginning with a discussion of why diversity in early education matters in the first place, followed by a summary of what we know about the demographics of early childhood education nationally. The subsequent sections give an overview of the early childhood system in New York City, covering children from birth up to age five; discuss the opportunities and challenges that the system presents for integration; and offer broad policy recommendations for the steps needed to provide more of the youngest New Yorkers with access to integrated learning environments.

Why Diversity in Early Education Matters

The racial and socioeconomic diversity of preschool classrooms is a key component of their educational quality.

For decades, research on K–12 education has shown that low-income students see gains to their reading and math skills from learning in socioeconomically integrated environments as opposed to attending schools with high concentrations of poverty.⁶ Racially integrated classrooms also help foster critical thinking skills and reduce racial biases, important traits in today’s complex, multicultural world.⁷

Adding to the large body of work on children in K–12, new research finds similar cognitive and social benefits in diverse preschool classrooms. A 2015 report from The Century Foundation and the Poverty Race Research Action Council highlights these findings.⁸ One study using a large dataset of children from eleven state pre-K programs found that preschool children in classes with higher average socioeconomic status (SES) learned more on average than those in low-SES classrooms—regardless of the children’s own backgrounds.⁹ A follow-up analysis of that data also found that racial diversity of pre-K classrooms was independently

associated with children’s outcomes, and that racially diverse classrooms offer advantages for students.¹⁰ Another study, comparing preschool children in economically mixed classrooms versus high-poverty classrooms, found that those in the economically mixed preschools showed greater growth in language skills.¹¹ In addition, a recent analysis of the impacts of universal versus targeted pre-K found that universal programs produced larger test score gains for low-income children and were more economically efficient in producing these gains than targeted pre-K programs that serve only low-income children.¹² Although the study did not examine why universal programs were more efficient than targeted ones, the increased opportunity for diversity in the classroom could be a possible explanation.

One of the reasons for the greater learning seen in diverse preschool classrooms may be teacher quality. Research shows that preschool classrooms with higher average SES and low minority enrollment tend to attract more skilled preschool teachers.¹³ However, even after controlling for instructional quality in the classroom, children in diverse preschool settings still show increased learning outcomes; thus, another mechanism by which diverse preschool classrooms promote children’s cognitive growth may be in effect, such as peer effects.¹⁴ Children learn by interacting with peers in the classroom. It is a particular advantage for lower-skilled children to have higher-skilled peers, while higher-skilled children tend to be less affected by the skill level of their classmates. Because children’s exposure to math and language skills outside the classroom is highly correlated with their socioeconomic background, low-SES children therefore may benefit, on average, from having some middle- or high-SES classmates.¹⁵

In addition, racially and socioeconomically diverse preschool classrooms may help reduce prejudice among young children. Research shows that children typically develop awareness of racial and social categories by kindergarten, and that exposure to peers helps shape these perceptions.¹⁶ One study of Anglo-British preschool children, for example, found that those children in racially integrated classrooms were less likely than those in homogeneous classrooms to show racial bias toward minorities.¹⁷

Demographics of Early Childhood Education Nationwide

Unfortunately, diverse preschool classrooms are a scarce resource in this country. New data analysis released in 2019 from Urban Institute researchers Erica Greenberg and Tomas Monarrez shows that early childhood settings are among the most racially segregated educational spaces in our country.¹⁸ Greenberg and Monarrez looked at data for all center-based and home-based early childhood programs enrolling at least five children, from birth to preschool, included in the federally funded 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education. This includes day care centers, private preschools, public pre-K, and Head Start programs, as well as family child care providers, nannies, and informal care arrangements, such as a relative or neighbor providing child care for children. Using the “index of dissimilarity”—a measure of how many children from one group would have to move programs in order to create an even distribution of children from two different groups (in this case, looking at a combined group of black and Latinx students versus all other students)—the researchers compared levels of segregation in early childhood settings versus elementary, middle, and high schools. Based on this measure, the researchers found that early childhood education was 13 percent more segregated than elementary school education, and 20 percent more segregated than high school education. This is deeply troubling, because elementary school and high school education are themselves already incredibly segregated. Greenberg and Monarrez also found that early childhood programs are significantly more segregated in the Northeast than in other regions across the country.

This data echoes findings from earlier scholarship. According to one study of state pre-K programs, only one in five children was enrolled in a classroom that was both racially and socioeconomically diverse.¹⁹ Another study looking at school-based preschool programs found that fully half of all preschool children were in highly segregated programs: about 40 percent of preschool children were in programs in which more than 90 percent of children were nonwhite, and another 10 percent were in programs that were more than 90 percent white.²⁰

These high levels of racial segregation in early childhood education are in large part likely to be byproducts of the socioeconomic segregation that households face while raising children. Families with young children must first contend with housing segregation, which shunts lower-income households into neighborhoods with limited early education choices.²¹ In fact, poor children are more likely than poor adults to live in high-poverty neighborhoods.²² Compounding that, families then face our early education landscape, which itself has evolved as a fractured system, with a mix of public programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, and state pre-K that mostly restrict eligibility to low-income or at-risk children and private programs that are frequently unaffordable for working families. As a result, many young children attend day care centers and preschool programs with peers who mostly have similar socioeconomic backgrounds. In many cases, this means that child care settings and preschool classrooms are fairly racially homogeneous as well.²³

The Early Childhood Landscape in NYC

New York City is in a strong position to work toward achieving better integration of its early childhood education system. The first prerequisite for integration in early education is equitable access, which typically requires public investment. Thankfully, the city has a robust subsidized early education program for eligible low-income families. It is also ahead of the curve nationally in providing universal access to early childhood education for all four-year olds and three-year olds in some neighborhoods.²⁴

Up until this year, New York City’s public early education landscape consisted primarily of EarlyLearn, a program of directly contracted child care providers serving eligible low-income children up to age five, run by the city’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS); child care vouchers, also administered by ACS; Head Start programs, some contracted directly with the federal government and others awarded subgrants from ACS; and Pre-K for All and 3-K for All, run by the New York City Department of Education (DOE). Starting in summer 2019, the DOE is

administering all city-contracted programs—EarlyLearn providers (including income-eligible child care programs and city-contracted Head Start), Pre-K for All, and 3-K for All—through an umbrella Birth-to-Five system.²⁵ This consolidation of city-contracted early childhood programs for eligible low-income families and universal pre-K and 3-K programs under the management of a single agency could provide new opportunities for supporting, coordinating, and blending these programs.

Nevertheless, the number of different funding streams, varied eligibility requirements, and a reality that still leaves many families to seek care in private settings together yield a complex landscape in which integration rarely happens naturally, or easily.

The sections that follow provide an overview of that landscape and an analysis of the challenges and opportunities for integration that result, dividing the field to look at the systems serving children under age three (for whom no universal programs are available) and three- and four-year-olds (who have access to programs with universal eligibility and a growing number of available seats).

Children under Age Three

For children under three years of age in New York City, there is no universal early education option available. The landscape of early care and education is accordingly divided between public programs that offer access to eligible low-income families and a private market serving higher-income families as well as lower-income families that are not served, due to lack of eligibility or availability, by public programs.

Public Programs for Low-Income Families

Eligible low-income families with children under age three are served through three main programs: early childhood programs in licensed day care centers or family child care homes (which are funded through the Child Care Development Block Grant [CCDBG] and were formerly part of EarlyLearn NYC, now part of the DOE's Birth-to-Five program); child care vouchers that may be spent at

licensed child care centers and family child care homes that accept them, as well as on informal care arrangements; and federally funded Early Head Start classrooms.

Eligibility and availability of these three public options differ. CCDBG-funded early childhood programs and child care vouchers are typically available to families earning up to 200 percent of poverty (roughly \$50,000 a year for a family of four), and families pay a copayment using a sliding scale based on family income that can range from a few hundred dollars to nearly \$9,000 per year for a child under age three.²⁶ Families may also have to meet work or education requirements in order to be eligible for CCDBG-funded programs and vouchers. Early Head Start primarily serves families whose incomes are below the federal poverty line, with no work or education requirements, and charges no fee.

Not every eligible family is served by these programs. In fact, the Citizens Committee for Children estimates that less than half of eligible children under age five are enrolled in public programs, with the greatest coverage for three- and four-year-olds, and significantly less coverage for infants and toddlers.²⁷ Several factors may contribute to the limited reach of the current public system. Historically, some CCDBG-funded programs have been under-enrolled. Families may not have been aware that seats are available to them, due to an ineffective referral system and centers' lack of capacity to advertise. Parents also may not be interested in the services at certain centers due to location or program specifics, because the seats available are for the wrong age group, because they cannot afford the copayments required to participate, or because they are not looking for child care. Language barriers, immigration concerns, and cultural preferences also impact families' choices in child care and may contribute to the disproportionate low enrollment of certain groups, especially Latinx families.²⁸ The city can also take a long time to approve children's enrollment, leaving seats empty in the interim.²⁹ At the same time, limited funding for subsidized programs and child care vouchers—which are dependent on federal appropriations, as well as state and local dollars—means that there is often a long wait for eligible families to be served by the voucher program and at popular directly contracted programs.³⁰

The Private Market

Families with children under age three who are not served by public programs are left to find child care in the private market. This category includes families who earn too much money to qualify for the subsidized programs or who do not meet the other eligibility requirements (such as work or reason for care requirements), as well as families who are eligible but not served due to a lack of funding and seats. The average cost of child care for infants and toddlers in the private market in New York City is substantial, straining the budgets of all but the wealthiest New Yorkers. Across New York State, the average cost of care for an infant in a day care center is over \$15,000 a year, and care in a family child care home is over \$10,000³¹—and the rates inside New York City are almost certainly higher than the state average.³² The New York City Comptroller’s office estimates that child care costs at the sixty-ninth percentile—a benchmark for affordability used by the state—were over \$21,000 for infants in center-based care and over \$10,000 for those in family day care settings.³³ Some centers charge more than \$40,000 per year.³⁴

Challenges and Opportunities for Integration

Without universal access to early education for children under age three, the main existing opportunities for socioeconomic integration lie in blending the different public funding streams and private pay tuition revenues to serve eligible and non-eligible children in the same classrooms. That is, wherever possible, children in early education settings must not be kept in separate programs according to the type of funding received for their care. The practice of separating classrooms by funding stream or otherwise differentiating services is, as researcher Kendra Hurley explains, “a case study in some of the ways integration goes astray when done without intent.”³⁵

Creating these opportunities is a two-step process: first, individual day care centers or family child care homes must

be receiving different funding streams to begin with, and second, within those settings, individual classrooms must mix children from different programs.

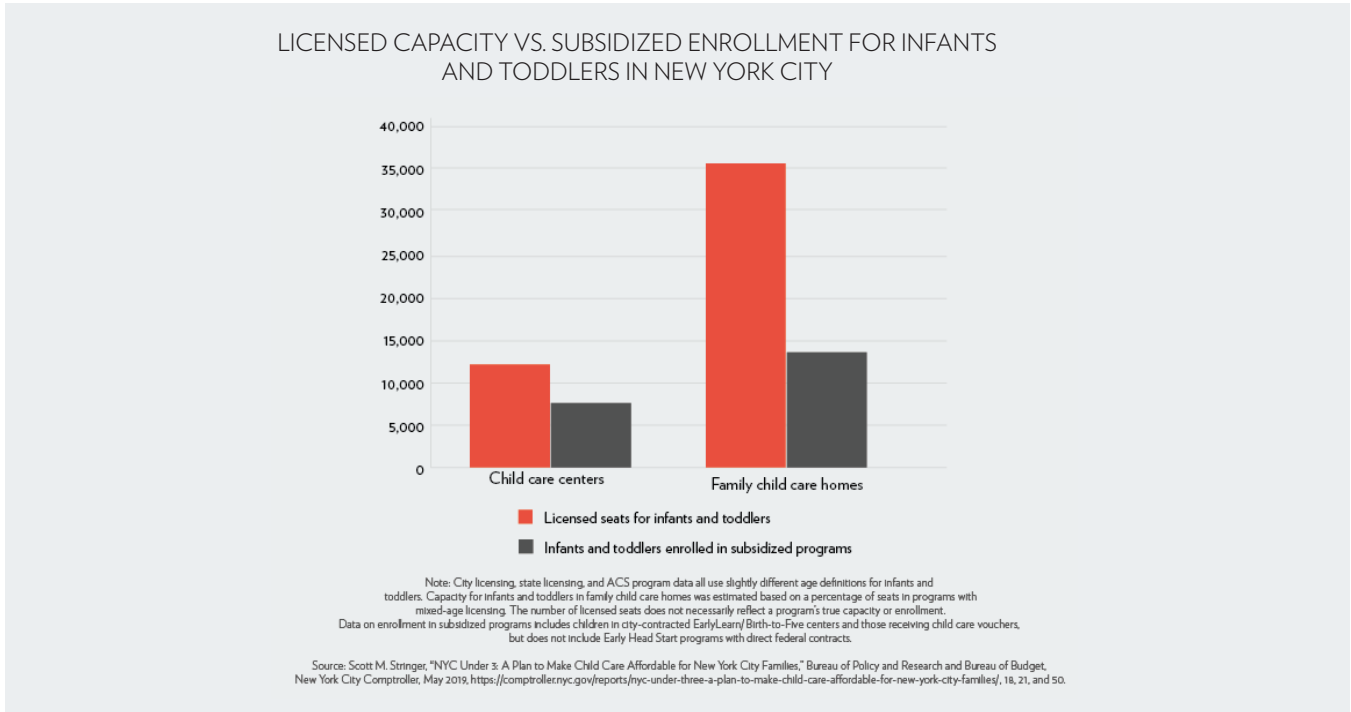
Blending Early Head Start and Other Public Programs

Some of this blending is possible within different publicly funded programs. Some early childhood providers serving children under age three, for example, receive funding to operate both Early Head Start and CCDBG-funded programs. The chief architect of the federal Head Start program originally hoped, during the program’s creation over fifty years ago, for a socioeconomically integrated model.³⁶ However, Head Start and Early Head Start have the lowest income eligibility of all of the funding sources for early education in New York City, serving children from families who have incomes below the poverty line, are experiencing homelessness, or receive public assistance. Thus, creating classrooms that have children attending with Early Head Start funding and with other public funding sources could create a degree of socioeconomic integration and ensure that Early Head Start children are not in classrooms with the greatest, concentrated need. Unfortunately, this type of blending does not always happen, and doing it successfully currently requires individual early childhood providers to bear the burdens of significant administrative complexity.

Some Early Head Start classrooms are funded through a central grant to the DOE, which then issues subgrants to providers. As part of this contracting process, DOE has said that the city will support providers in blending Early Head Start and Head Start programs with Birth-to-Five programs if providers choose to do so, but such blending is not required. At the same time that it has pledged to support providers who decide to blend, the DOE has also cautioned providers against undertaking this goal lightly. The request for proposals for Birth-to-Five states:

The DOE expects that effectively and seamlessly combining Birth-to-Five services with Head Start/Early Head Start services may come with significant programmatic complexity, additional costs, administrative and reporting requirements, and

FIGURE 1



*complex cost allocation requirements. Proposers are advised to consider their organizational and staffing capacity before deciding to pursue this option. Based on a program's request and demonstrated capacity, the DOE will approve blending Birth-to-Five services with Head Start/Early Head Start services in classrooms on a case by case basis.*³⁷

Thus the message from the city on blending Early Head Start and Head Start programs with other public programs has been mixed. The promise of support from DOE is helpful, but it seems likely that the administrative burden will still lie with individual programs, and it is unclear how many programs will willingly take on this challenge.

Other providers in New York City, like the Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center, have Early Head Start and Head Start grants directly with the federal government. These providers are on their own if they decide they want to blend programs into single classrooms, and the federal program is not generally set up to make such blending easy.

Blending Public Programs and Private-Pay Seats

Beyond blending Early Head Start with other publicly funded programs, opportunities for broader socioeconomic integration of children under age three lie in combining the variety of public programs with seats funded by private-pay tuition. This type of blending is possible in Birth-to-Five centers or family child care homes that enroll children whose families are paying market-rate tuition as well as children funded through one of the public programs. It is also possible in a range of child care centers and family child care homes that accept child care vouchers but also enroll private-pay families.

Based on a comparison of city data on the number of infants and toddlers in subsidized programs and licensing data on the number of seats available for infants and toddlers in programs across the city, about 60 percent of all licensed seats in day care centers and 40 percent of seats in family child care homes are currently filled with children funded through a public program (CCDBG-funded programs, DOE-contracted Early Head Start, or child care vouchers). (See Figure 1.) These are rough figures that do not perfectly align for a number of factors (see the note on Figure 1), but they nevertheless give a big-picture view of the type

of integration that might be possible, if public and private seats were more evenly distributed in the same programs and classrooms across the city.

But, of course, seats are not evenly distributed throughout the city. Some programs accept only publicly funded children, and others accept only private-pay families. It is unknown how many centers accept a mix of publicly funded and private-pay children, because the city does not keep that data.³⁸ DOE will permit programs that receive Birth-to-Five funding to enroll both private-pay and publicly funded students; however, there is no particular encouragement or support for programs to do so.³⁹ The federal Early Head Start program also allows programs to enroll private-paying students alongside Early Head Start children.⁴⁰

Some centers are blending programs already, and their reasons for doing so are varied. Some, like Friends of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, would prefer to enroll only publicly funded students, but have added private-pay children to help with their bottom line after losing funding for a number of subsidized seats.⁴¹ Others, such as University Settlement's Park Slope North/Helen Owen Carey center, intentionally embrace the opportunity for socioeconomic integration.⁴² Among centers that do receive public funding and private tuition, practices also vary as to whether the classrooms themselves are mixed, or kept separate based on funding stream.

Three- and Four-Year-Olds

For slightly older children, the introduction of universal early childhood programs, available to all families without charge, creates more opportunities for integration in New York City's early childhood landscape. All four-year-olds in the city are eligible for universal pre-K, and a growing number of community school districts across the city are offering universal 3-K for three-year-olds. As of the 2019–20 school year, twelve of the city's thirty-two geographic community school districts currently offer 3-K for All, with the current administration hoping to serve the entire city by the time the mayor's term ends in 2021.⁴³ As of 2018–19, nearly 68,000

four-year-olds were enrolled in full-day universal pre-K, and over 3,300 three-year-olds were enrolled in 3-K.⁴⁴

Although families of all socioeconomic backgrounds are guaranteed seats through these universal programs, not every seat is open to every child. Funding for these universal programs is combined with income-eligible funding streams and delivered across a variety of different settings, yielding a complicated landscape with its own challenges when it comes to integration.⁴⁵

Pre-K and 3-K in Public Schools and DOE Pre-K Centers

Roughly 45 percent of children in pre-K and 72 percent of children in 3-K are enrolled in programs at public district or charter schools or pre-K centers run by DOE.⁴⁶ Admission to these programs follows a list of priorities similar to the public kindergarten enrollment criteria, which include preferences for children living in the attendance zone or community school district that the school is located in, as well as for children with siblings already at the school.⁴⁷ There is no income eligibility for these programs, but there is also no guaranteed coverage of extra hours beyond the school day (6 hours, 20 minutes) or extra days beyond the school year (180 days a year, after holidays and summer break). Individual programs may have before-school or after-school care, as well as camps during school breaks, but availability and cost of these programs varies. In the 2019 Pre-K Admissions Guide, of the more than 700 pre-K sites in district schools, charter schools, or DOE pre-K centers, only about 200 are listed as having before-school programs, after-school programs, or both.⁴⁸

Pre-K and 3-K in Community-Based Organizations

The other 55 percent of children in pre-K and 28 percent of children in 3-K are enrolled in programs run by community-based organizations.⁴⁹ The community-based organizations that offer pre-K or 3-K take several forms: day care centers, family child care homes, and private and parochial schools.

The length of and eligibility for these programs also varies. Some community-based programs offer an extended day and year (covering eight or ten hours a day, for 225 or 260 days a year), which is publicly funded and available to families who qualify through CCDBG or Head Start. Other community-based programs follow the traditional school day and year calendar, and are open to all families regardless of income. These centers may choose to offer an extended day for families who pay tuition to cover the extra hours.

Challenges and Opportunities for Integration

With varying program schedules and eligibility requirements across school-based and community-based settings, the challenges and obstacles for integration look different, depending on the context.

Supporting Diversity at Public Schools and DOE Pre-K Centers

Within pre-K and 3-K programs at public schools and DOE pre-K centers, universal access creates an important opportunity for fostering diversity that is absent across most of the early education landscape. The challenges around integration in these classrooms are largely the same issues that face public elementary schools in the city. Residential segregation in the city means that geographically zoned schools often reflect the segregation of the neighborhoods in which they are located. Attendance zones are also sometimes drawn in ways that reinforce or even exacerbate that segregation.⁵⁰ The varied availability of programs to provide care before school, after school, or during school holidays may also affect the viability of a program as a strong option for working families.

The Century Foundation's analysis of pre-K enrollment demographics for the first year of the newly expanded universal program (2014–15) found that pre-K classrooms in public schools or DOE centers had levels of racial diversity similar to those of public kindergarten classrooms.⁵¹

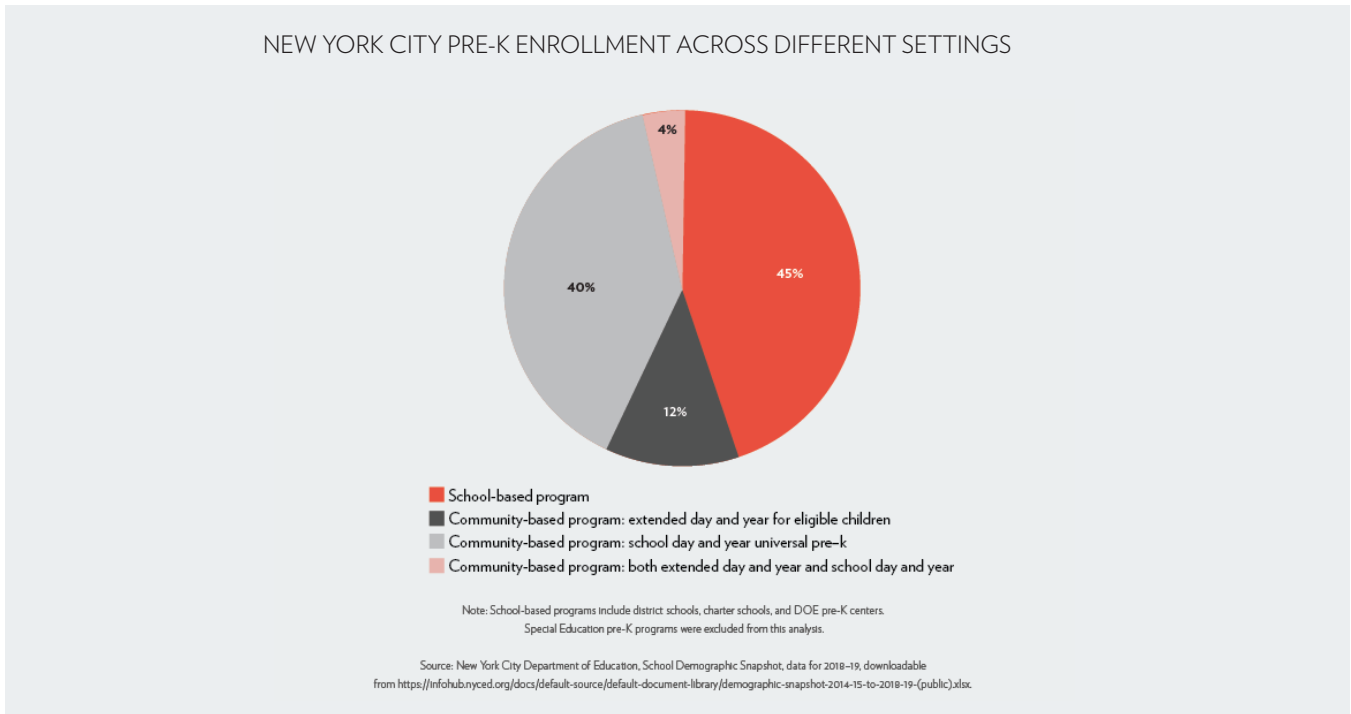
Supporting Diversity at Community-Based Programs

The enrollment priorities and eligibility requirements in community-based programs create a different set of opportunities and challenges. Enrollment for pre-K and 3-K programs run by community-based organizations is not based on a geographic zone. (However, universal 3-K is currently only available in twelve community school districts.) Breaking the tie between geography and enrollment priorities creates the potential for programs to enroll students from multiple neighborhoods and possibly attract a more diverse population as a result. This is particularly the case for programs that are in locations with good access to public transportation or near commercial centers. A handful of community-based pre-K programs have also been able to implement enrollment priorities specifically designed to promote diversity by giving priority to students who are emergent multilingual learners or eligible for free or reduced-price lunch through the city's Diversity in Admissions program.⁵²

The other enrollment priorities for community-based programs are primarily based on providing continuity for families—giving preferences to children who are already enrolled at the center in programs serving younger children and to those whose families receive other public services from the organization.⁵³ Prioritizing continuity for families makes sense, but it also poses a challenge: when the day care classrooms for children under age three that feed into pre-K and 3-K do not have universal access—largely separating families based on eligibility for public programs and ability to pay for private programs at a variety of price points—continuity for families can mean the patterns of segregation found in the programs for younger children are replicated in the programs for older children.

Given the fact that these universal programs are often fed by segregated pipelines, one of the best opportunities for creating integrated classrooms lies in centers that have both CCDBG-funded extended-day seats for eligible low-income families and pre-K or 3-K seats open to families of all backgrounds, and that blend both programs in the same classrooms. Historically, providers that offer both programs

FIGURE 2



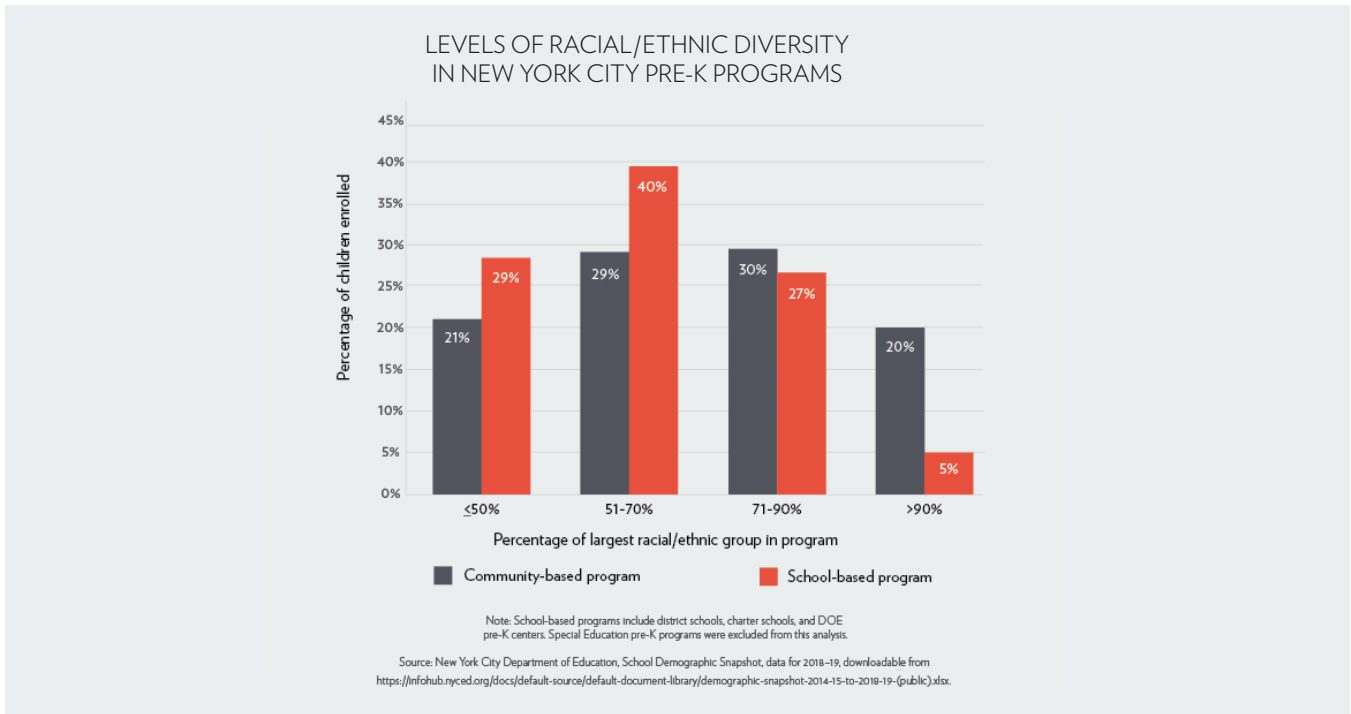
have not always blended them in the same classrooms. In fact, when Pre-K for All was first rolled out, the DOE initially required some providers to keep children in different programs in separate classrooms, resulting in centers with separate “EarlyLearn,” “Head Start,” and “Universal Pre-K Only” classrooms side-by-side, in the same building.⁵⁴ The DOE eventually changed its policy to allow providers to request waivers to blend their classrooms, and the new request for proposals for Birth-to-Five services takes this one step further. Under the new contracts (which will begin in 2021), all providers that are awarded both extended day and year seats for eligible low-income children and school day and year universal pre-K seats are required to blend both programs together in the same classroom, with the expectation that “all children and families participating in the program have shared and aligned experiences.”⁵⁵

The end to the separation of classrooms by funding stream within centers is an important positive change to support integration. However, there is more work to be done to increase the number of providers that receive both types of contracts to begin with. As of 2018-19, just 60 of the more than 1,000 community-based pre-K sites—enrolling less than 4 percent of all pre-K children—had contracts to serve

both eligible low-income children in an extended day and year program and universally eligible children in a school day and year program.⁵⁶ (See Figure 2.)

The DOE’s current request for proposals seeks to increase that number by naming socioeconomic integration as one of just four priorities for the evaluation of proposals, giving a leg up to programs that propose to offer both extended day and year and school day and year slots, over programs that propose school day and year slots only. This is a very positive development that could be an important incentive for providers that had not previously offered extended day and year slots to do so. However, it could be even better. The request for proposals does not provide any incentive for programs that were planning to seek extended day and year slots to include school day and year slots as part of their proposal. The DOE’s language about blending both programs in the same classrooms could also scare away some applicants. This blending will now be required of programs, and the request for proposals says that DOE will “provide resources and support to programs to implement this expectation.”⁵⁷ However, just as the DOE warns providers about the difficulties of blending Head Start or Early Head Start with CCDBG-funded programs, it cautions providers

FIGURE 3



about the additional administrative burden that operating both extended day and year and school day and year programs may entail:

While combining these service models offers an exciting opportunity to foster socioeconomic and racial integration at the classroom level, the DOE expects that effectively and seamlessly combining these models may come with additional administrative requirements, including cost allocation. Proposers are advised to consider their organizational and staffing capacity before deciding to pursue this option.⁵⁸

Thus, it remains to be seen whether the number of providers operating both types of programs will increase or decrease in the upcoming round of contracts.

On top of the challenges of blending programs with extended day and year slots with school day and year slots, adding Head Start further complicates the picture, introducing the same challenges that are associated with blending Early Head Start programs for younger children together with different funding streams. The DOE maintains the same policy for Early Head Start and Head Start of supporting but not requiring blended classrooms.⁵⁹

In The Century Foundation’s analysis of pre-K enrollment in the first year of Pre-K for All (2014–15), community based pre-K programs had much higher levels of segregation than public kindergarten classrooms. The community-based pre-K classrooms were half as likely as kindergarten classrooms to have highly diverse plurality enrollment with no majority over 50 percent, and they were almost twice as likely to have high levels of racial homogeneity with a majority group constituting over 90 percent.⁶⁰ Data from 2018–19 likewise shows high levels of segregation at the program level in community-based pre-K, with half of all children enrolled in programs that are fairly homogeneous (with 71 percent to 90 percent of the student body coming from a single racial/ethnic group) or highly homogeneous (with over 90 percent of students coming from a single racial/ethnic group). School-based pre-K programs, while still enrolling less than a third of all students in highly diverse programs (with no racial/ethnic majority), are somewhat more diverse. (See Figure 3.)

Policy Recommendations

New York City’s current early education landscape is a bit like its subway system: a complex web of different pathways, with varied entrances and exits, that is underfunded and frequently and frustratingly broken—but also far superior to what most other cities have. In a system this complicated, there is no quick fix that can make integration happen overnight, but rather a variety of different policy changes that can help create and support new opportunities for diversity.

The following steps are needed to promote integration in programs for children under age three:

- The city and the federal Office of Head Start should work toward simplifying systems to allow and encourage providers receiving Early Head Start funding and other funding streams to blend their programs in order to integrate their classrooms.
- The city should encourage more early childhood providers to house public programs as well as private-pay seats, and require blending of programs for those that do.
- City, state, and federal leaders should work to expand access toward having public programs with universal eligibility.

While blending programs is the best possibility for integration in the current system, the third step—expanding access to publicly funded child care programs—holds important long-term promise and is picking up some political steam. New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer, for example, has proposed a plan that would expand eligibility for subsidized early education (through Birth-to-Five or vouchers) to include families earning up to 400 percent of poverty, or roughly \$100,000 a year for a family of four.⁶¹ At the federal level, proposals such as the Child Care for Working Families Act⁶² would more than double the number of families eligible for child care subsidies by increasing eligibility to families earning up to 150 percent of the median income in

their state.⁶³ With increased eligibility for public programs to include middle-class families come additional possibilities to bring children from different backgrounds together—but only if programs are structured to support such integration.

For three- and four-year-olds, universal access is already well underway in New York City, but some of the structures to support integration are still lacking. The city should:

- Include discussion of pre-K and 3-K programs in broader conversations about socioeconomic and racial integration across grades in the public school system.
- Expand options for enrolling children in programs before school, after school, and during school breaks.
- Encourage more community-based centers to offer both extended day and year and school day and year programs and shift more of the administrative burden of blending programs to the central office.
- Continue to simplify and support the blending of Head Start with other programs.

In addition to tackling these individual strands of the solution to promote greater integration in early childhood programs in New York City, the administration should also consider convening a working group of experts, providers, teachers, community members, and parents—plus perhaps even students, in some capacity—to consider questions of diversity and integration in early childhood education. Just as the School Diversity Advisory Group has done in its analysis of elementary, middle, and high school admissions,⁶⁴ the early childhood integration working group would undergo a systematic review of early childhood programs in New York City with respect to equity and diversity. Using a framework like the “5 Rs of Real Integration,” developed by the youth advocacy organization IntegrateNYC, the group would consider not just enrollment demographics but also other aspects of the early care and education experience—such as resource equity, strong relationships

among children and teachers, diversity of the early childhood workforce, and culturally responsive pedagogy—that are required for programs to reflect the diversity of the city and meet the needs of diverse families.⁶⁵ The analysis and recommendations from this group would create a blueprint for fostering integrated learning environments starting from birth that would feed into and strengthen integration efforts in K–12 schools.

Conclusion

In contrast with K–12 education policy, in which universal eligibility is taken for granted, advocates in early education are still working toward the basic goal of access for all children to high-quality programs. This stark reality can at times make questions about socioeconomic and racial integration seem premature, but the fight for increased access and increased integration should go hand in hand. Diversity is a key aspect of program quality for early childhood education. And if advocates work merely to expand a system of siloed opportunities, then the city runs the risk of cementing lines of segregation that are difficult to work around, even when we achieve universal access through programs such as Pre-K for All and 3-K for All. As New York City works to expand and improve early childhood education, advocates, policymakers, providers, and parents should seize opportunities for diversity where they exist and lay the groundwork for broader integration throughout the early education system.

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