

# State-Funded Preschool Availability in Illinois Depends Upon Where You Live: An Equity Analysis of ISBE Pre-K Resources

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In 2006, Illinois established the Preschool for All program with the goal of providing universal, voluntary access to state-funded preschool for all three- and four-year-olds. Under the Preschool for All program’s authorizing legislation, the state prioritized serving children “at risk for school failure” as it continues to build toward universal access to preschool.<sup>1</sup> To determine whether or not priority children in Illinois are receiving equitable access to preschool we analyze how the state distributes preschool funding.

Unlike K-12 education funding, early learning funds are awarded to Illinois school districts, regional offices of education and community-based service providers through a competitive process. We explore whether this competition has advanced access for priority children.

We use two measures as proxies to estimate the number of priority children residing in a community (i.e., an elementary or unit school district):

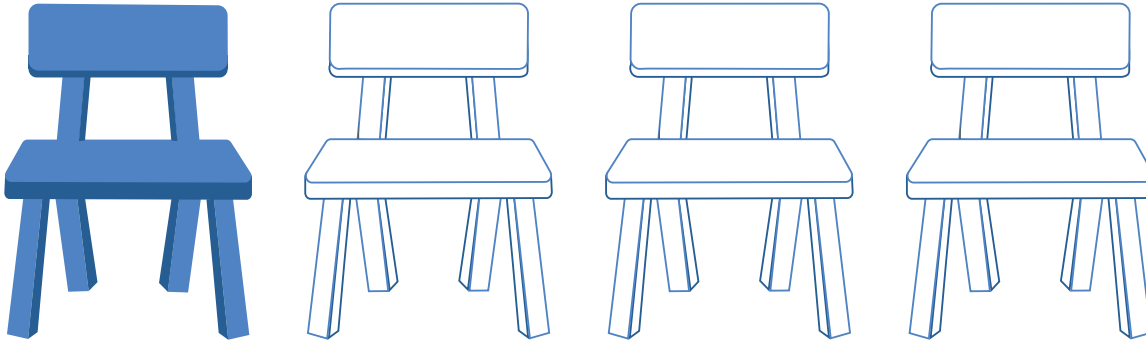
- Low-income children: The number of preschool-age children (ages 3 and 4) who live at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level.
- Children in poverty: The number of preschool-age children who live at or below federal poverty level.



<sup>1</sup> School districts have the flexibility to define risk factors for children to meet local circumstances, such as living in families with low incomes, poverty incomes or in deep poverty, having a special need, being a dual-language learner, having a teen parent or experiencing homelessness.

## Key Findings:

The state's preschool funding provides seats for only a quarter of preschool-aged children.



### Preschool seats (slots) are not equitably distributed across the state.

- In almost one-fourth of the 482 school districts with 30 or more low-income children, there are no state-funded preschool seats available.
- Another 230 districts (48%) have less than one seat per low-income child in their community.
- Yet 28 districts (6%) have over 2 seats per child in their community.
- In 282 school districts (59%), children living in poverty have no access to a federal or state preschool seat designed with comprehensive services for children in poverty.

### Changes in 2019 to the state funding system made the system slightly more equitable, but Illinois is still underserving children with least access to preschool.

- Communities with very few publicly-funded preschool slots were only slightly more likely to receive an increase in state-funded seats in the latest award distribution process.
- Among rural communities, underserved districts did not receive any priority over districts with higher levels of service.
- Districts with majority Black and Latinx students were somewhat more likely to receive increases in state-funded seats. This can be considered a move toward racial equity. Among these districts, however, the most under-served districts were less likely than other districts to receive new slots.
- Communities least able to fund preschool seats (Tier 1 and Tier 2 districts according to the state's Evidence-Based Funding Formula) were somewhat more likely to receive new preschool seats than communities most able to pay (Tier 3 and Tier 4 districts). While this is also a step toward equity, it does not reflect a strong commitment to fund the districts least able to pay.



The state should examine other potential funding distribution approaches.



## Recommendations:

1. Move to a need-based formula and away from a competitive grant process. The current approach does not appear to be producing an equitable distribution of opportunity to attend preschool for low-income children. The state should examine other potential funding distribution approaches, ranging from a significantly revised competitive grant process to a formula-driven allocation of resources to communities.
2. Expand early care and education funding. Given the number of communities with very low levels of access to early learning services, the state should continue to expand funding through the Early Childhood Block Grant while it studies potential new funding approaches.

Illinois has great opportunity to redesign its early care and education funding system to serve all children. Until Illinois achieves universal preschool, many children will have no opportunity to attend preschool. During the transition to universal preschool Illinois should increase access to high-quality child care for three- and four-year-olds, particularly for those living in poor and low-income families.

The Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) could take a number of steps to support parents in enrolling their three- and four-year-olds in high-quality child care: waive work requirements and copayments for low-income families with three- and four-year-olds in high-quality child care; use a simpler application process; increase reimbursements for high-quality (gold- and perhaps silver-rated) child care programs; and for providers, improve pathways to an ExceleRate quality rating and/or credentials and offer other quality supports for child care homes and licensed centers that care for three- and four-year-olds.

As such, restructuring the current funding approach would provide families with meaningful choice in their child's early care and education. Addressing how the state distributes funding for preschool seats would be one of the most effective investments towards building a more equitable start for children. The present process perpetuates inequality and must be significantly revised in order to ensure each child has an equal chance of success regardless of where they live.







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