



Turning the Curve on the Early Childhood Education Diversity Gap



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Teachstone is thrilled to be a member of the [Early Care and Education Consortium](#) (ECEC). As an ECEC member, Teachstone joins with leading national, regional, and independent providers of high-quality child care and early learning programs and services to shape federal and state policy in support of improving care and education for children and families.

In 1991, the publication of Johnathan Kozol’s “Savage Inequalities” captivated the public and policymakers alike by presenting a compelling portrait of stark inequities in our public education system drawn along lines of race and socioeconomic status. Now, nearly 25 years later and against a backdrop of community unrest in highly segregated urban areas such as Baltimore, new scholarly research and policy analyses are alerting us to a socioeconomic diversity gap that threatens to replicate K-12’s divisions in educational opportunity among our youngest learners. And, this gap is growing within a newly expanded context that includes not only low-income, but moderate-income families as well.

A new report from Columbia University Teachers College’s National Center for Children and Families, [A Better Start: Why Diversity Matters in Early Education](#) emphasizes the linkages between early care and learning program equity, access, and quality. Expanding on known and troubling trends showing that low-income children are less likely to be in a high-quality center-based school readiness program, the report states that “programs that are segregated by race or ethnicity and income are rarely of equal quality, and that efforts to make early childhood investments sustainable must take this into account.”

Realizing socioeconomic diversity in early learning programs will require aggressive and innovative policy and program implementation changes to address the challenges of residential segregation, as well as logistical and structural barriers. Another recent report, [Lessons From New York City's Universal Pre-K Expansion](#) released by The Century Foundation, unpacks these challenges by focusing on the dynamics of diversity within New York City's recent and dramatic prekindergarten expansion.

Together, these reports echo an urgent call to address diversity through our public investments in early care and education as an important pathway to improving access to high-quality programs, particularly among the most disadvantaged young children.

What are the benefits of a socioeconomically diverse early learning environment?

The relationship between socioeconomic diversity and quality within early learning settings extends beyond classroom composition simply serving as a proxy for other key measures of quality, including teacher quality or parent involvement. Emerging research now shows that diversity in classroom composition itself—a key component of program quality—directly produces positive peer effects on early development, particularly in the areas of language and literacy among learners from low-income backgrounds.[i] Classroom diversity promotes positive social-emotional development and reduces racial biases among all children regardless of socioeconomic background. [ii]

What is the growing diversity gap in early childhood care and education?

The national arena for growing concern about diversity within programs serving young children is the expansion of universal pre-kindergarten programs (UPK). Political support and public buy-in for UPK is high, with surveys showing seven in ten Americans favor federal funding to support it.[i] While public investment in early childhood care and education has historically focused on increasing access to high-quality early learning and developmental experiences among low-income children, UPK stands to benefit a wider slice of the population of families with young children. As costs of providing high-quality early care and education have risen across the child care market, UPK expansion also offers moderate-income families the opportunity to access high-quality, affordable care in either a center- or school-based program. In fact, as pointed out by the New Century Foundation report, middle-class and low-income children alike have been shown to benefit across a range of cognitive and social-emotional skills development. And, long-term measures of earnings gains based on participation in high-quality Pre-K benefit both low- and moderate-income children at a nearly identical rate.[ii]

However, despite the growing promise of increased socioeconomic integration within prekindergarten programs, emerging patterns of UPK enrollment tend to mirror income and racial concentrations within school districts and residential communities. The result is that, as authors Jeanne Reid and Lynn Kagan find, “many children remain clustered in pre-K classrooms that are both high-minority and high-poverty” and are not benefiting from positive peer effects within diverse learning environments.

Parent Choice among High-Quality Options is the Primary Diversity Driver

Taken together, the two recently released reports offer an extensive list of recommendations for improving access, equity, and diversity at the state and local levels, including the need to:

- Prioritize community engagement and parent involvement
- Establish and expand programs in neighborhoods central to parent employment or adjacent to higher-income residential concentrations
- Adjust school-based UPK enrollment parameters to encourage geographic flexibility in program choice.
- Provide or subsidize transportation

The Teachers College report also proposes national policy recommendations that include calling on national early childhood organizations to endorse commitment to diversity and increasing flexibility in targeted programs such as Head Start to allow for higher levels of socioeconomic integration.

However, among these recommendations for increasing early childhood program diversity, one key recommendation appears absent:

Incentivize parent choice among high-quality community program options to promote socioeconomic integration.

The first step in making this recommendation actionable is building the supply of high-quality community program options across varying settings. A systemic reliance on school-based programs of varying quality will not successfully turn the curve on increasing socioeconomic diversity. Authors Jeanne Reid and Lynn Kagan acknowledge that ‘strength in diverse settings’ is an essential foundation for building a system of socioeconomically diverse programs. And, New Century’s report underscores that flexible and innovative contractual partnerships with high-quality community programs have been integral to NYC’s ability to expand its UPK capacity. High-quality community programs should serve as magnets for families of varying income levels, drawing children from a different economic backgrounds through the doors based on the program’s ability to demonstrate quality and meet the needs of a family’s work schedule.

Next, building a UPK system of diverse program settings requires comprehensive planning to improve and maintain program quality, and incentivize participation on the part of both programs and parents. What NYC’s efforts underscore is that diversity will not take place in a vacuum—the city strategically put key elements of systemic infrastructure in place to bolster program quality overall and engage parents and communities. The expanded UPK program implemented citywide parent engagement and outreach to increase enrollment, invested in teacher recruitment, certification, and professional development through the [City University of New York’s Early Childhood Professional Development Institute](#), and increased compensation parity between school- and community-based settings. Since 2013, the city has expanded enrollment of four-year olds in full-day UPK by over 30,000 by relying heavily on community-based programs to in a range of settings, including taxing and non-profit centers, and Head Start to enhance citywide capacity.[i] These policy changes lay a

foundation for more targeted strategies such as subsidized transportation and revised enrollment priorities for UPK programs that seek to increase classroom diversity across UPK classrooms.

Finally, incentivizing parents to choose among high-quality program options means that understandable, accurate and consistent information about program quality must be readily available. In order to maximize the impact of community engagement and parent involvement, public-private community partnerships should leverage statewide measures of quality represented by ratings on a statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

There are several innovative models that incentivize parent choice among a range of high-quality programs which may also enhance socioeconomic diversity within classrooms. [Minnesota's Early Learning Scholarships](#) are funded by the state Department of Education and provide income-scaled scholarships to families living at or below 185% of the federal poverty threshold. Parents can choose a provider across a diverse range of settings, including center-based community providers, family child care, Head Start or preschool-based programs, within the allowable rating parameters of the statewide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Parent Aware. This approach both encourages parent choice based on program quality and allows for flexibility across geographic areas and neighborhoods. The Early Learning Scholarships have demonstrated strong effectiveness outcomes and garnered bipartisan support from policymakers.

A Call to Action to Close the Diversity Gap:

It is imperative to take steps now to address the diversity gap in levels of access to high-quality school-readiness experiences among our youngest learners and their families. Not doing so runs counter to our resolve to close our national achievement gap. The diversity gap ultimately undercuts the sustainability the return on investment of public funds in high-quality early care and education opportunities for all children, particularly those living in communities characterized by high concentration of poverty and a shortage of high-quality program options.

[i] J.L.Reid and S.L.Kagan. *A Better Start: Why Classroom Diversity Matters in Early Education*. (New York: National Center for Children and Families, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2015).

[ii] H. Potter. *Lessons from New York City's Pre-K Expansion*. (The Century Foundation, 2015).

[iii] H. Potter. *Lessons from New York City's Pre-K Expansion*. (The Century Foundation, 2015).

[iv] H. Potter. *Lessons from New York City's Pre-K Expansion*. (The Century Foundation, 2015).

[v] H. Potter. *Lessons from New York City's Pre-K Expansion*. (The Century Foundation, 2015).