Strategies to Foster Integration in Early Childhood Education

Sara Plasencia and Hanna Melnick

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Executive Summary

Research shows that socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically integrated schools can have important benefits for student learning. While much research has focused on the benefits of integrated K–12 settings, emerging evidence indicates that the benefit of school- and classroom-level diversity may also be significant in early childhood education (ECE).

Integrated education likely benefits children for several reasons. One reason is that socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse schools often receive more resources than schools with concentrated poverty, many of which have student bodies that are predominantly Black and Latino/a. Another reason why children may benefit from diverse classrooms is that they learn from their peers, and diverse classrooms tend to have children with a wide range of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Children can also benefit from diverse classrooms by developing positive relationships across lines of difference, which has been found to reduce prejudice.

Despite the positive influence of integrated settings, most ECE programs are remarkably segregated. A study of publicly funded preschools found that nearly half of Black and Latino/a children are taught in racially isolated schools where 90% of students are students of color. Another study found that ECE programs are, on average, 13% more racially segregated than elementary schools and 20% more segregated than high schools. Research has also found ample evidence of socioeconomic segregation in ECE settings, as well as segregation of dual language learners into schools with a majority population of students of color.

Segregation in ECE is driven by patterns of residential segregation, but it is also driven by policies that govern access to programs. Where publicly funded ECE is available, it is often not universally accessible, and private programs are unaffordable for many families. Most states limit access to subsidized ECE to children from low-income families, and the federal government limits Head Start to children from families with the lowest incomes. As a result, children are segregated into classrooms and settings by their family's income. While public policies have exacerbated segregation in ECE, this does not always have to be the case.

Strategies for Fostering Integration in ECE Settings

This report explores five policy strategies that foster integration rather than segregation:

1. **Establishing universal ECE programs.** Programs that are universal and only require children to be a certain age to participate avoid the sorting of children by family socioeconomic status that can occur in programs that have income eligibility criteria, also known as means-tested programs.

2. **Braiding public funding or combining funding streams from various sources.** The process of braiding entails using two or more funding sources to support a program or initiative, and costs are allocated and tracked by specific sources. In the absence of universal programs, braiding funding can support integration by enabling children who meet different income eligibility requirements to learn in classrooms together.

3. **Allowing tuition-paying families to enroll in public programs.** Enrolling children from families who pay private tuition in programs with children who are publicly subsidized, including in state-funded preschool and state-contracted child care centers, can help increase programs' socioeconomic diversity. Some public programs have one tuition rate for all families who do not qualify for federal or state subsidies. Other programs use a sliding fee scale, where families pay progressively more as their incomes increase.

4. **Attracting families across neighborhoods or district boundaries.** Given the long-standing impacts of residential segregation, strategies that seek to integrate children across neighborhoods or district boundaries can increase diversity in ECE programs. Some of the ways programs and districts have addressed residential segregation is by using open enrollment policies to allow children to attend a school outside of their local area, including allowing parents to enroll their children in programs near their workplace, and by providing transportation for children who attend schools outside of their residential area. Schools with innovative instructional models can also help attract diverse families from different neighborhoods.

5. **Creating two-way dual language immersion programs.** Two-way dual language immersion programs offer instruction in two languages. Typically, programs in the United States aim to enroll an even mix of native speakers of both English and the program's target language, thus providing an opportunity for linguistic integration. Given that dual language learners are disproportionately children of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged, two-way dual language immersion programs can also foster socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic integration.

We provide examples of how cities and school districts across the country are implementing each strategy and navigating common challenges. These examples include the following locations:

- **Washington, DC:** District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) braids local universal preschool funding with federal Head Start funding to enable children from different socioeconomic backgrounds to be taught in the same classroom. In addition, DCPS operates several dual language immersion programs, some of which enroll PreK students and reserve seats for Spanish-dominant students.

- **New York, NY:** New York City's expansion of universal preschool provides lessons learned to avoid segregating children by family income. Recent evidence suggests that the city's school-based preschool classrooms, which have no income eligibility requirements, are as diverse as kindergarten and 1st-grade classrooms.

- **San Francisco, CA:** San Francisco has several policies in place to reduce barriers to teaching children together in the same classroom, such as uniform quality standards that apply to all public programs, flexible city funding to fund access for middle-income families, and a coordinated data collection system that makes it easier for providers to collect and report enrollment and attendance information associated with different funding streams.

- **Hartford, CT:** Hartford's long-standing magnet school and open choice program promotes integration by allowing students to attend schools across the Hartford region. Several magnet schools in the region include preschool seats for 3- and 4-year-olds and accept private tuition for preschool from more affluent families.

- **San Antonio, TX:** San Antonio Independent School District uses a controlled choice approach in its "diversity by design" schools, which enroll students from inside and outside of the district's boundaries, starting in preschool. Diversity by design schools have three main components to foster and maintain socioeconomic diversity: (1) innovative instructional models that attract diverse families, (2) transportation that allows children to attend schools outside of their neighborhood, and (3) a complex lottery that maintains socioeconomic and linguistic diversity.

Considerations to Promote Inclusiveness Within Diverse Learning Environments

The strategies examined in this report highlight ways policymakers can create enabling conditions for children from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds to learn together. However, efforts to increase diversity should be coupled with practices that create inclusive learning environments in which all children can thrive. These actions include fostering culturally responsive learning environments supported by professional development for teachers, recruiting and retaining a diverse staff who can work effectively with diverse children and families, and engaging families in a way that meets their needs.

Policy Recommendations

Our research points to seven key ways that state and local leaders can help support integration through ECE policy:

1. **Establish universal ECE programs so that family income does not determine where a child can enroll.** The current ECE system is highly socioeconomically segregated. Investing in universal access can set the foundation for socioeconomic diversity by serving all children in one program, regardless of family income.

2. **Braid public funding to enable children from different socioeconomic backgrounds to learn in the same classroom.** Many ECE programs have different income eligibility, quality standards, and monitoring requirements. Braided programs typically must meet the highest set of standards in each program. Policymakers can provide support to help local programs braid funding from multiple sources, including aligning standards across programs and providing funding to meet these standards.

3. **Build a coherent system of ECE governance and administration.** The existence of multiple programs run by several agencies has created a siloed approach to policymaking and funding. Building a coherent system of governance makes it easier to align quality standards, communicate with families, prioritize enrollment in a way that will support diversity (e.g., reserving seats for children from low-income families or dual language learners), and support data collection that sheds light on the extent to which children are learning in diverse classrooms. States and other localities can identify and invest in a governing body with the authority to align ECE programs.

4. **Allow providers to enroll families of all incomes in publicly funded programs while reserving seats for families with low incomes.** Many publicly funded ECE programs have stringent income eligibility requirements, creating an "income cliff" that disqualifies families who earn even a dollar over the maximum income level. In some instances, enrolling fee-paying families is already allowable, but

providers are unaware of this option; states could clarify this for providers. A sliding fee scale in which families pay progressively more as their incomes increase could make tuition affordable for working-class and middle-income families who cannot afford the full cost of care. States can also provide technical assistance to help local programs collect private tuition and blend it with public funds.

5. **Support local strategies that draw families from different neighborhoods or district boundaries, including strategically locating programs and offering two-way dual language immersion programs.** State funds could help districts create or expand programs that have broad appeal to draw families from diverse backgrounds. These programs could be strategically located, such as within places of employment or near places of concentrated employment, as well as near district boundaries to optimize accessibility for diverse families. Funding for transportation could also enable families to enroll their children in programs outside of segregated residential zones.

6. **Use inclusive enrollment practices and clearly communicate ECE options to all families.** States and other localities can play a role in ensuring that preschool options are clearly communicated to families and enrollment processes are efficient and equitable. This can include creating a single application and enrollment process for providers, allowing publicly funded programs to enroll fee-paying families while reserving seats for students from low-income families, disseminating information across multiple platforms and languages to reach all families, and partnering with local community organizations to disseminate information. In addition, ensuring that open enrollment processes are inclusive and accessible to families who may not be familiar with all of their options or may not have the resources to manage the application process is key to enrolling a diverse group of families.

7. **Collect enrollment data—disaggregated by race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status—to understand the extent to which children are learning in diverse classrooms.** While some states and cities collect high-level enrollment data by program, they do not collect data on the demographic makeup of individual classrooms. Many states have a fragmented data collection system that makes it difficult for policymakers to understand how families choose early learning programs and whether enrollment disparities by provider reflect family preferences or other barriers that should be addressed. Policymakers can streamline collection and reporting of data for providers and support the development of data collection procedures that provide unified reporting on states' ECE access and quality.

As policymakers and practitioners work toward these goals, they should also consider how to support a diverse, well-qualified workforce that is prepared to support and collaborate with culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families, as well as provide ongoing training and coaching for staff.

Introduction

Walking into the Rosemount Center in Washington, DC, one can see "a gaggle of kids playing in an *Alice in Wonderland* garden, clambering over the rocks, slithering down the slides, and you know, in more ways than one, that you've come to the right place," writes Professor of Public Policy David Kirp in *Kids First: Five Big Ideas for Transforming Children's Lives and America's Future*.[1] The Rosemount Center is located in an area that includes public housing and a wealthy neighborhood, and unlike many early childhood programs, it serves families from both locations. Some children at the Rosemount Center are funded through Head Start, others pay private tuition, and many of the preschool-age children are funded through DC's universal preschool program. Children learn together in the same classroom, regardless of how their tuition is funded. As a dual language immersion program, the Rosemount Center serves both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking families, and children communicate with each other in both Spanish and English equally.

Research shows that integrated schools like the Rosemount Center can have important positive effects on student learning. While much research has focused on the benefits of integrated K–12 settings,[2] emerging evidence indicates that the benefit of school- and classroom-level diversity may also be significant in early childhood education (ECE) settings.[3]

Despite the benefits of diversity in ECE, most programs are remarkably segregated. A study of publicly funded preschools found that nearly half of Black and Hispanic children are taught in racially isolated schools where 90% of students are students of color.[4] Another study found that ECE programs are, on average, 13% more racially segregated than elementary schools and 20% more segregated than high schools.[5]

Despite the benefits of diversity in ECE, most programs are remarkably segregated.

Segregation in ECE, like segregation in K–12 schools, is driven by patterns of residential segregation, but it is also driven by insufficient funding and policies that govern access to programs. Unlike later grades, PreK is not guaranteed by most state constitutions. In the United States, funding for ECE represents a remarkably small portion of public funding: less than 0.4% of gross domestic product, compared to an average of 0.8% in other economically developed countries.[6] This deprives many children of formal early learning opportunities before age 5, creating a structural disadvantage from the start that even the best K–12 public schools will struggle to address.[7] Where publicly funded PreK is available, it is often not universally accessible, and private preschool is unaffordable for many families. Most states have income eligibility requirements (with varying maximum family income thresholds) to receive subsidized child care and attend state-funded preschool programs, and federal programs often have different income eligibility requirements (e.g., Head Start's income eligibility threshold is below the federal poverty level). By contrast, many private preschools are often only accessible to more affluent families.[8] As a result, many working- and middle-class families struggle to find affordable high-quality preschool. In 2018, approximately 42% of 3-year-olds and 64% of 4-year-olds in the United States were enrolled in ECE, lower than in many other economically developed countries.[9] The lack of affordable ECE options contributes to segregation *and* undereducation of the nation's youngest children.

Socioeconomic segregation may translate to racial, ethnic, and linguistic segregation as well.[10] Due to decades of discrimination, including the long-standing effects of residential segregation that are associated with concentrated poverty and inadequate resources, race and ethnicity are linked to socioeconomic status. In 2021, 34% of Black children, 30% of Native American children, and 24% of Latino/a children under the age of 5 lived in poverty (defined as children who live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, or $31,200 per year for a family of four in 2024), compared to 11% of White children and 10% of Asian and Pacific Islander children.[11]

The purpose of this report is to illuminate the important, but often overlooked, problem of segregation in ECE settings and identify strategies that policymakers and administrators can use to foster integration. Most of the research and examples shared in this report are specific to programs for preschool-age children, but the implications are applicable to programs for younger children as well.

To investigate this issue, we conducted a review of research on the benefits of diversity, particularly in the early years, and the extent of segregation in ECE settings. We also interviewed researchers and policy experts to identify promising integration strategies and places where these strategies are being implemented. To learn more about programs enacting each strategy, we interviewed administrators at the state, city, district, and program levels and reviewed publicly available documents. (See "Appendix: Methodology" for more information.)

The report begins with a description of research that examines why socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically integrated settings may be beneficial for children and describes the academic and social benefits of diversity, particularly for young children. It then describes what we know about access to diverse settings and the role of policy. With these insights into segregation in ECE settings, we then examine five strategies that are currently being used to increase diversity:

1. Establishing universal ECE programs
2. Braiding public funding, or combining funding streams from various sources (e.g., federal, state, and local ECE funding)
3. Allowing private-pay families to enroll in public programs
4. Attracting families across neighborhoods or district boundaries
5. Creating two-way dual language immersion programs

We describe how each strategy can be used to increase diversity in ECE settings and potential implementation challenges. Next, we provide examples of how states, cities, and districts across the country are implementing each strategy. The report also describes additional considerations to promote inclusiveness within diverse learning environments. The report concludes with recommendations for policymakers and program administrators to foster and maintain integration in ECE settings.

Why School and Classroom Diversity Matter

Research documents the academic and social benefits of socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically integrated schools from kindergarten through college, finding benefits that range from improved test scores to higher graduation rates and earnings.[12] Emerging research about children before kindergarten entry, described in this section, likewise shows that the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic composition of a classroom can have important academic and social benefits for all children. Linguistically integrated settings, in which dual language learners and native English speakers can learn with and from one another, may also be beneficial in early years when children are rapidly developing language skills. Although more research is needed to understand the extent of segregation by language in PreK, research on K–12 settings has found that English learners are often segregated into different classrooms or schools.[13]

Academic Impacts

Research shows that socioeconomically diverse classrooms can positively influence learning—a benefit that may be partially driven by reducing resource gaps. Research suggests that socioeconomically diverse schools often receive more resources than schools with concentrated poverty,[14] and children of color—particularly children who are Black, Latino/a, Native American, or Pacific Islander—are disproportionately likely to attend under-resourced schools.[15] Without adequate resources, providers struggle to provide quality learning environments and educational opportunities. Indeed, children of color are much less likely to enroll in high-quality preschool programs than children who are White.[16] Under-resourcing also harms programs' ability to attract and retain staff. Consistent staffing is particularly important in early childhood education (ECE) programs since stable attachments to a caring adult are critical for a child's development.[17]

Another reason why children may learn more in diverse classrooms is that they learn from their peers, and socioeconomically diverse classrooms tend to have children with a wide range of knowledge, skills, and abilities.[18] Studies of children in preschool through 1st grade find that socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity are related to small, positive effects on students' learning, in addition to teacher or school quality, potentially due to peer effects.[19] The effect of peer learning may be especially strong in preschool classes, which tend to emphasize play and interaction among children more than later grades.[20]

Research suggests that the combination of these factors supports learning, particularly for students from low-income families. For example, studies of children's reading growth in kindergarten and 1st grade show that children learn to read more quickly when they are in schools with lower concentrations of poverty and fewer peers who begin the school year reading below grade level, even after accounting for factors such as parental education and neighborhood context.[21] A randomized controlled trial in Montgomery County, MD, similarly found pronounced academic benefits for elementary school students from low-income families attending higher-income schools. The study followed kindergarteners whose families were in a public housing program. Families were randomly assigned to houses in neighborhoods with schools of various levels of socioeconomic diversity. After 5 to 7 years, children from low-income families in low-poverty schools started to score similarly to their more affluent peers, reducing reading test score difference by one third and cutting the initial average math test score difference in half.[22]

Research specific to preschool shows that the benefits of socioeconomic integration can also have meaningful effects for early learners, with results from studies examining children as young as age 3. A small study of seven preschool programs, for example, compared the language growth of 3- to 6-year-old preschoolers from low-income families in economically integrated preschools and preschools serving primarily low-income families. While the children from low-income families entered preschool with similar language scores, by the spring, children in the economically diverse programs had significantly greater gains in their language scores than peers in less economically diverse programs. In fact, in the economically diverse preschools, children from low-income families who spoke English at home scored similarly to their higher-income peers by the end of the school year.[23]

A larger-scale study of over 700 state preschool classrooms in six states found that for children at all income levels, individual children's language and math outcomes improved as the average class income increased. The study additionally found that children in classes with higher socioeconomic diversity—in which there was a greater variance in family income—tended to have improved language outcomes, even after accounting for differences in teacher qualifications and instructional quality. The effect of classroom socioeconomic composition on language and math skills appeared to be about as large as the effect of teacher quality and a student's own socioeconomic status.[24]

In the next section, we describe the social benefits of integrated classrooms, recognizing that children's social-emotional, cognitive, and language development are highly interrelated and build upon one another.

Social Impacts

Children can also benefit from diverse classrooms by developing positive relationships with peers who have different characteristics than their own. Specifically, exposure to children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds may impact how children interact and build relationships with peers and adults from backgrounds different from their own.

Most studies that have examined the social benefits of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity have focused on students in grades K–12 and higher education. This research suggests that exposure to students from diverse backgrounds can have several benefits, such as reducing prejudice, increasing cross-cultural friendships, building stronger leadership skills, fostering more advanced social and historical thinking, and developing empathy for people from different social groups.[25] A meta-analysis of 515 studies that examined the effects of increased interactions between different groups across many kinds of settings, including school and work environments, found that increased contact can have positive impacts on all groups by reducing prejudice, negative attitudes, and stereotypes.[26]

Research shows that children start to form ideas about social identity and racial biases early on.[27] For example, a study examined the racial attitudes of White 6-year-olds, 10-year-olds, and adults using an Implicit Association Test, which examines how participants associate images of Black and White individuals to words with negative or positive connotations (e.g., joy, hate). It found that implicit bias starts early and is present across age groups.[28] Other studies echo these findings that biases are developed over time but are established before adulthood.

As research shows learning and working in diverse settings helps older students and young adults reduce biases, exposing children to peers from diverse backgrounds in ECE settings may ameliorate biases early in their development.[29] Studies that examine the impact of increased exposure to individuals from different backgrounds suggest that cross-cultural friendships can be especially powerful at decreasing prejudice among children. Not surprisingly, several studies of K–12 students have found that cross-cultural relationships are more likely to take place in diverse schools.[30] Further, research outlines the broader societal benefits of school integration, including individuals' increased civic participation in a diverse global economy and increased likelihood of living in integrated neighborhoods and holding jobs in integrated workplaces as adults.[31]

Exposing children to peers from diverse backgrounds in ECE settings may ameliorate biases early in their development.

Less is known about the social effects of diversity in ECE settings; however, early childhood experiences can impact beliefs that set the foundation for future interactions. Evidence suggests that children can show preferences for individuals with similar characteristics to their own early on and that this preference continues to develop over time.

It is important to note that these preferences are not present at birth, but as children develop, they can exhibit preferences for who they have had exposure to and for what is known. For example, a study of White newborn and infant children who did not have exposure to individuals from a different ethnic group other than their own found that while newborns do not reveal a preference for individuals of their own or other ethnic groups, 3-month-olds did show a preference.[32] Although not addressed in the study, these findings could be due to the familiarity infants and toddlers have with their own families who may share similar characteristics, rather than bias due to having no exposure to other ethnic groups. The study did not compare children who did not have exposure to different ethnic groups with children who did have such exposure; however, it suggests that among children who had little to no exposure, preferences are learned during the early stages of development and that exposure to other ethnic groups may matter.

Because research shows that children start to develop their understanding of social groups and show preferences for same-race friends early on, it is important that early childhood settings be positive, culturally affirming, and inclusive spaces. Research points to several strategies to create integrated environments that are beneficial for all children, particularly historically marginalized children, who may experience discrimination in otherwise diverse settings. These strategies include providing staff training on implicit bias and anti-racism, hiring diverse staff, and confronting racial disparities in discipline.[33] (See "Considerations to Promote Inclusiveness Within Diverse Learning Environments.")

Segregation in Early Childhood Education Programs

Despite evidence of the benefits of diversity, many children lack access to diverse early learning settings. While student demographics and levels of segregation are well documented in K–12 schools,[34] fewer studies focus on the demographics of early childhood education (ECE) programs. Emerging research indicates, however, that ECE programs are more socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically segregated than K–12 schools, due in part to public policy and residential segregation.

A key reason early childhood programs are more segregated than K–12 schools is that most ECE programs are not universal, and families are often limited to programs they can afford. Many states have some form of state-funded PreK; however, it is often targeted to families with low incomes and does not reach all eligible families. Other families earn just over the income eligibility threshold for publicly funded programs yet cannot afford the full cost of high-quality ECE, which in many states costs more than in-state college tuition.[35] Not surprisingly, children from higher-income families are more likely to be enrolled in preschool in general. In 2019, 59% of 3- to 4-year-olds from families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level were not enrolled in preschool, compared to 46% of children from families with incomes at or above 200% of the federal poverty level.[36] Due to decades of racial discrimination, race and poverty are closely related, and therefore there are racial gaps in access to ECE as well.[37]

ECE program quality, in addition to access, is closely associated with family income as well as race and ethnicity. Children from low-income families and children of color tend to be enrolled in programs with lower-quality ratings.[38] Since most ECE programs rely on parents paying tuition, quality is often tied to what families can afford. Public subsidies play an important role in closing inequitable gaps in program funding, but studies consistently find that public funding levels are insufficient to provide high-quality care.[39] Family choice plays a larger role in early childhood programs than in K–12, and lack of affordable options severely limits these choices.

ECE Programs Are More Segregated Than K–12 Schools

Research suggests that early learning settings tend to be more segregated than K–12 schools, in terms of both socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity. A study, for instance, showed that, based on data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education conducted in 2012, 20% of early childhood programs only enroll Black or Hispanic children, compared to 10% of kindergarten and 1st-grade programs. Examining the extent to which Black and Hispanic children were evenly represented across schools in the United States in 2012, the study also found that overall, ECE programs are 13% more segregated than elementary schools and 20% more segregated than high schools. The study found that home-based child care, including family child care homes and unlicensed care that serve smaller groups of children, is particularly segregated.[40] This finding reflects research that families often prefer family, friend, and neighbor child care providers that match their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. (See "The Role of Family Preference in ECE Decision-Making.")

Another study examined the extent to which children were enrolled in highly segregated publicly funded preschool programs in schools across the United States. The study found that almost half of all Black and Hispanic preschoolers (48% and 49%, respectively) were enrolled in schools in which over 90% of students are students of color, while just under 20% of White students were enrolled in highly segregated, mostly White schools. They also found that dual language learners were disproportionately in schools with a majority population of students of color. Specifically, 56% of dual language learners were enrolled in schools in which 90% or more students were students of color.[41]

The Role of Family Preference in ECE Decision-Making

Research findings on whether families' preferences for child care type vary by race and ethnicity are mixed, perhaps due to the challenges of disentangling various demographic factors that affect early childhood education decision-making, such as income, neighborhood, language, and culture. In addition, the child care and preschool landscape varies considerably from one state or community to the next. Some studies find racial and ethnic differences in how families perceive quality care. For example, one study showed that among families selecting state-funded preschool programs, African American families prioritized home–school relationships, White families prioritized emotional climate, and Latino/a families prioritized comprehensive service provision. Still other studies discern no differences in preferences across race and ethnicity. However, multiple studies conclude that immigrant families have different child care preferences than other families. For example, some research indicates that Latino/a immigrants prefer child care by relatives to other options, and other qualitative research suggests that immigrants from various backgrounds prefer care that reflects aspects of their culture and country of origin, regardless of whether it occurs in a home- or center-based setting.

Source: Forry, N., Tout, K., Rothenberg, L., Sandstrom, H., & Vesely, C. (2013). *Child care decision-making literature review* [OPRE Brief 2013-45]. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Research shows that preschool programs are socioeconomically segregated in addition to being segregated by race and ethnicity. Research from Virginia found that economically disadvantaged children in public preschool were less likely than children in kindergarten to interact with children who were not economically disadvantaged. Black and Latino/a preschoolers who were economically disadvantaged had the lowest exposure to children who were not economically disadvantaged.[42] In a study of state-funded preschool programs in six states, data show that only 20% of children were in classes that were both racially and socioeconomically diverse. Universal programs, which allow children to participate in preschool regardless of socioeconomic status, tended to have greater variation in income than targeted programs.[43]

Children are likely segregated by language as well, but data limitations make it difficult to know the degree to which dual language learners are in linguistically diverse ECE classrooms. We know from research of K–12 schools that English learners, particularly Spanish speakers, tend to be triply segregated by language, race and ethnicity, and income in schools that are majority Spanish speaking, Latino/a, and low-income.[44]

Public Policy Exacerbates Segregation in ECE

Although state and federal programs fund much-needed access to ECE, most are not designed to foster diversity. Only a few states offer universal access to preschool, and those that do are primarily focused on 4-year-olds. Public subsidies in ECE are often provided exclusively to families with low incomes, and regulations often drive programs to keep children from low-income families separate from their peers who do not receive public subsidies. (See "Eligibility Requirements in Publicly Subsidized Programs.") For example, Head Start is aimed at children from low-income families.[45] Many state preschools are limited to children from low-income families as well.[46]

Eligibility Requirements in Publicly Subsidized Programs

Most states offer a patchwork of publicly funded programs that are governed by different agencies, with different eligibility criteria for participating children. The largest programs are described here; states and localities may offer additional options.

- **Head Start** serves nearly 750,000 children and requires that a child's family income be below the federal poverty level, or $31,200 per year for a family of four in 2024. Programs may enroll up to 35% of their seats from families whose incomes are up to 130% of the federal poverty level, but only if programs demonstrate that seats cannot be filled by children from families with lower incomes.
- **State-funded preschool programs** serve over 1.3 million children nationwide. In most states, eligibility is limited to children from low-income families, with varying maximum family income thresholds. In many cases, states combine, or braid, Head Start and state-funded preschool programs. How programs are braided varies locally; sometimes children funded by Head Start attend classes with children who are not income eligible, and sometimes they are served in separate classes.
- **Special education preschool** is offered to preschool-age children with a disability, regardless of family income. Over 940,000 children ages 3 to 5 receive special education services. The extent to which children are integrated into state-funded preschool programs varies. Just over one third of children in the United States with special needs spend at least 40% of their school week (or at least 10 hours) with their general education peers; the majority do not, which is itself a form of segregation that may limit children's access to a high-quality education.
- **The Child Care and Development Fund** subsidizes nearly 1.4 million children monthly—most under age 5—from families with incomes at or below 85% of their state median income, which varies by state. Only children who are U.S. citizens are eligible, with a few exceptions. The majority (94%) of these children receive a child care voucher that can be used at a child care or preschool of the parent's choice. Because these vouchers can typically be used at private preschool programs that accept private-pay families, they may promote integration. However, the extent to which vouchers promote diversity is unclear and likely depends upon states' policies, such as the state's maximum reimbursement rate and how child care referrals are made.

Note: Head Start, special education, and state preschool data are from 2021; Child Care and Development Fund data are from 2020.

Sources: First Five Years Fund. (2023). *FFYF federal guide to early learning and care programs*; Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G. G., Gardiner, B. A., & Jost, T. M. (2022). *The state of preschool 2021*. National Institute for Early Education Research; U.S. Department of Education. (2023, Feb. 7). IDEA Part B, Child Counts and Environments, 2021.

While public policies tend to exacerbate segregation in ECE, this does not have to be the case. The following section highlights strategies that foster integration rather than segregation to reap the academic and social benefits of socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically integrated programs.

Strategies for Fostering Integration in Early Childhood Education Settings

This section explores five strategies that can be used to support socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity in early childhood education (ECE) settings: (1) establishing universal ECE programs, (2) braiding public funding, (3) allowing private-pay students to enroll in public programs, (4) attracting families across neighborhoods or district boundaries, and (5) creating two-way dual language immersion programs. It describes how each strategy can be used to foster integration, and we discuss common challenges. The following section provides examples of how the strategies are being implemented at scale.

Establishing Universal ECE Programs

Making ECE programs universal for children birth to age 5 is perhaps the most straightforward integration strategy, although universality alone will not create fully integrated settings. Programs that are universal, like K–12 public schools, avoid the sorting of children by socioeconomic status that we see in programs that have income eligibility criteria, also known as targeted or means-tested programs. Research on universal ECE programs is mostly limited to universal PreK, given that there are few universal programs for younger children.

Research on universal PreK programs suggests that school-based PreK classrooms tend to be about as diverse as 1st-grade classrooms in the same state. Black and Latino/a children in means-tested programs, by contrast, are less likely than 1st-graders in their state to interact with children from other racial backgrounds.[47] Another study indicates that universal PreK programs produce larger academic gains for children than targeted programs, particularly for children from low-income families. The author presents data to suggest that these benefits may make investments in universal preschool cost-effective despite the higher initial costs of serving all children.[48]

Several cities and states have invested in universal preschool programs, which tend to be broadly popular. Eight states—Florida, Georgia, Iowa, New York, Oklahoma, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin—have universal preschool programs in which access is only limited by age and in which the majority of 4-year-olds participate.[49] Several other states allow universal access that is not means-tested, although they do not yet serve the majority of children in the state. As of 2022, these included Alabama, California, Maine, New Jersey, and others.[50] Several of these states, such as California, are on a path to serve most 4-year-olds soon. Several large cities are also working toward universal PreK programs. For example, Charlotte, NC; Denver, CO; New York City; San Francisco, CA; and Washington, DC, serve over half of their 4-year-olds.[51]

Simply making programs universal will not ensure diversity, however. Studies of New York City's universal preschool program found that while school-based PreK classrooms were as diverse as 1st-grade classrooms, public PreK classrooms in community-based organizations (many of which offered subsidized child care that is means-tested) were more likely to predominantly serve children who are Black or Latino/a.[52] These program-level demographic differences stem not only from housing patterns but also from complex decisions about family choice and how programs are blended and braided, discussed in the next section.

Universal programming will also not ensure equitable access to quality programs for all children without careful attention. Studies from California, Georgia, and New York City show that Asian, Black, and Hispanic children have less access to quality preschool providers than White children, even in programs that have

common quality standards.[53] The most pronounced disparities were between Black and White children. Specifically, a study of New York City PreK showed that predominately Black communities were less likely to be located near high-quality providers, as measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System.[54] Researchers noted that differences in quality of early learning experiences, even in a universal program, may be due to concentrated poverty, residential segregation, and structural inequalities such as facilities and teacher qualifications.[55] These studies suggest that additional efforts are needed to ensure equitable access to high-quality programs, even in universal programs.

Braiding Public Funding

The current ECE system in most states is composed of a patchwork of programs, each of which has its own eligibility requirements and program funding. Blending and braiding funding, or combining funding streams, can support integration by enabling children who meet different income eligibility requirements to participate in classrooms together, rather than being sorted into programs by socioeconomic status. (See "What Is Blending and Braiding Funding?")

What Is Blending and Braiding Funding?

The process of blending funds entails combining funding from two or more sources to fund a program or initiative. While braiding also entails using two or more funding sources to support a program or initiative, costs are allocated and tracked by specific sources. Funds can be blended and braided by individual providers, or they may be braided by state or regional administrators before they are distributed to providers.

Blending and braiding funding can provide early learning administrators with greater flexibility to expand capacity, increase program quality, and serve a more socioeconomically diverse group of children.

Source: Children's Funding Project. (2023). *Blending and braiding: Funding our kids 101*.

Several programs braid funding to enable children to learn together, regardless of program eligibility status, but doing so can be challenging. One challenge programs face is that quality standards often vary by funding source; braided programs typically must meet the highest set of standards in each program. Meeting a higher set of standards can be costly, and programs often do not receive any additional funding to comply with higher standards. For example, Head Start sets maximum class size at 20 and requires teachers to have at least an associate degree. State-funded preschool programs may allow for a larger class size but require teachers to have a teaching credential. A blended program would require a program to have both a credentialed teacher and a maximum class size of 20.

Braiding funding is also administratively burdensome. Administrators, often at the provider level, must keep track of how funding is being spent and ensure that only income-eligible children are receiving certain services. Meeting various accounting requirements is time-consuming, and many providers do not have the needed capacity or resources, such as a coherent data system that makes collecting and reporting data easier. The lack of coherent governance of ECE also makes it difficult to coordinate programs that are housed under different state or local agencies and/or operate independently.

As shown by the example of All Five in California, blending and braiding funding is no small feat, but it is essential to serving a socioeconomically diverse community. A key component that All Five has is a dedicated staff member whose main responsibility is to keep track of reporting requirements associated with different public funding streams. (See "All Five Program Blends and Braids Funding.")

All Five Program Blends and Braids Funding

All Five is an infant/toddler and preschool program in eastern Menlo Park, CA, located in a region of Silicon Valley with high levels of income inequality. The program, which serves about 60 children, is situated between East Palo Alto's school district, where 85% of students are from families with low incomes and 98% are students of color, and Menlo Park's school district, where 10% of students have families with low incomes and just 46% are students of color.

The program promotes socioeconomic integration by blending and braiding state and federal funding, private tuition, and philanthropic dollars. Three quarters of the children enrolled are from families with low or middle incomes, who either qualify for state funding or who pay tuition on a sliding fee scale, and one quarter of the children enrolled are from families with high incomes, who pay the full cost of tuition. Families paying sliding fee scale tuition often have incomes just above the eligibility requirement to receive subsidized care, so the sliding fee scale helps keep the program accessible. The program is also racially and ethnically diverse. Just over half of students are Latino/a, 13% are White, and the others are Black, Middle Eastern, Asian, or multiracial.

All Five's financial director navigates the extensive reporting and complex paperwork associated with integrated funding streams. For example, the financial director manages completion of detailed forms to report complicated family economic details that determine eligibility and priority ranking for state subsidies. Data for children receiving subsidies must then be uploaded to a state database, a laborious process. Managing these details while serving families is time-consuming, especially for a small program. Having a skilled and driven financial director is thus essential to braiding and blending funding and serving a socioeconomically diverse community.

Source: Interview with Carol Tomsen, Founder and Executive Director at All Five, and Andrea Gueneau de Mussy, former Assistant Director (2020, April 1).

Allowing Tuition-Paying Families to Enroll in Public Programs

Another integration strategy is adopting policies that make it easier for tuition-paying families to participate in programs that receive public funding. Enrolling children from families who pay private tuition with children who are publicly subsidized—including in state-funded preschool and state-contracted child care centers—can help increase programs' socioeconomic diversity. Some public programs have one tuition rate for all families who do not qualify for federal or state subsidies. Other programs use a sliding fee scale in which families pay progressively more as their incomes increase. Using a sliding fee scale can ensure access for middle-income families who earn just over the income threshold but cannot afford to pay the full cost of tuition.

One of the policy considerations for this integration strategy is determining how much tuition programs should be allowed to charge families. On the one hand, families should not be charged more than they can afford to pay. On the other hand, if families who are not income eligible pay less than the true cost of the program, they may divert public funding from other participants who qualify based on need.

State policies sometimes discourage public programs from accepting families who pay tuition, such as by having onerous accounting requirements designed to direct public dollars only to qualifying families. With carefully crafted policies, however, these issues are surmountable.

Texas Allows Tuition-Paying Families to Enroll in Public Programs

Texas allows higher-income families to pay tuition to attend its publicly funded PreK. Texas's state preschool program is funded by the state and offered by most local education agencies. Children ages 3 and 4 may qualify for the program in many ways, such as by income, English learner status, being unhoused or in foster care, or having a parent in the armed services.

Texas education code specifically allows school districts to charge private tuition to families who want to enroll in public school prekindergarten but do not qualify based on family income or other eligibility factors. This means that when preschool slots exceed the number of children who are eligible for state-funded preschool, families who do not meet the income eligibility threshold can enroll for a fee. The state caps the amount of tuition districts are allowed to charge, which varies by district.

Many districts accept some tuition-paying students when there is capacity to serve additional students. In 2021–22, the state reported that just under 9,000 slots were taken up by families who paid tuition out of more than 222,424 PreK state preschool slots in public schools, a total of 4% statewide. Accepting private tuition has allowed districts to expand programs where parent demand exceeds preschool capacity. Austin Independent School District, for example, fills 15% of its preschool slots with tuition-paying families. Accepting tuition-paying families can also help districts fill unused state PreK slots in areas that have an insufficient number of families with low incomes to fill programs. Ensuring that classes are fully enrolled is key to covering their costs.

Sources: Texas Education Agency; LPI analysis of 2021–22 enrollment data. Texas public prekindergarten programs and enrollment ages 3 and 4—Statewide: 2021–22 school year; Smith, D., & Tinsley, A. (2019, January 28). Would you pay a public school district tuition for pre-k? More families want this option. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

Another way to increase diversity of ECE settings is to provide working- and middle-class families with vouchers or subsidized slots to attend private preschool that they otherwise could not afford. The Child Care and Development Block Grant provides states with funding for families to use at a variety of privately or publicly operated child care programs for children birth to age 12. Most state funding goes to child care subsidies, or vouchers, for families to use at a location of their choice. Unfortunately, there is little data to show the extent to which children that receive vouchers attend high-quality programs that are socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse.

Attracting Families Across Neighborhoods or District Boundaries

Given the long-standing impacts of residential segregation, strategies that seek to integrate children across neighborhoods or district boundaries can increase diversity in ECE programs. Evidence from K–12 settings shows that more than 80% of racial and ethnic segregation occurs between, not within, school districts.[56] Thus, efforts that do not consider local and surrounding neighborhood demographics may not lead to greater integration. Some of the ways programs and districts have addressed residential segregation in ECE, as in K–12, are by using open enrollment policies to allow children to attend a school outside of their local area, including schools with innovative instructional models, and locating programs strategically to attract diverse families.

Realizing the challenge residential segregation poses to integration, many program and city administrators mentioned the importance of providing additional support to attract families from diverse backgrounds to ECE programs. These supports include making enrollment processes accessible and easy to navigate to help ensure that a diverse group of children can participate and providing transportation to attend programs or schools outside of children's local area. While transportation is key to making programs accessible, other strategies may be more viable than putting preschool children on long bus rides. For instance, locating preschools near employment centers or within places of employment and allowing families to enroll their children in these programs rather than sites in their residential area can be a more promising way to increase diversity. Palcare in California is one example of a provider that is putting this strategy into action. (See "Employer-Based Child Care: Palcare.") However, creating and maintaining programs designed to attract diverse families can be challenging because additional resources may be required to implement innovative programs and expand capacity to meet demand.

Employer-Based Child Care: Palcare

Palcare is a child care and preschool program in Burlingame, CA, that supports socioeconomic integration by blending and braiding various funding streams and offering tuition assistance to San Francisco International Airport (SFO) employees, workers at a local hospital, and other professionals in the area. Serving the children of airport and hospital employees has supported greater diversity than might otherwise be the case because these employers have a socioeconomically diverse workforce. The program offers tuition assistance for families and SFO and hospital employees on a sliding fee scale, using funding from the California State Preschool Program and child care contracts, as well as funding from the airport, foundations, scholarships from the County of San Mateo, and private tuition. The Airport Commission says it recognized the need for child care with flexible scheduling and nontraditional hours for its employees, which is why it supports the program.

Source: Palcare.

Creating Two-Way Dual Language Immersion Programs

Two-way dual language immersion programs offer instruction in two languages. In the United States, instruction is typically in English and another language, and many programs aim to enroll an even mix of native speakers of both English and the program's target language, thus providing an opportunity for linguistic integration. Given the demographics of dual language learners, two-way dual language immersion programs may also foster socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic integration. (See "Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education.")

Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education

In 2021, dual language learners comprised about one third of children birth through age 5 in the United States. Dual language learners are disproportionately likely to be children of color and children from low-income families.

The term dual language learner refers to a child under age 8 with at least one parent who speaks a language other than English at home and who is learning more than one language at the same time. An English learner is defined by the federal government as an individual between 3 and 21 years old whose first language is not English and who has been classified as not being English proficient. This term is often used to refer to children in grades K–12 when students are tested for proficiency in English and subsequently identified as English learners. Since younger children may be developing their native language alongside English, this report uses the term dual language learner to describe children before kindergarten entry.

Sources: Migration Policy Institute National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. (2021). *U.S. young children (ages 0 to 5) by dual language learner status: National and state sociodemographic and family profiles* [Data set]; 20 U.S.C. § 7801(20). Definition.

Research suggests that dual language learners *and* native English speakers can reap the benefits of two-way dual language immersion programs. Dual language immersion programs—like other bilingual programs—enable dual language learners to develop their native language and honor the cultural assets children bring to the classroom. Research shows that supporting children's home language development helps children learn English and increases their development in other domains, including social-emotional development and literacy skills.[57] In addition, the benefits of bilingualism for all students are well documented.[58] Developing bilingualism in ECE programs is particularly important because children's early years are a crucial time for their development[59] and can be an ideal time to learn a second language.[60]

Emerging research suggests that in addition to being a beneficial instructional model, two-way dual language immersion programs can also increase school diversity. For example, a study of dual language immersion programs in Utah found that two-way programs were more racially and socioeconomically diverse than one-way programs (programs that typically enroll native English speakers *or* children who speak the target language) and non-dual language immersion schools.[61]

The demand for dual language immersion programs has created both an opportunity and a challenge for school integration. The growing interest in dual language immersion programs, especially among affluent families, suggests that the dual language model can be used to promote diversity. In some cases, however, two-way dual language immersion programs can become disproportionately enrolled with White, affluent, or monolingual English-speaking children.[62] Using two-way dual language immersion programs as an integration strategy can also be difficult due to a shortage of educators trained in bilingual education, which is a critical aspect of the model.[63]

Strategies in Action

This section provides examples of how cities and school districts across the country are implementing the strategies previously described and addressing common challenges. For example, braiding and blending public funding can increase capacity to serve additional children and provide additional resources to invest in quality learning environments. While these strategies are being implemented differently across the cities and districts highlighted in this report, there are several commonalities and ways that they can be supported through policy, as is discussed in the final section.

Washington, DC

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) provides an example of what it takes to braid public funding streams with different standards and income eligibility requirements to support integration in PreK. Washington, DC, has high levels of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity. The city's school-age population is 59% African American, 20% White, 15% Latino/a, and 6% identified as another race. DCPS has long been challenged to integrate its schools, however. Black students and Latino/a students are disproportionately likely to enroll in public schools, while only about half of White children living in the city were enrolled in public schools in 2016–17.[64]

Since 2008, DCPS has offered universal full-day preschool for 4-year-olds. For more than 10 years, DCPS has braided local universal preschool funding with federal Head Start funding to enable children from different socioeconomic backgrounds to be taught in the same classroom. (See Figure 1.) Braiding funding has extended the reach of Head Start services and created a more unified system of public preschool.

In addition to braiding funding, DCPS operates several dual language immersion schools, some of which enroll PreK students and are allowed to reserve seats for Spanish-dominant students. Reserving seats helps foster greater linguistic diversity in programs that can otherwise enroll more monolingual English-dominant children—and has supported racial and ethnic diversity as well.

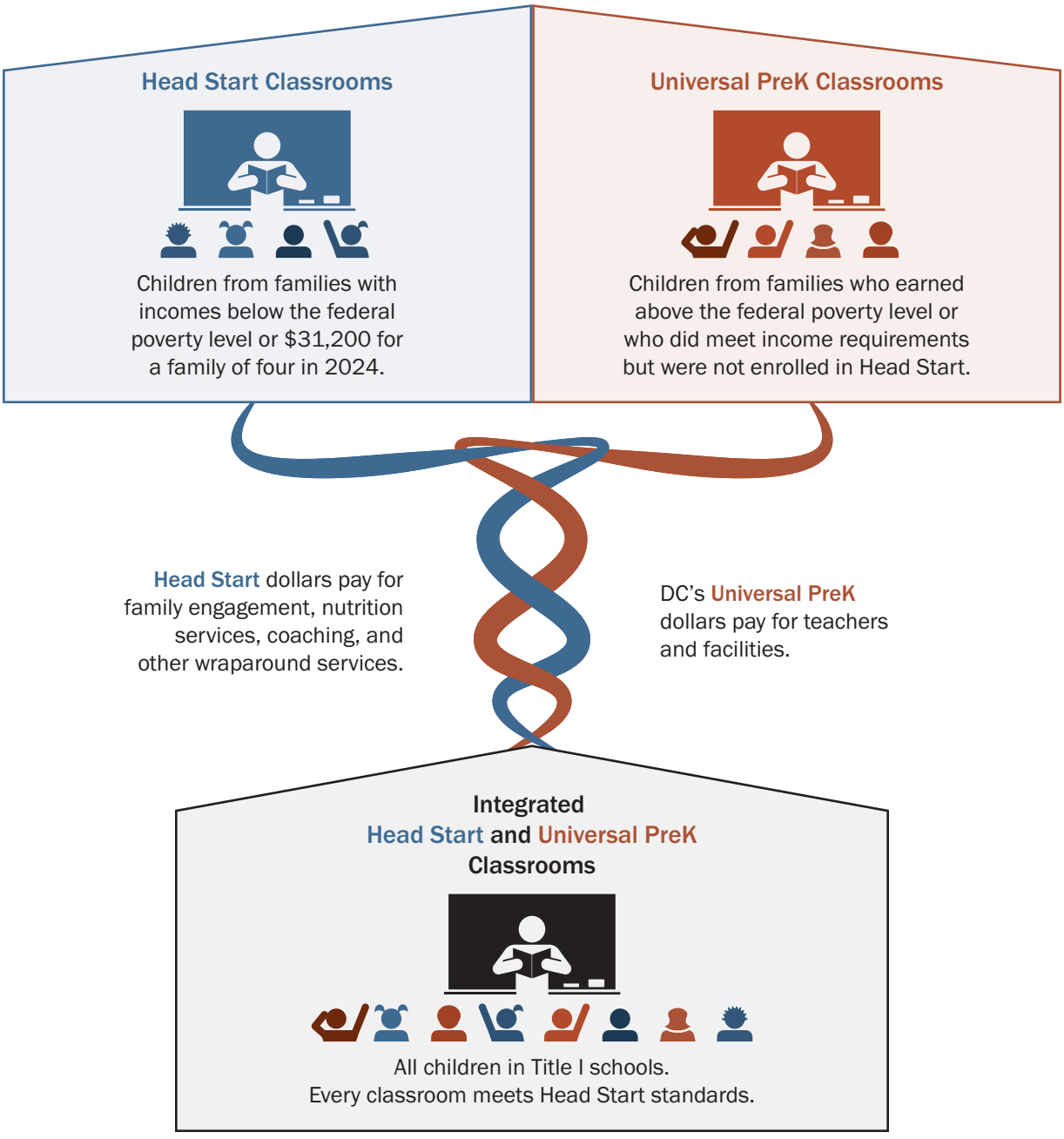
DC's Head Start School-Wide Model

When DC first rolled out its universal preschool program, children who were eligible for Head Start were being taught in separate classrooms from children who were enrolled in the universal preschool program, adding another layer of socioeconomic segregation to an already racially and socioeconomically segregated education system. Children from families with incomes below the federal poverty level were taught in Head Start classrooms and received wraparound services. Those who did not qualify were taught in separate classrooms.

In 2009, DCPS launched a Head Start School-Wide Model to increase classroom-level socioeconomic diversity by braiding Head Start funding with local universal preschool funding. To get approval to braid Head Start funds with DC's preschool funding, DCPS staff negotiated flexibility with the Regional Head Start Office under the condition that the district serve at least as many eligible children as in previous years and meet Head Start standards. Rather than allocate Head Start funding by eligible child, Head Start funding was layered on top of the district's base funding in Title I schools in the district—meaning

that all children in PreK in these schools received Head Start services, and a child's family income did not determine which classroom they were assigned to. Preschool teachers and facilities were paid for with DC's universal preschool funds; family engagement, nutrition services, coaching, and other wraparound services at Title I schools were funded by Head Start.

Figure 1. Head Start School-Wide Model for District of Columbia Public Schools



Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

To enable these changes, district staff had to go through a lengthy documentation process to show how DCPS would meet each Head Start standard and how auditors would be able to measure implementation, then work with school principals to ensure all classrooms were working toward the same standards. For example, the district renegotiated food contracts with vendors to provide family-style meals (a Head Start requirement) in all classrooms. DCPS staff had to go through a similar process for every Head Start standard, which was time-consuming but made it possible for schools to integrate children across programs.

In 2019–20, the Head Start School-Wide Model was implemented in 342 preschool classrooms across most Title I schools. The district's Head Start contract funded 2,081 slots; however, services were extended to over 5,000 children.[65] DCPS declined to renew its Head Start contract in 2020 for reasons unrelated to the features described in this report.[66] However, in 2021, the district received a new Head Start grant and continued the School-Wide Model in six elementary schools that are located in areas with high percentages of children who are eligible for Head Start.

Dual language immersion programs in DC

DCPS has 11 dual language immersion programs that provide instruction in Spanish and English, including two-way programs that serve a mix of dual language learners and native English speakers.[67] Some schools that serve PreK students can reserve seats for Spanish-dominant preschoolers.

The dual language model allows DCPS to foster racial and ethnic diversity, in addition to supporting language diversity. Dual language immersion schools are much more racially and ethnically diverse than other schools in DCPS: In the average DCPS school, approximately 79% of students belong to the predominant racial or ethnic group in that school; in dual language immersion schools, the average is 67%.[68] Four of the 11 dual immersion schools were ranked among the most racially and ethnically diverse in the district.[69] These schools are somewhat more likely to enroll affluent students, with an average of 41% of students who are considered "at risk," compared to a district average of 47%.[70]

As in other dual language programs across the country, maintaining linguistic diversity can be challenging with the growing demand from English-dominant families and gentrification.[71] Between 2015 and 2020, there was a 36% increase in demand for elementary dual language programs.[72]

The growing demand for dual language immersion programs in DC is promising. However, as demand for dual language immersion programs increases, establishing additional enrollment practices could help ensure that dual language learners and students from low-income families can access such programs so that they can benefit from the rich learning opportunities and maintain their native language. In recent years, some schools have enrolled a disproportionate number of White students and students from higher-income families, a trend that has been documented in other places with dual language immersion programs.[73]

To address the growing issue of equitable access for dual language learners, DCPS allows dual language immersion schools to reserve their PreK seats for Spanish-dominant children and requires families to indicate whether their child is Spanish- or English-dominant. Some dual language immersion programs, like Marie Reed Elementary School, set aside half of their seats for Spanish-dominant students.[74] In

2021–22, nearly half (47%) of the students at Marie Reed were dual language learners. The school also served a racially and ethnically diverse group of students, enrolling a student population that was 44% Hispanic/Latino, 23% White, 21% Black, 8% Asian, and 4% multiracial.[75]

The story of DC's dual language immersion programs highlights the promise and challenge of such efforts to foster greater diversity. On one hand, dual language immersion programs in DC are more racially and ethnically diverse than other schools in the district. On the other hand, enrollment data demonstrate the need for efforts to create equitable access for dual language learners, Black students, and students from low-income families. For example, in some dual language immersion schools in DC, Black students are underrepresented; 67% of DCPS students are Black, whereas 34% of students enrolled in dual language schools are Black.

New York, NY

New York City's expansion of universal preschool provides lessons learned from braiding funding from different sources to expand access and avoid segregating children by family income. New York City has a very diverse population. Among children enrolled in public preschool in 2017–18, 38% were Hispanic, 22% were Black, 19% were White, 17% were Asian, and 3% were Native American or multiracial.[76] Family income levels vary greatly by race. In 2017–18, children of color were significantly more likely to live in low-income households than White children in New York City: 70% of Hispanic preschoolers, 68% of Black preschoolers, and 51% of Asian preschoolers qualified for free or reduced-price school meals, compared to 29% of all White preschoolers. Integration by socioeconomic status, therefore, is closely tied to integration by race and ethnicity.

New York City has made notable, if incremental, progress in increasing diversity in its preschool program by making access to PreK universal. Studies show that the city's school-based preschool classrooms, which have no income eligibility requirements, are as diverse as kindergarten and 1st-grade classrooms, although community-based programs remain more segregated than school-based public PreK classrooms.[77]

Pre-K for All

In 2014, the city made universal PreK available to all 4-year-olds—regardless of family income—through a mixed delivery system, offering preschool in public schools, Head Start, and community-based organizations. The initiative, Pre-K for All, was overseen by the New York City Department of Education and funded with state and local dollars. All 4-year-old children, regardless of family income, were eligible. Limited seats were offered for 3-year-old children. The city has a single application and enrollment process for all universal preschool providers, which makes it easier for families to navigate their options.

When universal preschool was initially rolled out, it operated in parallel with the city's other early learning programs, called EarlyLearn NYC, which served children from birth to age 5 from low-income families using the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start, and local funds. EarlyLearn was overseen by the Administration for Children's Services and had different requirements and program standards than Pre-K for All. Families who earn up to 55% of the state median income, or $56,894, per year for a family of four, are eligible for a CCDBG subsidy.[78] Families with incomes below the federal poverty level, or $31,200 per year for a family of four, are eligible for Head Start.[79]

Having two sets of quality standards made it difficult to combine funding to serve children in the same classroom. Administering early childhood education (ECE) programs through two different agencies furthermore made it difficult to collaborate across programs and leverage resources. For example, some providers had to manage contracts from two different agencies that had different requirements and reporting processes. Other providers could only serve children who were income eligible, which exacerbated socioeconomic segregation.

In 2017, the city decided to consolidate all child care and Head Start contracts under the New York City Department of Education to avoid working in silos and to foster racial and socioeconomic integration.[80] (See Figure 2.) The city decided to stop braiding CCDBG and Head Start funding and separately braided each funding stream with more flexible state and local funding because it was difficult for providers to enroll families eligible for both funding streams. Now, some providers receive both Head Start and city and state preschool funding. Administrators braided funding at the city level and streamlined processes to encourage providers who receive both Head Start and other preschool funding to teach children in the same classroom, regardless of what funding source they are qualified to receive. Providers that receive CCDBG funding and other preschool funding may be required to integrate children across classrooms during the school day and reconfigure their classrooms after the school day to serve children eligible for extended-day services funded through CCDBG. Not all programs are integrated, however, and many Head Start providers continue to serve only Head Start–eligible children.

Braiding funding was administratively challenging, but the city took this on to prevent this burden from falling on individual providers. The city had to receive state approval to move contracts to the Department of Education and reapply for Head Start funding. The city simplified the administrative requirements for providers to braid funding to integrate classrooms by giving providers one contract, which included funding from multiple sources. Individual providers thus did not have to go through the arduous cost allocation process to prove they were using each pot of funds only for eligible children. Administrators also made efforts to reduce the burden for individual providers, such as creating a single data system to submit enrollment information and managing reporting requirements.

Making PreK universal has successfully increased the overall racial and ethnic diversity of the program. Notably, public PreK classrooms in district and charter schools had similar levels of diversity as kindergarten classrooms.[81] This is an achievement that highlights universality as a foundational step to foster diversity, although data show that some PreK settings are more racially and ethnically segregated than others. A 2019 study found that the city's community-based programs had higher levels of segregation than school-based public PreK classrooms.[82] Community-based programs receiving Head Start or child care vouchers were more likely to be majority Black or majority Hispanic, perhaps because they have income eligibility requirements that restrict access to other services, such as child care for children ages 3 and under, based on family income.

Public PreK classrooms in district and charter schools had similar levels of diversity as kindergarten classrooms.

The Department of Education tried to address this disparity with the new contracting system that was launched in 2021.[83] As part of the new system, the city prioritized providers that proposed to serve a socioeconomically diverse group of children. The city also required or encouraged providers that were funded by multiple programs to integrate children within classrooms by managing cost allocations associated with braiding funding so that individual providers do not have to do so.

San Francisco, CA

San Francisco's Department of Early Childhood[84] facilitates the braiding of many funding streams in a way that allows children from different income levels to learn in classrooms together. The city has several policies in place that reduce barriers to teaching children together in the same classroom, such as uniform quality standards that apply to all public programs, flexible city funding to fund access for middle-income families, and a coordinated data collection system that makes it easier for programs to braid funding streams.

San Francisco's early learning programs serve children from widely varying socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Approximately one third of families with children under age 5 are eligible for state-funded child care assistance; one third are ineligible for state subsidies but unable to afford high-quality ECE; and the remaining third are above the city's threshold for self-sufficiency for a family with two children under age 5.[85] The city is also very racially and ethnically diverse. Approximately one third of children age 5 and under are White, 22% are Latino/a, 20% are Asian, 12% are multiracial/multiethnic, 4% are Black, 2% are Filipino, and approximately 1% are either American Indian/Alaskan or another racial or ethnic background.[86]

Uniform quality standards

San Francisco draws upon multiple sources of public funding to make its ECE programs accessible to all, including Head Start, the California State Preschool Program, and child care vouchers. These funding streams primarily serve families with low incomes; however, families from many income levels participate in city-funded ECE (see Table 1). The city contributes its own funding to serve middle-income families who do not qualify for state subsidies.[87] State-contracted centers may serve children receiving each of these funding streams. Private preschools that rely on tuition from higher-income families may also serve children receiving vouchers from the state or the city, as long as the provider meets certain requirements.

Table 1. Maximum Family Income by ECE Funding Source in San Francisco

Funding source	Maximum family income for a family of four in 2022
Head Start	$27,750
State preschool and child care subsidies	$89,300
San Francisco Early Learning Scholarship	$152,400
Private pay	None

Source: San Francisco Child Care Planning & Advisory Council. (2023). *San Francisco early care and education 2023 needs assessment report*.

One way the city has supported braiding funding is by developing a set of uniform, high-quality standards that meet or exceed the quality standards of all publicly funded programs (e.g., Head Start and the California State Preschool Program).[88] Having common standards for city-funded programs allows providers to integrate children more easily in the same classroom despite receiving funding from various sources since all classrooms meet the highest of each program's requirements. However, meeting these standards requires more funding than state and federal contracts provide, especially in a city with as high a cost of living as San Francisco. For example, meeting the city's teacher qualifications requirements can be difficult without additional support for wages that are commensurate with teachers' education and experience.

The city thus provides supplemental funding to ECE providers to fill in the gap between state and federal subsidy rates and the cost of providing a quality program. Supplemental funding rates were originally determined by a fiscal analysis the city conducted in 2016, which identified the true cost of operating an ECE program that met the city's standards. With new funding for ECE obtained from the passage of a tax on commercial properties in 2021, the city has additionally launched a dedicated ECE compensation initiative across all publicly funded programs.[89] With the new funding, the city aims to raise wages significantly, recognizing that most subsidized programs were otherwise unable to provide competitive wages to retain high-quality staff. All programs that enroll children receiving subsidies are eligible to participate.

The local tax funding has enabled the city to expand free ECE to middle-income families as well. The city extended eligibility for full-day public preschool and child care from the state's median income ($89,300 for a family of four) to 110% of the area median income ($152,400 for a family of four). (See Table 1.) Extending subsidies to these families allows programs to be more socioeconomically diverse because families can use scholarships at public, nonprofit, and for-profit programs that meet the city's requirements. Initially, families receiving city funding paid tuition on a sliding fee scale; however, these fees were eliminated at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several of these programs also enroll full-fee-paying families. Once this subsidy program is fully implemented, the city may expand eligibility to families making as much as 200% of the area median income.

Over half of licensed centers and a large network of family child care homes in San Francisco meet the city's quality standards and accept city funding. Other providers experience barriers to participating in the initiative. One barrier is that even with the funding the city provides to top off state and federal rates, public funding is still less than what some providers charge families in many neighborhoods, given San Francisco's high cost of living. As a result, some programs accept only a few subsidized children since subsidies do not cover the full cost of care. Others deem the requirements for participation, such as getting a quality rating through the local quality rating and improvement system, too high.

Integrated data systems

From 2007 through 2021, San Francisco used a software program, Cocoa, to simplify data collection and make the braiding of funds easier for providers. Providers used Cocoa to input information on child enrollment for several different public programs. The software made it easier for providers to administer multiple funding streams, for example, by efficiently creating enrollment reports for different state and local programs and simplifying child assessment reporting. Prior to the introduction of this software

program, San Francisco's ECE programs used as many as 10 different databases for each funding stream to collect enrollment, attendance, and funding data, which was challenging for providers who served children funded by different sources. It also made it difficult for city officials to understand the ECE landscape in the city. As of 2023, the city is updating its data system to make further improvements.[90]

Hartford, CT

The long-standing magnet school and open choice program in Hartford, CT, promotes integration by allowing students to attend schools outside of their local area. In response to a 1996 state Supreme Court desegregation ruling, *Sheff v. O'Neill*,[91] Connecticut established a voluntary integration Open Choice program and designed desegregated educational opportunities, including an interdistrict magnet school program, to increase the number of Hartford students who are enrolled in reduced-isolation settings.[92]

The population of Hartford is 44% Latino/a, 36% Black, 15% White, 3% Asian, and 3% identified as another race or ethnicity.[93] The median household income is $36,278, and the city has a 28% poverty rate. However, many of the surrounding towns are predominately White and more affluent.[94] In Hartford Public Schools, nearly 80% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and the percentage of Black and Latino/a students reflects the city's demographics, 29% and 54%, respectively.[95] In contrast, West Hartford School District has a student population that is 56% White, 19% Latino/a, 10% Asian, 9% Black, and 6% multiracial, and 34% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.[96]

Interdistrict programs, like Hartford's regional magnet schools that encourage two-way transfers between Hartford schools and those of surrounding districts, have helped reduce the number of students who attend racially isolated schools. In 2015, nearly half (45.5%) of Hartford students were enrolled in reduced-isolation settings.[97] Another report found that magnet school enrollments in the state were more equally distributed across racial subgroups than statewide enrollment.[98]

Interdistrict magnet schools

Hartford's program is designed to attract families from both suburban districts and the city of Hartford by offering innovative instructional models and educational themes (e.g., STEM, the arts, language immersion). Since the beginning of litigation, expanding access to ECE has been a priority. Several magnet schools in the region include preschool seats for 3- and 4-year-olds and accept private tuition for preschool from more affluent families. In 2015, the state passed legislation that requires families of PreK students who attend a magnet school and whose family income is above 75% of the state median income to pay a tuition fee on a sliding fee scale that is determined annually, while families below this threshold are not required to pay tuition.[99] This strategy allows programs to be more socioeconomically diverse because seats are not limited to families who meet eligibility requirements, and the maximum tuition amount is relatively low compared to other preschool options.

Providing transportation is key to promoting integration across districts in the Hartford region. The Connecticut Department of Education's Regional School Choice Office partners with the Capitol Region Education Council to provide transportation for Hartford 3- and 4-year-olds attending 15 out-of-district schools.[100] Families who are not Hartford residents are eligible to receive a $5 transportation stipend per day for PreK students.

A continuing challenge for Hartford's program is that funding has not been able to keep up with demand, especially for preschool. Additional investment would help expand access to families who want their children to attend preschool in integrated settings and help children access the benefits of diversity earlier in life. It would also help provide additional resources such as transportation to ensure access. In 2022, the Connecticut state legislature approved a final settlement for the *Sheff* litigation. The settlement provides additional funding to meet demand by 2028–29 and expand PreK programs in existing magnet schools.[101]

Hartford's interdistrict approach has supported desegregation efforts. These efforts have decreased the number of students from Hartford who were enrolled in reduced-isolation settings; however, more could be done to increase socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity within Hartford Public Schools.[102]

San Antonio, TX

San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) uses a controlled choice approach—known as diversity by design—to promote socioeconomic integration in 6 of its 90 schools.[103] The district's student population is predominantly low-income and Latino/a: 89% of students in the district are economically disadvantaged, 90% are Latino/a, 6% are Black, and 3% are White. By contrast, the suburbs around San Antonio are wealthier and more racially and ethnically diverse.[104]

Diversity by design

Diversity by design schools allow students from inside and outside of the district's boundaries to enroll, starting in preschool, which allows the schools to be more socioeconomically diverse than other schools in the district. The schools have been met with high demand from families within SAISD and surrounding districts. In most SAISD schools, preschool access is limited to children who meet the state's income eligibility requirements. However, in diversity by design schools, children who are not income eligible for preschool are able to enroll for free because the district receives a state grant that covers the enrollment cost of children from higher-income families enrolled in in-district charter schools.

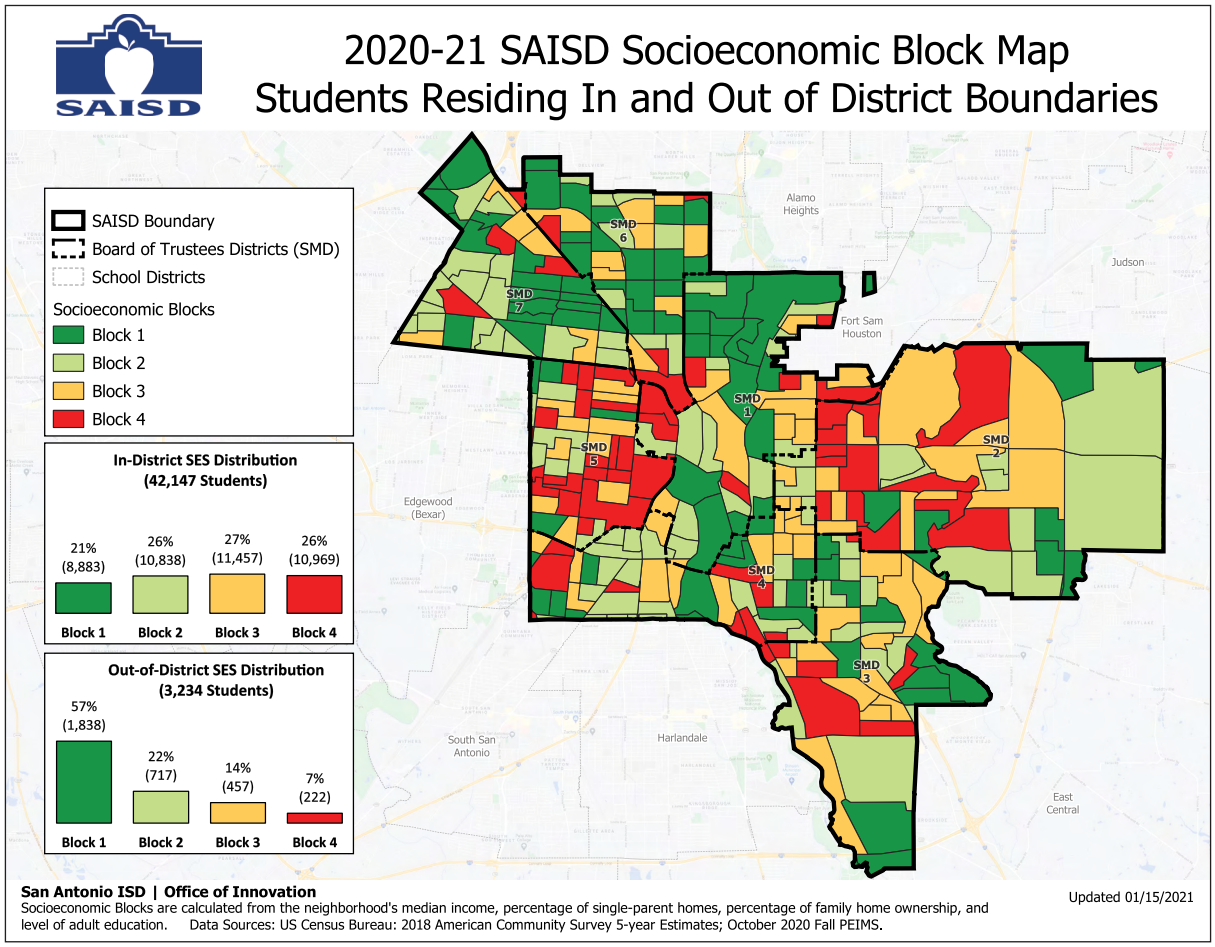
As a result, about half of the students in most diversity by design schools are economically disadvantaged, and half are not.[105] The schools are slightly more racially and ethnically diverse than others in the district, although most are still predominantly Latino/a.[106] Diversity by design schools have several components to foster and maintain socioeconomic diversity: innovative instructional models that attract diverse families, transportation that allows children to attend schools outside of their neighborhood, and a complex lottery that maintains socioeconomic diversity.

First, the district offers innovative and attractive instructional models, such as dual language immersion programs and Montessori schools. One interviewee noted that these programs have helped foster integration because they are popular and have been successful at drawing students who reside within district boundaries as well as those from wealthier families from surrounding neighborhoods.[107]

Second, the district offers free transportation for students to attend schools across the district, including transportation for PreK students, who can take the same bus as older students as long as an adult is present at pickup and drop-off. Using a "hub system," students who live farther from the school in which they are enrolled can get picked up and dropped off by a bus at designated locations across the district, where students can transfer to another bus, which will take them to their school.

Finally, SAISD uses what is known as "block methodology" to account for socioeconomic diversity across the district and ensure that diversity by design schools are enrolling students who live in the lowest socioeconomic blocks.[108] The city assigns each neighborhood in the district to one of four socioeconomic blocks that take into account factors such as average family income, single-parent households, educational levels, and homeownership. The district uses these designations to ensure that students from the lowest socioeconomic areas have access to schools with innovative instructional models that are in high demand. In diversity by design schools, at least 50% of seats are reserved for students from low-income families, 25% of whom must come from Blocks 3 and 4, which are the socioeconomic blocks with the lowest average median household incomes, home ownership levels, and educational attainment levels and the highest average percentage of single-parent households. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. San Antonio Independent School District Socioeconomic Block Map



Source: San Antonio Independent School District, Office of Innovation. Socioeconomic blocks.

SAISD strategically places diversity by design schools to foster socioeconomic diversity. In 2017, SAISD launched Mark Twain Dual Language Academy in a community with a school attendance zone that traditionally enrolls students from wealthy families; however, the school is popular with families across the district, and using the district's controlled choice approach, the school enrolls a socioeconomically and linguistically diverse student population. By contrast, Laura Steele Montessori Academy is located in

what has historically been a high-poverty neighborhood. Montessori is a popular model for more affluent families and has drawn in families from surrounding areas. The principal explained that she and her staff attend community events and build local interest in the model since many families were unfamiliar with the Montessori approach. The district reconfigures attendance zones using a "priority radii" approach to capture students living in subsidized housing and students from middle- or higher-income families. These schools demonstrate that by incorporating innovative academic offerings and specific guardrails to balance enrollment, increasing diversity is feasible, even in a highly segregated city like San Antonio.

Mark Twain Dual Language Academy, a diversity by design school that serves students in preschool to Grade 6, is also an example of how dual language programs have been used to foster diversity in SAISD. The school uses an 80/20 model in which 80% of instruction is in Spanish and 20% of instruction is in English. SAISD has had to balance the benefits and challenges of dual language programs becoming very popular, especially among more affluent families. Administrators report that dual language immersion programs can become dominated by English-native students from more affluent families. As a result, the district also considers students' language to maintain a 50/50 balance of native English speakers and children classified as English learners in dual language immersion programs. If a 50/50 balance is not feasible, the district ensures that English learners compose at least 30% of students.

Considerations to Promote Inclusiveness Within Diverse Learning Environments

As evident from the previous examples, there is no single strategy to increase diversity in early childhood education (ECE) programs. The cities and districts we highlighted use multiple and different strategies to achieve their goals. The strategies examined in this report highlight ways policymakers can create enabling conditions for children from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds to learn together. However, many interviewees for this report stressed that strategies to integrate children in classrooms should be coupled with practices that create inclusive learning environments in which all children can thrive. Specifically, interviewees emphasized the importance of fostering culturally responsive learning environments and supporting staff with professional development, recruiting and retaining a diverse staff who can work effectively with diverse children and families, and engaging diverse families in a way that meets their needs. These actions are important for all five of the integration strategies discussed in this report.

> Strategies to integrate children in classrooms should be coupled with practices that create inclusive learning environments in which all children can thrive.

Foster culturally responsive learning environments and support staff with professional development. Culturally responsive learning environments in which all students are known and valued create a sense of safety and belonging that is essential to healthy learning and development.[109] Culturally responsive teaching includes using children's cultural knowledge and prior experience to make learning relevant and effective.[110] In early childhood classrooms, this might include learning about and building on children's experiences in the home and community; reading diverse texts that reflect children's backgrounds; and incorporating the language, foods, and music that children are familiar with in their homes.[111]

Several interviewees for this study underscored the importance of culturally responsive settings in integrated schools and the efforts they are making to create these kinds of environments. San Francisco is attentive to children's home language as an important part of their culture and requires that all its assessments and teacher training be provided in the three most dominant languages used in the city. The Lighthouse for Children, an ECE program in Fresno, CA, conducts an in-depth family interview that helps staff become knowledgeable about children before they enter the program. Staff incorporate items from each child's culture in the classroom starting on the child's first day.

Interviewees also explained that reflection on teachers' own biases and strategies for engaging diverse learners was an ongoing part of their professional development. This is important because biases impact expectations and perceptions of behavior that can undermine efforts to create inclusive environments and student achievement, such as the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline for students of color.[112] A study of preschool teachers found that when teachers were asked to identify misbehavior among children playing (where no problem behavior was present), teachers were more likely to focus their attention on Black children, and on Black boys in particular.[113] To understand how implicit biases may manifest in learning settings, several school leaders we spoke to had training for their staff. The city of San Francisco, for example, has been investing in implicit bias and cultural competence training,

retreats, and study groups for its instructional coaches for over a decade; these coaches help teachers make classes, including math and literacy instruction, culturally relevant for children. School leaders in San Antonio maintained professional learning communities to share learnings from trainings they had attended together or as individuals.

Recruit and retain a diverse staff that can work effectively with diverse children and families. Several informants mentioned the importance of hiring staff who are linguistically, culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse and who know and understand the culture of the children and families they serve. Program leaders explained that having teaching and support staff from different racial and ethnic communities can help make families feel at home and help recruit families from diverse backgrounds, especially if staff speak families' home languages. Research from K–12 schools shows that having at least one teacher of color can have positive benefits for all students, and particularly for Black students taught by Black teachers. Benefits include improved academic test scores, attendance, and high school graduation rates, and fewer disciplinary referrals.[114]

The ECE workforce is racially and ethnically diverse, notably more so than the K–12 teacher workforce, where teachers of color make up 20% of the workforce. In contrast, a representative national survey that was conducted in 2019 found that 63% of center-based staff were White, 18% were Black, 14% were Hispanic, and 6% identified as another race.[115] The diversity of the ECE workforce is a strength, one to be cultivated and sustained. Currently, many states require early educators who teach in some publicly funded preschool programs to hold a bachelor's degree,[116] and some states require educators to obtain an early childhood teaching credential. Because students of color and students whose first language is not English can face significant barriers to accessing and completing higher education,[117] teacher credentialing programs that recruit and support candidates of color and bilingual candidates can help maintain the diversity of the ECE teacher workforce in programs that require a degree or credential.[118] For instance, the city of San Francisco has invested in a local higher education program, EDvance, which trains teacher candidates who reflect the diversity of the city's children, with a focus on cultural and linguistic competence. San Antonio invests in its teacher pipeline through a residency program and provides bonuses to bilingual teachers in its dual language immersion schools.

Engage diverse families in a way that meets their needs. As schools become more socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse, so do the needs of children's families. Several respondents mentioned the challenge of balancing these diverse needs, especially as more privileged families tend to have more resources, flexibility, and advantages to advocate for their children. Research points to essential competencies for early educators, one of which is family support and partnership.[119] This includes being able to communicate with families in their home languages (or have access to translation resources or tools to do so), and approaching families with a strength-based and culturally sensitive lens that respects and supports families' cultural differences. In addition, schools that have successfully engaged families use more inclusive approaches, such as communicating through various platforms (e.g., school website, phone calls, emails), translating this information into home languages, and organizing online or in-person meetings at times matched to parent availability.[120]

Conducting outreach so that families are aware of and can easily navigate their options for enrolling their children in ECE programs is a key consideration to fostering diverse schools. For example, one interviewee mentioned that it is important to have a commitment to integration among both staff and community

members, which requires educating families and the larger community about how integration strategies—such as lotteries—are being implemented and how integration efforts connect to a larger collective interest. School leaders mentioned several strategies for marketing their schools to new families. Rosemount, in Washington, DC, relies on its Early Head Start home visitor programs to share information about its preschool with hard-to-reach families. San Antonio's Laura Steele Montessori Academy principal says she and the families of her students spend time at community events explaining the benefits of Montessori education to less affluent families, many of whom are not familiar with the model. Partnering with local community organizations that families know and trust can also help communicate information to families in an effective way.[121]

Building stronger relationships between all members of the school community and involving families in decision-making can further support efforts to integrate early childhood settings.[122] District of Columbia Public Schools partners with a community organization, Kindred, to work with schools facing gentrification. Kindred facilitates community meetings and provides coaching to families, students, and school staff to support relationship building and build more equitable, inclusive schools that support shared decision-making. One school leader called the partnership "transformative." School leaders in San Antonio and Washington, DC, explained how they restructured their parent–teacher organizations to focus on school community and relationship building, rather than fundraising, and fostering all-school activities. One interviewee emphasized that just as school diversity benefits students, it also benefits families and strengthens the community.

Policy Recommendations

Segregation in early childhood education (ECE) settings has long been the norm due to residential segregation and other factors that are influenced by public policies. However, research has illuminated the benefits of diversity in ECE settings, and cities and districts across the country have shown that despite ongoing challenges, creating more integrated settings is possible. Policymakers can support more widespread integration through the following seven recommendations:

1. **Establish universal ECE programs so that family income does not determine where a child can enroll.** The current ECE system is highly socioeconomically segregated, in part because most families are limited to programs they can afford. Programs that are publicly funded tend to be targeted to children from low-income families and often have different eligibility and regulatory requirements. This web of requirements across ECE programs can cause children to be sorted, and thus segregated, into classrooms by their family's income, which in practice can translate to racial, ethnic, and linguistic segregation as well due to systemic inequities. Places that invest in universal preschool are setting the foundation for socioeconomic diversity by serving all children in one program, regardless of family income. Given larger patterns of residential segregation, universal preschool alone is not enough to achieve full integration, but it can lead to programs that are more integrated than what is currently the norm.

2. **Braid public funding to enable children from different socioeconomic backgrounds to learn in the same classroom.** Many federal, state, and local ECE programs have different income eligibility, quality standards, and monitoring requirements. These disparate requirements can dissuade providers from braiding funding from different programs and lead to children receiving very different early learning opportunities based on their socioeconomic status and, since they are closely linked, their race and ethnicity. State and local policymakers could take a lead role in braiding funding from multiple sources to avoid this burden falling on individual providers, including aligning standards across programs. In Washington, DC, district-level administrators aligned universal PreK standards to Head Start standards to make the Head Start School-Wide Model work and foster classroom-level integration. This prevented individual school leaders from having to go through the arduous process of braiding funding on top of their daily responsibilities.

   Braided programs typically must meet the highest set of standards in each program, which can be costly, and programs often do not receive any additional funding to comply with higher standards. Another step policymakers can take is therefore to provide funding to enable providers to meet a higher set of quality standards, which can otherwise be a barrier to braiding funds. In San Francisco, having common standards for city-funded programs allows providers to integrate children more easily in the same classroom despite receiving funding from various sources. The city provides additional funding to meet the quality standards.

3. **Build a coherent system of ECE governance and administration.** The existence of multiple programs run by several agencies has created a siloed approach to policymaking and funding. Building a coherent system of governance makes it easier to align quality standards, braid funding,

communicate with families, prioritize enrollment in a way that will support diversity (e.g., reserving seats for children from low-income families or dual language learners), and support data collection that sheds light on the extent to which children are learning in diverse classrooms.

States and other localities can identify and invest in a governing body with the authority to align ECE programs. For example, New York City built a more coherent system by administering all ECE programs through the Department of Education, instead of having two agencies run different programs. San Francisco created a new Department of Early Childhood that houses several city- and state-funded ECE initiatives in one department. Having an umbrella organization overseeing ECE has made it easier for the city to create its uniform set of quality standards and braid many funding streams.

4. **Allow providers to enroll families of all incomes in publicly funded programs while reserving seats for families with low incomes.** Many publicly funded ECE programs have stringent income eligibility requirements, creating an "income cliff" where families who earn even a dollar over the maximum income level do not qualify. States can allow providers that have additional capacity after serving children from low-income families to also serve fee-paying families in public programs. In some instances, enrolling fee-paying families is already allowable, but providers are unaware of this option; states could clarify this for providers. A sliding fee scale, in which families pay progressively more as their incomes increase, could also make tuition affordable for middle-income families who cannot afford the full cost of care. San Francisco, for instance, has provided flexible city funding to allow middle-income families who are ineligible for state preschool subsidies to participate in early learning programs. States can also provide technical assistance to help local programs collect private tuition and blend it with public funds. Enrolling fee-paying families can support socioeconomic integration, increase access to ECE, and make programs more financially sustainable by expanding the pool of children who can enroll in a given program.

5. **Support local strategies that draw families from different neighborhoods or district boundaries, including strategically locating programs and offering two-way dual language immersion programs.** State funds could help districts create or expand programs that have broad appeal, such as magnet schools and dual immersion programs, to draw families from diverse backgrounds. These schools have proven to be popular in San Antonio and Washington, DC, which have supported socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity. Programs could be strategically located near district boundaries, within places of employment, or near places of concentrated employment to optimize accessibility for diverse families. Funding for transportation could also enable families to enroll in programs outside of segregated residential zones: San Antonio, for example, provides transportation to preschoolers. Local education agencies can also leverage federal funds intended to increase diversity in preschool through Grade 12, such as the Fostering Diverse Schools Demonstration Grants Program and the Magnet Schools Assistance Program.[123] Funds can be used to implement interdistrict or regional strategies, including the development of magnet schools.

6. **Use inclusive enrollment practices and clearly communicate ECE options to all families.** States and other localities can play a role in ensuring that preschool options are clearly communicated to families and enrollment processes are efficient and equitable. This can include creating a single application and enrollment process for providers, reserving seats for students from low-income

families, disseminating information across multiple platforms and languages to reach all families, and partnering with local community organizations to disseminate information. In addition, ensuring that open enrollment processes are inclusive and accessible to families of color and low-income families, who may not be familiar with their options or have the resources to manage the application process, is key to enrolling a diverse group of families. For example, the San Antonio Independent School District provides families with several options to submit applications for open enrollment schools, including by mail or phone. The district also has several application drop-off hubs throughout the city. Enrollment is intentionally flexible to ensure the district reaches families from various socioeconomic backgrounds and with varying levels of resources. Some districts and providers also reserve seats for students from low-income families or dual language learners. San Antonio's diversity by design schools use a controlled choice approach to ensure students from the lowest socioeconomic blocks in the district and dual language learners have access to high-demand schools. All Five in California also reserves 75% of its seats for children from families with low incomes, who either qualify for state funding or pay tuition on a sliding fee scale, and 25% for children from families with high incomes, who pay the full cost of tuition.

7. **Collect enrollment data, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status, to understand the extent to which children are learning in diverse classrooms.** Existing research suggests that ECE programs are highly segregated by race, ethnicity, and family income; however, due to lack of data, it is difficult to understand the extent or effects of segregation. While some states and cities collect high-level enrollment data by program, the demographic makeup of individual classrooms is often not collected or not publicly available. In addition, many states have a fragmented data collection system that makes it difficult for policymakers to understand how families choose early learning programs and whether enrollment disparities by provider reflect family preferences or other barriers that should be addressed. For example, demographic data for Head Start and state preschool are collected separately, even when providers are braiding funding, and almost nothing is known about private programs that collect public voucher funds. To better track efforts to integrate ECE settings, policymakers can streamline collection and reporting of data for providers and support the development of data collection procedures that provide unified reporting on states' ECE availability and quality, including the socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and linguistic concentration of children within and across settings.

Our interviewees additionally noted that we will not reap the academic and social benefits of integration if classrooms are not inclusive and supportive places for all children and families. As policymakers and practitioners work toward these goals, they should also consider how to recruit and retain a diverse, well-qualified workforce that is prepared to support and collaborate with culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families and provide ongoing training and coaching for staff. This could include training on implicit bias and anti-racism to help educators address biases and understand how they may manifest in the classroom.

Conclusion

Integrated learning environments can yield positive academic and social benefits. Exposure to integrated environments early on can help ameliorate achievement gaps that take root before children enter kindergarten. It can also help build a more equitable and inclusive society. Yet most early childhood education programs are remarkably segregated. This is in part because few states offer universal access to preschool, and none offer universal programs for younger children. Even in programs with universal access, integration takes intentionality. Places across the country are making efforts to increase diversity, but these examples are rare. Much more work needs to be done to enable more children to reap the benefits of integration.

Appendix: Methodology

In this report, we examine strategies to foster integration in early childhood education (ECE) settings and highlight state, district, and local examples that describe how each strategy is being implemented. Much research on the harms of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic segregation and benefits of integrated learning environments focuses on K–12 settings. Information covered in this report draws upon research findings from K–12 settings and a literature review of existing research that examines the academic and social benefits of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity in the early years and the extent of segregation in early childhood programs.

Additionally, we conducted interviews with research and policy experts to identify gaps in existing research, strategies for promoting integration in ECE settings, and examples of places across the country that are using these strategies to promote integration. Based on our review of existing research and interviews with research and policy experts, we identified the following five integration strategies:

1. Establishing universal ECE programs
2. Braiding public funding
3. Allowing private-pay families to enroll in public programs
4. Attracting families across neighborhoods or district boundaries
5. Creating two-way dual language immersion programs

After selecting these strategies, we conducted additional web-based research on state, district, and local implementation examples that were obtained from interviews with research and policy experts. To select examples, we drew on background research and interviews with administrators to confirm information and learn more about implementation considerations and lessons learned for policy and practice. We used the following criteria to identify examples: The strategy is implemented at scale (e.g., beyond an individual school or setting), is strategically used to increase diversity, and has evidence of success. Using this selection criteria, we identified five examples that showcase how strategies are being used, common implementation challenges associated with each strategy, and ways policymakers can support more widespread integration efforts. Other examples were not included in this report either because there was a lack of evidence of increased diversity, strategies highlighted in this report were no longer being implemented, there was a lack of a systemic approach beyond an individual school or setting, or increasing diversity was not a specified goal. The selected examples include:

- Washington, DC
- New York, NY
- San Francisco, CA
- Hartford, CT
- San Antonio, TX

In addition, we interviewed school-level administrators and program staff to learn more about what it takes to sustain integrated settings at the site level. These takeaways are included in the section on promoting inclusiveness within diverse learning environments.

We employed a multi-method research design. Data came from the following sources:

- **Document and administrative data review.** We reviewed publicly available information from state, district, and local websites for information related to enrollment data and strategies being implemented. We also reviewed research, policy, and public media reports that contained information regarding the strategies being used.
- **State, district, and program-level interviews.** We conducted 30- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews with 37 state, district, and local administrators, which focused on what they saw as the benefits of integration, how administrators were using integration strategies, the implementation challenges they encountered, and lessons learned for other administrators who are interested in increasing diversity of ECE settings. Tables A1 and A2 provide a complete list of those interviewed for this report.

Table A1. State, City, and Local Administrator Interviewees

Organization/Location	Interviewees
Alabama	• Jeannie Allen, Director of the Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education • Marche Scott, Alabama Early Childhood Development Coach • Tara Skiles, Director of the Office of Professional Development and Coaching Support, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education • Tracye Strichik, former Senior Director, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education
All Five, Menlo Park, CA	• Andrea Gueneau de Mussy, former Assistant Director • Karen Pace, Strategic Projects Manager • Carol Tomsen, Founder and Executive Director
Dallas, TX	• Lorelehi Berrios, Enrollment Manager, Dallas Independent School District • Yesenia Cardoza Ramirez, Director of Family and Community Engagement in Early Learning, Dallas Independent School District
Fresno, CA	• Anna Arambula, Coach, Fresno Language Project • Barbara Daniel, Site Supervisor, Lighthouse Center for Children • Matilda Soria, Senior Director of Early Care and Education, Office of Fresno County Superintendent of Schools
Georgia	• Allison Setterlind, Head Start Collaboration Director, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

Organization/Location	Interviewees
Glendale, CA	• Rebeca Andrade, former Director of Early Education and Extended Learning Programs, Glendale Unified School District
Hartford, CT	• Josephine Di Pietro Smith, Principal, Reggio Magnet School of the Arts • Cara McClellan, former Assistant Council, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund
New York, NY	• Emmy Liss, former Chief Operating Officer, Early Childhood Education and Student Enrollment, New York City Public Schools • Josh Wallack, former Deputy Chancellor, Early Childhood Education and Student Enrollment, New York City Public Schools
Oklahoma	• Debra Andersen, former Executive Director, Partnership for School Readiness
Palcare, Burlingame, CA	• Melinda Day, former Board Member
San Antonio, TX	• Mohammed Choudhury, former Chief Strategy, Talent, and Innovation Officer, San Antonio Independent School District • Laura Christenberry, former Principal, San Antonio Independent School District • Cynthia Dennis, ECE Coordinator, San Antonio Independent School District • Aleida Perez, Director of Early Childhood Education/Head Start, San Antonio Independent School District
San Francisco, CA	• Graham Dobson, Senior Policy Analyst, San Francisco Office of Early Care and Education • Cheryl Horney, Child Development/Head Start Director, Wu Yee Children's Services • Jenny Lam, Director of Policy and Strategic Partnerships, San Francisco Department of Early Childhood • Lisa Lee, Senior Program Officer, First 5 San Francisco • Wei-min Wang, Deputy Director, Evaluation, Policy, and Communication, San Francisco Department of Early Childhood

Organization/Location	Interviewees
Texas	• Sylina Valdez, Programs Director of Early Childhood Division, Texas Education Agency • Lauren Zbyszinski, former Inter-Agency Deputy Director of Early Childhood Education, Texas Education Agency
Washington, DC	• Miriam Calderón, former Director of Early Childhood Education, District of Columbia Public Schools • Iliana Feliz, former Deputy Program Director, Rosemount Center • Claudia Luján, former Strategic School Planning and Enrollment, District of Columbia Public Schools • Katie Lundgren, Principal, Marie Reed Elementary School • Cheryl Ohlson, Deputy Chief, Early Childhood Education Division, District of Columbia Public Schools • Cornett Roberts-Njoku, Program Director, Rosemount Center

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Table A2. Research and Policy Interviewees

Interviewees
• Iliana Alanís, Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education, University of Texas at San Antonio • Gina Chirichigno, Director, National Coalition on School Diversity • Deepa Fernandes, Reporter, WBUR • Patricia Gándara, Co-Director, Civil Rights Project at UCLA • Erica Greenberg, Principal Research Associate, Urban Institute • Anna Hardway, Chief Programs Officer, Children at Risk • Erin Hardy, Senior Research Scientist, Diversity Data Kids • Kaleigh Hernandez, Children at Risk • Anya Hurwitz, Executive Director, Sobrato Early Academic Language • Tomás Monarrez, Senior Research Associate, Urban Institute • Halley Potter, Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation • Jeanne Reid, Research Scientist, National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University • Conor P. Williams, Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

Endnotes

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About the Authors

Sara Plasencia is a Policy Advisor at the Learning Policy Institute (LPI). Her work focuses on research and policies that improve early learning systems in California and other states. She is also a member of the Federal Policy team, where she focuses on school integration and early childhood education. Prior to joining LPI, she worked at the Education Trust as a graduate fellow on the National and State Partnerships team. Her work focused on increasing educational equity and strengthening advocacy efforts on behalf of students from low-income families and students of color. Plasencia received an MA in Public Affairs from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, Austin, and holds a BA in Government and Law and Sociology from Lafayette College.

Hanna Melnick is a Senior Policy Advisor at LPI, where she co-leads the Early Childhood Learning team. Her work centers on policies that can improve early learning systems in California and other states, including preparing a high-quality, diverse educator workforce. She is also a member of the Deeper Learning team, with a focus on school climate and social and emotional learning. She is an author of several LPI reports and two books. Before joining LPI, Melnick was a public school teacher in California. Melnick holds an MPP from the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley and a BA from Harvard University.

1530 Page Mill Road, Suite 250
Palo Alto, CA 94304
p: 650.332.9797

1100 17th Street, NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036
p: 202.830.0079

@LPI_Learning | learningpolicyinstitute.org