

Who's Left Behind by Universal Preschool in New York City?

Bridging an Archipelago of City Programs



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Low-Income Families Search for Pre-K

Mayor Bill de Blasio aims to provide 70,000 preschool seats this coming fall, serving 4 year-olds in schools and community centers. Yet just over 115,000 4-year-old children inhabit New York City, according to the Census Bureau.

Not all parents will seek out a city-run preschool. But will a significant count of children, whose parents can ill afford private preschool, be left behind?

We recently detailed how 28,000 children in low-income and blue-collar neighborhoods remain outside Mr. de Blasio's "universal" pre-k (UPK) initiative. But we have not known what share of these 4-year-olds is served by parallel preschools, especially in programs managed by the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and federal Head Start.

Based on new data released by ACS, we estimate that almost 19,000 children and families in low-income neighborhoods remain outside *any* city-run preschool. The rising count of pre-k seats opening this fall will just partly close this supply gap in poorer areas. The mayor's UPK effort appears to draw children out of existing programs as well, rather than extending access to additional families.

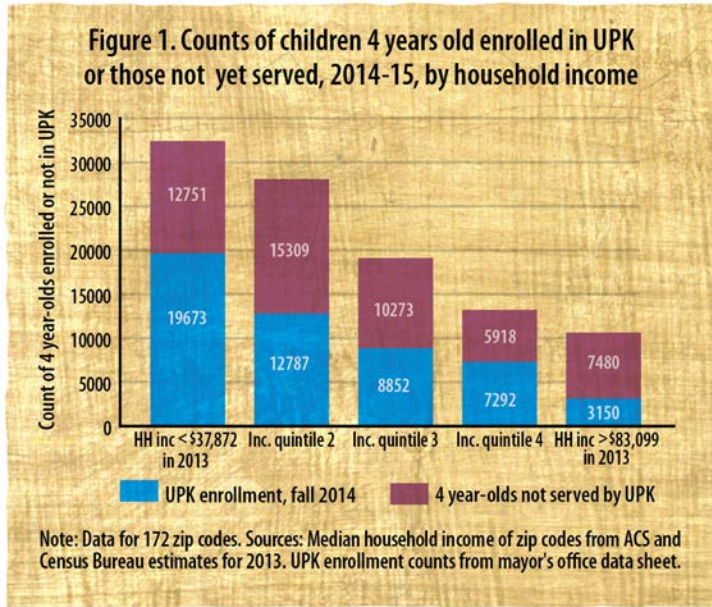
Universal Access to Preschool – A Work in Progress

Let's be clear about the basic numbers and bring into focus ACS-run programs, one cornerstone of the city's entire pre-k landscape.

First, census counts show that about 115,000 4-year-olds presently reside in the city.¹ Some 8,500 of these suffer from disabilities and would not thrive in a regular preschool setting, according to the Department of Education.² Another 3,400 4-year-olds do not enter kindergarten in a district, charter, or private school – likely home schooled, homeless, or failing to enroll.

After setting aside these groups, up to 103,000 families raising 4-year-olds may hold interest in city-supported pre-k. We do not assume that all families will express demand. Some will continue to opt for fee-supported preschools; others may rely on home-based care. At the same time, it's difficult to argue that 70,000 seats are sufficient to provide universal access.

Second, we earlier detailed how about 28,000 children in low-income parts of the city remained outside the mayor’s UPK program during the 2014-2015 school



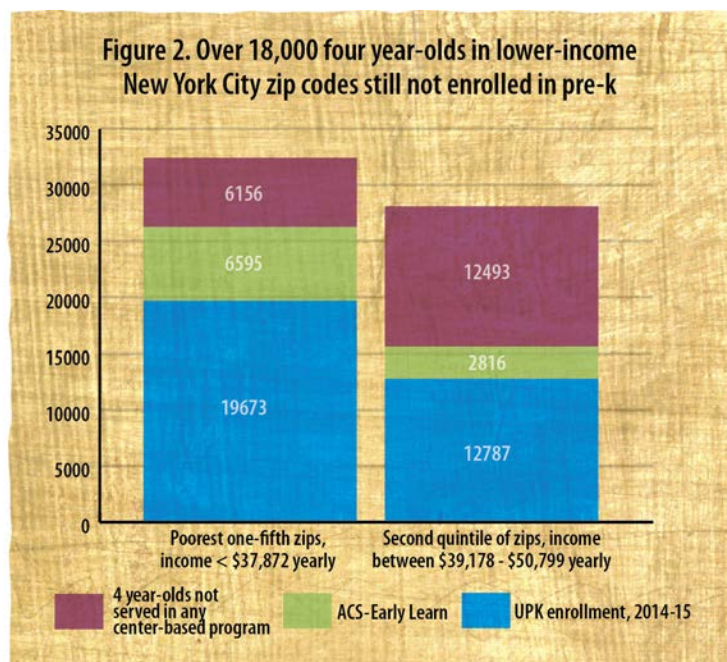
year. Figure 1 displays counts of 4-year-olds enrolled in the UPK effort – along with those who were not attending – for the poorest to the economically best-off zip codes. Each quintile includes about 34 zip codes ranked by median household income.

These enrollment counts are *not* adjusted for the population density of

4-year-olds residing in each quintile. UPK *enrollment rates* per 100 young children look quite similar across these areas, as detailed in our earlier brief, except that the UPK enrollment rate has long drifted lower in the most affluent quintile of zip codes.³

Third, we have known that pre-existing programs – largely those managed by ACS – serve a portion of the 4-year-olds outside the mayor’s program. But we have not known the extent to which ACS programs help to close the access gap facing many families in lower-income neighborhoods.

The city recently released these data to the University of California, including details on where ACS-supported preschools and families are situated. Most of these families live in lower-income parts of the city, given that ACS programs have long focused on lifting poor and working-class families, including via Head Start preschools.



These fresh data show that about 9,400 4-year-olds who reside in the two-fifths of city zip codes with low household incomes are served by ACS centers, as displayed in Figure 2 for the school year just completed (2014-15).⁴

Let's turn to the poorest one-fifth of zip codes where median household incomes fall under \$37,872 on average. We see that ACS-run programs serve just under 6,600 4-year-olds in these disadvantaged areas. The mayor's UPK effort served almost 20,000 4-year-olds in the past school year. But this left an access gap of 6,100 youngsters who were not served by any public pre-k.

The shortage of pre-k seats is most severe in the second quintile of zip codes, where families earn between \$39,178 and \$50,799 on average, according to the Census Bureau. ACS-run programs offer child-care or preschool seats for just over 2,800 4-year-olds. Yet this leaves more than 12,000 4-year-olds who remain outside any city-funded program.

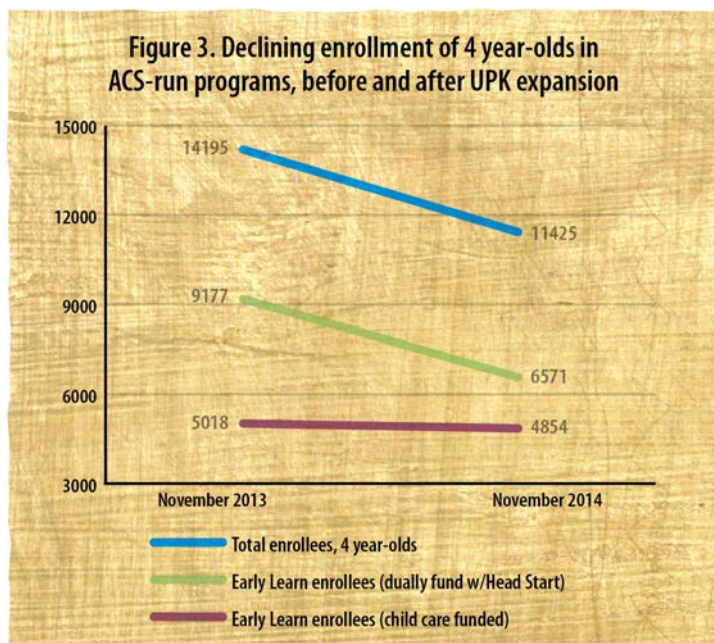
We estimate in total that almost 19,000 4-year-olds – raised in lower-income neighborhoods – remain outside any publicly supported pre-k program.

City officials hope that UPK seats will expand from 53,000 seats to about 70,000 this fall, a 32 percent increase. If the new seats were concentrated in low-income parts of the city, the existing gaps in supply would narrow.

But city officials have promised to create new seats in middle-class and better-off parts of the city.⁵ Even a boost in pre-k seats by one-third in the second quintile of zip codes would still leave over 8,000 4-year-olds outside any city program, those with scarce family resources to cover the cost of private pre-k.

Competition for Poor Children?

We also examined how enrollment counts in ACS programs may be shaped by



growth in the mayor's UPK effort. Evidence of this *substitution effect* – where community based pre-schools have lost children to the mayor's UPK effort – has already surfaced.⁶

Figure 3 displays a recent decline in the count of 4-year-olds enrolled in the ACS Early Learn program, along with a parallel program funded jointly with federal Head Start

dollars. In tandem, this pair of programs makes up the core child-care and preschool initiative managed by ACS.

We see that total enrollment of 4-year-olds declined from 14,195 in fall 2013, prior to Mr. de Blasio's enlarging of UPK, to 11,425 in fall 2014, following the mayor's first-year expansion.

The mayor's effort may not be the only factor that's driving down enrollments in ACS-run preschool seats. The city's employment picture for low-wage workers may mediate parents' eligibility for preschool over time. Funding levels may be a driver as well, given that enrollment counts have been fairly insensitive to the improving job market, except for a similar dip in fall, 2012.

Weaving Together a Colorful Quilt of Programs

The new ACS data accent how the mayor's focus on his initiative may distract attention from the interplay among programs – some of which now compete for the same families. Even as the access gap besets thousands of 4-year-olds raised by low-income families, an archipelago of pre-k efforts pushes to recruit many of the kids already enrolled in ACS programs as 3 year-olds.

Multiple funding streams, program rules, and quality standards may confuse parents and fragment early educators across the city. New York City is not unique in this regard: other cities and states display this same frayed and colorful patchwork of child-care and pre-k programs.

But as city officials expand access to pre-k, they could push to simplify entry points and eligibility criteria for parents, while reducing bureaucratic duplication of effort.

A single program might better ensure access to *all* low-income families. It would require greater flexibility in city and federal rules. A portion of these policy arguments appears in the recent analysis directed by the city's deputy mayor for health and human services.⁷

The mayor's office will know by late summer the extent to which families in low-income parts of the city will truly be served by city-run programs in the upcoming school year (2015-16). Extending access to their 4 year-olds – those who benefit most from pre-k if national patterns play out locally – has been a remarkable achievement for the mayor's team.

Still, considerable work remains if “universal” preschool is to narrow sharp disparities in children's early learning and development over time.

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This brief is authored by Bruce Fuller, professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley (b_fuller@berkeley). Earlier analyses with Elise Castillo appear at: <http://gse.berkeley.edu/expanding-preschool-new-york-city-berkeley-research-briefs>.

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Notes

¹ This population estimate is detailed in our April 2015 research brief, available at: http://gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/docs/De%20Blasio%20falls%20short%20of%20universal%20pre-k%20-%20Berkeley%20brief%20-%20April%202015_kn_BF888.pdf

² <http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/home/downloads/pdf/reports/2014/Ready-to-Launch-NYCs-Implementation-Plan-for-Free-High-Quality-Full-Day-Universal-Pre-Kindergarten.pdf>

³ See Figure 7 in http://gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/docs/NYC%20Pre-k%20Brief%20150305_print.pdf

⁴ Data tables provided by the Administration for Children’s Service, transmitted May 29, 2015. Special thanks to ACS staff for sharing this detailed enrollment information for 2013-14 and 2014-15.

⁵ Reiterated in a letter from the Deputy Mayor to preschool directors dated February 18, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/02/18/nyregion/document-pre-k-letter-2-18-15.html?_r=0

⁶ We estimated last spring that between 10,350 and 14,950 children enrolling in the mayor’s UPK program migrated from existing community-based centers in the 2014-15 school year. See page 9-10 in: http://gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/docs/NYC%20Pre-%20Brief%20150305_print.pdf

⁷ See the June 2015 report of the city’s task force: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/earlylearn/nyc-ece.pdf>

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