

Taking the Blinders Off: States Can't Fix Inequities They Can't See

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Abstract

Detailed child level data can facilitate evaluation of equity and effectiveness by state program administrators and by those outside state government who might wish to hold them accountable. Here we examine availability and use of those data within one program: state-funded preschool education. We identify and discuss as key issues: if states collect the data directly or can access it; if the data are available to state program administrators; and if the data are made available to the public. Not making data publicly available is a major shortcoming of many programs.

In the 2022 Yearbook survey, program administrators were asked about the child-level data elements collected for each state preschool program, whether they have access to those data, and whether data are made publicly available. The analysis that follows examines how preschool programs fare in terms of collecting and using child-specific information on issues related to access, quality, and effectiveness. Data were collected from 61 programs across 43 states, Washington, D.C. and Guam¹.

Data Related to Equitable Program Access

Collecting data on the home language, race and/or ethnicity, and family income of each child enrolled is a crucial first step toward assessing equity of access to state-funded preschool. Data on program attendance go a step further by providing information on the level of actual participation. Table 1 reports the extent to which these data are collected, available to state program administrators, and publicly reported.

Home Language

Information on how many children speak a home language other than English, as well as which languages are used, can inform decisions regarding staffing, recruitment, and the need for dual language services. Eleven state programs do not collect data on children's home language. In forty-four programs (70%), home language data are available to state program administrators, but just 16 (25%) report data (aggregated) publicly.

Race and ethnicity

Data on enrollment by race and ethnicity are crucial for understanding whether there may be overall or regional inequities in access, and, if so, how they might be remedied. Ten programs (16%) do not collect data on children's race and/or ethnicity. State preschool program administrators for 48 programs (76%) report having

access to race and/or ethnicity data. Only 24 programs (38%) report this information publicly, limiting transparency and accountability.

Income

At least 35 of 61 state preschool programs use family income to determine program eligibility, and program administrators in 30 of those programs have access to data on the family income levels of children attending the program. Administrators of the five remaining programs do not have access to data on family income, indicating that they may not have the ability to verify that the children enrolled in the program are those the state intended.

Of the 26 programs that do not use income to determine program eligibility, 18 report that program administrators have access to data on family income. For the eight remaining programs, states may not be able to gauge how program enrollment is distributed across income levels.

Attendance/absences

Children cannot benefit from everything preschool has to offer if they don't attend their program regularly. Without data on attendance and absences, state program administrators won't know where issues exist or how to begin alleviating the kinds of systemic issues that lead to chronic absenteeism. Of course, even if they have this information but lack data on home language, race/ethnicity, and income, they will be limited in understanding who has chronic absenteeism problems. Seventeen public preschool programs (27%) do not collect data on attendance/absences. In 41 programs (65%), data are made available to the state administrator and in 15 (24%), data are reported publicly. Of the 41 programs with data, 37 also have access to data on family income, 35 on home language, and 39 on race/ethnicity.

*Table 1: State Preschool Programs Collecting and Reporting Child-Level Data on Issues Related to Equitable Access (N = 61)**

| | Data are collected | State administrator has access to data | Data are publicly reported |
|----------------------|--------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Home language | 50 | 44 | 16 |
| Race/ethnicity | 51 | 48 | 24 |
| Attendance/absences | 44 | 41 | 15 |
| Measure(s) of income | 51 | 47 | 21 |

*In some cases, states do collect the data but do not make information available to state administrators.

Data Related to Program Quality and Child Outcomes

We also asked program administrators whether the state collects child-level data for developmental screenings, preschool and kindergarten child assessments, measures of classroom quality, and teacher qualifications. This information allows administrators to understand the needs of the population served, who has access, how quality might vary with child and

family characteristics (particularly if demographic data also are available at the individual child level) and to use administrative data to assess child outcomes. Table 2 shows states' responses to these questions.

*Table 2: State Preschool Programs Collecting and Reporting Data on Issues Related to Equitable Quality**

| | Data are collected | State administrator has access to data* | Aggregated data are publicly reported |
|--|--------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Developmental screenings (N=53) | 18 | 18 | 2 |
| Preschool child assessments (N=57) | 30 | 30 | 13 |
| Kindergarten child assessments (N=61) | 29 | 21 | 17 |
| Classroom quality assessments (N=57) | 32 | 31 | 11 |
| Teachers' education level (N=61) | 49 | 45 | 15 |

*In some cases, states do collect the data but do not make information available to state administrators.

Developmental Screening

Of the 53 state preschool programs that require developmental screenings, only 12 (23%) collect this information at the state level. For all 12 of those programs, the state preschool administrator has access to the information collected, but only two (both programs in Washington State) report the data publicly. South Carolina reports data publicly, but only for a subset of children.

Preschool and Kindergarten Child Assessments

Particularly when data are collected from developmentally appropriate assessments administered at preschool entry, program administrators have the ability evaluate how effective public preschool are for children during and after the preschool program year. Of the 57 state preschool programs with a policy to require preschool child assessments, 27 (46%) report that the state does not collect child-level data on preschool child assessments. Similarly, for 32 (52%) programs, the state does not collect data on kindergarten child assessments.

Classroom Quality Assessments

All but four state preschool programs (California TK, Kansas, Missouri and North Dakota) require structured observations of classroom quality, but only 31 of the 57 programs that require classroom quality assessments (54%) report that state program administrators have access to child-level data on classroom quality. Again, combined with other individual child data, this provides a basis for looking at equity with respect to quality. Just 11 state programs report this information publicly.

Teachers' Level of Education Home Language

Most state preschool program administrators (45, 74%) report having access to child-level data on their teacher's highest level of education. That is, they know for each child enrolled in the preschool program, characteristics of their teacher. Given the strong connection between teacher effectiveness and positive child outcomes, it is encouraging that most administrators are able to review this data point. However, it is also concerning that over a quarter of program administrators do not have access to this basic piece of program information and may miss signs of unequal access to high quality for some populations of children. Just 15 programs report aggregated data publicly, again leaving many stakeholders without information to hold states accountable for children's access to qualified teaching staff.

Conclusions

Identifying the characteristics of children who are, and are not, enrolled in publicly funded preschool programs is a first step towards understanding how better to ensure equitable access. Connecting these data to individual child data on attendance, quality, and child assessments opens opportunities for deeper insights into both equity and effectiveness. Equitable enrollment in state preschool by itself does not guarantee equitable access to a high-quality, effective program or that all children will fully benefit as intended. Connecting data on individual child and family characteristics with data on enrollment, attendance, and children's learning and development is, of course, just the first step. Making this available and ensuring agency staff have the capacity to appropriately analyze these data is also necessary if the data are to be effectively used to guide policy and practice for continuous improvement.

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About NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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Endnotes

¹ The 2022 State of Preschool Yearbook includes information on 63 programs across 44 states, Washington, D.C., and Guam. Data on the topics in this report were not collected from Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program or Virginia's Early Childhood Foundation Mixed Delivery.