



# Is Public Pre-K Preparing Hispanic Children to Succeed in School?

by Luis M. Laosa and Pat Ainsworth

The growth in public preschool education is based on research that shows high-quality prekindergarten has a positive effect on children's chances of succeeding in school and life.

Beneath the surface of this growth, however, lies a troubling lag in preschool education participation by the nation's largest, fastest growing and yet most educationally challenged group—Hispanic children, who may be challenged by issues of poverty and language. Many Hispanic children enter school well behind their non-Hispanic counterparts, achieve at lower levels throughout school and graduate at lower rates.

The gap in school readiness is unlikely to improve unless we address it with policies that increase preschool participation by Hispanic children and design programs that better accommodate their learning needs. Doing so may well entail rethinking the current approach to many programs.



## Preschool Policy Facts

Policy Facts series edited by  
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### What We Know:

- People of Hispanic descent comprise the fastest growing and least well-educated segment of the population.
- Hispanic families are least likely of any group to send children to public preschool education programs due in part to parental education, language barriers, low socio-economic status and lack of program access.
- Preschool education programs targeted to disadvantaged families fail to serve many Hispanic families who qualify.
- Hispanic children who attend high-quality preschool education have been found to benefit as much as children from other backgrounds...and in some cases, more.
- The prevalence of English Language Learners (ELL) in the preschool-aged Hispanic population is likely one reason this group lags behind children of other backgrounds on early learning measures.
- New approaches to serving English Language Learners hold promise for serving this population more effectively and efficiently.

### Policy Recommendations:

- States should evaluate their preschool education policies, with Hispanic children in mind. If ELL status is not a factor considered for targeted program eligibility, a consideration should be given to making it so.
- As future programs expand, conducting comparative analyses of targeted programs and pre-K for all children may prove useful. Universal programs can cost less per child and resolve problems of eligibility.
- States should ensure programs have some support for ELL children in their home language. Programs providing some support in the home language have been shown to foster improved cognitive, linguistic and social outcomes. More effort is needed to prepare and support teachers to meet the needs of Hispanic children.
- It should be a high priority at the state and federal levels to develop better reporting systems to ensure quality data for stronger research on Hispanic children and early education policies.

## Current Pattern of Disparities

A U.S. Department of Education study has shown that Hispanic children enter kindergarten well behind their non-Hispanic peers. The federal government's National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) provides a picture of school achievement in which Hispanic children consistently under perform relative to White non-Hispanic children. (See Figure 1.)

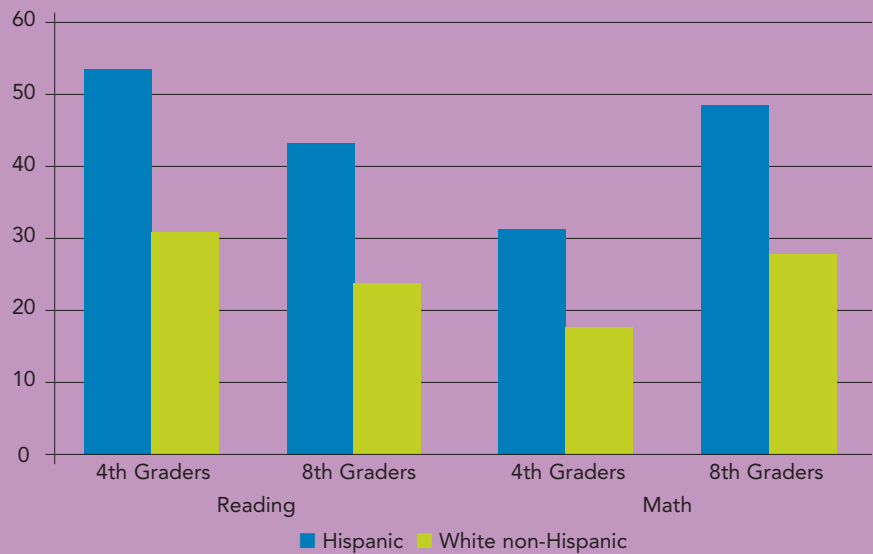
The extent to which this gap in achievement is due to language issues becomes clear when we look at NAEP scores for English Language Learners (ELL). It should be noted that ELL children are taking the NAEP reading and math tests in English, a language in which they are not yet proficient. It is therefore difficult to judge how much of their poor performance on these tests is a function of low skill levels in the subject matter and how much is a function of limited knowledge of English. (See Figure 2.)

## Hispanic Participation in Preschool

According to the 2005 National Household Education Survey (NHES), 30.5 percent of Hispanic 3-year-olds attended center-based preschool education programs as opposed to a 45.8 percent attendance rate for non-Hispanic children that age. (See Figure 3.) Participation rates were higher at age 4 but continued to lag behind other groups.

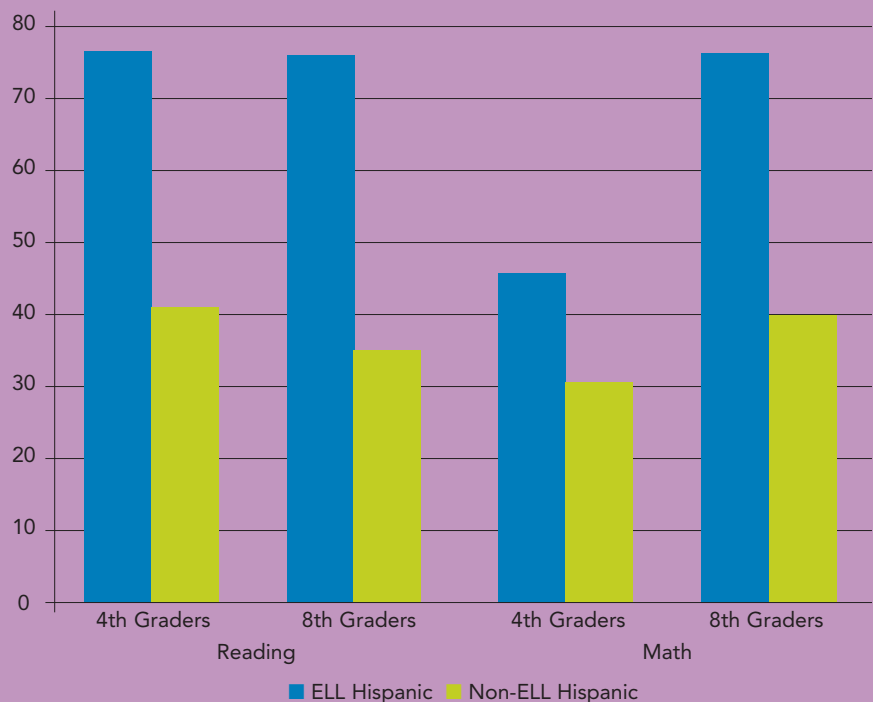
It is noteworthy that the differences in preschool participation rates between Hispanic and non-Hispanic children do not appear to be primarily due to cultural issues. A 2004 analysis by Barnett and Yarosz found that Hispanic children were not significantly less likely to attend preschool programs than White non-Hispanic children after controlling for factors such as education, income, employment, family structure and region of residence. In fact, a 2006

Figure 1. Percentage of Children Scoring Below the Basic Level in Reading and Math on the 2005 NAEP



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2005.

Figure 2. Percentage of Children Scoring Below the Basic Level on the 2005 NAEP



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2005.

survey of 1,000 Hispanic families in 10 states conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute found that 97 percent of parents said they would enroll their children in free voluntary

preschool education if it were available in their communities. Ninety-six percent indicated they believe it is important for children to attend preschool programs before kindergarten.

## Hispanic Children's Achievement in Preschool Education

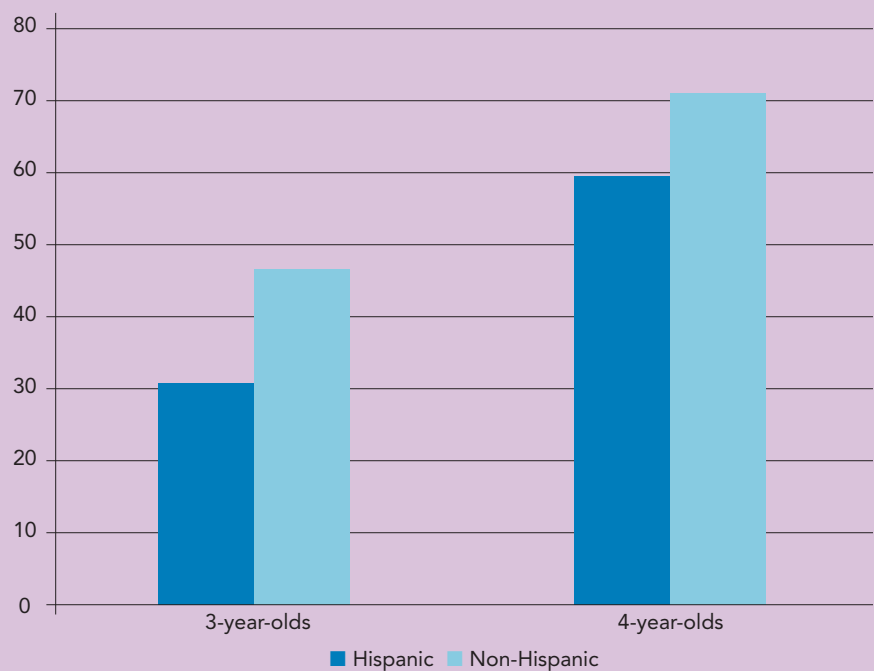
The pattern of reduced preschool attendance among children from Hispanic backgrounds accounts for at least a portion of the school readiness gap experience by this population. However, research indicates that not only do Hispanic children benefit from preschool education as much as children from other backgrounds but in some cases, they benefit more:

- An evaluation of the Oklahoma Preschool Program by Georgetown University found that in the areas of letter-word identification, spelling, and applied problem-solving, gains for Hispanic children exceeded those of children from other backgrounds.
- In 2004, NIEER researchers studied New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program. While the study did not break out results by demographic group, it is noteworthy that meaningful impacts were seen for all children, regardless of background in a sample of which about 40 percent was comprised of Hispanic children and 30 percent ELL children.
- The Congressionally mandated Head Start Impact Study examined the program's impact for each major racial/ethnic group. For Hispanic 3-year-old children, positive impacts occurred in pre-reading, vocabulary, and pre-writing.

Researchers using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K) studied the effects of all types of preschool education and child care centers and found that Hispanic children benefit more in terms of cognitive development from center attendance than White non-Hispanic or African-American children with similar characteristics.



Figure 3. Percentage of Children Enrolled in Center-Based Preschool Programs



Source: 2005 National Household Education Survey (NHES).

## Addressing the Language Issue

A central issue in providing early education to Hispanic children is the language used in teaching preschoolers who are English Language Learners (ELL). English-only policies for Hispanic preschool children are not supported by research. To the contrary, research finds that there are advantages to other approaches. In one analysis of 11 studies comparing bilingual programs with English-only programs, ELL children in elementary schools who attended two years of bilingual programs were found to perform at the 34th percentile. ELL children who attended English-only programs were found to perform at the 26th percentile. Other studies have found that teaching academic skills such as reading in the first language is more effective *in terms of second language achievement* than simply immersing children in English.

A relatively new approach to bilingual education is Two-Way Immersion (TWI). Also known as dual language, TWI programs have all students, both ELL and English proficient children, alternate between Spanish-only and English-only classes, providing all children with an education in two languages. A NIEER randomized trial of one such program found that both Spanish speakers and English speakers made gains in both languages. Spanish language gains were greater than in English Immersion (EI) while English language gains did not differ between TWI and EI.

## Expanding Access for Hispanic Children

Delivery of publicly funded preschool education has traditionally followed the model implemented with federal Head Start of targeting services to the neediest families. For reasons ranging from inadequate funding to families physically moving to families moving in and out of poverty, the goal of reaching and serving the target population remains largely unattained. However, it is possible to increase Hispanic participation in targeted programs through modifications to the eligibility process. For instance, only 12 states currently consider English Language Learner status as a factor making children eligible for targeted programs. Making ELL children eligible for more targeted programs could increase Hispanic participation in those programs.

A number of states have made the provision of state-funded prekindergarten to all children a policy goal. Since universal programs have no eligibility requirements when fully implemented, they are by definition likely to reach more Hispanic families.



This fact sheet is based on the policy brief "Is Public Pre-K Preparing Hispanic Children to Succeed in School?" by Luis M. Laosa and Pat Ainsworth. The brief includes full references and is available at [www.nieer.org](http://www.nieer.org). It was made possible by the generous support of The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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