Increasing access to school-based, full-day pre-k may be an effective policy strategy for increasing enrollment among high-priority student groups and making pre-k opportunities more equitable.

As pre-kindergarten (pre-k) expands across the country, school districts are making choices about where to place pre-k classrooms and developing policies for how families can apply and who is enrolled. In doing so, districts are considering policies that influence students’ access to pre-k. Research shows that some families have less access to pre-k than others, which contributes to inequitable enrollment within districts. This study explores whether and how Chicago’s school-based pre-k system was more equitable after the district implemented a set of policies focused on changing access to and enrollment in school-based pre-k. The outcomes from this Chicago’s efforts offer key insights for other school districts implementing similar efforts nationwide.

**Citing the Chicago’s Pre-K Policy Changes for More Equitable Enrollment**


**Two of Chicago’s primary policy strategies focused on expanding access to full-day school-based pre-k:**

- Increasing the number of full-day pre-k classrooms.
- Providing about 100,000 dollars for access to pre-k programs online or in person during school-based pre-k program year.

**Other complementary policy strategies that were being implemented citywide over the same time period:**

- Controlling CPS funding of school-based pre-k classrooms and enrollment decisions.
- Providing about 100,000 dollars for access to pre-k programs online or in person during school-based pre-k program year.
- Expanding on-ground efforts for measures to encourage enrollment among historically high-priority families, such as providing targeted information about available pre-k options and assistance in filling out the application.
Although the total number of pre-k seats in CPS did not increase during our study years (2010–11 to 2015–16), Chicago’s policy changes greatly expanded full-day pre-k to CPS:

• The portion of pre-k seats that were full-day classrooms quadrupled, from 2% to 8%.
• The percentage of elementary school offering full-day pre-k quadrupled, from 10% to 41%.
• The concentration of full-day pre-k seats increased most in the West and South sides of Chicago in mostly-Black neighborhoods and neighborhoods with high income and high male unemployment rates—which had the lowest rates of pre-k enrollment pre-policy.
• The average number of full-day pre-k seats in mostly-Black neighborhoods increased from 4.6 seats to 18 seats per 100 children.

As intended, these shifts in both the number and location of full-day pre-k classrooms resulted in increased access to full-day pre-k for high-priority student groups. (See Figure 2.)

• Although nearly all student groups saw an increase in the average number of full-day pre-k classrooms near their home post-policy (0.2 to 0.7), increases were largest for high-priority groups (e.g., an average of 0.5 to 1.7 for lowest-income students).
• Overall, students living an average of 0.2 miles closer to a school with at least one full-day pre-k classroom; improvements in proximity were even greater for high-priority student groups.
• The average distance to the closest school with full-day pre-k was cut in half for Black students, Latino students, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods (0.3 miles post-policy).
• Students living in mostly-Latinx neighborhoods lived 0.8 miles closer to a school with full-day pre-k post-policy (from 1.9 to 1.1 miles away, on average).

Like improvements in access, enrollment patterns in full-day pre-k changed in ways that were consistent with the policy goals. (See Figure 2.)

• Pre-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were White students; students in highest-income neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-Whites neighborhoods.
• Post-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were Black students, students living in lowest-income neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.
• These student groups were up to three times more likely to enroll in full-day pre-k post-policy (comparing three-years pre and post-policy).

Like improvements in access, enrollment patterns in full-day pre-k also experienced the largest increases in enrollment (see Table 1). Therefore, these increases in access and enrollment were stronger for Black students, low-income students, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.

Overall, the same high-priority student groups that experienced increases in access to full-day pre-k also experienced the largest increases in enrollment (see Table 1). Therefore, these high-priority student groups—those who stood to gain the most from going to pre-k but had been less likely to enroll prior to the policy changes—were the biggest beneficiaries of these policy changes. This meant that Chicago was able to achieve greater equity in both access to and enrollment in full-day, school-based pre-k.

This study demonstrates that access played a key role in achieving more equitable enrollment of high-priority student groups. Although numerous policy-related factors were changing simultaneously, predictive analyses revealed a persistent link between access to and enrollment in full-day pre-k, both overall and within student groups, before and after Chicago’s pre-k policy shifts.

• Pre-policy, students with more limited access to full-day pre-k in CPS were also less likely to enroll. The policy was small for all student groups, but slightly stronger for the lowest-income students, and for students living in mostly-Black and mostly-Latinx neighborhoods.

The portion of pre-k seats that were full-day classrooms quadrupled, from 2% to 8%.
• The percentage of elementary school offering full-day pre-k quadrupled, from 10% to 41%.
• The concentration of full-day pre-k seats increased most in the West and South sides of Chicago in mostly-Black neighborhoods and neighborhoods with high income and high male unemployment rates—which had the lowest rates of pre-k enrollment pre-policy.
• The average number of full-day pre-k seats in mostly-Black neighborhoods increased from 4.6 seats to 18 seats per 100 children.

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• Overall, students living an average of 0.2 miles closer to a school with at least one full-day pre-k classroom; improvements in proximity were even greater for high-priority student groups.
• The average distance to the closest school with full-day pre-k was cut in half for Black students, Latino students, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods (0.3 miles post-policy).
• Students living in mostly-Latinx neighborhoods lived 0.8 miles closer to a school with full-day pre-k post-policy (from 1.9 to 1.1 miles away, on average).

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• Pre-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were White students; students in highest-income neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-Whites neighborhoods.
• Post-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were Black students, students living in lowest-income neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.
• These student groups were up to three times more likely to enroll in full-day pre-k post-policy (comparing three-years pre and post-policy).

Like improvements in access, enrollment patterns in full-day pre-k also experienced the largest increases in enrollment (see Table 1). Therefore, these increases in access and enrollment were stronger for Black students, low-income students, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.
Although the total number of pre-k seats in CPS did not increase during our study years (2010–11—2015–16), Chicago’s policy changes greatly expanded full-day pre-k in CPS:

- The portion of pre-k seats that were full-day classrooms quadrupled, from 5% to 20%.
- The portion of elementary schools offering full-day pre-k quadrupled, from 10% to 40%.
- The concentration of full-day pre-k seats increased most on the West and South Sides of Chicago in mostly-Black neighborhoods and in neighborhoods with lower income and higher male unemployment rates—which had the lowest rates of pre-k enrollment pre-policy.
- The average number of full-day pre-k seats in mostly-Black neighborhoods increased from 4.6 seats to 9.5 seats per 100 children.

As intended, these shifts in both the number and location of full-day pre-k classrooms resulted in increased access to full-day pre-k for high-priority student groups. (See Figure 2)

- Although nearly all student groups saw an increase in the average number of full-day pre-k classrooms near their home post-policy (0.2 to 0.7), increases were largest for high-priority groups (e.g., an average of 0.4 to 1.7 for low-income students).
- Overall, students living an average of 0.6 miles closer to a school with at least one full-day pre-k classroom nearest post-policy in mostly-Black neighborhoods,improvements in proximity were even greater for high-priority student groups.
- For example, the average distance to the closest school with full-day pre-k was cut in half for Black students, 0.7 miles post-policy. Students living in mostly-Latinx neighborhoods lived 0.6 miles closer to a school with full-day pre-k post-policy (from 1.9 to 1.3 miles away, on average).

Figure 1
Post-Policy, High-Priority Student Groups Lived Near More CPS Full-Day Pre-K Classrooms and Lived Closer to a CPS School with a Full-Day Pre-K Classroom

Figure 2
Post-Policy, High-Priority Student Groups Became Much More Likely to Enroll in CPS Full-Day Pre-K

Student Groups

- Pre-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were White students, students living in mostly-White neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-Latinx neighborhoods.

Overall, students who benefited from the policy changes were those who stood to gain the most from going to pre-k but had been less likely to enroll prior to the policy changes—were the biggest beneficiaries of these policy changes. This meant that Chicago was able to achieve greater equity in both access to and enrollment in full-day, school-based pre-k. Overall, the same high-priority student groups that experienced increases in access to full-day pre-k also experienced the largest increases in enrollment (see Table 1). Therefore, these high-priority student groups—those who stood to gain the most from going to pre-k but had been less likely to enroll prior to the policy changes—were the biggest beneficiaries of these policy changes. This meant that Chicago was able to achieve greater equity in both access to and enrollment in full-day, school-based pre-k.

This study demonstrates that access played a key role in achieving more equitable enrollment of high-priority student groups. Although numerous policy-related factors were changing simultaneously, predictive analyses revealed a persistent link between access to and enrollment in full-day pre-k, both overall and within student groups, before and after Chicago’s pre-k policy shifts.

- Pre-policy, students with more limited access to full-day pre-k in CPS were also less likely to enroll.
- The policy was small for all student groups, but slightly stronger for the lowest-income students and for students living in mostly-Latinx and mostly-Black neighborhoods.

Overall, the same high-priority student groups that experienced increases in access to full-day pre-k also experienced the largest increases in enrollment (see Table 1). Therefore, these high-priority student groups—those who stood to gain the most from going to pre-k but had been less likely to enroll prior to the policy changes—were the biggest beneficiaries of these policy changes. This meant that Chicago was able to achieve greater equity in both access to and enrollment in full-day, school-based pre-k.

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**ACCESS to CPS Full-Day Pre-K Increased for High-Priority Student Groups**

Although the total number of pre-k seats in CPS did not increase during our study years (2010–11 to 2015–16), Chicago’s policy changes greatly increased access to full-day pre-K in CPS:

- The pre-policy period was mainly characterized by the fewest seats and the highest enrollment rates across all student groups.
- The post-policy period was characterized by increasing access to full-day, school-based pre-k.

Moreover, the redistribution of pre-k seats increased most on the West and South Sides of Chicago in mostly-Black neighborhoods and neighborhoods with a high percentage of Black students, which had the lowest rates of pre-k enrollment prior to policy change.

As intended, these shifts in both the number and location of pre-k classrooms resulted in increased access to full-day pre-k for high-priority student groups.

- Although nearly all student groups saw an increase in the number of full-day pre-k classrooms near their home post-policy (0.2 to 0.7), increases were largest for high-priority groups (e.g., an average of 0.5 to 1.7 for low-income students).

In the left panel, there were large increases in the portion of elementary schools offering full-day pre-k seats (between 5% and 21%).

- The average number of full-day pre-k seats in mostly-Black neighborhoods increased from 4.6 seats per 100 children.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Neighborhood Characteristics</th>
<th>Pre-Policy</th>
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<td>Percent of English Learners</td>
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### Figure 1

**Post-Policy, High-Priority Student Groups Lived Near More CPS Full-Day Pre-K Classrooms and Lived Closer to a CPS School with Full-Day Pre-K.

The portion of elementary schools offering full-day pre-k increased: (e.g., an average of 0.5 to 1.7 for low-income students). Overall, students lived an average of 0.6 miles closer to a school with at least one full-day pre-k classroom; improvements in proximity were even greater for high-priority student groups.

### Figure 2

**Post-Policy, High-Priority Student Groups Experienced the Largest Changes Both in Access to and Enrollment in CPS Full-Day Pre-K.**

Like improvements in access, enrollment patterns in full-day pre-k changed in ways that were consistent with the policy goals (See Figure 2).

- **Pre-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were White students, students living in mostly-high-income neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-White neighborhoods.**
- **Post-policy, the most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were Black students, students living in mostly-Latinx neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.**

The strength of the association between access and enrollment was stronger post-policy (compared to pre-policy) for Black students, lowest-income students, and/or students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.

### ACCESS Was a Key Policy Lever for Achieving Greater Equity in ENROLLMENT

This study demonstrates that access played a key role in achieving more equitable enrollment of high-priority student groups. Although numerous policy-related factors were changing simultaneously, predictive analyses revealed a persistent link between access to and enrollment in full-day pre-k, both overall and within student groups, before and after Chicago’s pre-k policy shifts.

- **Pre-policy, students with more limited access to full-day pre-k in CPS were also less likely to enroll in the program.**
- **Post-policy, access continued to predict enrollment, and the association became stronger for some student groups.**

Overall, the same high-priority student groups that experienced increases in access to full-day pre-k also experienced the largest increases in enrollment (see Table 1). Therefore, these high-priority student groups—those who stood to gain the most from going to pre-k but had been less likely to enroll prior to the policy changes—were the biggest beneficiaries of these policy changes. This meant that Chicago was able to achieve greater equity in both access to and enrollment in full-day, school-based pre-k.

### Figure 3

**Greater Equity in Enrollment in CPS Full-Day Pre-K.**

In all of the years we studied, only a small subset of all CPS pre-k students were enrolled in full-day pre-k. Yet full-day pre-k enrollment rates grew nearly four-fold from the first year of our study to the last (from 3.2% in 2010–11 to 11.6% in 2015–16), driven by enrollment of high-priority student groups.

Like improvements in access, enrollment patterns in full-day pre-k changed in ways that were consistent with the policy goals (See Figure 2).

- **Pre-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were White students, students living in mostly-high-income neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-White neighborhoods.**
- **Post-policy, the students most likely to enroll in full-day pre-k were Black students, students living in mostly-Latinx neighborhoods, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.**

The strength of the association between access and enrollment was stronger post-policy (compared to pre-policy) for Black students, lowest-income students, and/or students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods.
Increasing access to school-based, full-day pre-k may be an effective policy strategy for increasing enrollment among high-priority student groups and making pre-k opportunities more equitable.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH


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Start Early

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Increasing access to school-based, full-day pre-k may be an effective policy strategy for increasing enrollment among high-priority student groups and making pre-k opportunities more equitable.

ABOUT NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

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This snapshot focuses on full-day pre-k because we believe (1) it provides a more equitable and consistent pre-k experience, and (2) there are clear policy differences across settings in Chicago. As pre-kindergarten (pre-k) expands across the country, school districts are making choices about where to place pre-k classrooms and developing policies for how families can apply and who is enrolled. In doing so, districts are shaping policies that influence students’ access to pre-k. Research shows that some families have less access to pre-k than others, which contributes to inequitable enrollment within districts. This study explores whether and how Chicago’s school-based pre-k system was more equitable after the district implemented a set of policies focused on changing access to and enrollment in school-based pre-k. The outcomes from Chicago’s efforts offer key insights for other school districts implementing similar efforts nationwide.

Studying Chicago’s Pre-K Policy Changes for More Equitable Enrollment

Beginning in 2013, the City of Chicago launched major policy efforts to create more equitable enrollment in pre-k programs. The policies aimed to enroll more students from ‘high-priority’ groups (students of color, students speaking a language other than English, and students living in neighborhoods with lower incomes and higher unemployment), who were most likely to benefit from pre-k. A subset of these policies targeted school-based pre-k in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), such as a centralized application process for pre-k. This study sought to understand how these early education policies were related to changes in access to and enrollment in school-based pre-k within CPS. Two of Chicago’s primary policy strategies focused on expanding access to full-day pre-k classrooms:increasing the number of full-day pre-k classrooms; and providing targeted information about school-based pre-k. Other complimentary policy strategies were focused on increasing access to school-based pre-k:• providing targeted information about school-based pre-k;• increasing the number of full-day pre-k classrooms; and• working to improve enrollment among high-priority families. This snapshot focused on full-day pre-k because we found differences in access and enrollment among students who did not attend school-based pre-k. More equitable pre-k access and enrollment in Chicago

As pre-kindergarten (pre-k) expands across the country, school districts are making choices about where to place pre-k classrooms and developing policies for how families can apply and who is enrolled. In doing so, districts are shaping policies that influence students’ access to pre-k. Research shows that some families have less access to pre-k than others, which contributes to inequitable enrollment within districts. This study explores whether and how Chicago’s school-based pre-k system was more equitable after the district implemented a set of policies focused on changing access to and enrollment in school-based pre-k. The outcomes from Chicago’s efforts offer key insights for other school districts implementing similar efforts nationwide.
Increasing access to school-based, full-day pre-k may be an effective policy strategy for increasing enrollment among high-priority student groups and making pre-k opportunities more equitable. Providing more pre-k seats for historically under-served students can better prepare them for success in kindergarten and beyond.

- Policymakers can consider where school-based pre-k classrooms are located, and where none are added, to address inequities in student access and enrollment. While full-day pre-k enrollment remained relatively constant, CPS successfully and substantially increased full-day pre-k access and enrollment for high-priority students.

- District leaders can take the consideration of number and location of full-day pre-k classrooms and enrollments as a strategy for increasing enrollment among high-priority student groups and making pre-k opportunities more equitable. By providing more pre-k seats for historically under-served students, school districts nationwide can Leverage the potential of full-day pre-k to better prepare students for success in kindergarten and beyond.

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