

# State-Funded Preschool Availability in Illinois Depends Upon Where You Live: An Equity Analysis of ISBE Pre-K Resources



## RESEARCH BRIEF

### WHO GETS TO GO TO PRESCHOOL IN ILLINOIS?

Illinois established the Preschool for All (PFA) and Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) programs (i.e. state-funded preschool) with the goal of providing universal, voluntary access to preschool for all three- and four-year-olds. Currently the state's preschool funding provides seats for only one quarter of all preschool-aged children. Under the program's authorizing legislation, the state prioritized serving children at risk for school failure as it continues to build toward universal access to preschool. School districts have the flexibility to define risk factors for children to meet local circumstances, such as living in families with low incomes, poverty incomes or in deep poverty, having a special need, being a dual-language learner, having a teen parent or experiencing homelessness. We call these children “priority children” rather than “at-risk” in this brief. We also follow the state's determination that some children may have “multiple risk factors” or measurably deeper need, and we call these “highest priority children.” To determine whether preschool-aged children in Illinois are receiving equitable support from the state – especially priority children—we analyzed how the state distributes preschool funding.

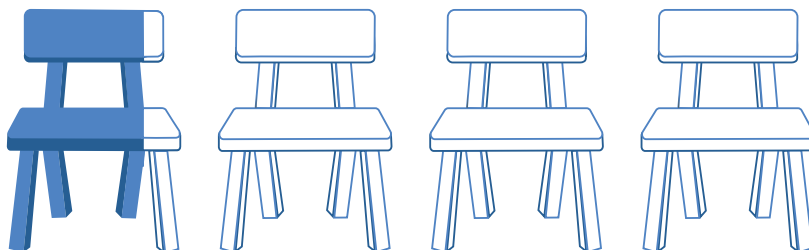
We use two measures to estimate the number of priority children residing in a community (with community defined as the geographic area served by an elementary or unit school district):

- Low-income children: The number of preschool-age children (ages 3 and 4) who live at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level.
- Children in poverty: The number of preschool-age children who live at or below federal poverty level.

While not all priority children are low-income and not all low-income children are priority, for this analysis the numbers of low-income children and children in poverty serve as proxies for the numbers of priority and high-priority children in a school district.<sup>1</sup>

### Do all children from low-income families have access to preschool?

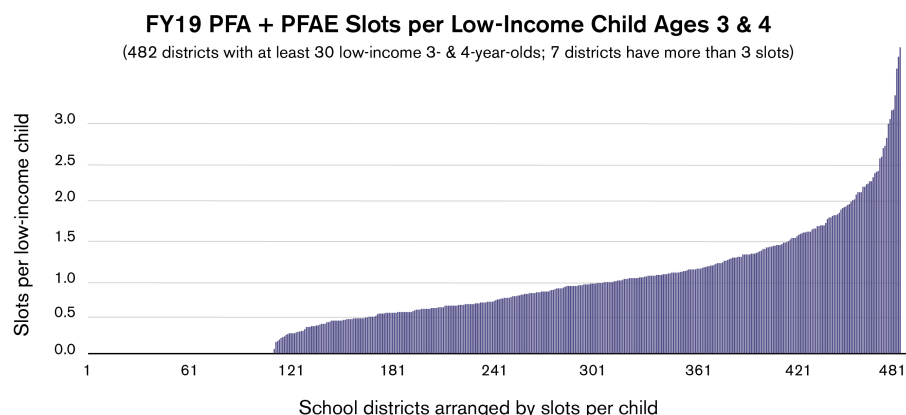
The short answer is no. Whether or not you get to go to state-funded preschool depends on where you live. **We estimate that about 21,300 low-income children ages 3 and 4 in Illinois, or more than 23%, live in school districts with less than half of a preschool seat available to them.**



<sup>1</sup> This analysis relies on poverty and population data for Illinois elementary and unit school districts provided by the U.S. Census Bureau in its annual American Community Survey (five-year estimates). Since Census data for very small school districts can be inaccurate, we exclude districts with fewer than 30 low-income children residing in them. We also exclude Chicago because its size and funding process require a separate analysis. We do not omit these districts because they are unimportant, but only because we feel they must be studied by other means.

In an equitable system with too few slots, we would expect priority children, especially high-priority children, to have access to state-funded preschool before that access is expanded to other children. This is not the case. Across the 482 districts that we analyzed that had over 30 low-income children, wide variation exists in the number of state-funded preschool seats per low-income child.

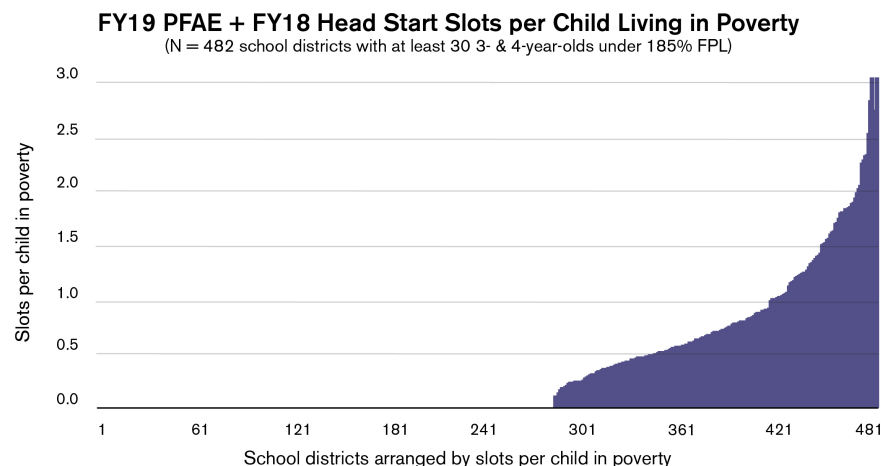
- 110 school districts, almost one quarter, have no state-funded preschool seats. 11,274 low-income 3- and 4-year-olds live in these districts.
- 62 school districts have seats but have fewer than half a preschool seat per low-income child. This means a low-income 3- or 4-year old has less than a 50-50 chance of getting a seat.
- 141 school districts (29 percent) have enough seats to serve every low-income child.
- 28 districts have over 2 seats per low-income child in their community.



## Are the highest-priority children receiving the most support?

Illinois PFAE, similar to federally-funded Head Start, was designed to provide enhanced full-day services for the highest-priority children in a community. If the system were fully equitable we would expect the highest priority children to have access to PFAE or Head Start before access is expanded to other children.

**In most school districts (59 percent), children in poverty have no access to a PFAE or Head Start seat. In the communities where there are PFAE or Head Start seats, the number of seats available per child in poverty varies widely from less than half a seat to more than three per child. In 58 school districts (12 percent) that have PFAE or Head Start seats, a child in poverty has less than a 50-50 chance of getting to preschool, whereas in more than 65 districts (13 percent) there are more than enough slots to serve every child in poverty.**



## Did the FY19 re-competition improve the equitable distribution of slots?

In 2019, the state changed the PFA competitive grant process to make the funding system slightly more equitable; however, Illinois is still underserving its priority children.

- In the latest award distribution process, the most underserved communities - those with the fewest publicly-funded preschool slots per low-income child - were only slightly more likely to receive an increase in state-funded seats than communities with already high levels of service.
- More moderately underserved communities (those with one-half to one slot per low-income child) were the most likely to receive slot increases in FY19. In rural communities, however, neither the most underserved nor the moderately underserved communities received priority over communities with higher levels of service.
- Districts with majority Black and Latinx students were somewhat more likely to receive increases in state-funded seats in FY19 than all school districts regardless of racial or ethnic composition. This can be construed as a movement toward racial equity.
- Communities least able to provide preschool seats through local funding (Tier 1 and Tier 2 districts according to the state's Evidence Based Funding Formula) were somewhat more likely to receive new preschool seats than communities most able to pay (Tier 3 and Tier 4 districts). While this indicates a moderate movement toward equity, it does not reflect a strong commitment to fund the districts least able to pay.

### Summary

While this analysis is no substitute for a detailed study of the state funding process, it is sufficient to raise substantial questions about equity in state preschool funding awards. The funding awards show little consistency in relation to need, as measured by low-income children or children in poverty.

## Early Care and Education Funding Must Meet the Needs of All Children

### Action Recommendations

1. Move to a need-based formula and away from a competitive grant process, in this administration. Given the state's goal of prioritizing access to publicly-funded preschool for the most-at-risk children, Illinois should undertake a comprehensive review of the current competitive application process for distributing Early Childhood Block Grant (ECBG) funds. The state should examine other potential funding distribution approaches, ranging from a significantly revised competitive grant process to a formula-driven allocation of resources to communities. Any approach should prioritize serving the most at-risk children first as the system grows, and ensure a high-quality, mixed-delivery approach that is inclusive of both school and community-based settings.
2. Redesign and expand early care and education funding. In the interim, given the number of communities with very low levels of access to early learning services, the state should continue to expand funding through the ECBG while it studies potential new funding approaches. The grant competition process should be designed to prioritize high-poverty communities with very low access to PFAE and Head Start. It should also prioritize expansion of PFA only in communities with few publicly-funded preschool slots per low-income child.

As expansion of funding continues, priority should also be given to ensuring that programs are sufficiently funded to provide the services children need to be ready to succeed as they enter kindergarten.

Illinois has great opportunity to improve its early care and education funding system. Addressing how ISBE distributes early learning slots would be one of the most effective investments in building a more equitable future. The present process perpetuates inequality and must be significantly revised in order to ensure each child has an equal chance of success regardless of where they live.

Finally, until Illinois achieves universal preschool, some priority children will have no opportunity to attend preschool. During the transition to universal preschool Illinois should increase access to high-quality child care for three- and four-year-olds, particularly for those in poor and low-income families or who otherwise face increased risk of school failure. The Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) could take a number of steps to support parents in enrolling their three- and four-year-olds in high-quality child care: waive work requirements and copayments for low-income families that place their three- and four-year-olds in high-quality child care; use a simpler application process for children ages three and four; increase reimbursements for high-quality (gold- and perhaps silver-rated) child care programs; and for providers, improve pathways to an ExceleRate quality rating and/or credentials and offer other quality supports for child care homes and licensed centers that care for three- and four-year-olds.

## Data

The full report “State-Funded Preschool Availability in Illinois Depends Upon Where You Live: An Equity Analysis of ISBE Pre-K Resources” analyzes data on FY17 and FY19 preschool grants provided by the Illinois State Board of Education, FY18 Head Start data provided by the Illinois Head Start Association, and 2016 Census data downloaded from the US Census Bureau’s American FactFinder: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>. The full report is available online at <https://www.actforchildren.org/research-data/research-reports/>



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*The analysis and conclusions presented in this report are those of the Research Department of Illinois Action for Children and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders.*

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