



IS THIS PRE-K PROGRAM WORSENING THE RACIAL DISPARITIES IT WAS SUPPOSED TO ADDRESS?



When Bill de Blasio launched his ambitious preschool plan shortly after being elected Mayor of New York City in 2013, racial equity was a major justification for the initiative, which expanded the number of four-year-olds enrolled in the city’s full-day early childhood program from 19,000 to 70,000 in just two years.

“We didn’t just implement universal pre-K to improve educational outcomes and put money back in the pockets of working families,” he wrote in 2019 on [CNN.com](https://www.cnn.com). “It’s about more than that. It’s addressing longstanding racial inequities and creating a more fair and just society.”

Although by many measures, the program has been successful, an [article](#) published in December in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Researcher* suggests that it may be falling short when it comes to equity-related goals.

Conducted by Scott Latham of Princeton University, NEPC Fellow [Sean Corcoran](#) of Vanderbilt University, Carolyn Sattin-Baja of UCSB, and Jennifer Jennings, also of Princeton, the study examines the quality of the city’s preschool programs—both overall and for students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The researchers found that program quality is high overall, as measured by two well-accepted ratings systems. However, they also found that White children attended higher quality programs than did their Black or Hispanic peers.

“The quality disparities we document are likely to contribute to small but meaningful disparities in student outcomes,” the researchers note.

The researchers suggest that the disparities may be driven by geographic considerations. In a city plagued by residential segregation, the highest quality programs are less likely to be located near Black students' neighborhoods. Yet Black students are more likely than White students to enroll in programs located within a quarter mile of their homes.

These findings are echoed by an April 2021 [study](#) led by NEPC Fellow [Bruce Fuller](#) of the University of California Berkeley. The Berkeley team also found that quality was lower at sites that mostly served Black and Hispanic children and in higher poverty Census tracts. They suggested that overall quality had plateaued after increasing during the initiative's early years—but that programs mainly serving White and Asian students were an exception. At these sites, quality continued to improve.

“This raises the specter—despite the mayor’s admirable intentions—that his program hardens, rather than narrows, racial disparities in children’s early growth,” [Fuller said last spring](#). “How can this pre-K entitlement narrow inequities in early learning when quality tilts toward better off families?”

Adding to the concern is the coronavirus pandemic, which has led to declines in preschool enrollment as parents kept their children home to avoid exposing their families to COVID. However, New York is continuing to make inroads into expanding early childhood education, with full-day programs [now available to many three-year-olds](#).

NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education

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