



**PRESCHOOL EDUCATION:
Delivering on the Promise for Latino Children**

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR)—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations, NCLR reaches millions of Hispanics each year in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. To achieve its mission, NCLR conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health. In addition, it provides capacity-building assistance to its Affiliates who work at the state and local level to advance opportunities for individuals and families.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

v	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
1	INTRODUCTION
5	DEVELOPING HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR LATINO CHILDREN
5	Research on Second-Language Development
8	Policy Implications
11	Looking Ahead
15	OVERCOMING PRESCHOOL ACCESS BARRIERS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS
16	Effective Latino Family Engagement
17	The Facilities Shortfall and Latino Enrollment
19	Policy Implications
20	Looking Ahead
23	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
23	For Federal Policymakers
25	For State Policymakers
26	Looking Ahead
28	ENDNOTES

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Libros en español



Books in english

INTRODUCTION

Latino* student achievement has emerged as a central issue in education reform debates. After decades of neglect and disregard for the persistent disparities faced by these students, this attention is both welcome and long overdue. There is growing recognition that our nation's public education system will only succeed in producing a 21st-century workforce and developing the next generation of leaders if we reverse the Latino educational crisis.

The numbers alone make these students impossible to overlook. In 2008, Latinos accounted for 22% of students enrolled in our nation's public schools.¹ The Census Bureau projects that in the coming decades, the Hispanic school-age population will increase from 11 million to 28 million,² and this number will continue to grow since Latino children[†] account for almost 26% of the nation's population under five years of age.³

The new environment has educators and policymakers seeking strategies to improve the academic performance of students who are at risk of school failure, particularly Latinos. Hispanic children are often less prepared for the first day of school than their non-Hispanic peers, and access to high-quality preschool education programs is critical to supporting their academic achievement from an early age.⁴ Mounting research shows that a positive preschool education experience narrows the school-readiness gap and affords children lasting educational benefits.⁵ Policymakers must increase access to preschool as part of broader education reform.

This approach would have a significant impact on Latinos, who are among the children least likely to have a preschool experience before kindergarten. In 2009, only 48% of Hispanic four-year-olds attended preschool, compared to 70% of White and 69% of Black children of the same age.⁶ This lack of preschool participation contributes to the school-readiness gap and to future educational disparities. For example, a California study documented that Latino children start kindergarten already two months behind White students in reading and math skills.⁷ Clearly, any attempt to equalize educational outcomes for Latinos must begin well before kindergarten.

Currently, federal, state, and local policymakers are engaged in a complex debate on the future of the nation's public education system. The pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as well as new competitive federal funding streams, including the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, make for an opportune time to address early learning as a means for closing the achievement gap between Hispanics and their White peers. As the education reform movement continues to gain momentum, it is critical that educators and policymakers view Latinos as key stakeholders.

Hispanic children have the most to gain from education reform efforts as they encompass more and more of the school-age population. However, few policy initiatives have focused on addressing the challenges faced by this diverse population, such as low household income, low levels of maternal education, limited English proficiency, and overrepresentation in underresourced schools.

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

† "Children" and variants thereof refer to those youth under the age of 18. When available, specific data for children under age five are provided.

In 2007, more than one-third of Hispanic children lived in high-poverty neighborhoods, or those areas with poverty rates of at least 20%.⁸ Furthermore, almost three-fifths (59%) of Latino children live in low-income families, which puts them at risk for poor educational outcomes.⁹

Low levels of maternal education are also associated with low levels of school readiness and poor language acquisition, and Hispanic children are more likely than their peers to live in a household with a mother who did not graduate from high school. In 2008, for example, 42% of Latino children lived with a mother who did not complete high school, compared to 25% of Black children and 10% of White children.¹⁰ This may partially explain why, by age two, Latino children are already behind White children in vocabulary and problem-solving skills.¹¹

Hispanic children also represent a large proportion (80%) of the nation's English language learners.¹² Among Latino students, nearly two-fifths are ELLs, and the majority of ELLs (65%) are native-born citizens.¹³ These students often require additional support to succeed academically, but the quality and effectiveness of education programs varies widely. Further complicating their achievement is that ELL students are concentrated in urban school districts. In 2003–2004, ELLs made up an estimated 17% of center-city public school students, compared to suburban and rural/small-town public schools where they made up 8% and 6% of the student body, respectively.¹⁴

Lastly, Hispanic children are concentrated in schools that primarily serve low-income students and have fewer available resources. In 2003–2004, one-third of Hispanic children were enrolled in high-poverty schools, compared to 32% of Black, 4% of White, and 10% of Asian children; Latinos account for 46% of all students attending school in high-poverty urban areas.¹⁵ In 28 states, high-poverty districts receive fewer cost-adjusted dollars than low-poverty districts, putting students in high-poverty schools at an even greater disadvantage.¹⁶

These barriers are evident in student achievement data. In 2009, 39% of Latino eighth graders scored “below basic” in reading, and 43% scored “below basic” in mathematics, compared to 16% and 17% of White students, respectively.¹⁷ Additionally, only 55% of Hispanic students who enter ninth grade graduate on time with a traditional diploma.¹⁸ As the population of Hispanic children continues to grow, it becomes increasingly important to address the inequities that exist and to close the achievement gap between Latinos and other racial and ethnic groups.

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) has prepared this publication to highlight opportunities to improve the educational outcomes of Hispanic children at an early age, a time that is critical to setting up the academic success of children. Specifically, this paper examines barriers to quality and access that limit the participation of Latino children and families in preschool and offers recommendations for state and federal policymakers on how to design a high-quality preschool education system that serves all children, including Latinos and English language learners (ELLs).

DEVELOPING HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR LATINO CHILDREN

Preschool programs must have developmentally appropriate curricula and instruction, teacher competencies, and high levels of family engagement in order to be effective.¹⁹ Researchers have identified basic quality indicators such as class size, ratios, and safety requirements that make programs successful. Despite the progress in better understanding the elements of high-quality preschool programs, very little attention has been given to developing measures of quality for working with culturally and linguistically diverse children, particularly Latinos and English language learners.

Between 2000 and 2010, the Hispanic population grew from 35.3 million to 50.5 million, accounting for more than half of the national growth rate during that period.²⁰ Moreover, data from 2008 show that 40% of all ELLs are between ages three and eight.²¹ These demographic changes have made classrooms throughout the country increasingly diverse, making it all the more important to provide services for culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Fortunately, current preschool policies have already established a strong foundation on which to build quality components that could significantly improve the school readiness of Latino and ELL children. The vast majority of states have developed early learning standards for preschool-age children and teacher competencies that have laid the groundwork for quality improvement efforts. Policymakers can leverage already-established systems to enhance the quality of services to and the early learning outcomes for this subgroup of children.

Research on Second-Language Development

Although we are far from answering all of the questions about the most effective practices for instructing young ELLs, researchers have contributed significantly to the literature on dual-language development for young children. Experts in brain development, language acquisition, and instructional strategies have revealed important findings that can greatly inform the education of young ELLs. Policymakers should consider this research when developing early learning standards and professional development systems.

Neuroscience

Advances in the science of brain development have documented the importance of early childhood experiences to future learning, behavior, and health.²² Although neuroscience and the science of bilingual learning are relatively new fields, neuroscientists have uncovered important findings that significantly affect the instruction of ELLs and provide insight into bilingual learning.

For decades, researchers have tried to document how bilingual language development affects cognition and intelligence. Studies of the mental development of young children point to the increased mental flexibility and cognitive advantages of bilingual children over monolingual children.²³ Findings show that early exposure to two languages not only has a positive impact on the linguistic, cognitive, and reading development of young children, but that bilingualism imparts no developmental disadvantages.²⁴ Other studies have shown that dual-language exposure deepens reading and phoneme awareness skills, which are vital to reading success.²⁵ This research puts to rest the fear that introducing more than one language to young children results in delayed linguistic development. In spite of this, few policymakers, advocates, or school leaders acknowledge the benefits of bilingualism and the utility of the native language in early learning programs.

Research on Second-Language Development

It is critical that policymakers, advocates, and practitioners consider the contributions of neuroscientists and second-language-acquisition experts when developing early learning standards and designing instructional strategies. For Latino children to reap the benefits of early childhood education, the following findings* should form the foundation of instruction for learners of a second language:

- **Bilingual children demonstrate higher levels of mental flexibility and cognitive abilities compared to monolingual children.** Exposing children to two languages has been shown to greatly benefit the early learning of both ELLs and native English speakers.
- **Early bilingual exposure does not negatively impact the linguistic, cognitive, or literacy development of young children.** Fearful myths have led some parents and educators to deny children exposure to another language, but this is detrimental, especially considering the benefits that learning two languages has on a child's development. Educators must not be afraid to use languages to systematically instruct children.
- **Studies have consistently shown that the native language acts as a foundation upon which a second language is built.** This is perhaps the most important and most ignored finding from language-acquisition experts. Effective education programs must provide intentional support and instruction in the native language in order for young ELLs to benefit the most. As ELL children enter preschool—their first year of formal schooling—they have an even better chance of success if instructed in their home language.

* National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, *Myths and Misconceptions About Second Language Learning* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1992).

Acquisition of a Second Language

As neuroscience continues to reveal new findings, language-development experts have also contributed significantly to understanding how young children acquire a second language. Most importantly, and perhaps in contrast to many state and local educational policies and practices, language-acquisition research clearly shows that the native language acts as a foundation upon which a second language is built.²⁶

Study after study has revealed correlations between native language and English vocabulary scores, proving that higher levels of native-language proficiency lead to higher levels of English-language proficiency.²⁷ Children transfer concepts and skills from their native language, once it is mastered, to the new language.²⁸ Thus, building knowledge and skills in the native language is a viable means to promoting academic achievement in English.

Recent research from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, illustrates that Spanish-speaking children have better social skills when their teachers speak some Spanish in the classroom.²⁹ Better social skills and closer relationships with classmates and teachers help ensure that young children benefit the most from their early childhood experiences. Given this wealth of research, the advantages of bilingual instruction must be part of any policy discussion to ensure that preschool programs benefit all children.

Best Practice: East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program

Research points to native language as a foundation from which to acquire a second language, and programs across the country have responded by developing strong instructional models for working with young English language learners. The East Coast Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program (East Coast), an NCLR Affiliate with 60 centers along the east coast migrant stream,* has developed an effective instructional program that supports the home language while also supporting the acquisition of English as a second language.

East Coast's program is based on Head Start Program Performance Standards, which require all grantees to have a written curriculum plan. During the development of the curriculum, East Coast engaged with parents, teachers, and community members to form a curriculum advisory group. The group developed a broad framework to guide the creation of the curriculum, which was grounded in incorporating evidence-based practices with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The program supports dual-language learning through three strategies: staff become familiar with the families they serve and their language backgrounds; they create a language-rich learning environment in English and in Spanish; and they determine which adults will be the consistent language role models in the classroom. Moreover, East Coast has a very well-developed daily instructional guide for teachers, which includes detailed lesson plans with bilingual materials for each day of instruction and is complemented by professional development trainings.

Anecdotal evidence from parents suggests that students are acquiring literacy in English and in Spanish, in addition to acquiring content knowledge in other domains such as numeracy. Data collected by East Coast also show positive trends in Head Start Outcomes for participants. For example, at the Florida site, only 10% of preschool students had high levels of English proficiency at the start of the program, compared to 33% of students by the program's end. Furthermore, data show that 90% of children demonstrated pre-writing skills by the end of the program as compared to just 39% at the start.

* Sites include locations in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York.

Policy Implications

State and federal policymakers have already taken important steps to improve the quality of early learning programs; however, more can be done to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse children reap the benefits of preschool programs. Policymakers and education advocates must closely examine the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Latino and ELL children and their families. In particular, policymakers should take a careful look at states' early learning standards and systems of professional development as potential areas to make improvements that will significantly boost the school readiness of young Latinos.

Early Learning Standards

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), of 49 state preschool programs, 41 have comprehensive early learning standards that include children's physical well-being and motor development, socioemotional development, approaches to learning, language development, cognition, and general knowledge.³⁰ However, a recent NCLR report³¹ shows that the specific needs of ELLs are only marginally addressed by state early learning guidelines.* As policymakers develop a framework for preschools, they have a unique opportunity to significantly enhance the quality of services and instruction provided to ELLs.

NCLR's analysis revealed that only Alaska had developed early learning standards that outline progress in the native language. Alaska is a significantly linguistically diverse state that has more than 20 American Indian languages and more than 80 other world languages. According to a publication by the Alaska Department of Early Learning, approximately 15% of young children speak a language other than English at home, a rate that is far less than that in many other states throughout the country. Despite the obstacles posed by significantly varied language ability throughout the state, Alaska has made great strides to preserve children's native language and ensure that they continue to make gains in both their home language and in English.

Alaska's early learning guidelines include indicators and strategies to support dual-language development; no other state advocates for, or even mentions, the use of any language other than English in the classroom. In some instances, states do not even specifically name English as the language to be used, making the assumption that no language other than English could be used for instruction. However, eight states have benchmarks by which to measure the English-language development of students who are not native English speakers. These range from listing the stages a dual-language learner experiences while acquiring both languages to explaining the developmental process in depth.

Several states, while not providing a system by which to measure English-language acquisition among ELLs, have acknowledged that some children will be learning two languages simultaneously, at home and at school. In these instances, states recognized achievement in a child's native language as evidence of age-appropriate language development. Six states (Alaska, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, and Oregon) did so, but did not provide benchmarks for language acquisition in either English or a child's home language.

* State early learning guidelines include state-funded programs and exclude programs such as Head Start.

Even when states provide benchmarks, they are almost always listed exclusively under the literacy/language category; no state incorporates the unique challenges of ELLs throughout its entire early learning standards, as in chapters on mathematics or social development. To date, English-language development is solely the purview of language instruction and not seen as an issue that pervades the entirety of a child's preschool experience.

The lack of comprehensive early learning standards is alarming given the growing rate of ELLs in preschool classrooms across the country. Without clear early learning guidelines to outline how ELL students should be progressing in a variety of content areas, this vulnerable group of students will continue to suffer academic setbacks. Fortunately, the vast majority of states have already established learning standards for three- and four-year-old children that could be revised to include more comprehensive benchmarks for culturally and linguistically diverse kids. In addition, policymakers at the federal level continue to develop legislative proposals to incentivize states to improve the quality of early learning programs. As these proposals unfold, states will have a new opportunity to examine their early learning standards and integrate what research has found to be essential for the healthy language and literacy development of young ELLs.

Professional Development

Research has confirmed that the most essential characteristic of an effective early childhood educator is the ability to build a close, trusting relationship with children that allows for effective communication, responsiveness, and engagement. As such, early childhood educators must not only be able to connect with children, but also be able to adapt to a young child's changing needs. For many young ELLs across the country, a teacher's ability to communicate is compromised by a lack of bilingual skills or unfamiliarity with how young children acquire a second language. As language and communication are fundamental to establishing strong relationships, often the promised outcomes of a strong preschool program are not realized for ELL students, and they continue to fall into patterns of academic hardship.

Despite the growing diversity among American children, few state-funded preschool programs have considered the qualifications, skills, and competencies that early childhood education (ECE) teachers must have in order to work effectively with a diverse group of students, including ELLs. Recent research from the Erikson Institute shows that most colleges and universities that prepare early childhood educators have few requirements related to understanding the needs of children from diverse communities and children with special needs.³² Moreover, although national data on the preschool workforce are scarce, state-level data provide a comprehensive study about the demographic characteristics of the early learning workforce and educator training levels.

In 2006, First 5 California commissioned a survey of the early learning workforce which revealed that ECE workers in California were much more diverse than K–12 public school teachers and more closely reflect the demographic characteristics of the young children in the state, 50% of whom are Hispanic. As demonstrated by the table that follows, Latinos account for 27% of center teachers and 42% of assistant teachers, as compared to only 14% of the K–12 teacher workforce.

The survey also found that the ECE workforce is more linguistically diverse than the general adult population. Almost half (49%) of California's assistant teachers are fluent in a language other than English and are more likely to be bilingual than both center teachers and

Ethnicity of California’s ECE Workforce, K–12 Teachers, and Birth-to-Five Children

	Family Childcare Providers	Center Teachers	Assistant Teachers	Directors	K–12 Teachers	Children 0–5 Years
White, Non-Hispanic	42%	53%	37%	62%	74%	30%
Latino	35%	27%	42%	16%	14%	50%
Black	15%	7%	8%	9%	5%	5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5%	5%	8%	6%	6%	10%
Other	3%	8%	5%	7%	1%	4%

Source: Marcy Whitebook, *California Early Care and Education Workforce Study: Licensed Childcare Centers and Family Childcare Providers, 2006 Statewide Highlights* (Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Childcare Employment and California Childcare Resource and Referral Network, 2006).

directors.³³ One of the many advantages of having such diversity in California’s workforce is that it lends itself to higher levels of bilingualism, increasing the probability that a teacher can communicate effectively with children and families of various cultural backgrounds.

Although Latinas are represented in each of the ECE workforce categories in California, they are also the least likely to have obtained higher levels of education. Rates of bachelor’s degree attainment are highest for White, non-Hispanic, center-based teachers and lowest for Latina licensed providers and center-based early childhood educators.³⁴ This is especially disconcerting given that California averages more than four times as many ELLs per classroom as the rest of the United States.

Furthermore, data from the Erikson Institute show that in institutions of higher education, very little attention is focused on preparing early childhood educators to work with children of color and ELLs. On average, only 12.5% of required professional development hours were related to working with diverse communities. Similarly, only 7% of programs require participants to complete an internship in a multicultural setting or expect them to work with diverse children in some way.³⁵

These data clearly show that the vast majority of early childhood educators are not receiving the tools needed to teach young Hispanic and ELL children effectively. This research is supported by state-level data that show a similar pattern. The Center for the Study of Childcare Employment documented that on average, only about one-third of teachers operating under a contract with Head Start or the California Department of Education have completed college credits in education related to dual-language learning.³⁶

As state and federal policymakers create professional development systems, they must consider what the ECE workforce looks like more broadly. States must be given incentives and supports to build comprehensive workforce data systems that allow them to understand not only the demographic characteristics of the workforce, but also their training needs and competencies. Only then will states be able to build a preschool workforce that is more reflective of the student population and better equipped to meet the needs of culturally

and linguistically diverse children and families. Moreover, policymakers should consider the persistent challenges to developing a culturally and linguistically competent preschool workforce, including low wages, family obligations, and language ability.

The childcare and early childhood education field is one of the lowest-paid industries in the country. According to studies, earnings for ECE teachers can be as low as \$6.25 per hour.³⁷ Researchers have linked wages with education level and turnover rates, showing that higher levels of education are associated with higher wages and lower levels of turnover. For the Hispanic ECE workforce, which is largely concentrated in the area of assistant teachers, low wages can greatly hinder access to higher education programs that will allow for professional advancement. As schools consider increasing requirements for teachers, policymakers must take into account the barriers that many ECE teachers face in accessing higher education programs.

More than half of the ECE workforce is composed of women between the ages of 29 and 55.³⁸ Often, those employed in the ECE workforce must manage significant family obligations, such as caring for their children and other family members, which makes it more challenging to find the time to complete credentialing requirements. At the same time, federal and state mandates that increase teacher qualifications also require teachers to reach higher levels of training in a shorter time frame. For example, the New Jersey Abbott Programs require that teachers meet a bachelor's degree requirement within six years.³⁹ Managing a schedule that includes a full-time job and family obligations prevents many in the ECE workforce from successfully completing programs that can lead to stronger skills and better job opportunities. It is critical that states develop mechanisms through which the ECE workforce can meet the demands of tougher teacher requirements and an increasingly diverse student body.

While the language skills of the national ECE workforce are not well documented, studies in California demonstrate that the workforce is much more linguistically diverse than the general adult population.⁴⁰ Despite the multilingual proficiency of this population, course offerings in higher education are rarely in languages other than English. Teachers who may be more comfortable in their native language have much more limited opportunities.

If we are to maintain a diverse and well-trained workforce, policymakers must provide supports to encourage current and prospective teachers to meet new professional development goals. Career ladders must allow assistant teachers the opportunity to obtain a bachelor's degree and/or specific training that will equip them to take lead teacher responsibilities and roles, including providing coursework and training in languages other than English. As noted, the ECE workforce is significantly underpaid, making financial aid and incentives necessary to encouraging assistant and prospective teachers to pursue higher education and training. There is a clear incentive and need for higher education programs and school districts to require training and practice working with ELLs.

Looking Ahead

In a challenging fiscal environment, it is all the more important to identify investments that have the most impact on student learning. For Latino and ELL children, this means investing in efforts that improve the quality of ECE programs. To make these improvements, states must develop and outline early learning guidelines that clearly articulate competencies for ELLs. Doing so will create demand for better approaches to instruction and curriculum development.

Additionally, policymakers can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of professional development systems that allow ample opportunities for the ECE profession to become more diverse and more culturally and linguistically competent. California is a shining example of a state that could leverage the diversity of its workforce to deliver high-quality preschool programs. Until states have more direction and resources to overcome these challenges, the ECE workforce will not adequately meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.



OVERCOMING PRESCHOOL ACCESS BARRIERS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS

In recent decades, the demand for early childhood education programs has grown significantly due to an increase in female participation in the labor force and the expansion of childcare subsidies, among other reasons. More and more attention is being paid to the quality of preschool programs, which has led to increased investments in early learning. These efforts must be complemented by initiatives that address the challenges related to accessing preschool programs, including developing stronger family outreach strategies and investing in facilities development, particularly in low-income communities.

Polling of Hispanic parents shows that families have a strong interest in enrolling their children in preschool programs, disproving the myth that Hispanic families have a cultural preference for keeping their children in family or home-based care. A study conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute of the University of Southern California in 2006 found that 96% of Latinos believe that preschool is important for four-year-olds and that those who attend preschool have an academic advantage over children who do not.⁴¹ The poll also showed that Latino parents would take advantage of such opportunities for their children if they had clear information about the availability and ease of enrollment. However, the polling data showed that more than one-quarter (26%) of families surveyed did not know where to get information about preschool services.⁴²

There is longstanding research pointing toward the connections between positive family engagement and greater academic motivation, grade promotion, and socioemotional skills for all young children, including those from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.⁴³ Of course, outreach strategies should not only inform parents and families about services, but engage them in the education and learning of their children. Evidence shows that when programs are effective in helping families create a home environment that promotes learning, expresses high expectations, and supports high levels of family engagement, both children and parents benefit.⁴⁴

In addition to their limited participation in preschool programs, many Latinos live in communities where the shortfall of preschool facilities is well documented. Data reveal that children who need preschool the most tend to live in large urban areas and isolated rural areas that have limited physical space or infrastructure for housing preschool programs. Moreover, programs that do exist in these communities have difficulty expanding because they do not have the financial resources or expertise to develop or renovate facilities on their own. Without a public-sector commitment to stimulate investments in facilities development for early learning programs, resources will continue to be a barrier in communities that need them most.

The experiences of California and Illinois help illustrate how programs and state policymakers are addressing the disparities in access to preschool in Latino communities. Their efforts explore the two major issues affecting Hispanic children's access: family engagement and the severe shortfall of preschool facilities. This section considers the states' experiences in meeting the needs of Hispanic families, and highlights some opportunities and resources that help children enroll in preschool programs.

Effective Latino Family Engagement

Family involvement matters substantially for young children’s cognitive and social development. There is a growing body of evidence showing that early interventions with parents yield positive results for young children and their levels of school readiness.⁴⁵ Effective family engagement programs focus on parenting, home-school relationships, and promoting learning. Most importantly, family engagement programs help parents understand the importance of nurturing adult-child relationships that support young children’s self-concepts and emotional well-being.

At ages three and four, children are at the peak of their learning and brain development. These early years are the most critical to engaging parents in their children’s education and helping them understand the importance of early learning. Family engagement is particularly important for Hispanic families, who tend to have fewer resources in the home. For example, studies show that Latina mothers read to their children less frequently than White or Black mothers.⁴⁶

Best Practice: Family Engagement at The Concilio

The Concilio, a Dallas-based NCLR Affiliate, has been working closely with Latino families for almost a decade. Recognized across the state of Texas, Concilio conducts outreach to parents of young children in Dallas elementary schools; the majority of participants are newly arrived or recent immigrants. Concilio enrolls them in a 30-week, school-based program that focuses on strengthening their skills to advocate for their young children. Classes are offered several times a week to make the program more accessible, and free childcare is offered while parents attend classes. The organization maintains a close partnership with the Dallas Independent School District to facilitate successful school and community engagement.

Since 2002, more than 5,500 parents have graduated from Concilio’s parent engagement program. The immediate impact on their young children is difficult to gauge, but a survey of more than 2,100 parent graduates who also had children in high school at the time of their program participation showed that 90% of their children graduated from high school, while 78% of those who graduated went on to postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that early learning programs are not effectively engaging Hispanic and English language learner families. In 2006, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted a study that sought to understand how the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services could improve access to early learning and childcare programs for families with limited English proficiency. Feedback from focus groups revealed that ELL mothers “faced multiple challenges, including lack of awareness, language barriers during the [childcare program] application process, and difficulty communicating with English-speaking providers.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, the GAO found that although many early learning programs had translated materials and provided application assistance, many did not have sufficient bilingual staff who could effectively communicate with parents. Recruiting and retaining bilingual professionals was cited as a consistent concern among preschool providers.⁴⁸

Anecdotal evidence from NCLR's Affiliate partners also suggests that, particularly in immigrant families, parents are often confused about the services for which they and their children qualify. Oftentimes families will refuse services in order not to reveal their documentation status or because immigration officials have targeted early learning programs to conduct immigration raids. Fortunately, there are multiple strategies that preschool programs can adopt to better inform Latino and English language learner families about the enrollment process and capitalize on Hispanic enthusiasm for education.

A Smart Start for Family Engagement

A growing body of research has established strong evidence that meaningful family engagement and outreach supports school readiness and academic success.* According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children,[†] effective family engagement and outreach strategies include the following:

1. Encourage and validate family participation in decision-making about their children's education.
2. Facilitate consistent, two-way communication through multiple forums that is responsive to the linguistic preference of the family.
3. Collaborate with families. Family members share their unique knowledge and skills through volunteering and actively engaging in events and activities at schools. Teachers seek out information about their students' lives, families, and communities and integrate this information into their curricula and instructional practices.
4. Create and sustain learning activities at home and in the community that extend the teachings of the program so as to enhance each child's early learning.
5. Help families create a home environment that values learning and school programs.
6. Develop an ongoing and comprehensive system for promoting family engagement by ensuring that program leadership and teachers are dedicated and trained and receive the support they need to fully engage families.

* Donald Bailey, Jr., "Evaluating Parent Involvement and Family Support in Early Intervention and Preschool Programs," *Journal of Early Intervention* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 1–14.

[†] Linda C. Halgunseth and Amy Peterson, *Integrated Literature Review, Family Engagement* (Washington, DC: National Association of Young Children, 2009), http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/ecprofessional/EDF_Literature%20Review.pdf (accessed April 5, 2011).

The Facilities Shortfall and Latino Enrollment

As states consider expanding preschool services, the availability of preschool facilities has become an increasingly important concern. The Advancement Project conducted a study to examine space availability for a universal preschool proposal that would reach all of California's three- and four-year-old children and a targeted approach that would serve just three- and four-year-old low-income children; policymakers had to ensure children would have access to a preschool program under either approach.

The study found that under either a universal or a targeted approach, there would be significant space shortfalls, particularly in those communities where children need preschool the most. In fact, the study states that of four-year-olds in California, one in five lacks a space in preschool and that existing preschool space is distributed unevenly over socioeconomic status.⁴⁹ The Advancement Project also found that as the percentage of Latino children increased, so did the severity of the facilities shortfall. For example, a community with a surplus of more than 1,000 preschool spaces correlated with a 14% Latino child population, however, in a community that had a shortage of more than 1,500 spaces, the percentage of Latino children increased to an astounding 78%.⁵⁰ While these findings are quite common across the country, few states have launched initiatives to address the disparity; Illinois is one of just a handful.

Preschool Programs in Illinois's Latino Communities

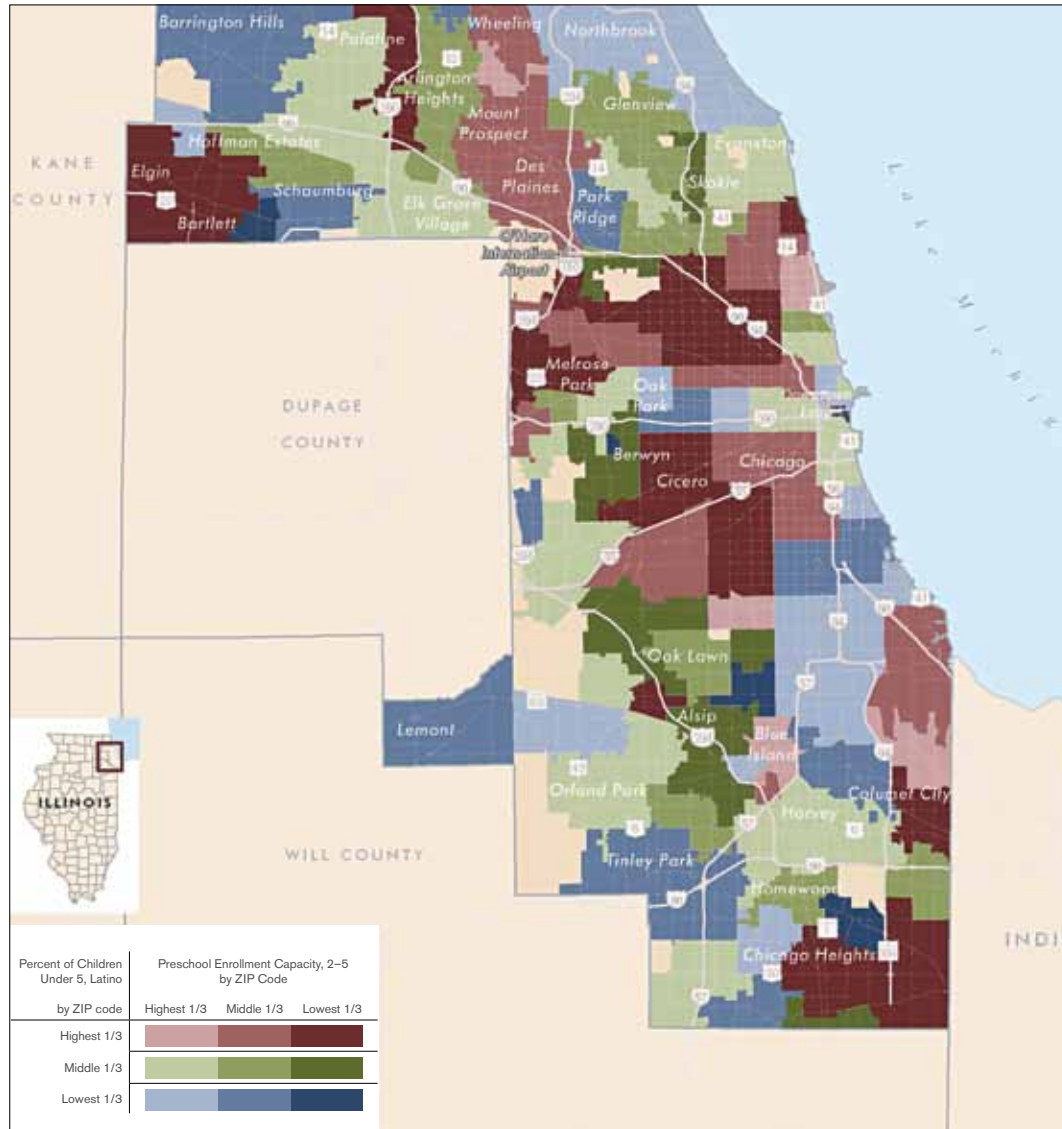
Illinois has a long history of investing in preschool for at-risk children. In 1985, the state launched its first preschool initiative, known as the Prekindergarten Program for At-Risk Children. Since then, Illinois has expanded its investments in preschool and in 2006 launched Preschool for All, with the goal of offering voluntary universal preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in the state by first reaching low-income families.⁵¹

As with other states that have made significant progress in advancing preschool policies, Illinois is working to address the facilities shortfall, particularly in high-poverty, high-minority districts. In 2009, the state committed \$3.4 billion to a capital plan that included \$45 million for early childhood facilities construction grants. These grants provided eligible early education organizations with much-needed funding for new construction and renovation.

Despite a significant increase in state funding for facilities and a growing Hispanic population, Latino children in Illinois continue to experience access barriers to enrolling in preschool. A recent report examined the facilities shortfall in Cook County, which includes Chicago. The report states that the availability of preschool centers remains much lower in Cook County neighborhoods populated more heavily by Latino families than those with higher concentrations of Black or White families (see map that follows).⁵²

In addition, a study conducted by the Illinois Facilities Fund showed that “the ratio of licensed childcare facilities to children in Latino neighborhoods is significantly lower than the comparable ratios in predominantly White or African American communities.”⁵³ School districts often partner with local childcare providers to offer mixed childcare and preschool options. This strategy helps expand preschool services in communities where schools have limited space. The shortage of licensed childcare facilities in Hispanic neighborhoods, however, presents a larger challenge to housing preschool programs and exemplifies the lack of basic infrastructure needed to support the growth of these programs in Hispanic communities.

**Cook County Preschool Enrollment Capacity for Latino Children
Ages 2–5, and Percent of Children Under 5**



Source: Bruce Fuller, Yoonjeon Kim, and Margaret Bridges, *Few Preschool Slots for Latino Children: Scarce access in Illinois drives learning gaps, even before starting school* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, 2010), http://www.ewa.org/site/DocServer/NJLC-Brief-3_FINAL_11_8_10.pdf?docID=1763 (accessed November 22, 2010).

Policy Implications

In addition to the challenges of improving the quality of preschool programs, persistent barriers to Hispanic access to preschool programs pose serious challenges to closing the achievement gap. Federal and state policymakers must consider ways to improve outreach to Hispanic families in order to boost enrollment, and must begin to invest in preschool facilities development, particularly in low-income communities that are facing severe shortfalls.

Family Outreach

Preschool programs must become more proactive and make stronger efforts to engage families and parents of young children. However, for outreach to be effective, preschools must have the resources and basic capacity for addressing language barriers and clarifying eligibility requirements, particularly as they relate to immigration status. Broader strategies that incentivize programs to hire bilingual staff and develop quality standards will go a long way to bolster culturally and linguistically appropriate services and outreach. Such efforts would be further strengthened by state involvement, wherein states should identify leads to oversee family engagement strategies and ensure consistency across individual programs and broad systems, including learning standards, quality rating systems, and teacher competencies.

Financial Barriers for Facilities Development

The experience of Illinois demonstrates that the preschool facilities shortfall is an urgent issue that must be addressed as part of an agenda for Latino education reform. One of the biggest challenges for programs is balancing the cost of financing facilities development with the costs of delivering high-quality preschool services, which include expenses such as teacher compensation and materials. According to a recent report, constructing or substantially renovating a preschool facility costs between \$10,000 and \$30,000 per child, making it prohibitively expensive for many programs.⁵⁴ Moreover, many parents in low-income communities cannot afford to pay high fees that allow programs to fund renovations, a reality that often depresses the market price for these services.

Further compounding the difficulty of improving the preschool system is the very fragmented nature of financing streams. Preschool providers receive funding from a variety of sources such as parents and other public contributors. This includes federal Head Start grants, which in some states are matched with appropriated state funds, as well as state childcare subsidies, including two federally funded block grants. Different state agencies oversee different parts of these funds, but none are obligated to oversee childcare facilities development. For example, the Child Care and Development Block Grants—administered by the Department of Health and Human Services—help low-income families obtain childcare through contracts with childcare providers. However, funds may not be expended for acquiring land or for the construction or rehabilitation of preschool facilities.

Looking Ahead

Early learning programs are finally starting to garner adequate attention and investment, and several state and federal legislative proposals have been introduced to increase access to high-quality preschool programs.* While these efforts are to be lauded, it is clear that preschool programs must develop stronger methods for conducting outreach to limited-English-proficient families; simply increasing the number of slots is not sufficient.

* Recent proposals include the “Universal Prekindergarten Act” (H.R. 555), introduced by Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D–OH) in January 2009; the “Supporting State Systems of Early Learning Act” (S. 470), introduced by Senator Robert Casey (D–PA) in March 2011; the “Ready to Learn Act” (S. 1170), introduced by Senator Patty Murray (D–WA) in June 2011; and California’s “Preschool for All” ballot initiative of June 2005.

All families must be able to access and comprehend information about preschool programs, and they should be able to enroll their children with ease, regardless of a parent's immigration status or language ability. Policymakers should consider integrating basic standards into preschool programs that address how well programs serve culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.

However, a high-quality preschool is not enough if there is insufficient space to house the program and meet the needs of the surrounding community. Developing facilities requires substantial investment, and a handful of states have successfully explored creative ways to surmount funding obstacles. Even so, the efforts of states are small relative to the reality of demand. In many American communities, investment in expanding preschool slots will not reach Latino children simply because they live in neighborhoods that lack the basic physical infrastructure needed to grow these programs.

As the Hispanic child population continues to grow and enrollment levels in preschool remain stagnant, it is essential that policymakers not only address the quality of programs, but also increase preschool access by expanding outreach and ensuring that facilities can accommodate whole communities. Unless disparities in access are eliminated, the achievement gap will continue to widen and affect a disproportionate number of Latino children.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Latinos are changing the face of public schools throughout the country. One in every four children under the age of five is Hispanic, and demographers predict that they will outpace the growth of all other groups of children in the coming years.⁵⁵ It has become clear that preschool policies have the potential to significantly affect whether Hispanic children enter school ready for success or continue to fall behind.

There is significant research to guide the process of expanding access to high-quality preschool programs for all children, including Latinos and ELLs; what remains to be seen is whether policymakers and advocates will heed the research. NCLR has developed the following policy priorities that support the school readiness of Hispanic and ELL children and put them on a path to success.

For Federal Policymakers

Federal policymakers should play a prominent role in shaping national preschool policies. Although federal investments in early learning have primarily focused on Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grants, there are several potential opportunities for policymakers to incentivize states to improve the quality of preschool programs and to expand access to the children most in need. Federal legislators should make every effort to ensure that early learning is a fundamental piece of education reform.

Improve Quality

The school readiness of Latino and ELL children greatly depends on the availability and provision of high-quality services. As such, it is important that federal preschool policies drive a demand for creating effective strategies to work with Latino and ELL children and families.

- **Require states to develop early learning guidelines that establish benchmarks for English-language development.** As the Early Learning Challenge Fund becomes available through the Race to the Top initiative, these competitive grants to states should incentivize the development of comprehensive, inclusive early learning standards that are based on current research on second-language development. By developing standards for English-language acquisition, states will create demand for intentional and effective instructional methods and professional development strategies that will help all teachers understand how to monitor progress for young ELL children.
- **Promote professional development, training, and technical assistance for ECE providers to meet the needs of Latino and ELL children.** Legislators should increase access to higher education programs that expand the pool of highly-qualified bilingual teachers and personnel with expertise in working with Latinos and ELLs. Congress should develop legislative proposals that allow programs to build in career ladders for the existing ECE workforce. The ladders would include financial assistance and academic supports that allow instructors to complete coursework and/or certification requirements while remaining in the workforce.

- **Support programs that promote meaningful parental involvement and family literacy opportunities.** Forty-three percent of Latino children come from families where mothers have less than a high school education.⁵⁶ For ECE initiatives to be effective, families must have access to two-generational literacy programs that educate parents and their young children alike. Recent elimination of the William F. Goodling Even Start Program (Even Start)—an important family literacy program—is of great concern given the program’s successful track record serving ELL children and their families, the vast majority of whom are Latino. Congress should ensure that the fundamental elements of Even Start are still a part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).
- **Incentivize states to develop quality instruction for ELLs.** ECE programs across the country have developed innovative and effective strategies for working with ELLs. Congress must encourage states to improve the quality of their zero-to-five programs by replicating research-based, successful approaches to teaching and assessing young ELLs—particularly in dual-language instructional programs—through competitive funding streams.
- **Fund dual-language programs for PreK–fifth grade through Title III of ESEA.** Recent trends show high demand across all communities for dual-language programs, yet low-income students have only limited access to them. To expand access to high-quality instruction, Congress should provide competitive funding to states to develop dual-language programs for PreK–fifth grade.

Expand Access

Although Latino children are the fastest-growing segment of the child population, they have the least access to early care and education programs. Recent data suggest that in 2009, only 48% of Hispanic four-year-olds attended preschool, compared to 70% of White and 69% of Black children of the same age.⁵⁷ In order to increase access to ECE programs, federal policy must focus on family outreach and facilities development.

- **Create a clearinghouse of effective family outreach programs and provide funding to evaluate promising outreach strategies.** Early childhood education programs should develop strategies for family engagement that include identifying points of contact and outreach for ELL families, such as immigrant-serving institutions, faith-based organizations, and community-based organizations. Additionally, programs must be able, at minimum, to translate materials into other languages and provide comprehensive services in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner.
- **Establish a system for service delivery that leverages the expertise of community-based organizations to provide ECE services.** A service delivery system that offers options for public/private, center-based, and home-based services could reach more Latinos because so many of the public schools in low-income Hispanic neighborhoods are already overcrowded and have little room to serve preschoolers. A study that examined states’ experiences using community-based programs to provide preschool found that states employing this model were able to offer preschool options to more working families.⁵⁸ Congress should mandate collaboration between school districts and private or community-based centers through the Early Learning Challenge Fund and the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act.

- **Fund the development of facilities in communities where there are limited ECE programs.** As Congress considers revisions to early learning policies, it must ensure equitable access to preschool programs. Latino children often have no childcare or preschool center in their neighborhoods, making them less likely to enroll in any program. Funding for facilities development, particularly in Latino communities, is an essential component of any preschool proposal. Congress should provide funding in the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act that is targeted toward funding facilities development, technical assistance, and capital subsidies.
- **Promote the use of Title I of ESEA funds for early learning programs.** Although preschool is an allowable venue for the use of Title I funds, very few school districts apply funds to this arena. Congress should provide additional information and guidance to states on how to use Title I funds for early learning and provide technical assistance to school districts for investing in preschool programs.

For State Policymakers

Just as federal policymakers have a role in promoting access to high-quality preschool programs, so can state-level policymakers heavily influence and shape early learning legislation and the implementation of programs. To date, much of the movement around preschool has been due in large part to the initiative of forward-thinking governors and state legislators who understand the importance of early learning and its role in closing the achievement gap. State-level policymakers will continue to have this role and, in a time of economic crisis across the country, must consider the importance of investing in early learning as an avenue for strengthening the economic viability of communities nationwide.

Improve Quality

Policymakers must carry out legislation that specifically improves the quality of programs for culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. Although preschool quality improvement initiatives have been developed at both the federal and state levels, more must be done to ensure that services are improved for children who are acquiring a second language. Quality improvement policies at the state level should incentivize strong instruction for ELLs and professional development for the ECE workforce.

- **Establish a strong infrastructure for effective ELL instruction.** For ECE programs to meet the needs of ELL children and families, broader systems must be in place, including early learning guidelines that delineate outcomes for ELLs and strong educator core competencies that demonstrate what educators should know about working with ELLs. Both strong early learning foundations and educator core competencies serve as a guide for professional development and drive the creation of coursework, training methods, and instructional strategies.
- **Create professional development programs that attract and retain culturally and linguistically diverse educators.** The most promising strategies for recruiting and retaining the ECE workforce, such as T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood,* include programs that provide

* T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood is a comprehensive scholarship program that provides the ECE workforce access to education. By promoting higher education, the program is helping establish a well-qualified, fairly compensated, and stable workforce in the early learning field. T.E.A.C.H. programs are found throughout the country, but they have been particularly successful in North Carolina.

scholarships, tuition assistance, flexible schedules, and increases in compensation. As states reexamine their professional development systems, it is important that these types of programs have sufficient resources to grow and expand and that they are accessible to early childhood educators who speak languages other than English.

- **Partner with institutions of higher education (IHEs) to develop innovative coursework.** IHEs play a critical role in the professional development of the early childhood education workforce. A recent study conducted by the Erikson Institute showed that only 7% of ECE teacher training programs require students to complete an internship in a multicultural setting.⁵⁹ States should work with IHEs to help ECE educators better understand how a second language is acquired, teach them to work with diverse populations of children, and offer credit-bearing coursework and training in languages other than English.

Expand Access

States and local governments will play a critical role in expanding access to preschool programs for Hispanic children. As such, states must provide funding and technical assistance to programs as they launch efforts to enroll more children in high-quality programs. Moreover, states should leverage the expertise of community-based organizations that have a strong track record with the Hispanic community.

- **Establish capital subsidies for the renovation or construction of preschool facilities.** One of the biggest challenges for programs is balancing the costs of financing facilities development with the costs of delivering high-quality preschool services. States should develop set-asides for capital subsidies to ensure that all communities, particularly low-income communities, have access to preschool programs.
- **Develop the technical capacity of preschool providers to build and renovate preschool facilities.** State policymakers should develop partnerships with nonprofits with expertise in facilities development to train ECE providers and school leaders in real estate development and to demystify the legal process of building and renovating.
- **Develop partnerships with Latino-serving community-based organizations to provide effective family outreach.** Much like federal policymakers, state policymakers should also look to develop partnerships with immigrant-serving institutions, faith-based organizations, and community-based organizations to provide effective outreach and share information with Latino families.

Looking Ahead

Latino families and children are important stakeholders in the development of early childhood education policy. Polls demonstrate that Hispanic families prioritize early education for their children, yet existing policies and the current debate on early childhood education have not acknowledged the needs of this community. As our schools become increasingly diverse, the future of public education will largely depend on how prepared it is to serve all children and all families. Policymakers must advance policies that improve the instruction and quality of services provided to young English language learners and increase access to programs through facilities development and more effective outreach.

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