

Currently, one in five children under the age of 5 in the U.S. is Hispanic or Latino. By 2030, Hispanic and Latino children will represent 25 percent of the total child population – making this group of young children the fastest growing child demographic and important but often overlooked stakeholders in the current preschool debate. Hispanic and Latino families almost universally support preschool (96 percent) and believe that access to preschool provides an advantage to children when they start kindergarten (95 percent).<sup>1</sup> Yet Hispanic and Latino children are enrolled in preschool at substantially lower rates than their peers. Hispanic and Latino children are also among the poorest in the country and many are English language learners (ELLs), both which can contribute to poor academic outcomes that are made worse when children can't access high-quality preschool.

## HISPANIC AND LATINO CHILDREN LACK ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL

Some of the most important learning takes place in the years before kindergarten, making high-quality early education experiences important to prepare children for kindergarten and academic success throughout life. In fact, every dollar spent on pre-K returns an average of \$7 in later cost-savings and benefits from reduced grade repetition, fewer special education referrals, greater productivity, and higher crime rates.<sup>2</sup> Too much time and too many limited school resources are currently spent helping kids who are behind at the start of their academic careers catch up, rather than challenging all students to meet their full potential.

The high cost of private preschool and the limited availability of publicly funded preschool means that children from low- and middle-income families are often left out,<sup>3</sup> with Latino children being left out at even greater rates than children of other racial and ethnic groups. In fact, enrollment of Hispanic and Latino children in preschool is now at an all-time low. From the 1990s to the mid-2000s the percentage of Hispanic and Latino 4-year olds attending preschool grew significantly, peaking in 2005 at 53 percent. By 2009, that number had dropped to 48 percent and was estimated to be significantly lower for children of immigrants. As the chart below shows, though preschool enrollment is low for all races, fewer Hispanic and Latino children are enrolled in preschool than any other race: only 37 percent of Hispanic children are enrolled in center-based preschool, compared to 50 percent of their non-Hispanic white peers and a national average of 46 percent.

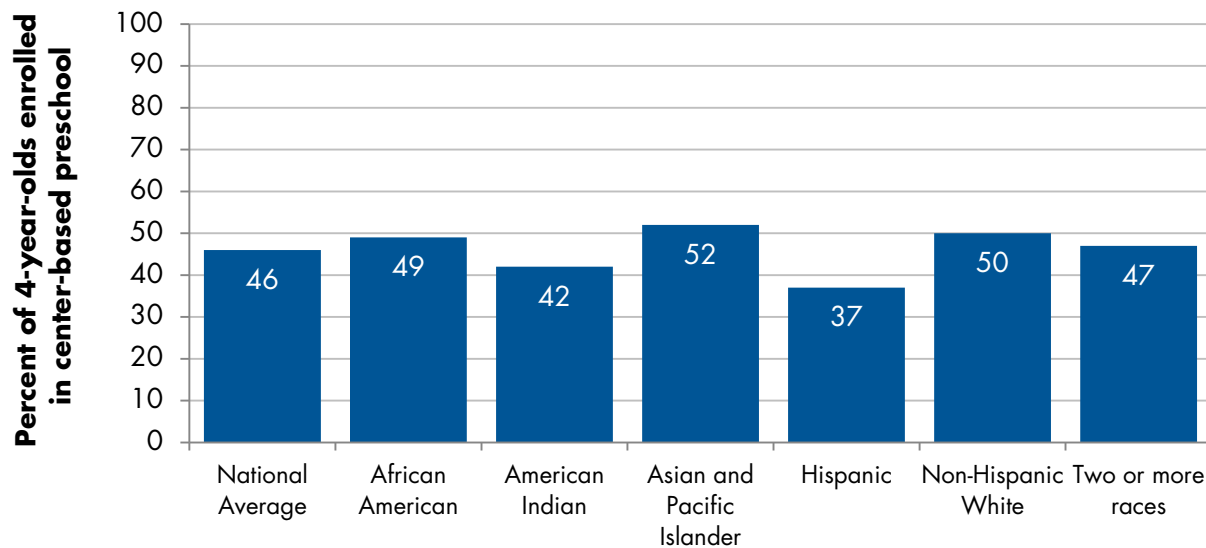
A number of factors contribute to this low rate of enrollment:

- **Working families often can't afford to send their children to preschool.** As noted above, the cost of preschool is a major deterrent for low- and middle-income families who can't access the limited supply of public preschool. With 5.8 million Hispanic and Latino children living in poverty – more children than from any other racial or ethnic group – it is not surprising that many Hispanic and Latino children do not attend preschool. The poverty rate for Hispanic and Latino children is 34 percent, significantly higher than for white children (14 percent) and the poverty rate for all races (23 percent), but a larger share of African American children live in poverty (40 percent)<sup>4</sup> meaning that poverty is not the only factor contributing to low Hispanic and Latino enrollment in preschool.
- **Population growth is outpacing preschool growth in many places.** The population of Hispanic and Latino children is growing faster than the availability of preschool in many predominantly Hispanic and Latino communities.<sup>5</sup> The recession made this worse by reducing state investments in publicly funded preschool, further slowing growth and limiting access to preschool. During the 2011-2012 school year, when emergency funding from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ran out, total state funding for pre-K decreased by more than \$500 million

from the previous year.<sup>6</sup> State-funded pre-K is an important source of preschool for low- and middle-income families, including many Hispanic and Latino families, but funding decreases since the recession result in lower enrollment and decreased quality.

- **Mixed status households are less likely to enroll their children in preschool.** Children of all races in families with mixed immigration status, where one or more members of their family are undocumented, are enrolled in preschool at lower rates than their peers. Immigration status is often a chilling factor for enrolling children in preschool; fear of undocumented immigration status becoming known to official agencies deters families from seeking to enroll their children in preschool.<sup>7</sup> With enrollment rates for Hispanic and Latino children already low, the addition of a broken immigration system that leads to complications around living in a mixed status family leads to even lower enrollment rates.

### Percent of 4-year-olds Enrolled in Preschool by Race, 3-year estimate 2009-2011



**Source:** Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013) KIDS COUNT Data Center analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2009-11 three-year American Community Survey

## HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL WOULD IMPROVE HISPANIC AND LATINO STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Hispanic and Latino children face multiple challenges to academic achievement before they even enter school, including poverty and lack of access to preschool. More than half of all kindergarten students coming from poor households lack the math, reading, and behavioral skills needed to succeed in school, largely as a result of the lack of access to high quality early learning experiences.<sup>8</sup> The impacts of poverty and failure to attend high-quality preschool persist and get worse through the middle grades, resulting in a literacy gap that places poor students five years behind their more affluent peers when they start high school.<sup>9</sup> With the poverty rate for Latino children at 34 percent it means a large proportion of Hispanic and Latino children enter kindergarten already 6-8 months behind their peers in academic measures of school readiness.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, English Language Learners (ELLs), about three-quarters of whom are Hispanic or Latino,<sup>11</sup> would benefit tremendously from expanded access to high-quality dual language early learning experiences. The academic achievement gap between ELLs and monolingual students begins before kindergarten and persists even after students have been in school for years.<sup>12</sup> In fact, ELLs in 4th and 8th grade experience an achievement gap of around 30 percent based on scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). ELLs also experience lower graduation and college placement rates and higher high school dropout rates than monolingual students.<sup>13</sup> But high-quality dual language early childhood instruction that accounts for social, cognitive, emotional, and communicative skills of ELLs and can help close or eliminate this achievement gap. With about 68 percent of Hispanic and Latino elementary and secondary school students speaking a

language other than English at home,<sup>14</sup> making access to high-quality dual language instruction preschool paramount for Hispanic and Latino children.

Research indicates increasing preschool enrollment rates for young Hispanic and Latino children improves school readiness and helps close achievement gaps, including one study that finds increasing preschool attendance for Hispanic and Latino children could help close the Hispanic-White Achievement Gap by 26 percent.<sup>15</sup> But increasing attendance must be done at scale; another study finds that incremental changes in either enrollment or quality will do little to narrow academic achievement gaps, while substantial increases in enrollment for Hispanic and Latino children, alone or in combination with an increase in program quality, have the greatest potential to decrease school readiness gaps.<sup>16</sup>

## EVERY CHILD SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY PRESCHOOL

Access to high-quality preschool should be expanded dramatically for every child, but especially for Hispanic and Latino children in non-English speaking and low-income families. These children face a number of barriers to academic success, but widely available high-quality pre-K would mitigate many of those challenges and increase academic achievement. It is unfair and unwise to have large numbers of children unable to attend high quality preschool. This is especially true for Hispanic and Latino children, the fastest growing segment of the child population. A new state-federal partnership that increases access to high-quality preschool for low- and moderate-income children would ensure a child's position at birth does not dictate her ability to start kindergarten ready to learn on day one, and succeed academically and throughout life with positive outcomes for the entire nation as a result.

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