

New York's preschool expansion tilts system toward better-off families

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Rather than extending access to new families, Mayor Bill de Blasio's robust expansion of free preschool across New York City has instead drawn thousands of children from existing programs and aided better-off families who already enjoyed abundant preschool supply, according to a new study released today (Feb. 25).

De Blasio delivered on a campaign pledge last fall by creating more than 26,000 new seats in preschools offering a full-day program, tuition-free regardless of family income and run by city schools or community-based organizations.

But to meet his enrollment target, the mayor's team pulled up to three-fifths of these children – almost 15,000 youngsters – from existing preschools, according to a survey of pre-K directors conducted by education researchers based at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Mr. de Blasio did invite some new families into quality pre-K," said Bruce Fuller, the UC Berkeley professor of education and public policy who led the study. "But under pressure to expand quickly, the mayor's team nudged families to switch out of long-established preschools."

This creates instability for [young children](#) and weakens the city's wider set of pre-K programs, the researchers said.

UC Berkeley analysts found that 41 preschool slots per 100 young children now serve those raised in the most affluent one-fifth of the city's zip code areas, compared with 30 slots per capita in the poorest one-fifth. At the same time, over 12,000 young children raised in the poorest one-fifth of city zip codes remain outside the mayor's own pre-K program.

De Blasio's office earlier claimed that his first-year expansion had benefited lower-income parts of the city. But this failed to adjust for much higher counts of 4-year-olds residing in poor neighborhoods. De Blasio created similar counts of new pre-K seats for every 100 children, age 4, in upper-middle-class areas as he did in zip codes that host the poorest one-fifth of city residents, the study found.

Established preschools lose out to new pre-K

programs

To estimate the migration of young children from existing programs to the mayor's new pre-K centers, the UC Berkeley team drew a 15 percent random sample of preschools that did not receive new funding last fall, canvassing 103 directors across the city. The directors reported losing just under 10 children on average to nearby pre-K programs that did receive new funding from de Blasio's effort.

Extrapolating from survey results, the researchers estimate that between 10,350 and 15,950 of the 26,000 new slots under the mayor's effort were filled by children who had already attended or signed up for preschool, as reported by interviewed directors. The margin of error equals 1.7 children, establishing statistical significance and ensuring that results are generalizable to preschools citywide.

"Our data suggest that, despite the mayor's promise to expand access, many families who benefited from new pre-K slots were already enrolling their children in existing preschools," said graduate student Elise Castillo, a co-author of the UC Berkeley study. "As fee-based preschools lose enrollment to the mayor's new pre-K seats, he creates wasteful competition with neighborhood preschools that have operated for ages."

Analysts call this a 'substitution effect,' where rapid growth in one sector erodes the strength of a neighboring sector. A nearby parallel is how the New York archdiocese has been forced to close several parochial schools as free charter schools sprout across the city.

Building from Census Bureau data, the new report shows how preschool organizations have grown at a rapid clip in better-off New York City communities over the past quarter-century, in spite of the fact that, while in office from 2002 to 2014, then-mayor Michael Bloomberg focused on

expanding pre-K offerings in low-income parts of the city.

De Blasio's deputy mayor has promised even greater expansion of pre-K in middle-income and affluent parts of the city by this summer.

"This appears to shift public resources away from the historical priority on narrowing disparities in children's basic health and early learning," Fuller said.

Uneven market demand also played a role in driving new dollars out to better-off parts of the city. Just over half (51 percent) of Staten Island parents with a 4-year-old applied for a new pre-K seat, researchers found, compared with just one-third of their lower-income peers residing in Manhattan.

More information: "Expanding Preschool in New York City: Lifting Poor Children or Middling Families?" [gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default ... tudy 25 Feb 2015.pdf](https://gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/2015-02-25_Feb_2015.pdf)

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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