

Middle-Income Families Used Public Pre-K Targeting Low-Income Families: Lessons from a COVID Policy Change

Jamie H. Wu, PhD., Hope O. Akaeze, PhD., Bethany Wilinski, PhD. & Alyssa Morley, PhD.

Michigan State University

Abstract

Currently 34 out of 44 states that offer state-funded pre-kindergarten programs have income requirements. In the 2020–2021 school year, Michigan removed its cap on the percentage of higher-income families who could attend public pre-K programs while still giving enrollment priority to lower-income families. This article examines how this COVID-induced policy change affected the public pre-K participant profile, including eligibility factors beyond income levels. Researchers also gathered qualitative data from teachers and administrators. Results show increased enrollment of middle-income families and provide a snapshot of their needs. The findings have implications for the current debates on universal pre-K.

Keywords: Public pre-kindergarten, preschool, pre-K policy change, COVID-19, middle-income families

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Child care generally and preschool education in particular have increasingly become too expensive for many middle-income American families (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016) recommends that families be expected to pay no more than 7% of their income for child care. A study by the Center for American Progress found that middle-income families (defined as 200–399% of the federal poverty level) with young children spent, on average, 14% of their income on child care. High-income families spent 7% of their income—but this proportion represents a much larger gross expenditure: an average of \$365 per week for families earning more than 600% of FPL vs. \$197 for families earning 200–399% of FPL (Center for American Progress, 2019). Apparently affluent families tend to choose high-priced private programs for their young children.

Meanwhile, only 40% of all lower-income families with young children paid for child care; those families spent 35% of their income, on average (Center for American Progress, 2019). The other 60% of low-income families either did not use center-based care or sent their children, for free, to Head Start or state-funded pre-K programs. A study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018) found that the percentage of preschool-age children from families earning 200–300% of FPL who were enrolled in center-based care was actually lower than the percentage of children from families earning 100–200% of FPL, who generally qualify for publicly subsidized programs. These findings suggest that many middle-income children are being excluded from access to center-based preschool education.

Studies of publicly funded pre-K programs almost routinely find that the low-income children targeted by most of these programs realize academic and social-emotional benefits, at least in the short term (see, e.g., summaries of research by Phillips et al., 2017, and Yoshikawa et al., 2016). That is, these programs are, at least to some extent, accomplishing the goal of narrowing the income-based achievement gap. In addition, some studies have shown that middle-income children also benefit from preschool education, though not necessarily as much as lower-income peers (e.g., Fuller et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Studies of universal pre-K programs in Tulsa (Gormley et al., 2018) and Boston (Gray-Lobe et al., 2023) found that middle-class children benefited as much or nearly as much as low-income children.

Meanwhile, research has documented that both low-income and middle-income preschool-age children benefit from learning together in socioeconomically diverse classrooms (Cascio, 2023; Reid & Ready, 2013; Schechter & Bye, 2007). Studies of preschool and K–12 education have consistently found that low-income children benefit from participating in higher-SES classrooms (e.g., Bagby et al., 2005; Bowman & Dowling, 2010; Kahlenberg, 2012). Other studies have found that, as Reid and Ready (2013) put it, “above-average SES *and above-average income diversity combine to promote learning*” (p. 1104, emphasis added). The benefits of income diversity apply to both low-income and middle-income children, though low-income children are likely to benefit most (Cascio, 2003; Schechter & Bye, 2007).

These findings combine to suggest that equity for both low-income and middle-income young children can best be served by offering universal free public pre-K. The next question is whether middle-income families will take advantage of public pre-K programming if it is offered. Some qualitative studies have explored the ambivalence of middle-income families who

enroll their children in mixed-income, mixed-race educational settings. Even having chosen these settings over more exclusive private options—often citing a desire to improve public education in their city—these parents nevertheless express deep concerns, particularly about program quality (Demma, 2022; Reay, 2008). Meanwhile, evidence from existing universal pre-K programs suggest that middle-income families do in fact enroll their children (e.g., Allee et al., 2022; Cascio, 2023; Gormley et al., 2018; Gray-Lobe et al., 2023). No doubt the high price of private preschool is one driver of that decision. Perhaps families’ concerns about the quality of programs serving disadvantaged populations are ameliorated by the fact that universal pre-K programs explicitly invite all families instead of targeting low-income families.

Our study of enrollment in Michigan’s state-funded pre-K during the COVID-19 pandemic adds to the evidence that middle-income families take advantage of access to public pre-K when it is offered—in this case, accessing a program that continued to serve primarily low-income families. In anticipation of a significant enrollment drop during the first full school year of the pandemic in 2020–2021, Michigan temporarily eased the income restrictions of its Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) to enable more middle-income children to enroll. As the contracted evaluators of GSRP, we examined the extent to which “over-income” families—those at or above 251% of the federal poverty level (FPL), most of whom were excluded by the pre- and post-pandemic policy—took advantage of the COVID-induced policy change. We analyzed quantitative data to see how many over-income children enrolled in GSRP and to classify the resulting population by demographic characteristics including income. We also examined the exposure of over-income children to educational risk factors defined by GSRP policy to understand whether middle-income families enrolled their children because of special needs. In

addition, we collected qualitative data to learn how GSRP program administrators and teachers perceived the impacts of the policy change.

The data show that the percentage of over-income children increased during the 2020–2021 school year. This result suggests that at least some middle-income Michigan families wanted or needed to enroll their children in public pre-K—despite barriers including safety concerns during the pandemic and the program’s continuing focus on low-income children. The policy change, whose intent was essentially to fill seats, had the unintended benefits of making at least some GSRP classrooms more economically diverse and improving equity of access for middle-income families.

Michigan’s Pre-K Enrollment Policy

Since its launch two decades ago, GSRP has restricted enrollment to families earning 250% or less of FPL. Michigan is thus one of 34 states that impose an income limit for participation in state-funded pre-K programs (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). Applying families were sorted by percentage of the federal poverty level (FPL) into quintiles: 0–50% of FPL, 51–100%, 101–150%, 151–200%, and 201–250%. To determine which children to admit to the program, intermediate school districts (ISDs, the administrators of GSRP grants) started with the lowest-income families in the lowest quintile. Three risk factors automatically placed children in the lowest quintile, regardless of actual income: if the child had a qualifying IEP, was experiencing homelessness, or was in the foster care system. In a given quintile, if two families had the same percentage of FPL, another set of eligibility factors came into play: disability, abuse or neglect, home language other than English, severe challenging behavior, environmental risk, and low parental education (Michigan Department of Education, 2020). After all applying

children in the lowest quintile were enrolled, children in the next-lowest quintile were considered based on the same rule, considering their percentage of FPL first and then the other eligibility factors.

If seats remained after all income-eligible children were enrolled, ISDs could ask the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) for a waiver to enroll children whose family income was above 251% of FPL. ISDs again began by admitting children with the lowest family incomes. Over-income families paid a sliding-scale fee determined by the ISDs. Before the 2020 COVID-induced policy change, MDE limited the percentage of over-income families to 10% or less of the ISD's total GSRP enrollment.

Anticipating a drop in enrollment due to COVID, the Michigan legislature, in consultation with MDE, made two changes to its enrollment policy for the 2020–2021 school year, with the goal of filling empty seats. First, the legislature increased its income eligibility range from 250% to 400% of FPL. Second, it removed the 10% limit on the percentage of children from higher income levels who could be enrolled in GSRP. Though priority was still given to families with lower incomes, once all applicants with family incomes of less than 400% of FPL were admitted, sites could admit children whose families were over that limit to fill as many seats as possible. Other eligibility factors and enrollment procedures remained the same.

Methods

We used qualitative and quantitative data to explore how Michigan's COVID-related policy change was implemented and perceived at the local level; the extent to which the targeted group, over-income families, reacted to the policy change; the demographic characteristics of the resulting cohort of children; and the risk factors faced by the over-income families.

Quantitative Data

The quantitative analysis used GSRP participants' demographic and eligibility data to compare how the 2020–2021 cohort, including children from formerly excluded over-income families, was different from previous cohorts, when stricter income limits were imposed. Data came from the MDE GSRP database, covering four cohorts of GSRP participants, from 2017–2018 to 2020–2021. We generated statistics to show participants' family income level and racial/ethnic makeup by year. Then we examined the prevalence of GSRP risk factors among over-income children, comparing pre-COVID cohorts to the COVID year with its relaxed income requirements.

Qualitative Data

As part of a larger investigation of the effects of the pandemic on local grantees and sites, we conducted Zoom and phone interviews with 25 GSRP teachers and 8 administrators from four ISDs between April and June 2021. The selection of ISDs was purposive, intended to reflect the range of GSRP grantees and sites in terms of their service populations and geographic locations. Semi-structured interview protocols covered a wide variety of topics and allowed the interviewer to follow up on interesting comments. Teacher interviews focused on how teachers adapted their practice to pandemic conditions and how the pandemic affected them professionally. Teachers were not specifically asked about the enrollment policy change; rather, they were asked whether they had noticed any changes in the demographics or risk factors of the student body. Interviews with administrators focused on understanding state- and ISD-level responses to the pandemic, including pandemic-related changes to policy and programming and supports for GSRP teachers, students, and families. A question about the removal of the cap on over-income families was included in the administrator protocol. Interviews were recorded, with

participants' permission, and were transcribed. In examining the data, the researchers noted when and how interviewees mentioned enrollment. Enrollment-related excerpts were then analyzed to identify themes.

Results

Quantitative Results

During the first full school year of the pandemic, GSRP enrollment dropped 24%, from 37,232 in school year 2019–2020 to 28,422 in 2020–2021. The finding is consistent with the nationwide trend of lower enrollment on the part of lower-income children (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). The 2020–2021 class included 2,999 over-income children.

Table 1 shows the breakdown by gender and racial/ethnic groups. The proportions are mostly consistent from year to year: an average of 49% of students were female; 27% were Black, 54% White, 10% Hispanic, 5% multiracial, 2% Asian, 1% American Indian, and 1% Pacific Islander. The obvious difference in 2020–2021 is that the proportion of White children was higher than in previous years, while the proportion of Black children was somewhat lower. The increase in the proportion of White children during the year when more over-income children were allowed to enroll is not surprising in light of the persistent racial wealth gap in this country. Without the over-income children, the racial/ethnic proportions would have been very close to the averages: 26% Black, 54% White, 12% Hispanic, and so on.

Table 1. *GSRP Participants’ Gender and Racial/Ethnic Makeup by Year*

Year	Number of Students	Female	Black	White	Hispanic	Multi-racial	Asian	American Indian	Pacific Islander
2017–2018	38,088	49%	27%	54%	10%	5%	2%	<1%	<1%
2018–2019	38,075	49%	28%	53%	10%	5%	2%	1%	<1%
2019–2020	37,232	50%	27%	54%	11%	6%	2%	<1%	<1%
2020–2021	28,422	49%	24%	57%	11%	5%	2%	<1%	<1%

Note: Entries in bold represent statistically significant differences between 2020–2021 and the previous three years.

Table 2 shows the family income levels as percentages of FPL. As expected, the percentages of enrolled children whose families earned over 251% of FPL were higher during the COVID year, 2020–2021, than during the pre-COVID years, 2017–2020. Correspondingly, the proportion of income-eligible children fell. However, most of the difference came from the lowest income groupings. The percentage of families earning 0–50% of FPL fell most precipitously, with families in the next two groupings, 51–100% and 101–150% of FPL, also dropping. The percentages of families in the middle groupings, 151–250% of FPL, did not change appreciably.

Table 2. *GSRP Participants’ Federal Poverty Levels by Year, 2017–2021*

Year	Number of Students	0–50% FPL	51%–100% FPL	101%–150% FPL	151%–200% FPL	201%–250% FPL	251%–300% FPL	301% FPL and above
2017–2018	38,088	30%	24%	20%	13%	9%	2%	3%
2018–2019	38,075	30%	24%	20%	13%	10%	2%	2%
2019–2020	37,232	27%	23%	20%	14%	10%	3%	3%
2020–2021	28,422	25%	22%	19%	14%	10%	4%	7%

Note: Entries in bold represent statistically significant differences between 2020–2021 and the previous three years.

In addition to analyzing data on family income as a percentage of FPL, we also analyzed whether families met other MDE-defined eligibility criteria for GSRP enrollment beyond income: whether the child has a disability or developmental delay, experiences abuse or neglect,

does not speak English at home, has severe challenging behavior, or is exposed to environmental risk, and whether the child’s parents have low educational attainment. Environmental risk is defined as loss of a parent (including through divorce, military deployment, or death), sibling issues, teen parent, homelessness, residence in a high-risk neighborhood, or pre- or postnatal exposure to toxic substances. We did not analyze the other three eligibility criteria in Michigan’s pre-K enrollment policy—whether the child is in foster care, is homeless, or has a qualifying IEP—because the policy equates those criteria with low family income. Table 3 lists the proportion of eligibility factors among participants by year. Several risk factors showed decreases in 2020–2021, while home language other than English increased slightly and abuse or neglect and severe challenging behavior held steady.

Table 3. *Eligibility Factors of GSRP Participants, 2017–2021*

Year	Number of Students	Low-Income (250% of FPL and below)	Environmental Risk	Parent Low Education	Disability	Home Language Not English	Abuse or Neglect	Severe Challenging Behavior
2017–2018	38,088	96%	55%	18%	13%	9%	9%	4%
2018–2019	38,075	96%	52%	17%	11%	9%	9%	3%
2019–2020	37,232	95%	47%	18%	11%	9%	9%	3%
2020–2021	28,422	89%	46%	15%	12%	10%	9%	3%

Note: Entries in bold represent statistically significant differences between 2020–2021 and the previous three years.

Next, we focused on the 2,999 over-income children, the ones whose families made more than 250% FPL, to analyze their characteristics in comparison to the over-income children who attended the program in the previous three years, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *GSRP Risk/Eligibility Factors of Over-Income Children, 2017–2020 vs. 2020–2021*

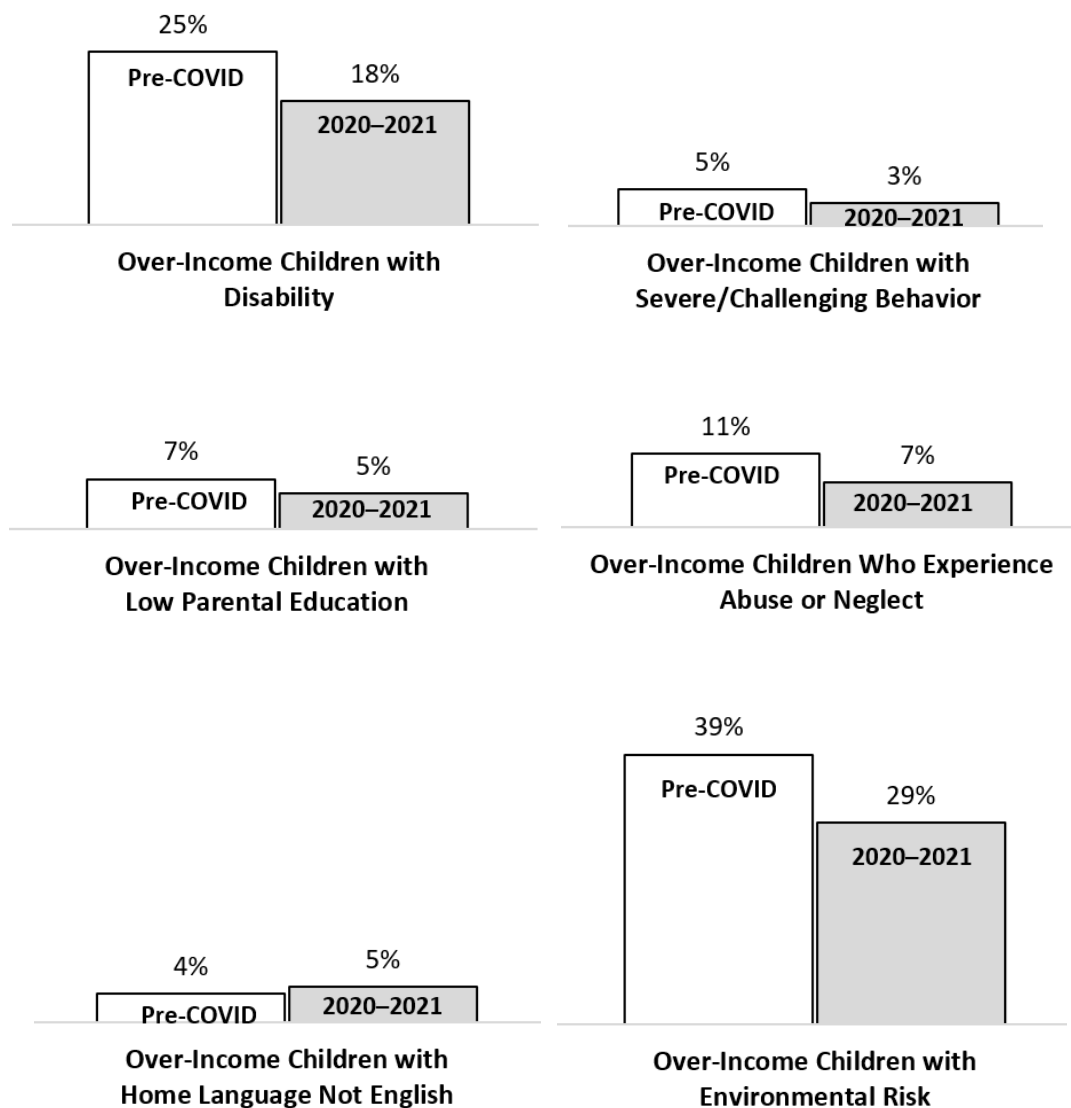


Figure 1 shows that, compared to the over-income children enrolled in the three years preceding the pandemic, the over-income children who enrolled when income restrictions were relaxed tended to have fewer risk factors. Over-income children showed an increase over pre-pandemic years in only one of the six GSRP risk factors: home language other than English. The proportions of over-income children experiencing all other risk factors—disability, severe

challenging behavior, low parental education, abuse or neglect, and environmental risk—fell in 2020–2021. All differences, even those of only one or two percentage points, are statistically significant.

Qualitative Results

In talking about changes to their work during the pandemic, the teachers we interviewed did not mention the policy change to admit more over-income children. In answer to questions about changes in enrollment in 2020–2021, some, but not all, said that enrollment decreased at the beginning of the year. None mentioned any change in the demographic makeup of their classes.

The grantee administrators were aware of—and appreciated—the change in the enrollment policy. One said, “We’re so appreciative of the release of the cap on funding. So that families, regardless of income, could attend ...” Another administrator highlighted the effect on families and the community, noting, among other points, that lifting the cap on over-income families enabled that district’s sites to offer child care to essential workers.

Discussion

During the pandemic, many families of all income levels hesitated to send their children into group child care settings of any kind. The 24% decline in enrollment in Michigan’s GSRP was consistent with the national decline in enrollment in public pre-K programs (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). In Michigan, as throughout the country (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022), enrollment of lower-income children declined more than enrollment of higher-income children. Higher rates of pandemic-related stresses related to health, employment, and housing disparities among low-income families (Jalongo, 2021) are likely to have driven this decline. In Michigan, our data show that 2,999 over-income families took advantage of the lifting of the income-based

enrollment cap to place their children in GSRP classrooms. The finding is all the more remarkable given that the program was not defined as universal; it still targeted low-income children but temporarily allowed middle-income children to enroll. Furthermore, higher-income families might be expected to have had more options for child care during the pandemic than lower-income families—yet still, some of them sent their children to public pre-K. The decision to admit more over-income children had the effect Michigan policymakers intended to fill seats. It also had the unintended effect of increasing the income diversity of GSRP sites and classrooms. By offering more middle-income families the opportunity to enroll their children, the policy change served the cause of equity for families earning more than 250% of FPL.

Compared to over-income children enrolled in previous years, the 2020–2021 cohort of over-income children was less at risk on most factors prioritized by GSRP policy. The percentages of over-income children who experienced disability, severe challenging behavior, low parental education, abuse or neglect, and environmental risk were smaller in 2020–2021 than in previous years. For only one risk factor, home language other than English, did the percentage of over-income children increase in 2020–2021. A similar increase was observed for the total population of GSRP students in 2020–2021 (Table 3). The findings suggest that the presence of risk factors did not drive families' decisions to send their children, despite their safety concerns, to the state-funded pre-K that targets low-income children. We do not have data on what did drive those decisions. For at least some families, who have found private preschool beyond their means, affordability must have been one factor. When subsidized pre-K became available to them for free or at reduced cost, they took advantage of the opportunity.

In interviews, GSRP administrators demonstrated their positive perceptions of the policy change. They appreciated the decision because it enabled the grantees to fill empty slots and to

address the child care needs of essential workers who otherwise would not have been eligible for enrollment. The interview data with classroom teachers revealed that the change in participants' family income as an eligibility factor was not obvious to classroom teachers. This finding is unsurprising, as the over-income children represented a small number in any given classroom. Teachers might be more likely to perceive the income diversity in their classrooms if more over-income children enrolled, for example, as a result of implementing a universal eligibility policy.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings contribute to the ongoing debates and current discussions about universal pre-K (e.g., Brewer et al., 2011; Cohen-Vogel et al., 2022) by offering evidence that some middle-class families would enroll their children in state-funded pre-K programs if they were allowed to do so. Our insights are limited by the fact that we interviewed GSRP personnel but not families. One reason was the difficulty of conducting interviews during the pandemic; we chose not to add to the stress and burden already being experienced by many parents and caregivers. Another reason is that we saw families “voting with their feet”: We inferred from the fact that they enrolled their children that they valued the opportunity. Qualitative research into why middle-income families chose either to send their children to public pre-K during the pandemic or to enroll them in universal programs would provide more insight into the needs and concerns of these families.

As Michigan considers implementing universal pre-K, we look forward to having data on the extent to which middle-income children enroll and income diversity is achieved, particularly over time. Then we will be able to study the effects of income diversity on children's academic and social-emotional development, in the short term and over time. Another direction for future

study is to identify the resources teachers need in order to maximize the benefits of income diversity in the classroom.

Conclusion

Our study revealed that middle-income families took advantage of the policy change that allowed more of them to enroll their children in GSRP during 2020–2021. This finding suggests that middle-income families want and need access to publicly funded pre-K. Access to public pre-K thus improves equity for middle-income families, many of whom struggle to afford center-based preschool education for their children. The income diversity that would result if access were expanded would benefit both middle- and lower-income children.

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