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Inequality in Preschool Quality? Community-Level Disparities in Access to High-Quality Learning Environments

Daphna Bassok¹ & Eva Galdo²

In recent years, unequal access to high-quality preschool has emerged as a growing public policy concern. Because of data limitations, it is notoriously difficult to measure disparities in access to early learning opportunities across communities and particularly challenging to quantify gaps in access to high-quality programs. Research Findings: Using unique data from Georgia's universal prekindergarten program, this study provides empirical evidence of the relationship between community characteristics and the availability of high-quality preschool opportunities. We show that in Georgia, a national leader with respect to preschool access as well as quality, there are still meaningful differences in quality across communities. Low-income and high-minority communities offer state preschool classrooms that are rated significantly lower on a widely used and validated measure of classroom process quality. Practice or Policy: This process quality gap is troubling given the positive relationship between our process quality measure and children's learning. Note that we do not see similar gaps in structural measures of quality, which are the aspects of quality more often regulated but are also weaker, inconsistent predictors of children's learning. Implications for policy are discussed.

¹University of Virginia

²Institute of Educational Sciences

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EdPolicyWorks
University of Virginia
PO Box 400879
Charlottesville, VA 22904

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Curry School of Education | Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy | University of Virginia