

MONITORING POVERTY AND WELL-BEING IN NYC

SPOTLIGHT ON
**EARLY
CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION:**

**Participation in Pre-K Before and
During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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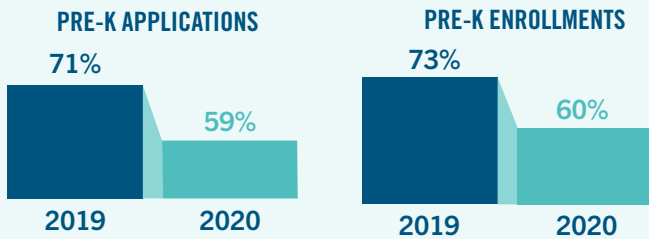


KEY FINDINGS

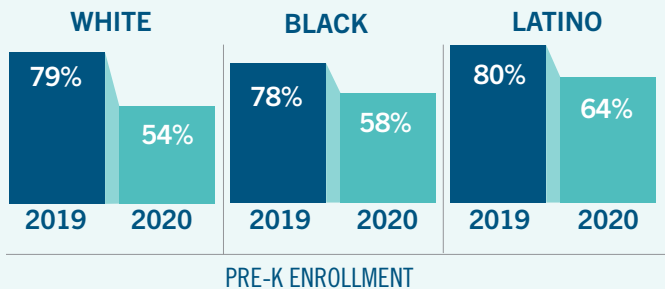
In this report, we examine New York City families' participation in public pre-K programs during the four academic years that began in fall 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. We compare participation trends between the pre-pandemic (2018–February 2020) and pandemic (March 2020–2022) periods to better understand how COVID-19 changed families' engagement with pre-K programs. We find:



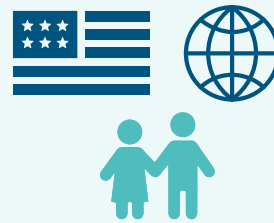
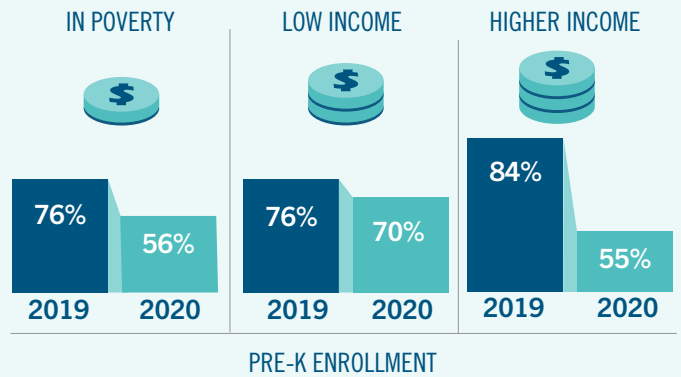
Pre-K applications dropped to 59% of eligible families in 2020 from 71% in 2019. Pre-K enrollment dropped to 60% of eligible families in 2020 from 73% in the previous year.



Before COVID-19, New York City families with different racial and ethnic backgrounds enrolled in pre-K at similar rates. During the pandemic, pre-K enrollment declined among white families from 79% to 54% and among Black families from 78% to 58%. The enrollment rate decrease was relatively smaller among Latino families, declining from 80% to 64%.

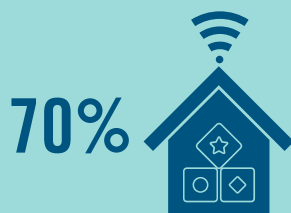


Higher-income families (above 200% of poverty) had the largest decline in pre-K enrollment during the pandemic, from 84% to 55%. The enrollment rate of families in poverty (below 100% of poverty) dropped from 76% to 56%. Low-income families' (between 100–200% of poverty) enrollment rate only dropped from 76% to 70%.

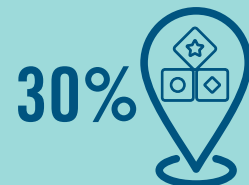


Children of U.S.-born parents had lower enrollment rates during the pandemic period than children of immigrant parents. However, the children of U.S.-born parents who enrolled in pre-K received in-person learning at higher rates than children of immigrant parents who enrolled in pre-K.

During the 2020–2021 school year, 70% of pre-K students attended the program remotely or hybrid (a combination of remote and in-person) and 30% attended in person.



REMOTE PRE-K ATTENDANCE



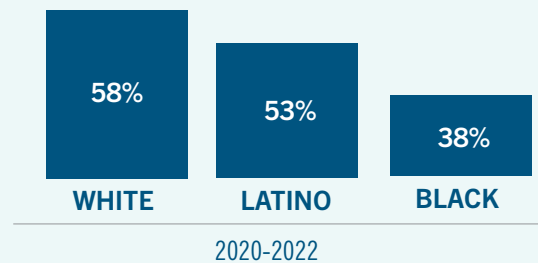
IN PERSON PRE-K ATTENDANCE



- Although pandemic pre-K enrollment rates appear comparable for higher-income families and families in poverty, **children from lower-income families were more likely than children from higher-income families to experience pre-K through remote learning.**



PRE-K IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE



- Among the pre-K participants, over half of the children from white families (58%) and Latino families (53%) attended in person instead of remotely during the pandemic period (2020–2022). **Pre-K students from Black families had the lowest rates of in-person pre-K at 38%.**

- Parents who opted out of pre-K during the pandemic period reported doing so primarily because they decided to **delay their child’s school entry until kindergarten and/or they preferred to have their child at home.**

- Remote learning introduced additional challenges to the pre-K enrollment decision. Parents were torn between wanting their children to **experience in-person learning while remaining safe from the pandemic.**



- Parents continued to prioritize programs that were conveniently located, had siblings attending, and provided high-quality education in their search both before and during the pandemic. **Convenient location and flexible hours were more likely to be rated as important features of pre-K programs by lower-income families, likely due to unpredictable work schedules.**

INTRODUCTION

The earliest educational experiences of children’s lives are critical for their development and lay the foundation for their future achievement and well-being. Research shows that children who participate in high-quality preschool have better social-emotional and academic outcomes, with some researchers finding that exposure to preschool can boost children’s high school graduation rates and even improve future earnings.¹ Early childhood programs like preschool are also beneficial for parents because they allow parents to work or pursue education, while ensuring that children are well cared for in an enriching environment.² For children from families facing socioeconomic disadvantage, high-quality public preschool (typically referred to as pre-K) is particularly important because of its potential to close educational opportunity gaps.³ However, evidence suggests that, even in places with public pre-K programs, children from lower-income families are less likely to be enrolled than children from higher-income families, and enrollment can also vary by racial/ethnic group.

Families in New York City are attuned to the importance of early education in large part due to the emphasis that the city has placed on its full-day universal pre-K program, known as Pre-K for All for four-year-old children.⁴ Pre-K for All is one of the largest pre-K programs in the country, serving an average of 70,000 children annually (about 65% of all New York City four-year-olds) prior to 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic tremendously disrupted New Yorkers’ lives, and early education programs (including Pre-K for All programs) faced difficult challenges during the height of the pandemic and in its wake. Many private preschool programs closed entirely, and programs that remained open struggled to decide how to offer services: remotely, in-person, or a combination.⁵ Researchers have found that existing inequalities in access to early education programs have been exacerbated in the wake of the pandemic, particularly for low-income families and people of color. Although the Pre-K for All system is one of the city’s strengths, the disruptions to New Yorkers’ lives at multiple levels have contributed to changes in pre-K participation.

This report draws on five years of survey data (from 2018 to 2022) collected from a representative sample of New York City families with young children surveyed by the Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT). In this report, we examine families’ participation in New York City pre-K programs during the four academic years that began in fall 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. We focus on the following questions:

¹ Gormley et al. (2005, 2011); Heckman and Masterov (2007); Yoshikawa et al. (2013).

² Hartley et al. (2022); Kesler (2020).

³ Potter (2015); Yoshikawa et al. (2016).

⁴ The universal pre-K for three-year-olds is known as 3-K for All. For more information about New Yorkers’ participation in 3-K, see our accompanying 3-K report.

⁵ Barnett et al. (2021); Lee and Parolin (2021).

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- What proportion of New York City families with four-year-old children applied for and enrolled in pre-K programs during the four academic years?
 - How did pre-K participation trends change after the start of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and are there differences in these trends by family poverty level, parent's race and ethnicity, and other household demographic characteristics?
 - Which factors did New York City families consider for their pre-K program participation and selection? How did they change during COVID-19?

ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD POVERTY TRACKER

The Early Childhood Poverty Tracker (ECPT), a collaboration between Robin Hood and Columbia University, is a longitudinal study of New York City families with young children. Launched in 2017 when the children were between the ages of 0 and 3, this study follows a representative sample of families with young children in New York City, using repeated surveys to provide a detailed description of the challenges and resources that shape the development of children during the critical early years of life. The ECPT study uses repeated surveys with the same parents to understand how families' circumstances change as their children grow and develop. The baseline survey included 1,576 parents, each of whom reported on a "focal child" who was 0-35 months old in June 2017 or was born in the subsequent year. Since the baseline survey, parents have been surveyed several times per year about the focal child's health and development, enrollment in school or child care, and family circumstances including economic conditions, health, and well-being. The figures presented in this report exclude families who have moved out of New York City and are weighted statistically to be representative of children born in and living in New York City. The report draws on the baseline through 40-month follow-up surveys (fielded from 2017 to 2022). For more detail about the methods used in the ECPT study, and for a profile of our sample, see our baseline report.⁶

⁶ Neckerman et al. (2019).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The report draws on 12 ECPT survey waves conducted from the baseline through 40-month follow-up surveys. Survey items were released to eligible parents based on their child’s birth-year eligibility for pre-K and the time of year that the survey was fielded. Parents received survey items about their interest in applying for pre-K beginning in the fall before the year their child was eligible to enroll (the calendar year in which the child turned four) through the early spring of the enrollment year, their application to pre-K from the spring through the fall of the enrollment year, and enrollment in pre-K from the fall of the eligible year until the spring of the following year. For example, parents of children born in 2015 were eligible to apply to pre-K for the 2019–2020 academic year (see Appendix Table A1 for more information on birth-year eligibility). The parents in this example received survey items about (1) their interest in enrolling their child in pre-K from the fall of 2018 until early spring 2019; (2) their application experiences from spring 2019 until early fall 2019; and (3) their enrollment experiences from fall 2019 until spring 2020.

Throughout this report we consider differences in families’ experiences of and participation in pre-K by the family’s poverty level and the parent’s race and ethnicity.

Poverty. Poverty is measured using the supplemental poverty measure (SPM), an improved measure of poverty developed by the Census Bureau that accounts for cash income and benefits, non-cash benefits such as SNAP (food stamps) and housing subsidies, medical and work expenses, taxes and tax credits, and differences in cost of living. This report considers families living in poverty (below 100% of the poverty line), those who are low-income (between 100 and 200% of the poverty line), and those who are higher-income (above 200% of the poverty line).

Race and ethnicity. The patterns of inequality documented in this report are powerfully shaped by systemic racism, which impedes opportunity for families in many ways – in schools and the labor market, in housing and community resources, and in access to wealth. The ECPT sample reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of New York City: the full sample of parents is 43% Latino, 28% white, 18% Black, 6% Asian, and 5% of other or multiple races.

In this report, we refer to Black non-Latino and white non-Latino New Yorkers as Black and white New Yorkers, respectively. In addition, when we say “New Yorkers,” we are referring to adults in New York City. Asian American parents and parents of “other” races are included in the full sample, but due to sample size limitations, we are unable to provide separate estimates for Asian American parents in this report.

PART 1. PRE-K IN NEW YORK CITY

In 1998, several years before the launch of the Pre-K for All initiative, New York City began providing public pre-K but lacked the funding to offer truly universal pre-K. In 2013, the year before Pre-K for All began, only 19,480 children (about 18% of all four-year-olds in New York City) were enrolled in full-day pre-K programs. Just two years later, 70,000 four-year-olds (about 65% of all four-year-olds in New York City) were enrolled in full-day pre-K.

The current landscape of early childhood care and education in New York City is extensive and complex, and Pre-K for All represents only a portion of the available options. Pre-K for All programs are provided by a combination of program settings (e.g., public schools, community-based programs) and funding streams (e.g., the Department of Education, Head Start). Some community-based programs even offer Pre-K for All classrooms alongside private preschool classrooms.

Eligible families who want to learn more about all available options often have to navigate a maze of information from different sources because a unified directory of all early childhood education programs does not exist. Home-based programs, a limited number of which may be publicly available to three-year-olds through the 3-K for All program, are not part of the Pre-K for All network and must be sought out separately from the city's pre-K enrollment directory. Additionally, many community-based programs, as well as some Head Start programs, are not a part of the network.

This complexity is also found in the terms used to describe these programs. Although *preschool*, *pre-K*, and *child care* are often used synonymously, pre-K typically refers to early childhood (for children between three and five years old) education programs that are publicly funded — so any resident child of eligible age can enroll.

Given the mixture of programs, funding sources, and naming conventions, some parents with a four-year-old attending an early care and education program are unsure if their child is enrolled in one of the city's Pre-K for All programs. Our ECPT surveys asked separate questions about preschool in general versus Pre-K for All, and parents responded to the best of their knowledge. Many parents also provided us with the name⁷ of their child's early care and education program, and we used this information to verify if the child was attending pre-K.

Although the best early care and education program for a child is the program that best fits the child's and family's needs, this report focuses on Pre-K for All enrollment to better understand New Yorkers' engagement with this citywide initiative. The descriptive information on the patterns of pre-K engagement and the characteristics of families who participate may inform strategies to promote equitable access to universal pre-K.

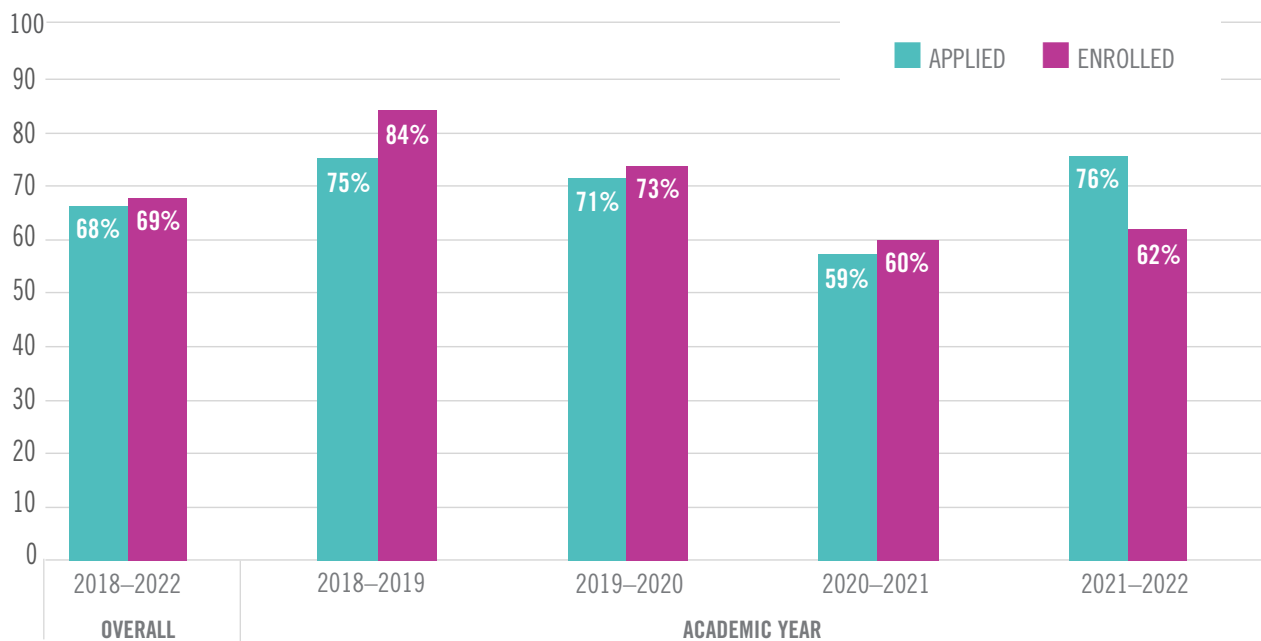
⁷ If parents were unsure of the program's name, they also had the option to share the program address or street intersection. This information was used to determine the most likely program of enrollment.

Participation in NYC's Pre-K for All

Although every parent in New York City who wants a pre-K seat for their four-year-old child will be able to find a seat *somewhere* in the city, this doesn't mean that every family can automatically enroll in their first-choice program. Participating in pre-K can involve a lot of time and research, especially for families considering programs outside of their zoned district. These steps can be summarized as preparing to apply, application, and enrollment. We surveyed parents throughout each step of the process and repeated the same questions every year to collect information about pre-K participation in New York City from 2018 to 2022.

Figure 1

Overall pre-K participation 2018–2022



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2022. Overall sample size across the four academic years ranges from 1,073 to 1,268.

Overall

When we look at the average rates of application and enrollment across all four years of our survey (2018–2022), we find that nearly 7 out of 10 parents with eligible children participated in Pre-K for All (Figure 1). More specifically, 68% of parents applied for pre-K and 69% of parents enrolled their child in pre-K, on average.

These average rates across the four years suggest that most New York City families who wanted a pre-K seat for their four-year-olds were able to find a program. However, these four-year averages do not tell the full story. Rates of participation varied each year, and the largest fluctuations could be found just before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Annually

Looking at the pre-K participation trends across years, we find that application and enrollment rates were relatively high from 2018 to 2020. In 2018, about three-quarters of parents with eligible children applied to pre-K. Within that same year, about 84% of parents enrolled their child in pre-K, surpassing the application rate.⁸ The following year, 2019, a similarly high percentage of parents (71%) applied for pre-K, and 73% of parents enrolled their child.

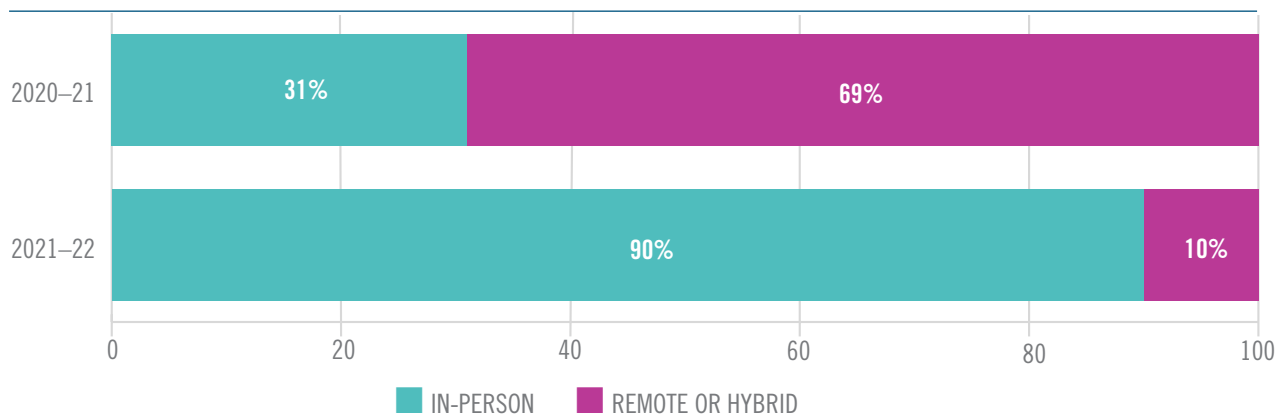
However, the 2020–2021 academic year was an uncertain time period because it immediately followed the COVID-19 shutdowns of spring 2020. Correspondingly, pre-K participation rates declined relative to the prior years. **Compared to 2019, the pre-K application rate in 2020 dropped from 71% to 59%, and the enrollment rate from 73% to 60%.** Additionally, pre-K attendees’ learning environments changed substantially in this academic year. **During the 2020–2021 school year, 70% of pre-K students attended the program remotely or hybrid (a combination of remote and in-person) and 30% attended pre-K in person** (Figure 2).

After this initial dip in participation during the 2020–2021 academic year, we see a recovery the following year (2021–2022). The application rate rebounded to 76%, and the enrollment rate to 62%.⁹ Whereas the pre-K application rate reached the pre-pandemic rate, the enrollment did not fully recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 2 shows that more students attended pre-K in person in 2021–2022 as well. Nine out of ten pre-K students returned to the classroom, while one in ten joined some portion of the program virtually. In the second part of this report, we focus on the differential changes in pre-K participation after the outbreak of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic by family poverty level, parents’ race and ethnicity, and other family demographic characteristics.

Figure 2

Pre-K modality during COVID-19



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2020 to 2022. The rates are calculated among families who enrolled their children in a pre-K program during the pandemic. AY 2020–2021: n = 266; AY 2021–2022: n = 52

⁸ These 2018–2019 enrollment estimates are higher than those provided by the city due to the relatively small sample size and ECPT’s oversampling for families living in poverty. Please refer to appendix Table A2 for details about the sample sizes.

⁹ These 2021–2022 estimates may be less accurate than those of prior academic years due to the relatively small sample size (n = 105–117).

PART 2. PRE-K PARTICIPATION BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

New York City closed schools in March 2020 to slow down the spread of COVID-19. In the following September, the city reopened public schools for its youngest students. With some anxiety and uncertainty, some parents sent their children back to pre-K while others opted out.

This section investigates how the pre-K enrollment rate changed during COVID-19 compared to the pre-pandemic rate. Additionally, we highlight how families at different levels of poverty, with different racial and ethnic backgrounds and with other demographic differences, may have experienced the reopenings during the pandemic in different ways. To maximize our sample, we combine the academic years 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 and refer to this period as pre-pandemic, and the academic years 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 as pandemic.

Reasons for not participating in pre-K

Hearing parents' reasons for not participating in pre-K can help us understand the decline in participation during the 2020–21 academic year. We asked the parents who did not apply for any type of pre-K to share their reasons why.¹⁰

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, more than half (59%) of the parents who didn't apply said their child was already in an early care and education program they liked, making it a top reason for not applying to pre-K. In addition, just under half (49%) of the parents who didn't apply reported that they planned to apply next year, meaning that this group of parents decided to delay school entry. Toward the bottom of the list, 13% of parents said that they preferred to have their child stay at home.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, more than half (62%) of the parents who didn't apply reported that they were planning to apply next year. Having the child already in an early care and education program parents liked was the second most common reason (47%). Preferring to have the child at home (32%) stood out during the pandemic period relative to the prior academic years.

Comparing parents' reasons for not applying to pre-K between the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods, **a larger share of parents opted out of pre-K during the pandemic period because they decided to delay their child's school entry until kindergarten and/or preferred to have their child at home.**

In addition, we asked the parents who did not enroll their child in pre-K to share their primary reason for this decision. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the majority of parents who didn't enroll their children provided responses that suggested they preferred another early education program or at-home care over Pre-K for All.

¹⁰ Survey respondents could select one or more options.

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- “We send him to a Russian language daycare.”
 - “Too many horror stories involving toddlers in pre-K.”
 - “The school that I wanted didn’t have a pre-K program.”
 - “My child is attending a private nursery school. We expect her to go to kindergarten in the 2021 school year in private school.”
 - “[Pre-K for All programs are] not religious affiliated.”

The themes that we found in parents’ responses differed during the period after the COVID-19 outbreak. During these years, parents’ concerns related to COVID-19 overwhelmed the other reasons for not enrolling their child in a pre-K program. In addition to the many responses that simply (and meaningfully) said “COVID,” parents provided the following information:

- “He’s only 4 and it wasn’t worth the risk. And, at 4 I didn’t want him in front of a screen to go to school.”
- “Because it’s not in person.”
- “Concerns about group size due to COVID-19.”
- “COVID-19 and I was working two jobs. My grandmother didn’t know how to use the tablet for remote learning.”

These responses reveal the additional challenges that remote learning introduced to the pre-K enrollment decision, in particular that many parents were torn between wanting their children to experience in-person learning and wanting to minimize the risks of COVID.

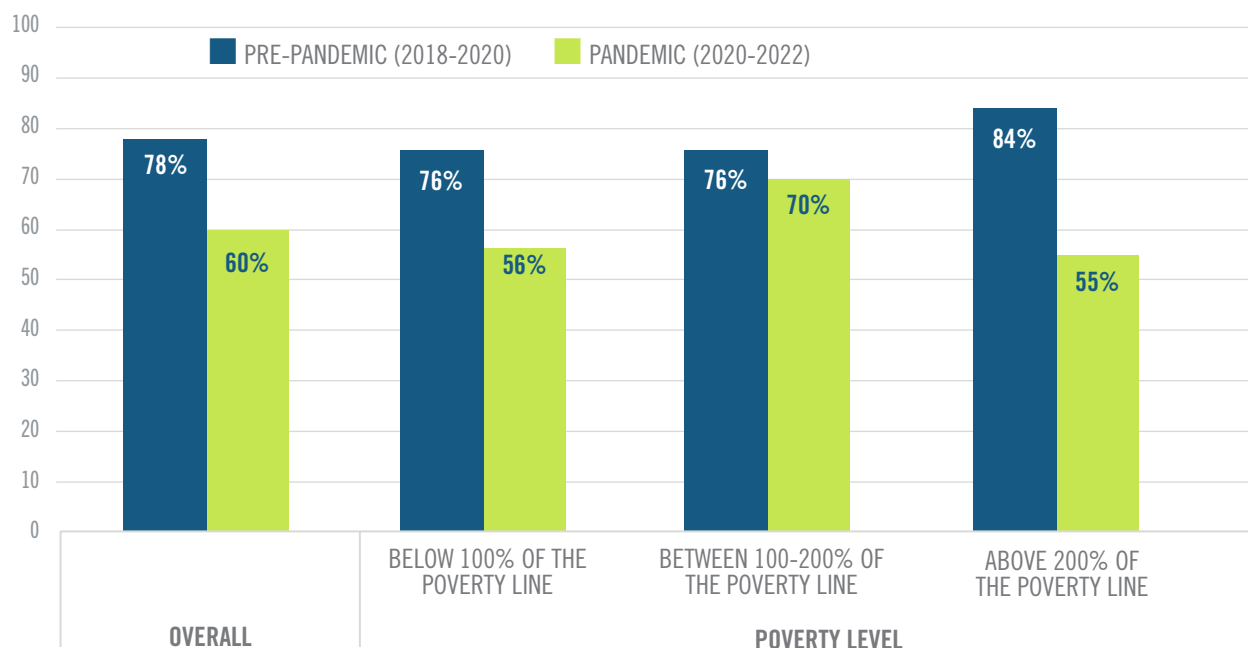
Pre-K enrollment by poverty level before and during COVID-19

First, we break down overall pre-K enrollment before and during COVID-19 by family poverty level. Figure 3 shows that in the pre-pandemic period, pre-K enrollment was high, almost 80% across all incomes. The higher-income families (above 200% of the poverty line) showed the highest enrollment rate at 84%. Lower-income families (between 100% and 200% of the poverty line) and families in poverty (below 100% of the poverty line) followed at 76% enrollment. This pre-pandemic pattern reflects the trends of overall pre-school enrollment from national research, which find that children from lower-income families are typically less likely to be enrolled in preschool than children from higher-income families.¹¹

¹¹ Magnuson and Waldfogel (2016).

Figure 3

Pre-K enrollment by poverty level before and during COVID-19



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2022. Pre-pandemic: n = 508; Pandemic: n = 565

During the pandemic period, we find that higher-income families showed the largest decline in pre-K enrollment, from 84% to 55%. The families in poverty also experienced a considerable drop from 76% to 56%. In contrast, low-income families' enrollment rates only dropped from 76% to 70%. In fact, low-income families had the highest pandemic-period enrollment rates when compared to families in poverty and families above 200% of poverty.

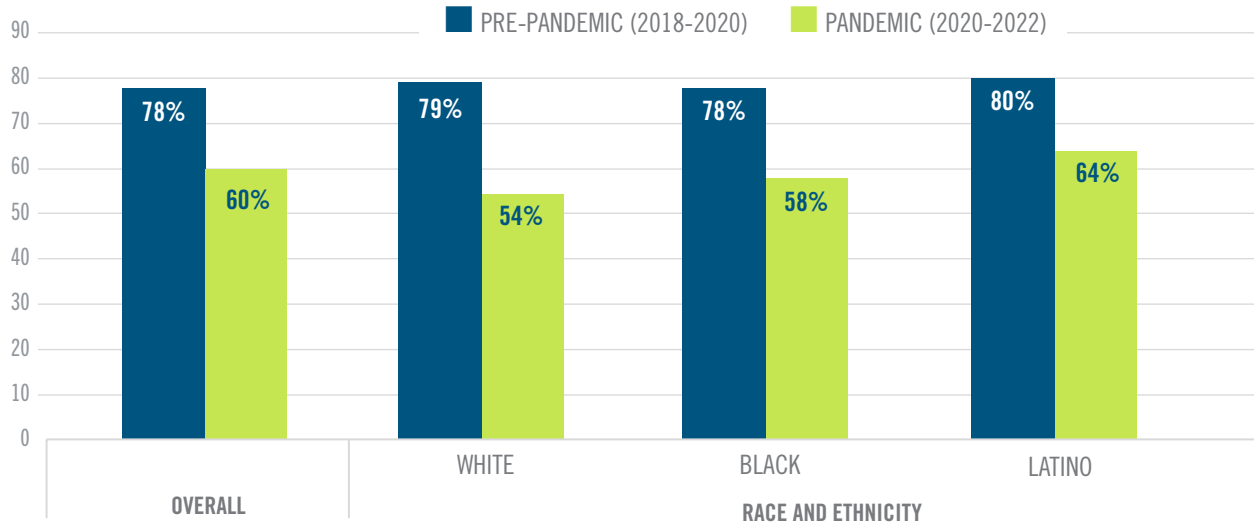
Pre-K enrollment by race and ethnicity before and during COVID-19

Next, we explore the rates of pre-K enrollment before and during COVID-19 by parent race and ethnicity. Figure 4 shows that before COVID-19, New York City families from different racial and ethnic backgrounds enrolled in pre-K at similar rates of 78 to 80%. These pre-pandemic trends differ from research on different cities across the United States, which frequently finds disparities in universal pre-K enrollment by racial and ethnic identity. This is thought to happen for a variety of reasons, but most often because of racial and ethnic neighborhood segregation coupled with an unequal distribution of available high-quality programs.¹²

¹² Gillispie (2019); Latham et al. (2021); Potter (2016); Reid et al. (2019).

Figure 4

Pre-K enrollment by parent race and ethnicity before and during COVID-19

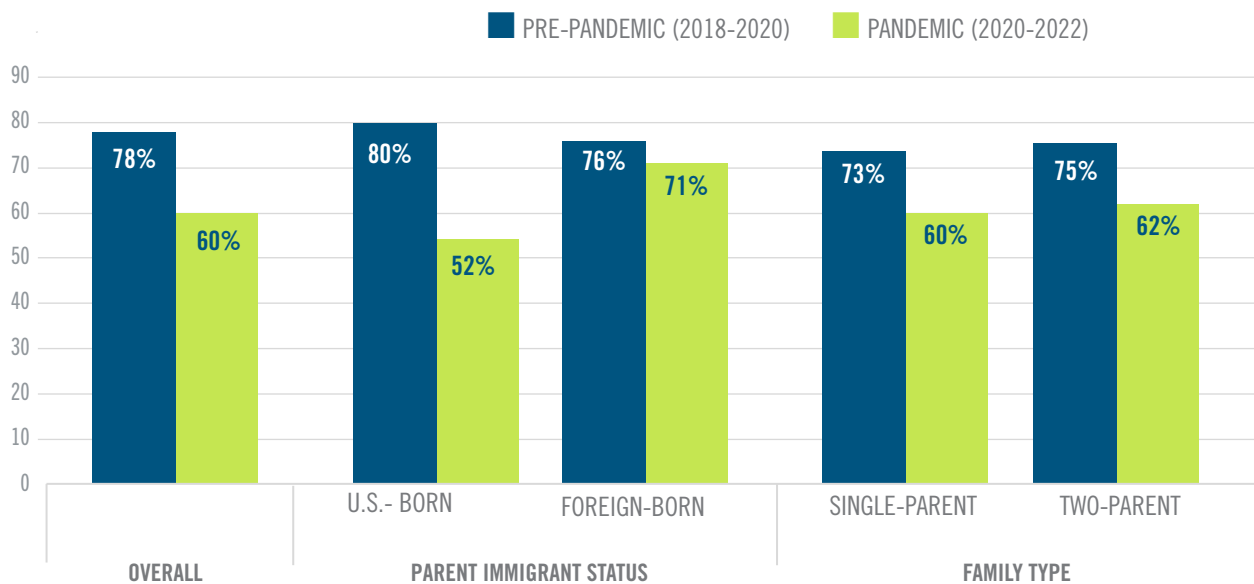


Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2022. Pre-pandemic: n = 508; Pandemic: n = 565

Following the onset of COVID-19, parents of all racial and ethnic backgrounds enrolled in pre-K at lower rates than observed pre-pandemic. However, the pre-K enrollment rate among white and Black parents declined from 79% to 54% and from 78% to 58%, respectively. The enrollment rate decrease was relatively smaller among Latino parents, declining from 80% to 64%.

Figure 5

Pre-K enrollment by household demographics before and during COVID-19



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2022. Pre-pandemic: n = 508; Pandemic: n = 565

Lastly, we examine the changes in pre-K enrollment by several important characteristics: the parents' immigration status and the number of parents in the household (Figure 5). **Before the COVID-19 pandemic, both U.S.-born parents and foreign-born parents enrolled their children in pre-K at the similarly high rates of 80% and 76%.** The high pre-K enrollment among immigrant families pre-pandemic suggests that programs were equally accessible for four-year-olds from immigrant families and from U.S.-born families. This result is promising because pre-K yields larger educational returns for immigrant families and likely serves to narrow the gap in school readiness between children born to immigrant families and U.S.-born families.¹³ **During the pandemic period, the enrollment rate among immigrant parents fell slightly to 71% while that of U.S.-born parents dropped to 52%.**

Turning to the results by the number of adults in the household, we find that both single-parent and two-parent households showed a comparably high pre-K participation rate of 73% and 75%. Single-parent households reduced pre-K participation to 60% and two-parent households to 62%.

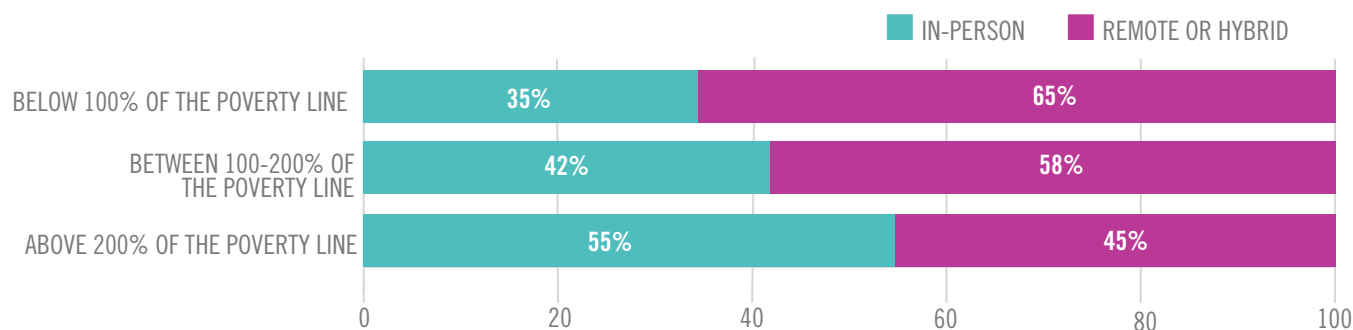
Differences in pre-K modality by family demographics

In fall 2020, at the start of the pandemic period, pre-K programs that reopened used a variety of risk mitigation strategies to keep their communities safe. Programs differed in their approaches, with some schools attempting in-person classes with no virtual options available during periods of closure, some only offering remote virtual learning, and some employing a hybrid model of in-person and remote learning.

In addition to the observed differences in pre-K enrollment rates between the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods, children enrolled in pre-K during the pandemic may have experienced different modalities of learning based on what the programs in their community offered and/or what their families prioritized during pre-K selection. Although we are unable to identify if any observed differences in pre-K modality are due to what the programs in their area provided or what the parents chose for their children, research suggests that remote learning may have less positive outcomes than in-person learning. Beyond potential disruptions to parents' work and technological challenges associated with virtual learning,¹⁴ young remote learners are likely to miss out on opportunities for one-on-one learning activities, physical activities, peer socialization, and arts enrichment.¹⁵

Figure 6

Pre-K modality during COVID-19 by poverty level



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2020 to 2022. The rates are calculated among families who enrolled their children in a pre-K program during the pandemic. Between 100% and 200% of the poverty line: n = 132; Above 200% of the poverty line: n = 99

¹³ Gottfried and Kim (2015).

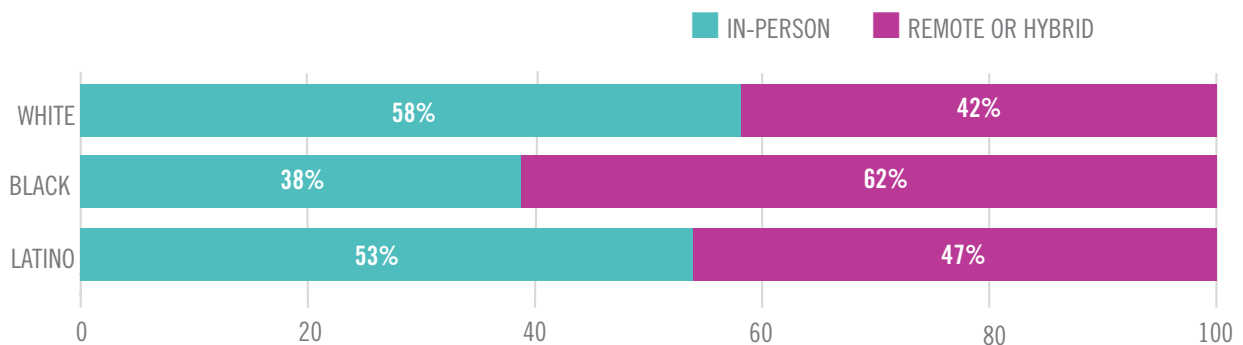
¹⁴ Neckerman et al. (2021).

¹⁵ Barnett et al. (2020); Delgado et al. (2022); Lee and Parolin (2021).

Figure 6 illustrates that the rates of in-person schooling differed by poverty level: 55% of students from higher-income families participated in in-person pre-K, while the rates were 42% for low-income families and 35% for families in poverty. This suggests that, **although pre-K enrollment rates appeared comparable for higher-income families and families in poverty, a greater proportion of children from families with fewer economic resources experienced pre-K through remote learning in comparison to children in higher-income families.**

Figure 7

Pre-K modality during COVID-19 by race and ethnicity



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2020 to 2022. The rates are calculated among families who enrolled their children in a pre-K program during the pandemic. White: n = 81; Black: n = 57; Latino: n = 147.

Figure 7 illustrates the racial disparity in pre-K class modality during the pandemic period. **Among the pre-K participants, over half of the children from white families (58%) and Latino families (53%) attended pre-K in person. Pre-K students from Black families had the lowest rates of in-person pre-K at 38%.** This trend has been found in multiple studies on pandemic-era education, which suggest that white students were more likely to attend school in-person during this period.¹⁶

As mentioned previously, we are unable to identify whether these disparities stem more from differences in access to in-person programs or from differences in families' enrollment decisions. However, it is now well-known that communities of color experienced higher COVID-19 community infection rates and higher rates of hospitalization and mortality.¹⁷ Districts serving communities of color may have accounted for this public health challenge and revised their school reopening plans accordingly. Furthermore, when compared with white parents, Black and Latino parents were more likely to express concerns about school safety and about schools reopening during the pandemic.¹⁸ Given the elevated health risks for these families, Black parents may have preferred enrollment in remote pre-K or alternative childcare and education arrangements during the pandemic.

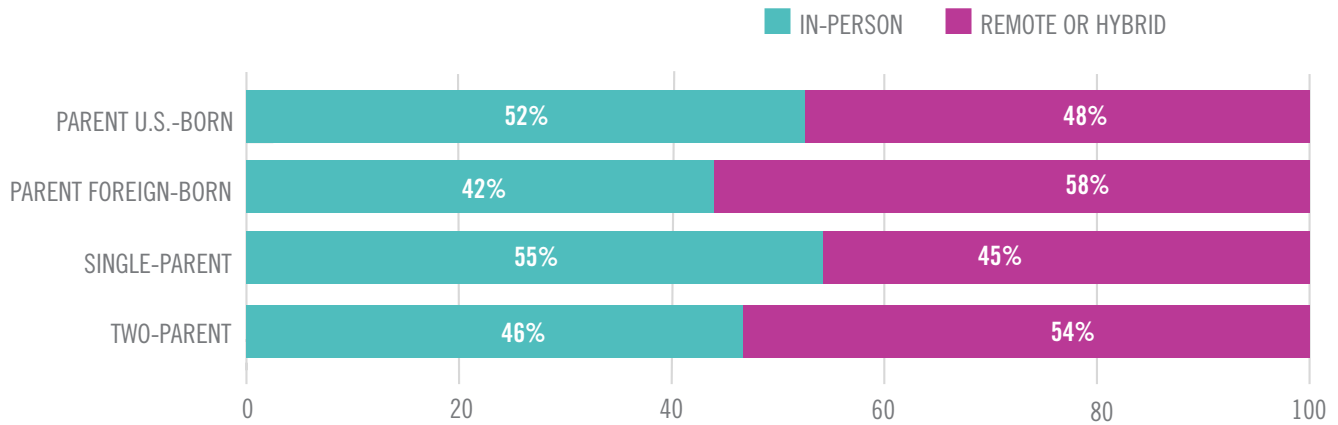
¹⁶ Camp and Zamarro (2022); Haderlein et al. (2021).

¹⁷ Gold et al. (2020); Oster et al. (2021).

¹⁸ Gilbert et al. (2020); Neckerman et al. (2022).

Figure 8

Pre-K modality during COVID-19 by household demographics



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2020 to 2022. The rates are calculated among families who enrolled their children in a pre-K program during the pandemic. U.S.-born parents: $n = 185$; Foreign-born parents: $n = 133$; Single parents: $n = 83$; Two parents: $n = 218$.

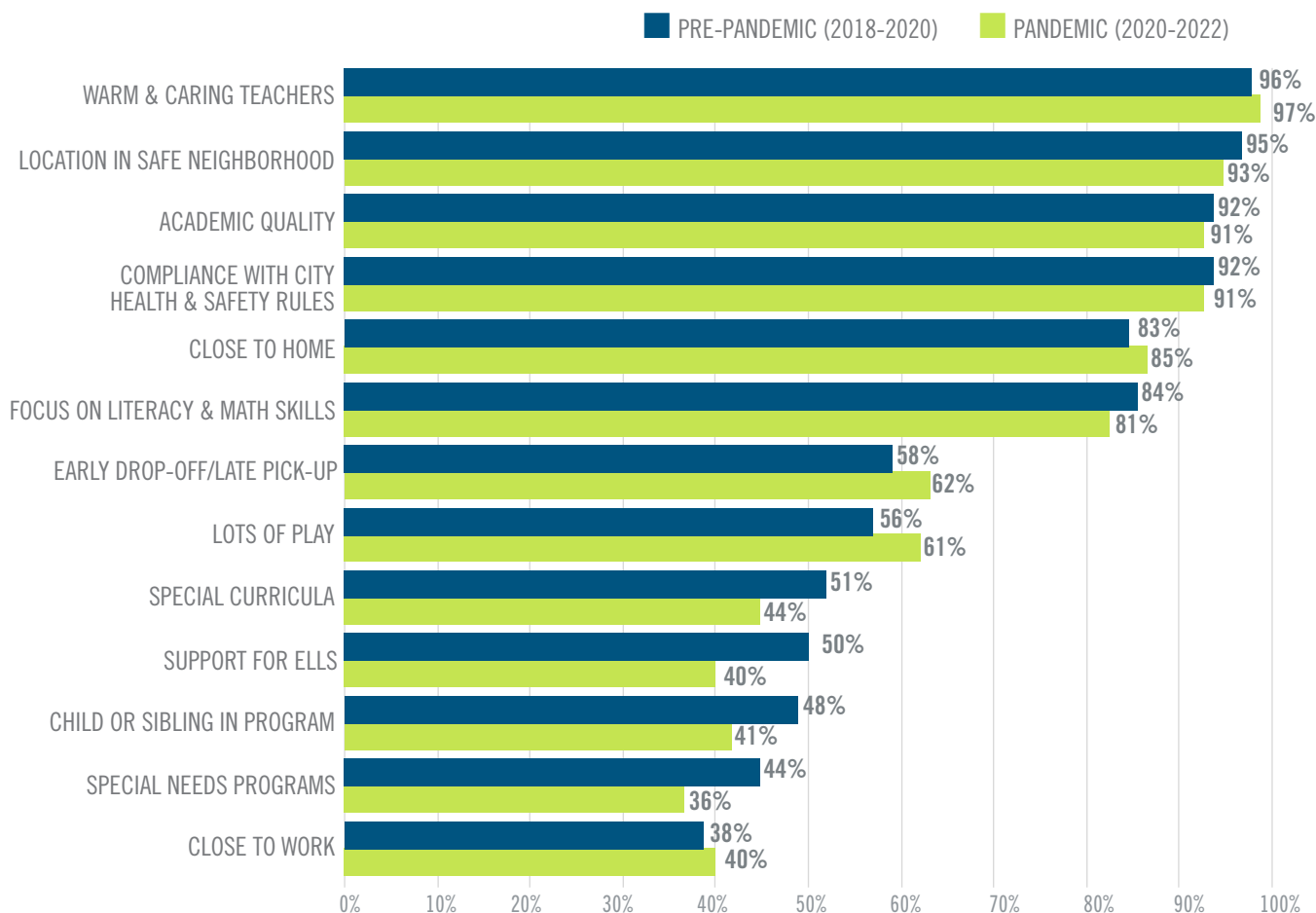
When examining pre-K modality by additional household demographics (Figure 8), we find that children from immigrant families had lower rates of in-person learning compared to U.S.-born families. Taken with the dramatic enrollment decrease of children of U.S.-born parents in comparison to children of immigrant parents, this suggests that U.S.-born parents may have sought out public programs that offered in-person learning.

Turning to the results by the number of adults in the household, although pre-K enrollment rates were similar between the two household types, children from single-parent-headed families had higher rates of in-person attendance than students living with two adults (55% vs. 46%). This trend could indicate that single parents may have intentionally selected an in-person pre-K program because they didn't have a second adult in the household to help support their child's remote education.

PART 3. PRE-K PREFERENCE AND SELECTION

Figure 9

Important factors in pre-K selection before and during COVID-19



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2022. Percentage of New York City parents who expressed their interest in pre-K programs, evaluating each factor of pre-K as “very important.” n = 911–1036

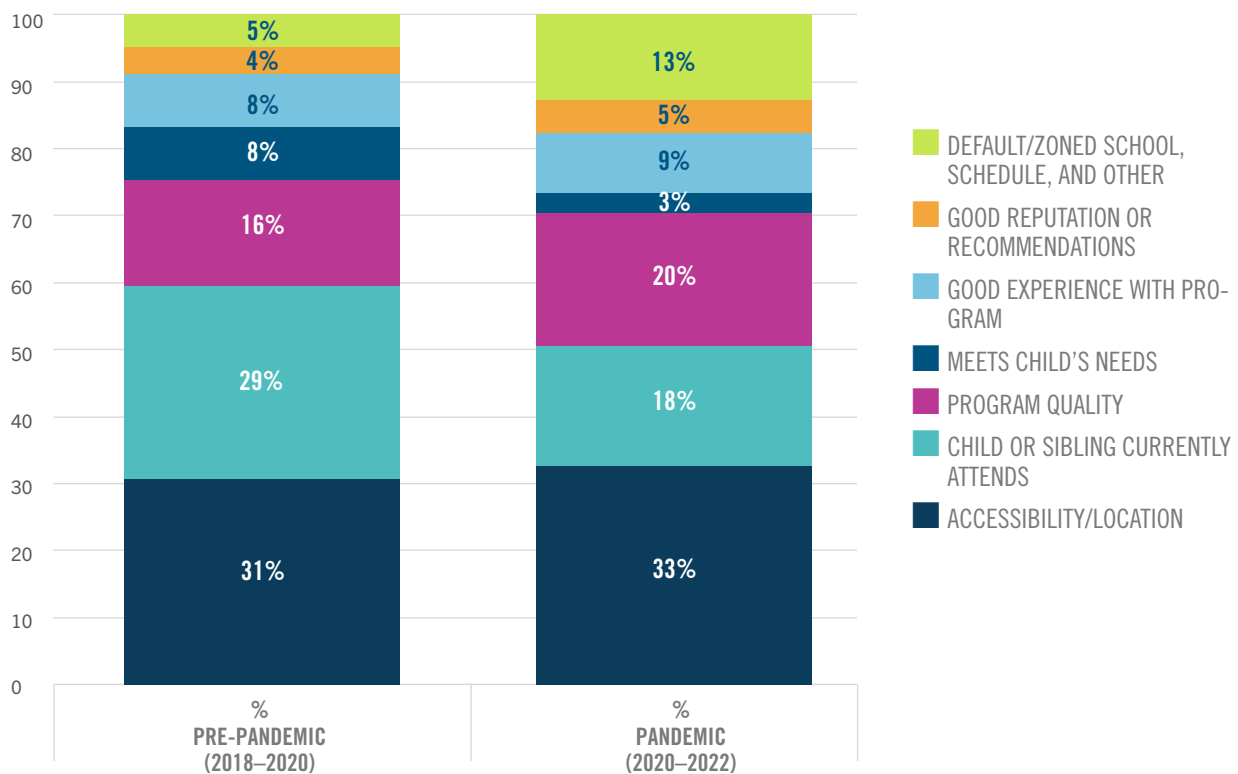
We asked parents who reported applying to New York City’s Pre-K for All program to rate the importance of each pre-K factor in their program selection. Despite the widespread changes in many New Yorkers’ lives and routines, parents’ reports of the important factors in their pre-K selection process did not change after the COVID-19 outbreak. This stability in trends suggests that the underlying reasons for the changes in pre-K participation are likely due to factors other than what parents personally value.

Across all four survey years, the majority of parents pointed to “warm and caring teachers” (96%), “safe neighborhood” (94%), “academic quality” (92%), and “compliance with city health and safety rules” (91%) as essential factors for pre-K programs. Such priorities in emotional climate and physical safety were consistently high among parents regardless of their poverty level or racial and ethnic background.

On the other hand, for the factors that relate to the logistics of childcare arrangements, such as “close to home” (84%), “early drop-off/late pick-up” (60%), “having a child or sibling in the program” (44%), and “close to work” (39%), the rate of parents regarding these features as very important varied by family background. A greater share of lower-income families (below 200% of the poverty line) rated these factors as critical for their pre-K decision process than higher-income families (above 200% of the poverty line). Given that lower-income families are more likely than higher-income families to have shift-based work and/or “essential work” jobs that cannot be performed remotely, the availability of conveniently located pre-K programs is critical for their children to access services.¹⁹

Figure 10

Main reason for ranking a program first before and during COVID-19



Source: Tabulations from ECPT surveys from 2018 to 2022. $n = 592$

Another way to understand parents’ needs and preferences for pre-K programs is to ask them to reflect on the top reason why they listed a specific program as their first choice in their pre-K applications. Similar to parents’ search preferences, parents’ responses did not differ much during the pre-pandemic and pandemic years. Over all four years of our surveys, three-quarters of parents’ responses fell into one of the three top categories: “convenient location” (30%), “having child or sibling currently attending the program” (25%), and “program quality” (18%). Ultimately, families need their children’s pre-K to work with their busy schedules and provide their children with a quality education, regardless of the inconsistencies they face in the world around them.

¹⁹ Neckerman et al. (2022); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020).

CONCLUSIONS

New York City is a city that has truly embraced early care and education for its four-year-olds. When considering all forms of preschool (including private preschools, pre-K, early intervention programs, etc.), an astonishing 94% of families reported enrolling their four-year-old in a preschool program before the pandemic. However, not every New Yorker can access all preschool options, and the Pre-K for All initiative was launched to address this inequity.

Before the pandemic, patterns of pre-K participation were fairly similar by poverty, racial and ethnic identity, or other demographic characteristics such as immigrant status and the number of adults in the home. These patterns changed during and after the pandemic.

After the onset of the pandemic, fewer families enrolled their children in the city's pre-K programs. The pre-K enrollment rate was 60% in the 2020–2021 academic year, a marked decrease from the rate of 73% in the prior year. However, this enrollment decrease was not equally distributed across family demographics. We saw a considerable reduction in pre-K enrollment for the higher-income families and for the families in poverty, but low-income families (between 100% and 200% of the poverty line) had a relatively small enrollment reduction during the pandemic period. Additionally, pre-K enrollment fell more for white and Black families than for Latino families, and more for children with U.S.-born parents than for those with immigrant parents. Altogether, these enrollment decreases affected families with the highest and lowest levels of social and economic capital. These lower enrollment rates can be attributed to a variety of reasons, but ultimately the consequences of differential changes in pre-K participation depend on the quality of care children received in place of the pre-K. For families with the highest levels of economic and social capital, these children likely had access to in-home enrichment or alternative forms of paid care.

Additionally, children who attended pre-K during the pandemic faced changes in class modality, with 70% of pre-K students attending partially or fully remote in the first year of the pandemic (2020–2021). These changes were not distributed equally across family demographics. Families with lower incomes, Black families, and immigrant families had disproportionately higher rates of remote learning than their peers. Although a variety of health-related reasons likely influenced these trends, there are consequences to remote learning, particularly for vulnerable young children. In addition to the job-related disruptions parents faced during remote learning, children faced a higher risk of poor learning outcomes and adverse mental health and behavioral consequences.²⁰

In considering pre-K's path forward, nearly all families highly appreciated the importance of emotional climate, health and safety, and academic quality. The unanimous agreement on the importance of these features was not affected by COVID-19. Reliability in safety and quality of the educational program is a fundamental criterion to make pre-K a viable care option for parents. Importantly, families with the fewest resources were most likely to cite reliability and proximity as the important features of their child's pre-K program. This demand for a program with predictable openings and a location for in-person childcare was something that many pre-K programs simply couldn't provide in the midst of the pandemic, and low-income

²⁰ Loades et al. (2020); Oster et al. (2021).

families and families living in communities of color experienced greater repercussions to their work and childcare because of it. As the city continues to heal through the lingering pandemic, these data suggest that Pre-K for All should prioritize creating new universal pre-K slots in a variety of programs that are accessible to families of all backgrounds.

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APPENDIX

Table A1

Survey year and pre-K eligibility by child's birth year

	CHILD'S BIRTH YEAR			
	2014	2015	2016	2017
2017	Planning to apply			
2018	Application/ Enrollment	Planning to apply		
2019	Enrollment (cont.)	Application/ Enrollment	Planning to apply	
2020		Enrollment (cont.)	Application/ Enrollment	Planning to apply
2021			Enrollment (cont.)	Application/ Enrollment
2022				Enrollment (cont.)

Table A2

Survey sample sizes by topic

	APPLICATION	ENROLLMENT
OVERALL	1,268	1,073
<i>Academic year</i>		
2018–19	135	101
2019–20	482	407
2020–21	534	460
2021–22	117	105
<i>Poverty level</i>		
Below 100%	286	248
Between 100-200%	491	424
Above 200%	400	349
<i>Parent race and ethnicity</i>		
White	365	317
Black	235	195
Latino	527	442
Asian/Other	141	119

Source: ECPT survey responses from 2018 to 2022.