



# Are there differences in parents' preferences and search processes across preschool types? Evidence from Louisiana

Daphna Bassok\*, Preston Magouirk, Anna J. Markowitz, Daniel Player

University of Virginia, United States



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## ABSTRACT

A rising proportion of four-year-olds now attend formal, or center-based, early childhood education (ECE) programs. Formal settings, such as Head Start, public preschool, and subsidized child care centers vary significantly in regulation, funding, and service provision. As these differences may have substantial implications for child development and family well-being, understanding how parents search for and select formal programs is critical. Using data from a sample of low-income families with four-year-olds enrolled in publicly-funded programs, we examine whether parents' preferences for ECE and their search processes vary across formal ECE program types. We find little evidence of differences in preferences across preschool types but do find significant differences in parents' search processes. Parents with children in subsidized child care consider more options, consider their search more difficult, and are less likely to call their child's program their "first choice." Implications for policy and future research are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Most four-year-olds in the United States regularly experience non-parental care, and a rising proportion of these children are enrolled in 'formal' or center-based early childhood education (ECE) programs (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2016). The formal sector includes a diverse set of ECE programs including federally-funded Head Start programs, state-funded preschool, as well as for-profit, not-for-profit, and faith-based child care programs, some of which receive public funds through parents' use of child care subsidies. Each of these program types provides center-based classroom experiences for preschool-aged children, they differ with respect to their funding levels, regulatory structures, workforce characteristics, and service provision (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, Greenberg, & Loeb, 2016; Henry, Gordon, & Rickman, 2006), and these differences may have important implications for children and families.

Although there is substantial variation in quality *within* program types, particularly by state and locality, recent research suggests that, on average, Head Start and state-funded preschool are of higher quality than private child care centers receiving public subsidies that low-income children might otherwise attend (Bassok et al., 2016; Dowsett, Huston, & Imes, 2008). For example, using

nationally representative data, Johnson, Ryan, and Brooks-Gunn (2012) show that even after controlling for an extensive set of family characteristics, subsidy-eligible children who enrolled in Head Start or state-funded preschool experienced substantially higher quality care than those who attended private child care centers funded in part by child care subsidies. One explanation for this pattern is that in many states Head Start and state preschool are subject to more stringent quality regulations than child care centers. For instance, because the educational credentials required to work in Head Start and state preschool exceed those typically required in licensed child care settings, teachers in those settings are more likely to hold bachelor's degrees than are child care workers in private settings (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 2014).

Services provided to families also vary across program types. For example, Head Start programs provide extensive services for low-income children with special needs, and in many states, they provide services for families including health services, parenting supports, and work training. Such services may mean that Head Start is more effective than other preschool types in influencing both family and child outcomes. Indeed, research suggests that Head Start programs impact maternal educational attainment as well as parenting practices relative to the families of children in non-Head Start settings (Gelber & Isen, 2013; Sabol & Chase-Lansdale, 2015; Schanzenbach & Bauer, 2016).

Finally, formal ECE types differ with respect to practical features that may be salient to parents, including their eligibility criteria,

\* Corresponding author at: EdPolicyWorks, University of Virginia, PO Box 400879, Charlottesville, VA 22904, United States.

E-mail address: db9ec@virginia.edu (D. Bassok).

capacity, price, transportation provision, and length of day. Head Start and public preschool programs are generally free to all eligible families. Child care centers receiving public subsidies, on the other hand, typically rely on program fees and subsidies provided to low-income families, which may be linked to employment requirements. These differences may have important consequences for families, particularly low-income families that are more likely to be constrained by cost and logistical factors (Child Care Aware of America, 2015; Mattingly, Schaefer, & Carson, 2016).

Because the type of ECE program a child experiences may have important implications for their own developmental trajectory and their family's well-being, it is important to understand how families end up in one type of center-based program versus another. While a number of studies have explored which families select into the formal ECE sector and which select home-based options (e.g., Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000), we have very little evidence about the selection processes that lead families into different types of center-based ECE settings. Given the high rates of participation in formal settings among four-year-olds, there is a need to understand not only which children attend formal settings, but also how they sort into different types of settings. This is the gap the current paper aims to fill.

Using data from a large survey of low-income Louisiana parents whose four-year-old children were enrolled in formal ECE settings that receive some type of public funds, the present study provides the first descriptive evidence about differences in parents' preferences and search processes across three major formal program types used by low-income four-year-olds—Head Start, publicly-funded preschool, and private center-based child care settings that receive funding, in part, from child care subsidies. Although there are significant differences across states in how the early childhood landscape is organized and regulated, and the current study is focused specifically on a single state, results from this descriptive study provide hypothesis-generating information as to why similar families enroll their children in different program types and how parents are currently navigating the fragmented formal ECE market. Implications for policies, including interventions designed to influence parents' ECE choices, are discussed.

## 2. Background

We begin by describing the three primary types of publicly-funded formal ECE programs used by low-income children, highlighting key differences across preschool types and findings from studies that have assessed the impacts of each program type. We then summarize the existing evidence on parents' preferences and search for an early childhood program. We cite a variety of research studies, many of which use national data across multiple program types, but acknowledge that these on-average estimates may mask important heterogeneity and are not specific to the Louisiana context that is the focus of the current work.

The formal ECE sector has expanded substantially over the past 50 years. From 1968 to 2000, enrollment rates in formal ECE for four-year-olds increased from 23% to 68% (Bainbridge, Meyers, Tanaka, & Waldfogel, 2005), a proportion that has remained relatively stable (70%) through 2013 (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2016). Increasing public provision of formal ECE for low-income children has facilitated this expansion. For example, Head Start enrollment increased from about 450,000 children in the 1980s to more than 925,000 in 2014 (Office of Head Start, 2016). The program served about 9% of four-year-olds in 2015 (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2016). State preschool programs have also experienced a substantial period of growth. Programs now exist in 43 states and serve nearly 30% of four-year-olds, a doubling of enrollment since 2002 (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2016). Even with this expansion, how-

ever, about 30% of four-year-olds attend non-public formal ECE programs, such as licensed private child care centers, which in most contexts, face less stringent regulations. Among low-income four-year-olds, public programs such as Head Start and public preschool account for most formal ECE enrollment. Still, these public programs fail to serve the majority of eligible children (Barnett et al., 2010; HHS-ACF, 2010).

### 2.1. Head Start

Head Start is a federally funded anti-poverty program that provides free ECE for low-income three- to five-year-old children as well as comprehensive services for their families, including health, nutrition, social, and employment support services. Head Start programs operate under stringent regulations requiring them to continuously monitor and improve program quality in order to maintain funding (Currie & Neidell, 2007; Walters, 2015).

Head Start is targeted; the program prioritizes access for children in families with an annual income at or below the federal poverty level. Nonetheless, roughly 85% of Head Start programs are estimated to be oversubscribed (HHS-ACF, 2010), and recent evidence suggests that only 40% of eligible children are served by Head Start programs nationwide (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2016; Schmit, 2013). Additionally, hours of operation are often limited and inflexible, with over half of the programs providing half-day ECE, which may pose significant problems for working parents (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2016). In Louisiana, the context for the current study, Head Start programs serve about 12% of four-year-olds (Barnett et al., 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, 2016; Louisiana Policy Institute for Children, 2014).

### 2.2. State-funded public preschool

State-funded preschool programs aim to promote school readiness at kindergarten entry. Public preschool programs, which are offered in both public schools and community organizations, often mirror lower elementary school settings, dedicating a large portion of program time to academically focused content (Pianta & Howes, 2009). Lead teachers in most programs are required to hold bachelor's degrees and to undertake specialized training in early childhood education (Barnett, 2003; Barnett et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2014).

Public preschool programs vary significantly across states in terms of access, duration, and quality. For example, 33 state programs require families to meet income-based eligibility criteria. Public preschool programs are generally, but not always, free, both in Louisiana and nationwide. Thirty-eight state programs operate during the academic year only, and 23 state programs provide only part-day ECE. In some states, state-funded preschool programs may be colocated in settings including Head Start programs or private child-care settings, and at times, funding sources are blended to build cohesion across types of ECE. In Louisiana, the Cecil J. Picard LA 4 Early Childhood Program (LA4) is the primary provider of full-day (six-hour) state-funded preschool, serving 26% of low-income four-year-olds statewide in public school settings. LA4 meets 9 of the 10 minimum quality standards set by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) (Barnett et al., 2017). In Louisiana, state-funded preschool is generally operated independently from Head Start and private child care.

### 2.3. Center-based child care

As defined in the current study, child care centers are privately operated, regulated through licensing standards (which in Louisiana and most other states are less stringent than those governing public preschool and Head Start programs), and funded

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