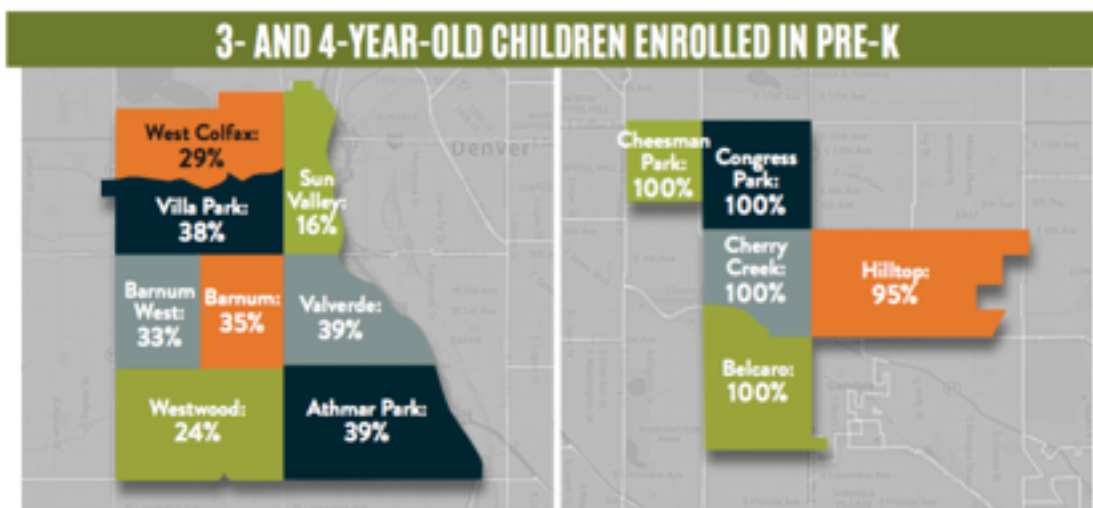


The Great Unequalizer

By **Padres & Jóvenes Unidos** | Feb 2016
Summary of the Great Unequalizer Report

How Denver's Pre-K System Fails the Children of Southwest Denver and Other Low-Income Communities of Color

High-quality pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds promotes healthy childhood development and success in school and throughout life. It can also be a "great equalizer," as it has proven effective at addressing socioeconomic inequities and the racial achievement gap. However, in Denver, while virtually every child in predominantly White, affluent neighborhoods attends pre-K, only a small fraction of children in predominantly Latino, lower-income neighborhoods of Southwest Denver are enrolled in pre-K. [See map]



Source: Denver Office of Children's Affairs

Reasons for Not Enrolling 3 or 4 Year old children in Pre-K

No Available Slots in Local Sites	45%
No Conveniently Located Sites	26%
Poor Quality of Local Sites	19%
Could Not Afford It	18%
Other	11%
Preferred Other Childcare Options	10%

There is a widespread belief that these differences are primarily due to Latino parents preferring other childcare options, not placing as much value on early childhood education, or simply not knowing about the pre-K opportunities available to them. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos spoke with thousands of residents within Southwest Denver to find out if this was true. What we found is that, overwhelmingly, Southwest Denver parents are not choosing to keep their children out of pre-K. They are being prevented from accessing high-quality pre-K for their children. They are consistently encountering substantial barriers related to access, affordability, and quality when they attempt to enroll their children in pre-K.

ISSUE #1: ACCESS

There are simply not enough high-quality pre-K slots in Southwest Denver to meet the needs of residents. Parents report being on waiting lists for up to two years, not being able to locate programs that serve 3-year-olds, or simply not being able to find any school with an open slot near their house. These experiences were confirmed through our survey of pre-K providers in Southwest Denver, the vast majority of which had no open slots.

ISSUE #2: AFFORDABILITY

In Denver, the average annual cost of pre-K in a center, for just one child, is \$11,477. It would be impossible for many families to be able to afford such programs on their own. While there are several sources of funds that can assist Denver parents in covering the cost of pre-K, each has significant gaps that prevent it from coming close to meeting the financial needs of all the families of 3- and 4-year-olds. Thus, many families who would like to enroll their children in pre-K program are simply unable to because of cost.

ISSUE #3: QUALITY

For those families that are able to access pre-K programs, while many are undoubtedly having positive experiences, there are still significant concerns over quality. In particular, parents are experiencing difficulties around inadequate language instruction being provided to Spanish-speaking students and the overuse of harsh disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions, which pushes 3- and 4-year-olds onto the School-to-Jail Track. For example, 41% of residents reported that suspensions or expulsions were being used at least occasionally at their pre-K sites, with

one in six respondents (16%) saying they were used “frequently.” Numerous parents described the use of suspensions for such typical behaviors as not wanting to help clean up toys or distracting other kids.

0%

Percentage of Southwest Denver Sites that have open slots for 3-year-olds* (based on 12 DPS schools in target community, as of October 2015)



These systemic barriers can make it extremely difficult, or even impossible, for many low- and moderate-income families to access a high-quality pre-K education. Thus, many children in Southwest Denver and other low-income communities of color are not even able to receive the education that is considered the norm within wealthier Denver communities. Moreover, instead of being one of our leading strategies for eliminating the achievement gap in the K-12 system, Denver’s pre-K system is an active and significant contributor to the achievement gap. It is contributing to citywide inequities by reinforcing the advantages enjoyed by the children of more affluent families and the disadvantages suffered by children of color from low-income families. Consequently, unless these deficiencies are addressed, Denver’s pre-K system will continue to function as a “great unequalizer.”

To address these problems, here are five necessary action steps for creating equal educational opportunities within Denver’s pre-K system:

Action Steps

- ★ Guarantee tuition-free access to high-quality, full-day pre-K for every 3- and 4-year-old from a low- and moderate-income family.
- ★ Prohibit the use of suspensions and expulsions in pre-K.
- ★ Require that pre-K sites adopt a consistent policy for meeting the needs of dual language learners that includes support for, and nurturing of, students’ native languages.
- ★ Fund pre-K appropriately so that every provider and employee is making a living wage.
- ★ Ensure that all pre-K teachers and administrators receive training on classroom management, implicit bias, developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods, dual language instruction, and the use of inclusive, culturally affirming practices.

The members of Padres & Jóvenes Unidos are working to implement these action steps through advocacy with city- and state-level policymakers. Please join us in ensuring that all children are able to receive a high-quality pre-K education. For the full report, visit www.padresunidos.org