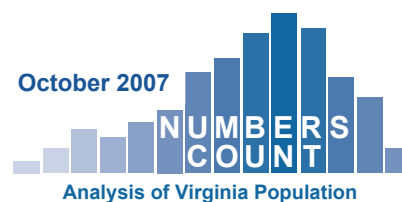


# Virginia's At Risk 4-Year-Olds Missing Out on Preschool

By Amanda Walters



## Executive Summary

- Approximately 105,000 four-year-olds lived in Virginia in 2005. Almost 43% (45,000 children) were not enrolled in any type of preschool program.
- Enrollment in preschool is highest among those children from families earning more than three times the poverty threshold (70%). Children from families below the poverty level are enrolled at the lowest rate (40%).
- Thirty percent of Virginia's four-year-olds live in single-parent households.
- Five percent of Virginia's four-year-olds live in households where no one speaks English very well.
- Public and private preschool programs attract different students and may provide different results for participating four-year-olds. Four-year-olds not enrolled in preschool are similar to four-year-olds enrolled in public preschool programs. Both groups tend to come from single parent households, to live in or near poverty, and to have mothers with less education than four-year-olds enrolled in private preschool programs.
- Public preschool programs are more racially/ethnically diverse than private programs, more closely mirroring the environment four-year-olds will enter in the public schools.

## Introduction

Early childhood experiences impact later success in school and in life. In their first five years, children develop the skills that allow them to learn to read, to work with others, and to become critical thinkers. Documented benefits of preschool include improved academic achievement and college enrollment, reduced incidence of teen pregnancy, lower crime and delinquency, higher earnings and employment rates, and lower dependence on welfare and public health services. [1]

Although preschool is available for children from families in poverty through state and federally-funded programs, this

group of children is enrolled at the lowest level (40%) overall. Governor Kaine's recent initiative to expand access for students who live near poverty may raise the level of enrollment of children from this group, which is currently at 50 percent overall. Some children from middle-income families remain under-enrolled (44%), perhaps because they do not qualify for state-funded preschool and their parents cannot afford the fees required of private schools.

*"Approximately 105,000 four-year-olds lived in Virginia in 2005. Of these, almost 45,000 were not enrolled in any type of preschool or nursery program"*

Recognizing the significance of early childhood education to Virginia's families, workforce, and economy, Governor Kaine appointed the Start Strong Council to guide the expansion of access to high-quality preschool programs for Virginia's four-year-olds. [2] To guide the decision-making process, this article describes the most current trends in public and private preschool enrollment in the Commonwealth, as well as child and parent characteristics pertinent to involvement in preschool.

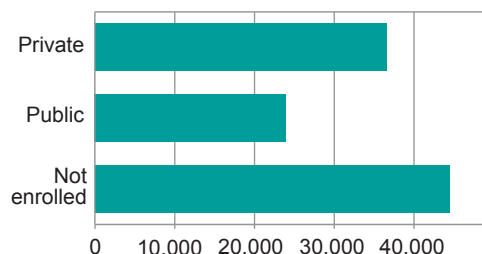


Fig. 1. Preschool Enrollment

Utilizing the United States Census Bureau's American Community Survey, we identified all four-year-olds living in Virginia in 2005, as well as parents or grandparents living in the same household. Our analysis includes a comparison of enrolled and non-enrolled preschoolers, as well as a comparison of publicly and privately enrolled preschoolers.

## Who Are Virginia's Four-Year-Olds?

The most striking aspects of Virginia's four-year-olds are:

- Almost 30 percent come from single-parent households and 15 percent are living in poverty.
- Ten percent of parents are not U.S. citizens and approximately 5 percent of four-year-olds come from linguistically isolated households.

*“Approximately 5 percent of Virginia’s four-year-olds live in linguistically isolated households, that is households where no one can speak English very well.”*

Approximately 105,000 four-year-olds lived in Virginia in 2005. Of these, almost 45,000 were not enrolled in any type of preschool or nursery program (Fig. 1). Over 65 per-

cent of Virginia’s four-year-olds are White, about 20 percent are Black, and 8 percent of all four-year-olds living in Virginia are Hispanic. (Fig. 2). Additionally, approximately 5 percent of Virginia’s four-year-olds live in linguistically isolated households, that is households where no one can speak English very well.

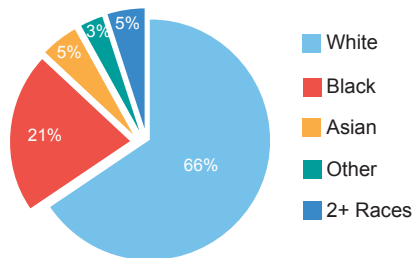


Fig. 2. Distribution of Race

Almost 30 percent of four-year-olds live in single parent households; and about 5 percent have at least one grandparent living in the household. The majority of Virginia’s four-year-olds live in a household of size four (Fig. 3); and 45 percent of four-year-olds have one co-residing parent in the labor force. 12 percent have no co-residing parents in the labor force. Over 16,000 four-year-olds, or 15 percent, are

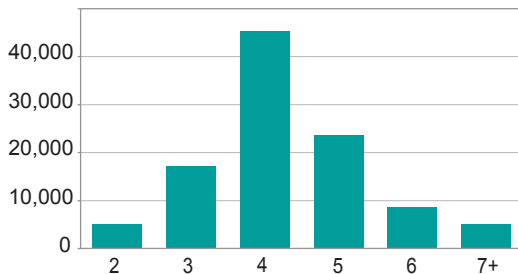


Fig. 3. Preschool Enrollment by Household Size

living in poverty, which is defined as below the 100th percentile of the poverty threshold.

90 percent of mothers of Virginia four-year-olds are at least high school educated and 40 percent are at least college educated (Fig. 4). Educational attainment for fathers is not substantially different from that of mothers; about 90 percent of fathers are at least high school educated and about 45 percent have a bachelor’s or advanced degree. As a final note, about 10 percent of parents are not U.S. citizens.

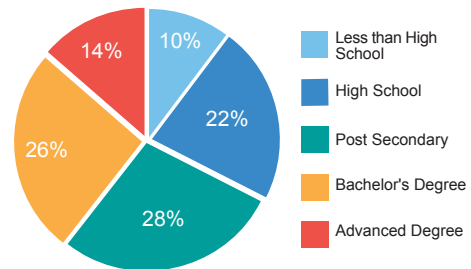


Fig. 4. Mother's Educational Attainment

### Who's More Likely to Be Enrolled?

#### Enrolled versus Non-enrolled

Four-year-olds in Virginia are more likely to be enrolled in preschool if:

- Their mother is at least a high school graduate.
- They do not have a grandparent living at home.
- They have at least one parent in the labor force.
- Blacks and Whites are equally likely to be enrolled.

Enrollment in preschool reflects some basic household differences. Enrolled four-year-olds tend to live in married-couple households and their parents tend to be members of the labor force. About 76 percent of enrolled four-year-olds live in married-couple households, while only 66 percent of non-enrolled four-year-olds live in the same type of household. Approximately 92 percent of enrolled four-year-olds in Virginia live in households in which at least one co-residing parent belongs to the labor force, compared to only 82 percent for the non-enrolled four-year-olds.

Fewer enrolled four-year-olds live in poverty as well. While 22 percent of non-enrolled four-year-olds are living in pov-

erty, only 11 percent of enrolled four-year-olds are living in poverty.

Enrolled four-year-olds tend to have mothers with a bachelor's degree or advanced degree; approximately 53 percent of mothers who have a four-year-old enrolled in a preschool program have a bachelor's or an advanced degree, while 21 percent of mothers with a non-enrolled child have the same type of degrees (Fig. 5). The difference in educational attainment for mothers of enrolled and non-enrolled four-year-olds is probably due to awareness. Mothers with better education may be more aware of the importance of early childhood education and development. Additionally, educated mothers tend to have more information and resources to send their children to pre-k.

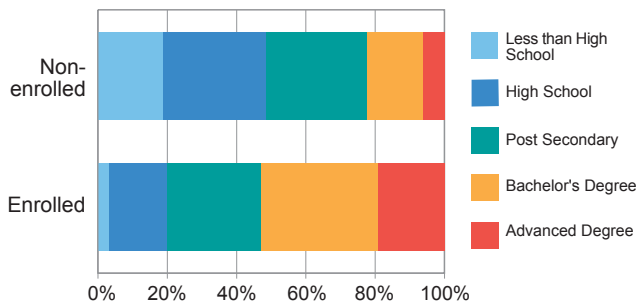


Fig. 5. Mother's Educational Attainment by Enrollment Status

**Public versus Private**

The major differences between public and private preschool enrollees are:

- Public school enrollment is more racially diverse.
- A higher percentage of public school enrollees come from single-parent households.
- A higher percentage of public school enrollees live below the poverty threshold.

One of the major differences between public and private preschool programs is the diversity of the student population, with private programs tending to be less diverse. Of four-year-olds attending state-funded preschool in Virginia, 60 percent are White, approximately 28 percent are Black, and 8% are Hispanic. In contrast, the population in private preschool programs is 78 percent White, 16 percent are Black, and 5 percent Hispanic.

The households of children in public and private preschool are also different. Four-year-olds attending private school tend to live in married-couple households and in households in which the parent is responsible for them as opposed to grandparents being responsible for them. Approximately 83 percent of four-year-olds attending private school live in married-couple households, whereas only 66 percent of four-year-olds attending public school live in the same type of household.

*“Over 16,000 four-year-olds, or 15 percent, are living in poverty, which is defined as below the 100th percentile of the poverty threshold.”*

Parents' educational attainment also seems to influence public or private enrollment. Parents of four-year-olds in private preschool programs tend to be members of the labor force; and more of those mothers tend to be college educated. Almost 95 percent of privately enrolled four-year-olds live in households in which at least one co-residing parent belongs to the labor force, whereas only 85 percent of their publicly enrolled counterparts live in the same type of household. About 62 percent of mothers who have four-year-olds in private school are college educated, while only 38 percent of mothers who have four-year-olds in public school are college educated (Fig. 6).

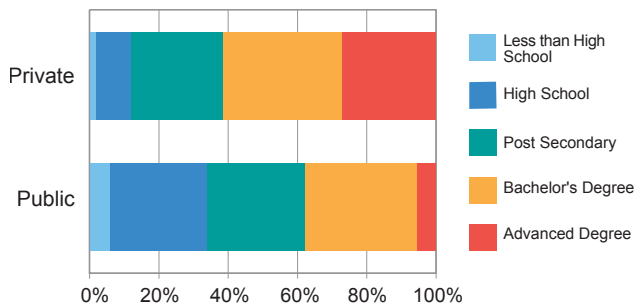


Fig. 6. Mother's Educational Attainment by School Type

As a final note, fewer four-year-olds attending private preschool programs live in poverty. Only 4 percent of privately enrolled four-year-olds are living below the poverty threshold, while 22 percent of publicly enrolled four-year-olds are living below the poverty threshold.

**Conclusion**

This article provides an overall snapshot of Virginia's four-year-olds and their household environments. Additionally,

we sought to provide Virginia's educational policy-makers with the major differences between the state's publicly enrolled and privately enrolled four-year-olds to guide them in their expansion of state-funded preschool programs.

This research provides a reference for Virginia and its educators on the current characteristics of the four-year-olds enrolled in the various types of pre-kindergarten programs available in the Commonwealth. We hope that this paper offers Virginia's educational decision-makers a starting point as to how to coordinate the state's pre-kindergarten expansion.

#### References

- [1] "Start Strong Council, Initial Report." (December 2006). Retrieved March 5, 2007, from <http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/StartStrong/index.cfm>.
- [2] Bryant, Donna, Clifford, Dick, Early, Dianne, and Little, Lloyd (Spring 2005). "Pre-Education in the United States." *Early Development*, 9 (1), 6-9.

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