



# Understanding Equitable Access to Public Montessori Pre-K: A Case Study of Montessori Recruitment and Enrollment Practices

## Executive Summary

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## Introduction

Ensuring equitable access to high-quality early education for families from all racial, ethnic, and income backgrounds is a critical component for addressing systemic racism and inequality within the public education system. This study examined one piece of this issue by investigating access to public Montessori pre-K, as well as barriers that may hinder equitable access. While many public Montessori pre-K programs report that students are admitted through a random lottery process, initial efforts to study these programs indicated that certain enrollment policies may create barriers to access. Potential barriers to accessing public Montessori pre-K include lottery priority status for siblings, neighborhood residents, and children of staff; a lack of targeted recruitment practices for families from underserved communities; and affordability.<sup>1</sup> These barriers to access may disproportionately affect Black and Latine<sup>2</sup> families and families facing poverty, who have unequal access to high-quality educational opportunities overall.<sup>i</sup> The Montessori model was originally created to give children with learning challenges (e.g., children who exhibited concentration, attention, and discipline challenges) a high-quality educational environment where they could thrive.<sup>ii</sup> Given the origins of the Montessori pedagogy and existing disparities within the educational system, questions of equity should be at the center of policy development for accessing public Montessori pre-K.

### What is public Montessori pre-K?

For purposes of this case study, public Montessori pre-K programs are those that self-identified as following Montessori practices, are publicly funded, and served children ages 4 or younger (either for a fee/tuition or for free). These programs included public charter and public magnet schools offering Montessori programming.

To explore whether and how public Montessori pre-K enrollment policies might create barriers to access for underrepresented families, our team at Child Trends, with support from the Brady Education Foundation:

- Compiled a *national landscape scan dataset* of public Montessori pre-K programs and their characteristics
- Surveyed *school administrators* about their public Montessori pre-K programs' recruitment and enrollment policies
- Interviewed *families* about their perceptions of public Montessori pre-K

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted our ability to collect data. Sample sizes for both school administrators and families are small, likely due to the additional pressures placed on these individuals as they navigated the pandemic and virtual learning. As such, we cannot draw firm conclusions from our analyses of these data. Rather, our findings are meant to provide an exploratory snapshot of the barriers families face when trying to access public Montessori pre-K. Although our findings may not be nationally representative of public Montessori pre-K, we hope these preliminary data might shed light on the factors that facilitate or inhibit equitable access to Montessori pre-K and inform priorities for future research.

<sup>1</sup> Affordability includes the presence of costs for attending public Montessori pre-K, as well as access to financial aid.

<sup>2</sup> Latine is a gender-neutral version of Latino and Latina.

# Key Findings

## National landscape of public Montessori pre-K

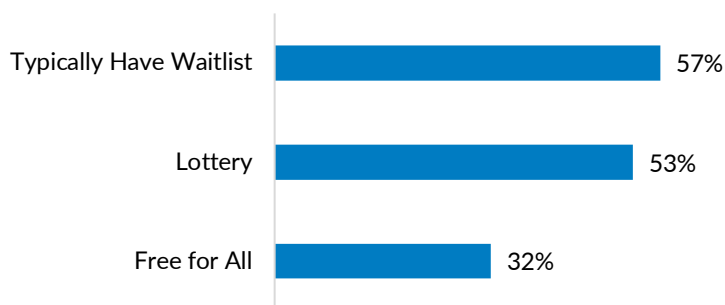
Using existing lists of public Montessori pre-K programs as a starting point,<sup>3</sup> we identified key characteristics of each program through a combination of phone/email outreach and online research. From December 2019 to May 2020, our team reviewed a total of 698 schools as part of the landscape scan. Two hundred and eighty-eight of those schools (41%) were deemed eligible for inclusion in the final dataset because they were public Montessori programs serving children ages 4 or younger. The remaining 410 schools were removed from the dataset because they were no longer using a Montessori curriculum (n = 130), were closed (n = 117), did not serve children ages 4 or younger (n = 113), were private (n = 42), could not be reached or researched online (n = 6), or declined to answer questions about their school (n = 2). Of the 288 schools in the final dataset, we collected all information about 125 (43%) through online research only, resulting in significant missing information for those schools.

The following findings are based on an analysis of the 288 public Montessori pre-K programs in our final landscape dataset.

### Key program characteristics

- Many programs were public charter (32%) or public magnet (25%) programs.
- The majority of the public Montessori pre-K programs had a waitlist in a typical year (meaning, the program receives more applicants than there are slots available).
- About half of public Montessori pre-K programs used some form of lottery to enroll new children.
- Only around one third of programs were free for all children. Many programs charged tuition for some or all families at the pre-K level, though some also offered financial aid.

Figure 1. Key program characteristics, all schools (n = 288)



Source: Landscape Scan of Public Montessori pre-K Dataset, Child Trends (2020)

### Match between program and community demographic characteristics

To explore the extent to which the demographic characteristics of students enrolled in public Montessori programs match the characteristics of their surrounding communities, we analyzed administrative data from the American Community Survey, Civil Rights Data Collection, and Common Core of Data.

- Nearly half of public Montessori pre-K programs had majority White student bodies; around 20 percent had majority Black student bodies.
- More than half of public Montessori pre-K programs were located in majority White communities.
- Almost all public Montessori pre-K programs had racial/ethnic demographic characteristics that reflected their surrounding communities' characteristics.

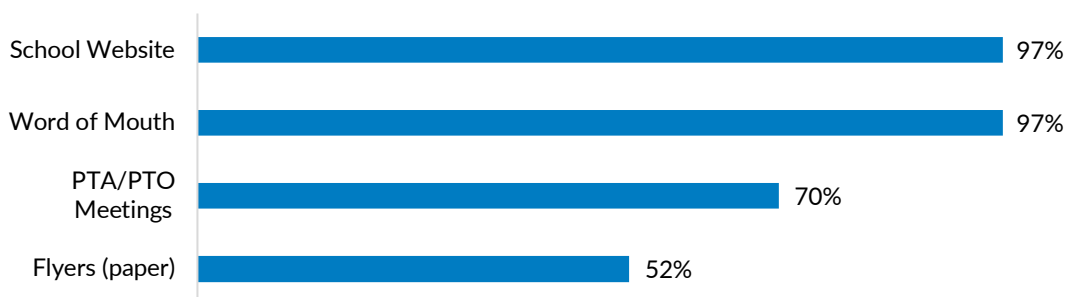
## Programs' recruitment and enrollment practices

To understand programs' recruitment and enrollment practices, we surveyed school administrators in public Montessori pre-K programs. The following findings are based on responses from 37 public Montessori administrators.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically, our team compiled lists of programs from the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector (NCMPS) as well as a study from the Trust for Learning.

- In line with our findings from the landscape scan, most surveyed programs used some version of a lottery system to admit students. However, even among those that said they used a completely random lottery, most programs gave certain groups of children (e.g., siblings of currently enrolled students, children of school staff) priority or preference for admission.
- Only around one third of programs provided transportation services to all students, while just under one third provided transportation options only to certain students—most commonly students with disabilities or those from families experiencing poverty. A lack of transportation may pose barriers to access, particularly for families without access to private transportation options.
- Most programs reported having a recruitment or outreach plan that they used to recruit and engage with prospective families. Many programs publicized information about how to apply for or enroll in their program via their websites, word of mouth, PTA/PTO meetings, and flyers.
- All programs plan to train teachers on racial equity and social justice topics, as well as cultural responsiveness, but very few plan to change their enrollment policies or tuition structure.

**Figure 2. Surveyed schools' means of publicizing information about how to enroll (n = 33)**



Source: Survey of Public Montessori School Administrators, Child Trends (2020)

## Family perceptions of access to early education

The study team also conducted interviews with families to explore their experiences choosing an ECE program, as well as their perceptions and experiences with public Montessori pre-K. The following findings are based on 13 interviews with families: nine with a child in Montessori and four with a child in another type of ECE program.

### Families had a general understanding of Montessori programs and perceived these programs as different from other, more traditional early learning programs.

- Most families described Montessori programs as having a greater focus on encouraging child interests, promoting independence, and being hands-on and interactive.
- Parents who attended Montessori themselves, or who had older children who attended a Montessori program, reported these experiences as central to looking for or continuing enrollment in a Montessori program.
- In general, parents had positive things to say about Montessori programs, with the exception of a few parents who noted a lack of racial diversity and their belief that Montessori is not a good fit for children who require more structure.

### Many factors contributed to considering a Montessori program.

- Families considered applying to a Montessori program for a variety of reasons, including the program's school environment (e.g., physical environment, students, or staff), educational value to the child, feasibility of attendance, fit between the environment of the program and the needs of the child, alignment of cultural values, and how welcoming the program was to all families.
- Three of four non-Montessori families did not consider a Montessori program as an option because of location and perceived scheduling flexibility.
- Parents reported acquaintances, their own research, and online communities as their means of learning about specific Montessori programs in their communities. Only one parent reported learning about their Montessori program from the program's direct outreach efforts.

**Almost all families reported considering other programs besides the program in which they enrolled.**

- All parents, across Montessori and non-Montessori programs, reported primary factors influencing their decisions to enroll in ECE options. These factors included the classroom's environment, perceived warmth of staff and students, sharing similar educational values to the program, and the chance of their child receiving a slot at the program.
- Parents reported the program's alignment with their cultural or familial values as an important driver for applying and enrolling in the program they selected.
- Families did not mention any barriers to applying to programs, but several noted that there was not a lot of direct outreach from the Montessori pre-K program.

## Implications

- **Most programs do not use a truly random lottery process to admit students**, and instead give preferences to certain groups within their lottery system. The groups that get a preference are often those who have had access in the past (e.g., siblings, children of staff, children in the neighborhood). Therefore, lottery preferences may reinforce the status quo, preventing Black and Latine families from gaining access.
- **Most public Montessori programs are located in majority White communities**, systematically limiting access for Black and Latine families. Considering that most programs serve children with characteristics similar to their surrounding neighborhoods, this distribution of public Montessori pre-K programs in predominantly White communities compounds access barriers for families of color.
- **Majority White programs were more likely to charge some families tuition to attend**, which may create a barrier to entry for families experiencing poverty. Tuition may also create barriers for Black and Latine families whose incomes are lower, on average, than those of White families.<sup>iii</sup>
- **Majority White and diverse programs<sup>4</sup> were more likely to have no geographic residency requirements for prospective families**, potentially making these programs more accessible for families outside of the surrounding community.
- **Families navigate the public Montessori pre-K program search and enrollment process without much support from schools.** Families who took part in our interviews reported navigating these processes on their own or with support from friends or others in their community, not from the pre-K programs.
- **While all public Montessori pre-K programs plan to train teachers on racial equity topics, very few plan to change their enrollment policies or tuition structure.** These structural changes represent the most persistent barriers to access reviewed in this study.

The full report can be found [here](#).

## Acknowledgments

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Friedman-Krauss, A. & Barnett, S. (2020). *Special Report Access to High-quality Early Education and Racial Equity*. <https://nieer.org/policy-issue/special-report-access-to-high-quality-early-education-and-racial-equity>

<sup>ii</sup> American Montessori Society. (2019). History of Montessori [webpage]. Retrieved March 5, 2021 from <https://amshq.org/About-Montessori/History-of-Montessori>

<sup>iii</sup> Creamer, J. (2020). Poverty rates for Blacks and Hispanics reached historic lows in 2019. US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/09/poverty-rates-for-blacks-and-hispanics-reached-historic-lows-in-2019.html>

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this study, "diverse programs" means no single racial/ethnic group made up 50 percent or more of the population.