

# Kids who need preschool the most aren't enrolled

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LOS ANGELES -- Low income and minority children could benefit most from quality preschool, but a new report finds that they're least likely to be enrolled in good early development programs.

In a report released Wednesday by the RAND California Preschool Study, researchers estimate that only 15 percent of those who could benefit most are in high-quality programs that prepare them for success in K-12.

"We can't close the achievement gap unless we close the preparedness gap before kindergarten," said Debra Watkins, founder of the California Alliance of African American Educators. "As a former high school teacher of nearly 30 years, I certainly see what happens (to students who) do not have high quality preschool by the time they reach high school, where we have a dropout problem."

Researchers surveyed 2,000 California parents of 3- and 4-year-olds, interviewed more than 700 state providers, and observed 250 child care and preschool centers.

They found that just under half of 3- and 4-year-olds in economically disadvantaged families are in preschool programs of any quality, compared to 70 percent of children whose families are better off.

In all, an estimated 59 percent of preschool-age children in California are getting public or private early care and education.

The study also found that parental education played a role: 45 percent of children whose mothers didn't finish high school were enrolled in preschools. Meanwhile there was an 80 percent enrollment for children whose mothers have a graduate or professional degree.

Access was also found to be an issue for black, Hispanic and low income parents, who reported the most difficulty finding the care they wanted, the report said.

"There's room to both increase participation for underserved groups and to raise quality across the board," said lead researcher Lynn Karoly.

She noted that success has been seen when group size and student-teacher ratio are considered, and training and professional development is made available to teachers.