

# THE CHICAGO UNIVERSAL PRE-K STUDY

Rapid Research Report

April 2025

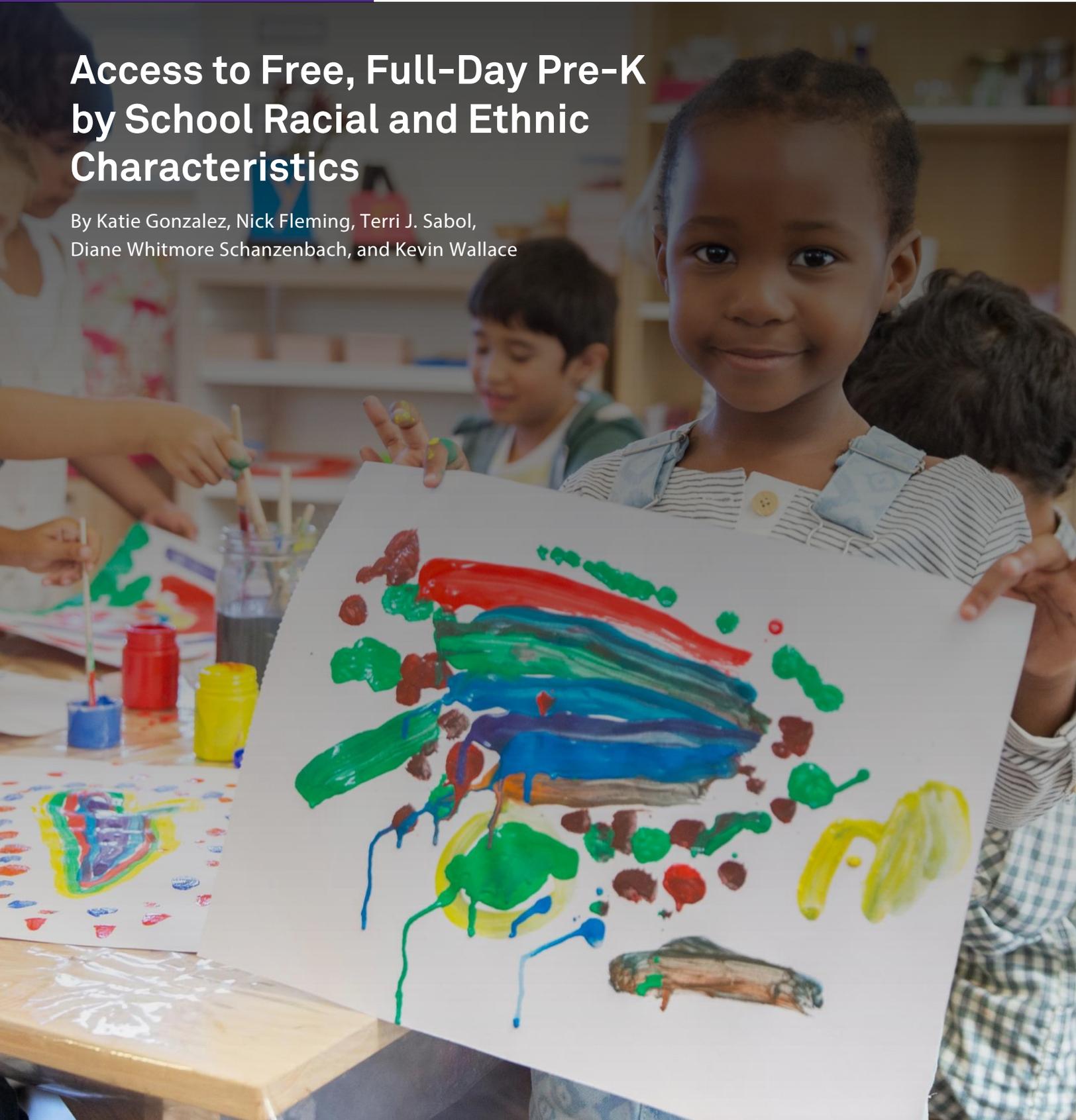


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## Access to Free, Full-Day Pre-K by School Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

By Katie Gonzalez, Nick Fleming, Terri J. Sabol,  
Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Kevin Wallace



## Access to Free, Full-Day Pre-K by School-level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

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### Introduction

Chicago has taken several major steps to expand access to free, full-day pre-kindergarten (pre-K) over the past decade, first with targeted efforts to provide access in schools serving high proportions of historically marginalized students, then subsequently by committing to a universal pre-K system by 2023. In this report, we examine access to free, full-day pre-K in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) based on the race and ethnicity of the students they serve, measured by the proportion of Black, Hispanic, White, and Asian students.

### Overview of Chicago's Efforts to Expand Pre-K Access

In 2013, Chicago began a targeted effort to expand pre-K in communities with higher shares of children from racially minoritized backgrounds, non-English-speaking children, and low-income families. Prior to 2013, enrollment in full-day pre-K was very low, reaching about 3% of all age-eligible children, with enrollment rates lower among Black and Hispanic children than among White children. The 2013 targeted expansion led to a large increase in the delivery of free, full-day pre-K in communities with high proportions of Black students. Areas with populations that are predominantly Hispanic saw smaller but measurable increases in enrollment during the targeted expansion period, while those with predominantly White populations experienced minimal change in CPS pre-K enrollment (Ehrlich, et al., 2020).

In 2019, building on the success of the prior efforts, the City committed to a universal pre-K (UPK) system to equitably expand free, full-day pre-K to all children in the city (City of Chicago, 2019). A hallmark of Chicago's UPK expansion is its stated commitment to reach *all* eligible children in the city, while preserving access in the schools serving the most historically marginalized students to address

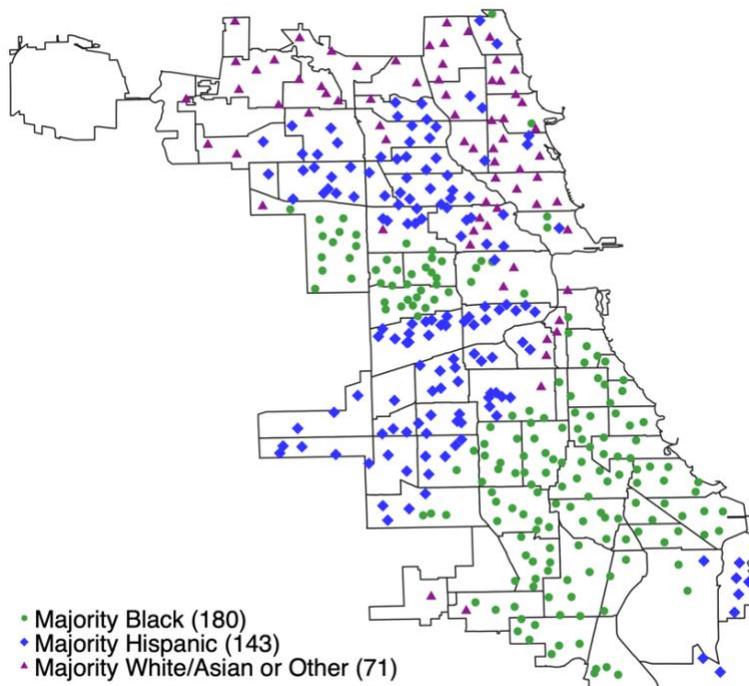
opportunity gaps. Our previous work finds that the UPK expansion substantially increased the number of free, full-day seats for 3- and 4-year-olds available in CPS, and increased enrollment in free, full-day pre-K (Sabol & Schanzenbach, 2023). Additionally, we find that capacity and enrollment increased in both high- and low-income areas across Chicago as result of the UPK expansion (Sabol & Schanzenbach, 2024).

In this rapid research report, we examine trends in access to free, full-day pre-K in CPS schools categorized by the race and ethnicity of the students they serve. We find that the city's turn to universal access did not come at the expense of historically marginalized populations.

### Categorizing Schools Using Racial and Ethnic Demographics

We categorize schools into three mutually exclusive groups based on the race and ethnicity of the students they serve: (1) greater than 50% Black (Majority Black; n = 180 schools), (2) greater than 50% Hispanic (Majority Hispanic; n = 143 schools), and (3) greater than 50% White or greater than 50% Asian, or no racial/ethnic majority (Majority White/Asian or Other; n = 71 schools). Figure 1 shows the locations of CPS schools that offer pre-K for each school grouped by racial and ethnic characteristics.

Figure 1: Chicago Schools With Pre-K, by School-Level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics (2017-18)



*Note: Map shows the locations of 394 CPS schools that offer pre-K.*

Schools tend to be geographically clustered by racial and ethnic characteristics, which is consistent with broader racial and ethnic segregation trends across the city. Table 1 shows the number of CPS schools in each school group that participated in the UPK expansion (UPK Expansion Schools) and that offer pre-K but did not participate in the expansion (Previously Expanded Schools).

Table 1: Schools Offering Pre-K, by Year and School-Level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

Racial/Ethnic Characteristics	Total Number of Schools that Offer Pre-K	Number of Previously Expanded Schools (before 2019)	Number of New UPK Expansion Schools, by Year of Expansion					
			2018-19	2019-20	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Majority Black	180	112 (62.2%)	46 (87.8%)	22 (100%)				
Majority Hispanic	143	45 (31.5%)	64 (76.3%)	29 (96.6%)	4 (99.4%)		1 (100%)	
Majority White/Asian or Other	71	17 (23.9%)	28 (63.3%)	10 (77.4%)	5 (84.4%)	6 (92.9%)	4 (98.5%)	1 (100%)

*Note: Including previously expanded schools plus UPK expansion schools, 395 schools in CPS offer pre-K (one Virtual Academy school has no data on racial/ethnic composition and expansion status). The columns under the heading “Number of New UPK Expansion Schools, by Year of Expansion” represent the number of schools that began to offer free, full-day pre-K in each school year for each school grouped by racial/ethnic characteristics, with the cumulative percentage of schools (out of all schools in the racial/ethnic group) in parentheses. No schools expanded during the 2020-21 school year.*

Overall, because of the prior targeted expansion efforts, we find that a higher share of schools serving a Majority Black or Majority Hispanic population were previously expanded compared to Majority White/Asian or Other schools; 62% of Majority Black schools (112 out of 180) had expanded pre-K offerings before the start of the UPK expansion in 2018-19, compared with 24% of Majority White/Asian or Other schools (17 out of 71). Most of the pre-K expansion among Majority Black schools (and to some extent Majority Hispanic schools) occurred in the first year (2018-19), and the expansion was universal among Majority Black schools by 2019-20. The pattern differs among Majority White/Asian or Other schools, where a lower share of schools was previously expanded and the UPK expansion occurred more slowly and extended through 2024-25. Note that because of differential

rates of prior pre-K expansion, Majority White/Asian or Other schools were more likely to participate in the UPK expansion, with 76% of these schools in the UPK expansion compared to 38% of Majority Black schools.

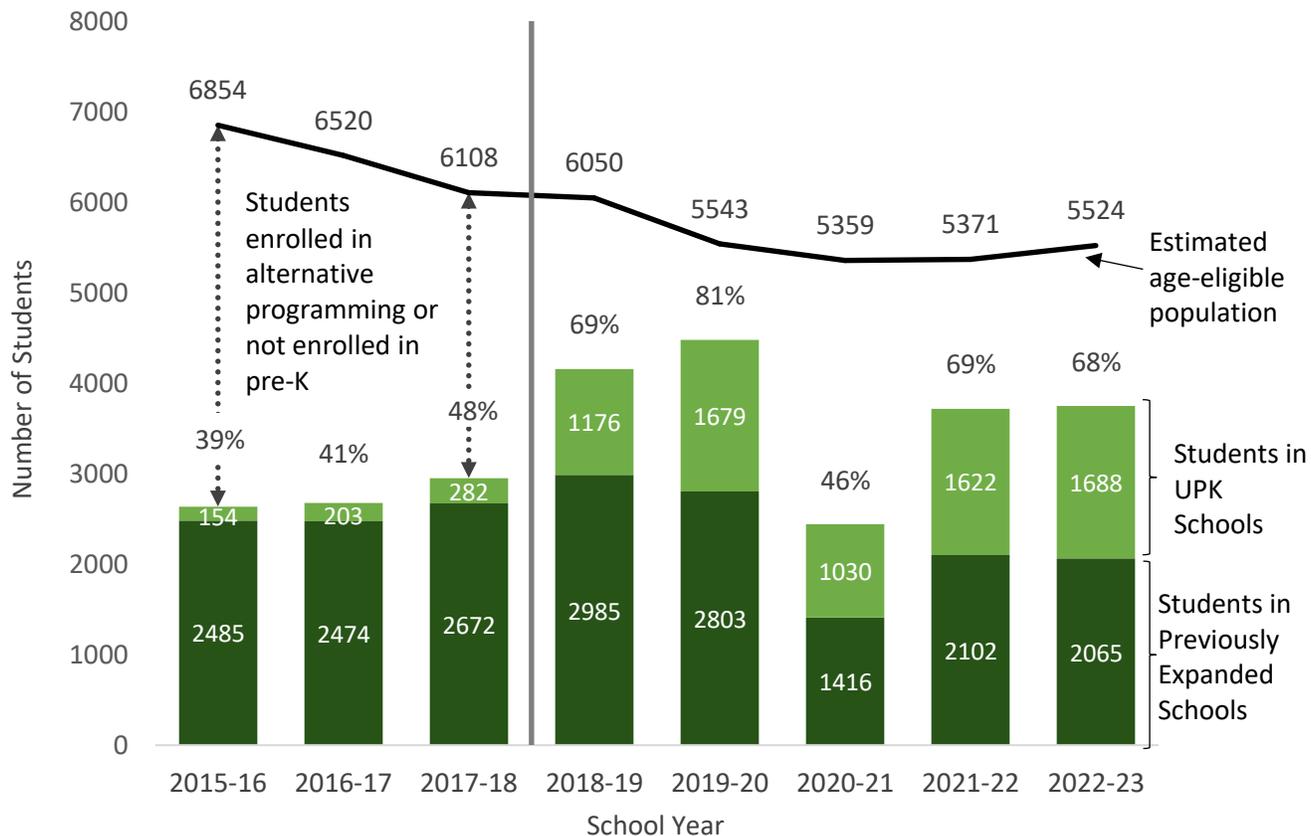
## Free, Full-Day Pre-K Enrollment Rates for 4-Year-Olds, by School-Level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

We examine the total level of enrollment and enrollment rates between 2015-16 and 2022-23 among schools by the racial and ethnic characteristics of the students they serve. Enrollment in 2015-16 reflects the outcomes of the city's earlier, targeted efforts to expand pre-K access. The changes over this period reflect both the UPK expansion and the widespread impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We first examine enrollment across Majority Black schools. Figure 2 displays the number of students in Majority Black schools enrolled in free, full-day pre-K in previously expanded schools (shown by the dark green bars) and UPK expansion schools (shown by the light green bars). We also present kindergarten enrollment in the following year (shown by the black line), which we use as an estimate of the age-eligible population (that is, the number of 4-year-olds who are eligible to attend pre-K) in the given school year.

Figure 2 demonstrates the changing proportion of the age-eligible population that attended free, full-day pre-K in Majority Black schools. For example, in the 2015-16 school year, we estimate that there were approximately 6,854 children eligible for free, full day pre-K in Majority Black schools (represented by the black line). Among these eligible children, 39% attended free, full-day pre-K (2,639 children; the sum of the light green and dark green bars). The remaining 4,215 were not enrolled in free, full-day pre-K and instead may have been enrolled in half-day pre-K in CPS schools, enrolled in programs outside of CPS, or not enrolled in any early care and education program.

Figure 2: Pre-K Enrollment in Majority Black Schools



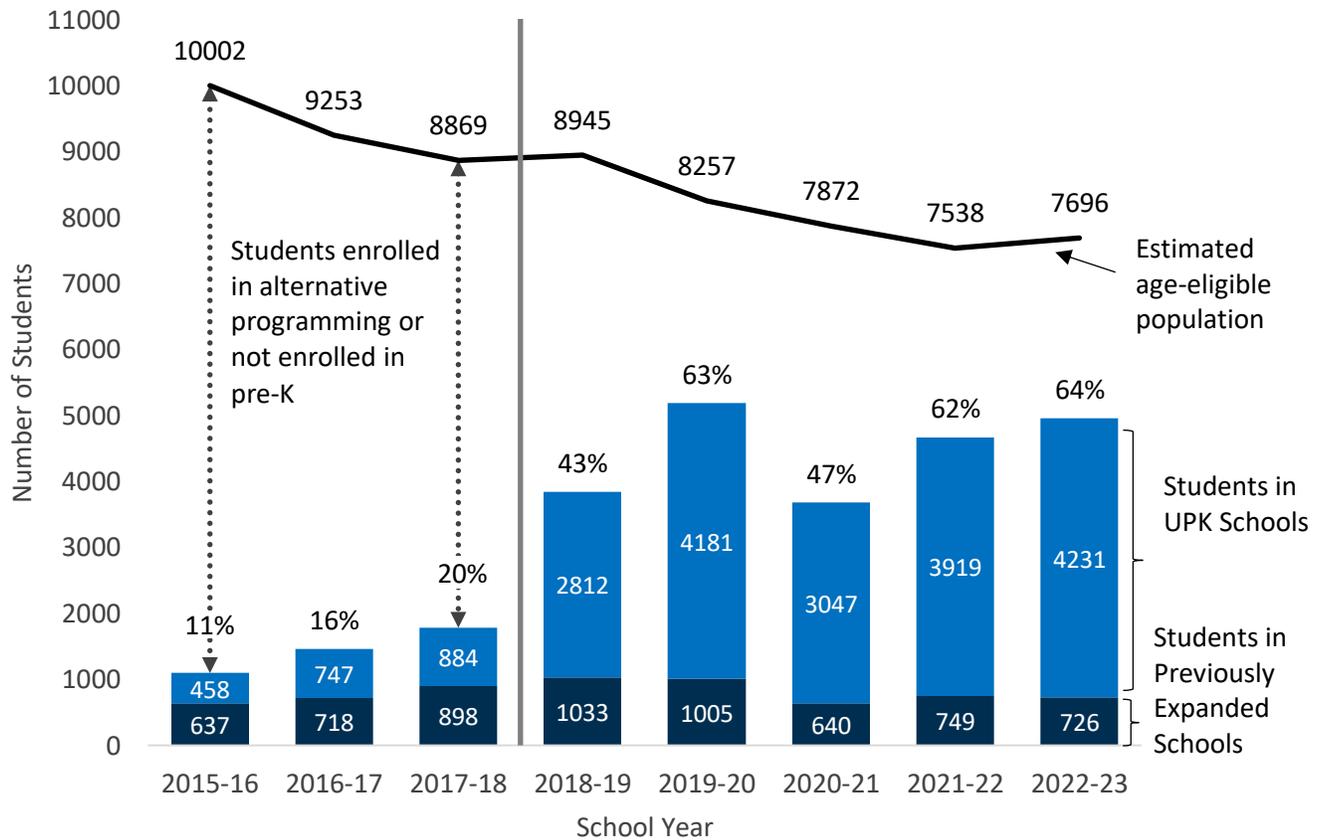
Note: Enrollment is measured as those in free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

Immediately following the start of the UPK expansion, the share of age-eligible children enrolled in free, full-day pre-K in Majority Black schools increased substantially. Before the UPK expansion, fewer than half of age-eligible children were enrolled (39%-48%). In the first year of expansion in 2018-19, the enrollment rate increased to 69%, mostly driven by an increase in enrollment among UPK schools. Although enrollment dropped sharply in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the enrollment rate rebounded to 68%-69% in the two subsequent years. Note that the estimated age-eligible population for these schools declined by nearly 20% over this period.

Using the same approach, we examine pre-K enrollment over time among Majority Hispanic schools (Figure 3). In the years prior to the expansion, enrollment rates in free, full-day pre-K were low compared to rates among Majority Black schools. Prior to the UPK expansion, between 11% and 20% of age-eligible children attended free, full-day pre-K. However, as with Majority Black schools, enrollment in Majority Hispanic schools increased dramatically after the start of the UPK expansion. The share of

age-eligible children enrolled in free, full-day pre-K more than doubled from 20% in 2017-18 to 43% in 2018-19, with most of the increase occurring among expansion schools. By the 2022-23 school year, Majority Hispanic schools enrolled 64% of eligible children in free, full-day pre-K—similar to the enrollment rate among Majority Black schools (68%).

Figure 3: Pre-K Enrollment in Majority Hispanic Schools

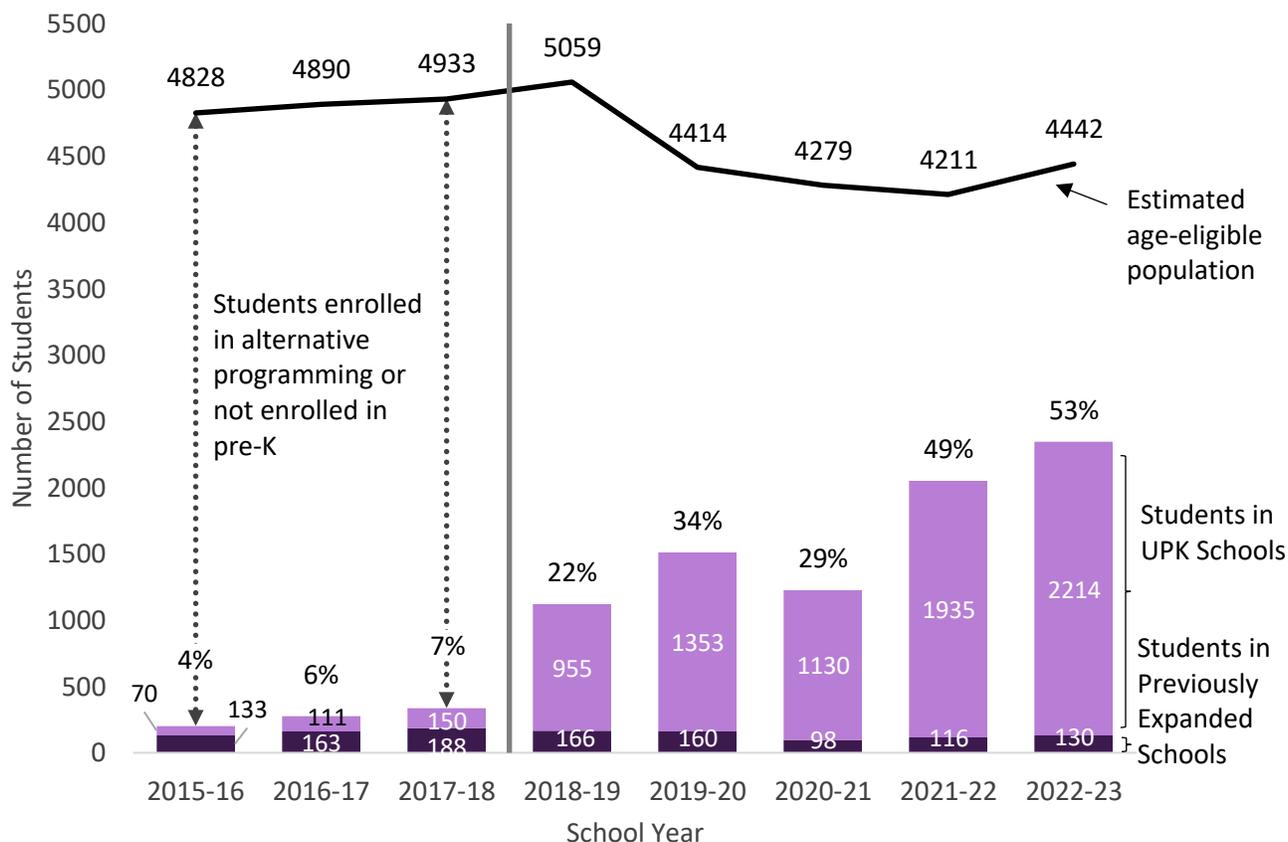


Note: Enrollment is measured as those in free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

Figure 4 shows enrollment patterns among Majority White/Asian or Other schools. Compared to Majority Black and Majority Hispanic schools, enrollment rates prior to the UPK expansion were lower, ranging from 4%-7%. These schools were less likely to have been included in the targeted pre-K expansion that occurred prior to the UPK expansion. As in the other cases, in the year following UPK expansion, the enrollment rate in these schools increased substantially to 22%. Enrollment rates continued to climb as more schools were added to the UPK expansion, and by the 2022-23 school year, about 53% of eligible children in Majority White/Asian or Other schools were enrolled in free, full-day pre-K. This increase in enrollment was driven entirely by UPK expansion schools: in 2022-23, 94% of

students attending Majority White/Asian or Other schools who were enrolled in free, full-day pre-K were in UPK expansion schools.

Figure 4: Pre-K Enrollment in Majority White/Asian or Other Schools



Note: Enrollment is measured as those in free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

Taken together, these descriptive results show how the UPK expansion supplemented previous targeted efforts to expand free, full-day pre-K. Prior to the UPK expansion, enrollment rates were highest in Majority Black schools and lowest in Majority White/Asian or Other schools—reflecting the success of earlier, targeted efforts. Across all three groups, enrollment rates in free, full-day pre-K increased dramatically during the UPK expansion. As a result, by 2022-23, at least half of age-eligible children attended free, full-day pre-K across all three groups.

These figures also show that although the pandemic led to declines in enrollment rates across the city, enrollment rates subsequently recovered. Across all three groups of schools, enrollment rates in free, full-day pre-K surpassed pre-UPK enrollment rates as a proportion of the estimated eligible child population. For Majority Hispanic and Majority White/Asian or Other schools, the share of age-eligible

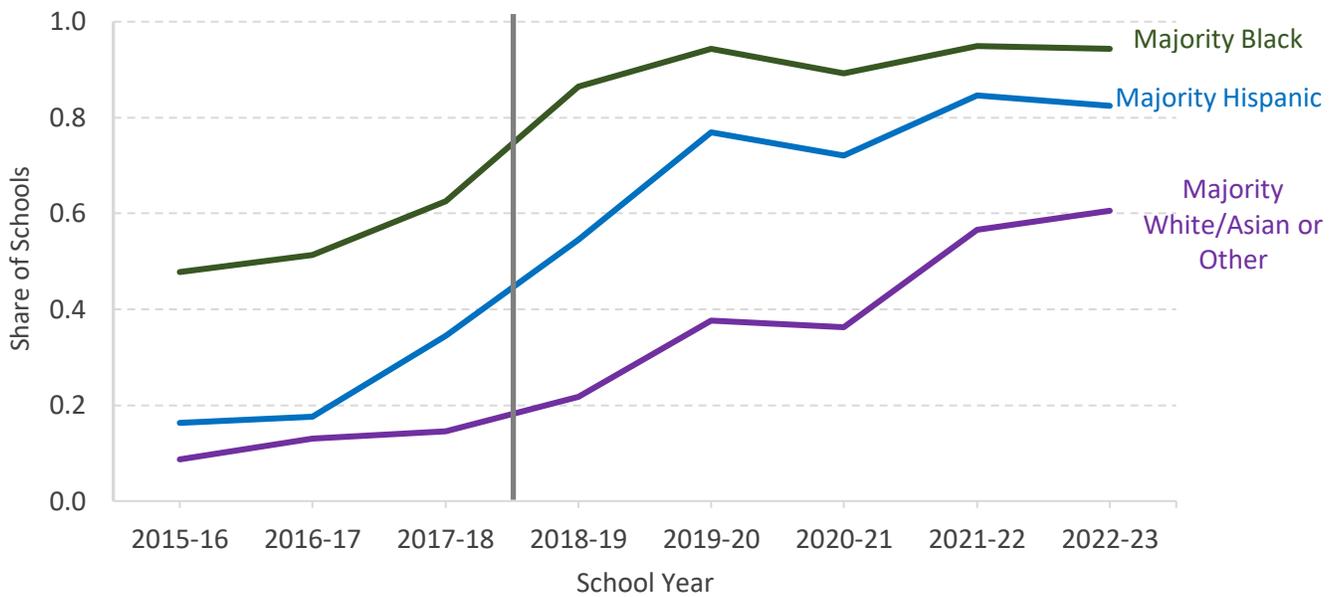
children enrolled in free, full-day pre-K was at its highest in 2022-23. Among Majority Black schools, the enrollment rate in 2022-23 was on par with the enrollment rate in 2018-19—and notably, still higher than the enrollment rates in the other two groups.

## **The Share of Schools with Capacity to Provide Pre-K to a Majority of Age Eligible-Children, by School-Level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics**

Next, we chart the share of schools with enough free, full-day pre-K capacity to serve at least half of their age-eligible children, and the share of schools that enroll a majority of their age-eligible children. To approximate the number of children eligible for pre-K, we use the number of kindergarteners enrolled in the following year as our proxy of the population of 4-year-olds in a given year. (A limitation of this approach is that not all pre-K children go on to attend their local elementary school.)

**Figure 5 shows schools with capacity to serve 50% or more of the population based on the number of available free, full day pre-K seats, by school-level racial and ethnic characteristics.** Most Majority Black and Majority Hispanic schools reached this level of capacity in the initial expansion years. Among Majority Black schools, over 80% had the capacity to serve a majority of their populations in the first year of expansion (2018-19), rising to over 90% in the second year (2019-20). Roughly half of Majority Hispanic schools had capacity to serve at least 50% of the age-eligible population in 2018-19, rising to approximately 80% in 2019-20. The share of Majority White/Asian or Other schools with capacity to serve at least half of the age-eligible population expanded more slowly, but still reached over 60% by 2022-23. Patterns are similar when we look at schools with capacity to serve at least 70% or 90% of the age-eligible population (see Appendix Figures A5-A8 for details).

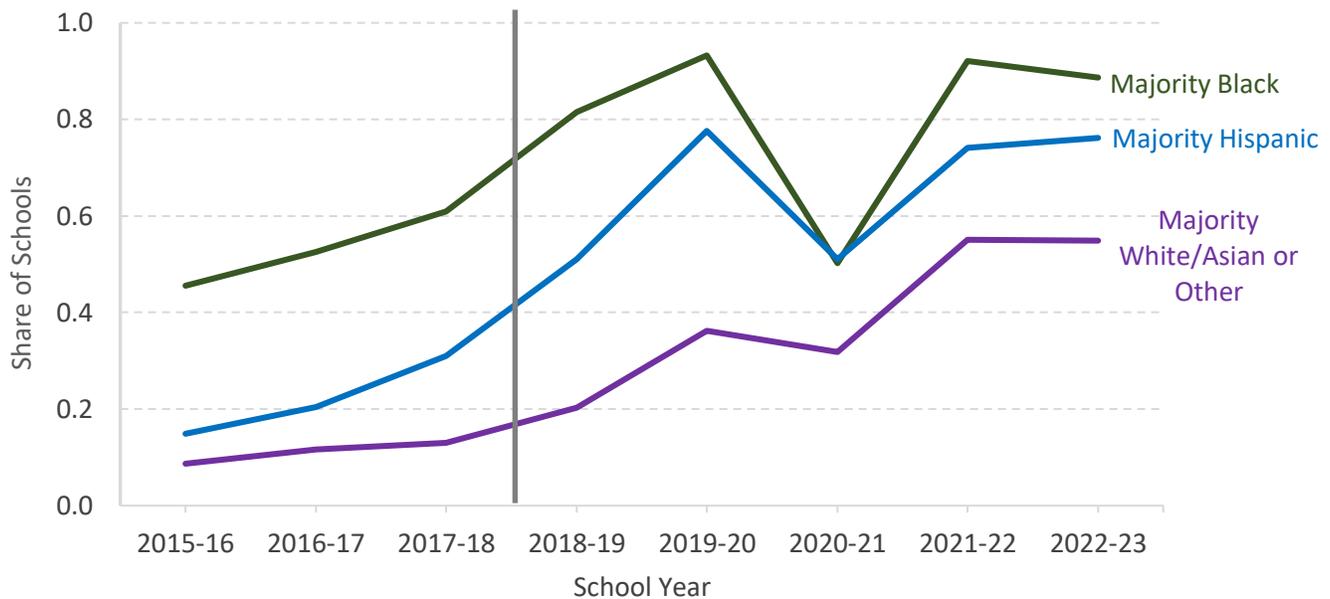
Figure 5: Schools with the Capacity to Serve 50% or More of the Population, by School-Level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics



Note: Capacity is measured for free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

Figure 6 shows the share of schools where the number of children enrolled in free, full-day pre-K seats was at least 50% of the estimated age-eligible population by school-level racial and ethnic characteristics. Consistent with our findings about capacity described above, most Majority Black and Majority Hispanic schools enrolled at least half of age-eligible children in the initial expansion years. The share of Majority White/Asian or Other schools that enrolled at least half of age-eligible children increased more slowly, but still reached 50% by 2022-23.

Figure 6: Schools That Enroll 50% or More of the Population, by School-Level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics



Note: Enrollment is measured for free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

## Conclusion

Patterns of access to free, full-day pre-K by school-level racial and ethnic characteristics show the success of Chicago’s efforts to equitably expand access. Prior to 2019 UPK expansion, the availability of free, full-day pre-K varied across schools by the racial and ethnic characteristics of the students they serve. Enrollment and capacity were highest among Majority Black schools, and lowest among schools with Majority White/Asian or Other schools. This pattern reflects the aims of the city’s initial, targeted expansion efforts which began in 2013.

Our findings demonstrate that the 2019 UPK expansion increased capacity and enrollment across the city for all three groups of schools (Majority Black, Majority Hispanic, and Majority White/Asian or Other). However, there were varying patterns in how growth occurred across the three school groups. The UPK expansion itself had the largest effects on schools with Majority White/Asian or Other schools, but this was because Majority Black and Majority Hispanic schools had higher rates before the expansion.

The combined effects of the city’s previous targeted expansion effort and subsequent UPK expansion meant that by the end of the 2022-23 school year, the percentage of age-eligible children enrolled in

free, full-day pre-K was similar across the three groups of schools. Majority Black schools enroll an estimated 68% of age-eligible children, while Majority Hispanic schools enroll 64%, and Majority White/Asian or Other schools enroll 53%. Changes in the schools' pre-K capacity are similar to changes in enrollment. Taken together, these results indicate the Chicago UPK succeeded in increasing access to free, full-day pre-K across the city while still prioritizing and maintaining access for historically marginalized and lower-resourced communities.

## Works Cited

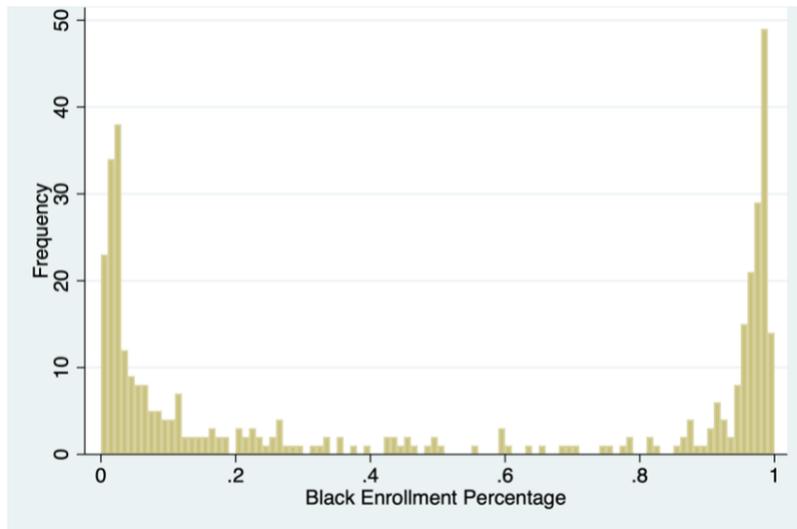
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## Appendix

### Categorizing Schools Based on School-Level Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

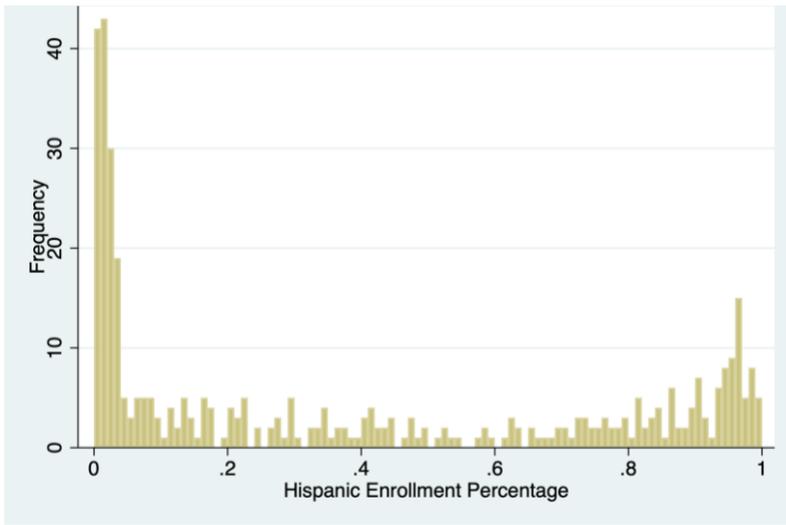
We categorize CPS schools into groups based on the racial and ethnic composition of their overall student populations in the 2017-18 school year. School demographic data is sourced from CPS. We categorize CPS schools that provide free, full-day pre-K into three distinct groups: 1) those serving a population with greater than 50% Black students; 2) those serving a population with greater than 50% Hispanic students; 3) those serving a population with greater than 50% White or Asian students, and those with no racial or ethnic majority. In the third group, 66% of the schools have no racial and ethnic majority, and 34% of the schools are Majority White or Majority Asian. Given the high share of schools without a racial and ethnic majority, combining those schools with schools that are Majority White or Asian provided a viable sample size for analysis. Figures A1-A4 show the distribution of school-level compositions of Black, Hispanic, White, and Asian students by which we based our grouping of schools.

Figure A1: School-Level Frequency Distribution of Black Enrollment Percentages, 2017-18



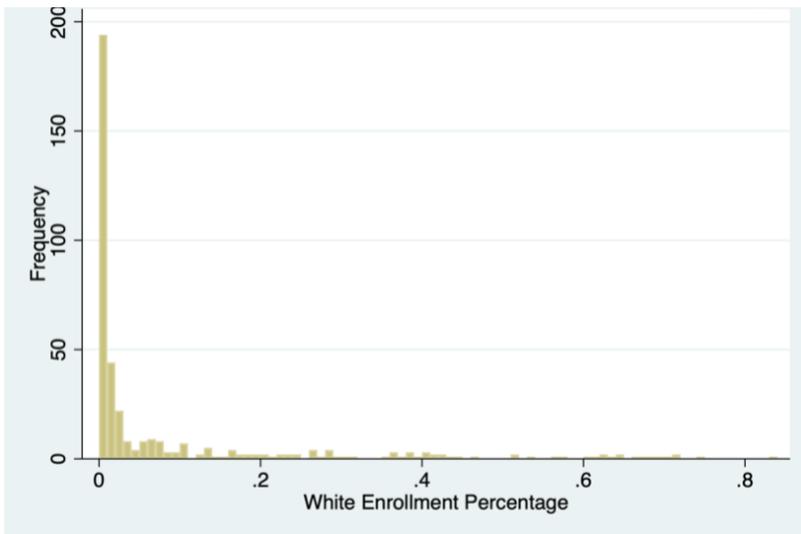
Notes: Histogram shows the count of schools for each possible percentage of Black students enrolled at each school.

Figure A2: School-Level Frequency Distribution of Hispanic Enrollment Percentages, 2017-18



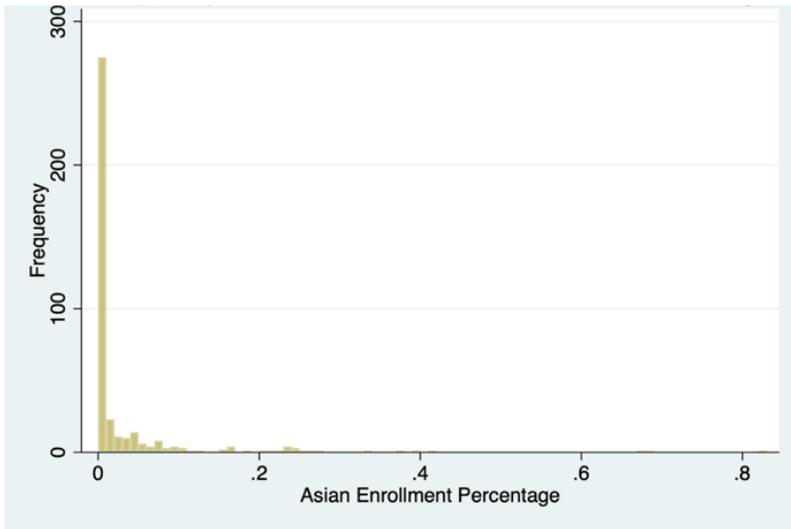
Notes: Histogram shows the count of schools for each possible percentage of Hispanic students enrolled at each school.

Figure A3: School-Level Frequency Distribution of White Enrollment Percentages, 2017-18



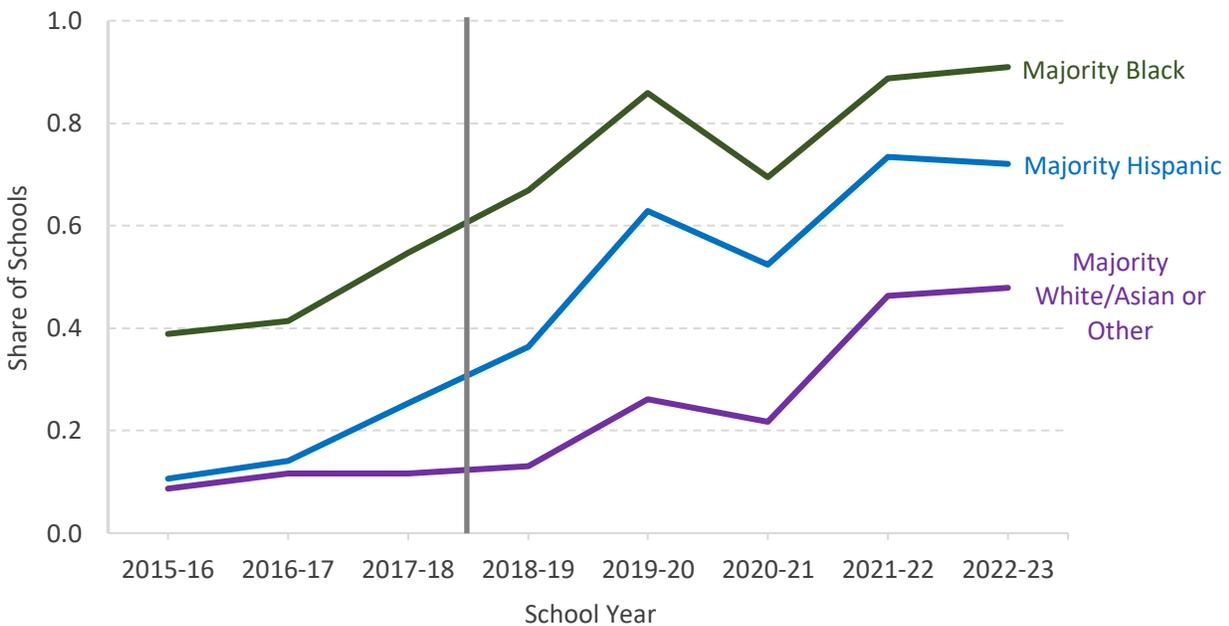
Notes: Histogram shows the count of schools for each possible percentage of White students enrolled at each school.

Figure A4: School-Level Frequency Distribution of Asian Enrollment Percentages, 2017-18



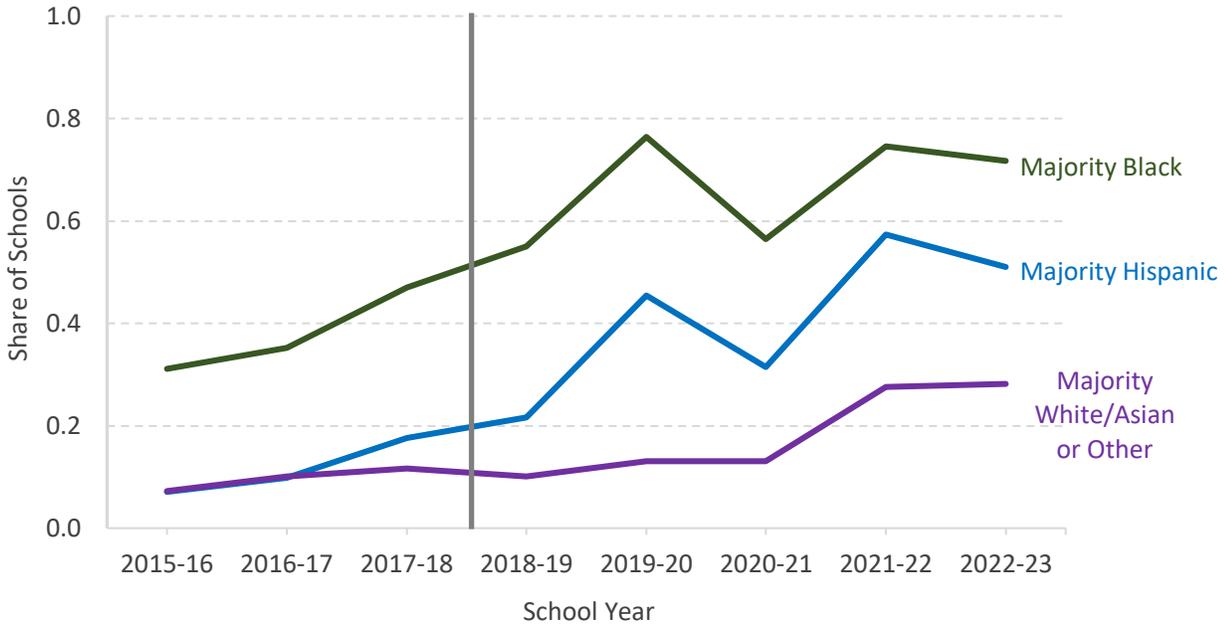
Notes: Histogram shows the count of schools for each possible percentage of Asian students enrolled at each school.

Figure A5: Schools with the Capacity to Serve 70% or More of the Population



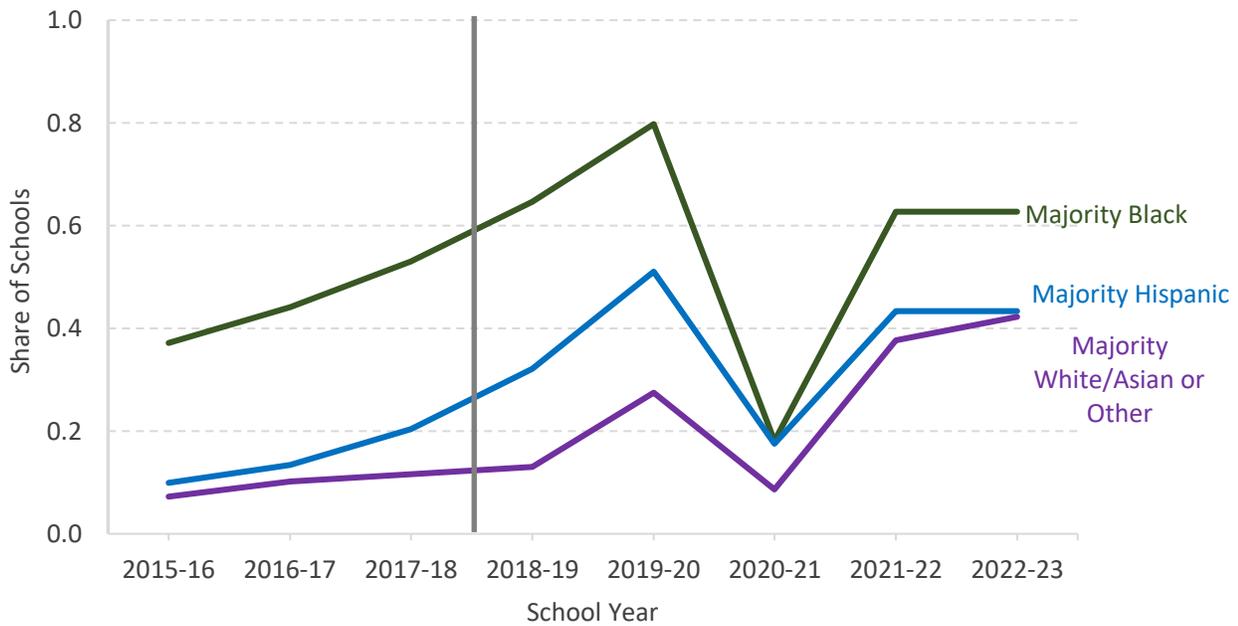
Note: Enrollment is measured for free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

Figure A6: Schools with the Capacity to Serve 90% or More of the Population



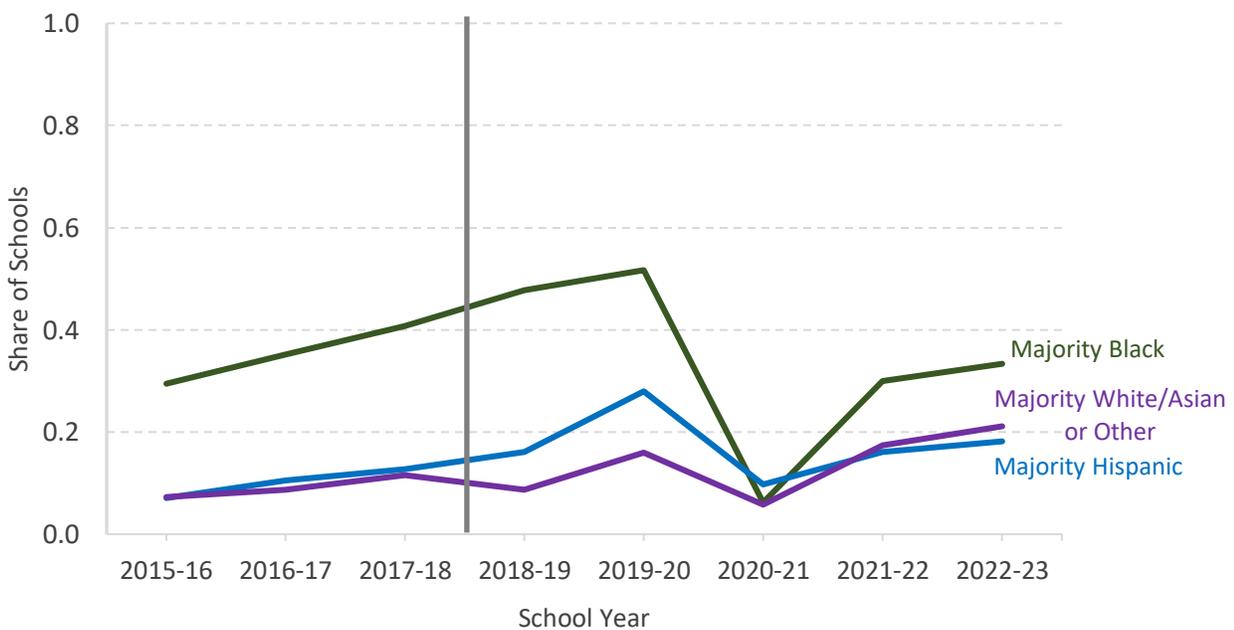
Note: Enrollment is measured for free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

Figure A7: Schools That Enroll 70% or More of the Population



Note: Enrollment is measured for free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

Figure A8: Schools That Enroll 90% or More of the Population



Note: Enrollment is measured for free, full-day pre-K. Vertical line between 2017-18 and 2018-19 shows the start of the UPK expansion. Age-eligible population is estimated as the number of kindergarten entrants in the following year.

## Data Sources

We have an established data use agreement with CPS. Our study draws from existing administrative and census data from 2015–24, including:

- UPK/school-based pre-K expansion year data from CPS
- Enrollment and capacity on school-based pre-K programs for 3- and 4-year-olds from CPS
- Five-year estimates for community characteristics from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS).

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