

Equity in Early Learning:

Continuing Assessments on
Race and Ethnicity in
Wisconsin Shares, YoungStar
and Four-Year-Old Kindergarten

This report explores the statewide 2017-2019 pre-pandemic landscape of Wisconsin Shares, YoungStar and Four-Year-Old Kindergarten (4K) through a racial and ethnic equity lens.



April 26, 2021

In Spring of 2020, Kids Forward published its first report that specifically examined racial equity in Wisconsin's Early Care and Education (ECE) system. Unsurprisingly, the resulting data showed significant disparities in access to high-quality childcare as determined by YoungStar rating. Fortunately, we did not see this same inequity in four-year-old kindergarten (4K) participation across the state.

This brief interim analysis report updates the findings from our 2020 report with three more years of data (2017-2019). There has been very little change. The new information mirrors the results from our baseline 2020 report that relied on 2016 numbers. The same trends have continued now over four years.

In the Summer of 2021, we will produce a new report that incorporates not just data, but qualitative analysis of the YoungStar approach. We will engage a broader community of parents on equitable early learning, document their stories, and develop strategies to promote new standards on equitable QRIS (YoungStar) that are based on parents' voices.

This next publication will use 2020 numbers and will reflect the devastating impact of the pandemic through most of last year.

Some questions we hope to address:

1. Does the current QRIS criteria reflect quality and cultural competence?
2. Why does our state have such a low participation rate for the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy benefit?
3. What can we learn about 4K quality?

We are excited for the opportunity to move forward on this journey that endeavors to make Wisconsin a better place for every kid, every family, and every community.

Sincerely,



Michele Mackey
CEO/Executive Director
Kids Forward



April 2021



Equity in Early Learning: Continuing Assessments on Race and Ethnicity in Wisconsin Shares, YoungStar and Four-Year-Old Kindergarten

Background

Building on our previous report, [Achieving Equity in Early Learning: A Baseline Report on Race and Ethnicity in Wisconsin Shares, YoungStar and Four-Year-Old Kindergarten](#), this report explores the statewide 2017-2019 pre-pandemic landscape of [Wisconsin Shares](#) (Wisconsin's early learning subsidy program), [YoungStar](#) (Wisconsin's Quality Rating and Improvement System) and [Four-Year-Old Kindergarten \(4K\)](#), through a racial and ethnic equity lens. Our intent is to continue tracking progress in these programs, to guide policy directions and inform proposed solutions in early learning. Wisconsin Shares is a child care subsidy program supporting low-income families. YoungStar quality ratings for child care providers serving children in Wisconsin Shares range from 2 Stars (lowest rating permitted) to 5 Stars (highest quality). A rating of 4-5 stars is considered high quality care. Half-day Four-Year-Old Kindergarten is available in the majority of public school districts across the state, at no cost¹.

Key Findings

Results from these analyses mirror the results in our 2016 Baseline report. Wisconsin Shares continues to be underutilized among many potentially eligible families. Black children continue to participate in Wisconsin Shares at higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups, yet receive high quality child care through this program at lower rates than other racial/ethnic groups. Participation in 4K continues to be relatively high across racial/ethnic groups, and 4K continues to serve children in an equitable manner.

Analyses

The calculation methodology used in the Baseline report was repeated for these analyses (see the Appendix of that report for further details). To determine participation rates, statewide program data was compared with data on populations estimated to be eligible for each program. 4K data on children in Wisconsin enrolled during the 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 school years from each racial/ethnic group were compared with population data on four-year-old children. Wisconsin Shares data on children served in 2017, 2018, and 2019 from each racial/ethnic group (from providers at each level of quality), were compared with population data on children ages 0-8 in families at 185% or less of the federal poverty level². Results refer to 3-year averages across 2017, 2018, and 2019 unless specified.

¹ While nearly all Wisconsin public school districts offer half-day 4K, less than 10% offer full-day 4K.

² Similar to previous analyses, this age range represents over 81% of the children served in Wisconsin Shares in 2018.

Results

Participation

Participation rates are the percent of children in each racial/ethnic group participating in a program, out of those estimated to be eligible. Participation in 4K was consistently high, with lower participation in Wisconsin Shares. Nearly 50,000 children were enrolled in 4K across the state, representing about 3 out of 4 children estimated to be eligible (73.7%³). About 63,000 children were served in Wisconsin Shares statewide, representing about 1 out of 4 children estimated to be eligible (27.4%⁴).



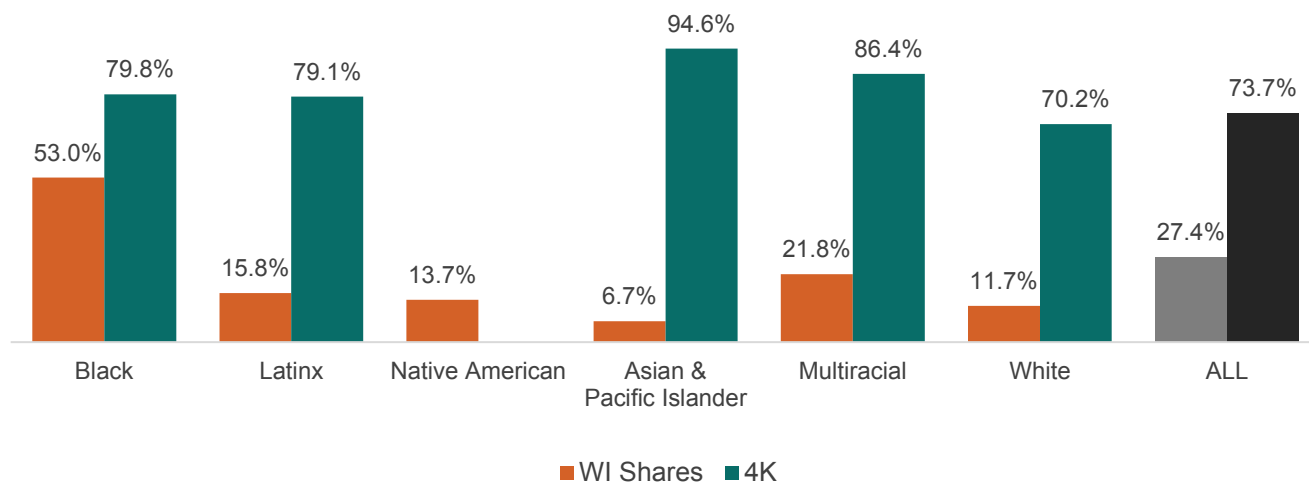
4K Participation Among Eligible Children



Wisconsin Shares Participation Among Eligible Children

Asian and Pacific Islander children participated in 4K at higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups (94.6% of eligible Asian and Pacific Islander children were enrolled in 4K), and white children had the lowest 4K participation rate (70.2%). Participation in Wisconsin Shares was highest among Black children (53.0% of eligible Black children were served in the program) and lowest among Asian and Pacific Islander children (6.7%).

Participation Rates: 2017-2019 Wisconsin Average



³ Total enrollment in 4K was 48,843 in 2017-18, 49,032 in 2018-19, and 49,393 in 2019-20.

⁴ The total count of all children served in Wisconsin Shares at any time during the year was 67,513 in 2017, 61,901 in 2018, and 59,274 in 2019.

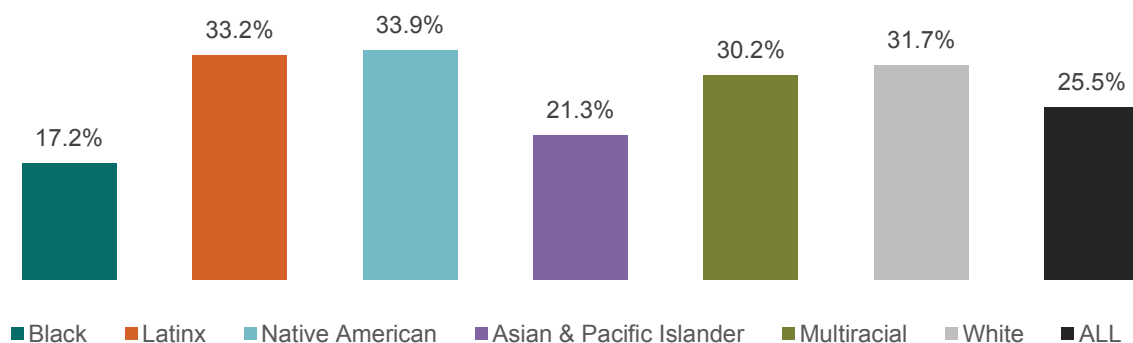
Racial/Ethnic Equity

Results of racial/ethnic disparity and disproportionality analyses show that Asian and Pacific Islander children were served in Wisconsin Shares at consistently lower rates than white children, whereas Black, Latinx, and Multiracial children were served at consistently higher rates than white children. Additionally, the proportions of Asian and Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native American, and white children who were served in this program were disproportionately lower (2 to 4 times lower) than their proportions of the eligible population⁵. Analyses also showed that children of color were enrolled in 4K at consistently higher rates than white children. Proportions of racial/ethnic groups enrolled in 4K were generally in balance with their proportions in the eligible population (not over- or under-represented).⁶

Child Care Quality⁷

Only about a quarter of all children in Wisconsin Shares (25.5%) were served by child care providers rated as high quality by YoungStar. Experiences of high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares varied for different racial/ethnic groups. Among children served in Wisconsin Shares, about 1 in 6 Black children (17.3%) and about 1 in 5 Asian and Pacific Islander children (21.3%) received high quality care, compared to about 1 in 3 among Latinx, Native American, Multiracial, and white children. The percentages of Black children receiving high quality care were very consistent across three years⁸.

Proportion of Each Group Served in Wisconsin Shares Receiving High Quality Child Care: 2017-2019 Statewide Averages



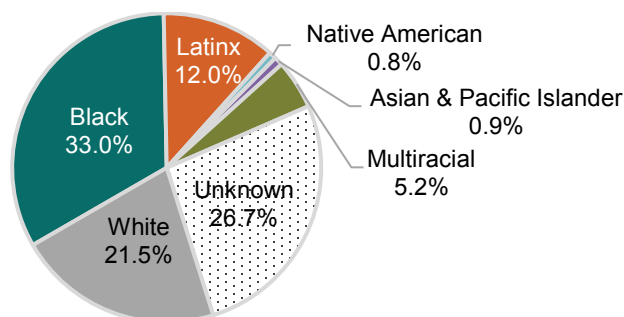
⁵ For example, Asian and Pacific Islander children were only 0.9% of children served in Wisconsin Shares, despite being 3.7% of the population eligible for this program.

⁶ Though Asian and Pacific Islander children were slightly overrepresented in 4K (a disproportionality ratio of 1.3), calculations may be influenced by small percentages: Asian and Pacific Islander children were 4.4% of the children enrolled in 4K and 3.4% of the children eligible for 4K.

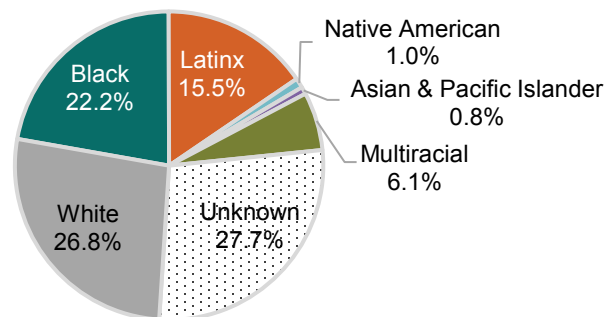
⁷ This analysis was fairly conservative in its assignment of the highest child care quality rating available for each child. A child served by multiple providers was assigned the highest rating among these, and the highest rating in the year if a provider's rating changed. The implication is that children's main experiences in child care may be lower of quality than reported.

⁸ These percentages were 16.5% in 2017, 17.3% in 2018, and 17.7% in 2019.

Black children were under-represented among those receiving high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares. Though 33.0% of children served in Wisconsin Shares were Black, only 22.2% of children receiving high quality care through Wisconsin Shares were Black⁹. Also, Black children received high quality care through Wisconsin Shares at only about half the rate that white children did¹⁰.



Children Served in Wisconsin Shares



Children Served in Wisconsin Shares Receiving High Quality Child Care

Baseline Comparisons

The percentage of all children who received high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares was less than 2% higher than 2016 data, and the percentage of Black children who received high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares was about 5% higher¹¹. This small improvement for Black children has resulted in moderate reductions in the severity of disproportionality (compared to the population of all Black children in Wisconsin Shares) and disparity (compared to the percentage of white children receiving high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares¹²) that were identified in 2016 calculations. The results show small improvements and a slight easing of the existing racial inequities found previously in high quality child care supported by Wisconsin Shares. However, a greater pace of change than the slow crawl towards equity identified here will be necessary if we are to create meaningful benefits in the lives of the Black children who are served through this program.

Conclusion

After three years, most children served in Wisconsin Shares are still not experiencing the benefits of high quality early learning through this program, especially Black children. Similar to results from our Baseline report, Wisconsin Shares continues to be under-utilized among eligible families, particularly

⁹ This represents a disproportionality ratio of 0.67.

¹⁰ Analyses revealed an average disparity rate of 0.54 between the percentages of Black and white children receiving high quality care through Wisconsin Shares. In other words, the percentage of white children receiving high quality care through Wisconsin Shares was nearly double the percentage of Black children receiving high quality care through Wisconsin Shares (1.9 times greater).

¹¹ Counts of children authorized for care in Wisconsin Shares were provided for the Baseline report, which can differ from counts of children served in Wisconsin Shares. In 2016, 13.6% of Black children authorized for care in Wisconsin Shares received high quality child care. Using counts of children authorized for care in 2017-2019, the average percentage of Black children receiving high quality care was 17.7%, and the average percentage for all children was 25.7%.

¹² These results are partially driven by the fact that the percentage of Black children in Wisconsin Shares, and the percentage of white children receiving high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares, were both similar to 2016 levels.

those with Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American, and white children. Participation in 4K remains high, especially among families with Asian and Pacific Islander children. Though over 20,000 Black children accessed early care and education through the Wisconsin Shares program on average between 2017-2019, major gaps persist in the quality of care Black children typically experience through this program, compared to their white peers. Black children are still less likely than white children, and less likely than other racial/ethnic groups, to receive high quality child care through this program. Four-Year-Old Kindergarten continues to serve a large proportion of eligible Wisconsin children, in a fairly equitable manner.

Which children receive high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares may be influenced by the location and typically higher cost of care at providers rated as high quality. Access to high quality child care has been an ongoing challenge in both urban and rural areas. Searching the [YoungStar Child Care Finder tool](#) returned only 33 providers rated as high quality in Milwaukee, and only 1 provider each in Ashland, Iron, and Price counties¹³. To achieve and maintain a high quality rating, investments are required, which may be a challenge in an industry with narrow profit margins. However, [new pilot initiatives](#) for child care providers and families will explore strategies to build access to high quality care.

Next Steps

COVID-19 has deeply impacted early care and education across the state. Kids Forward will soon be exploring the experiences of families, teachers, child care providers, and early learning leaders during the pandemic. Along with 2020 quantitative data, results from these interviews will be presented in a 2021 report on the state of early care and education in Wisconsin, informing infrastructure, workforce, and policy directions to support our collaborations and advocacy for every child, every family, and every community.

Analysis Notes and Limitations

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families provided Kids Forward with unduplicated annual statewide counts for the Wisconsin Shares data. Unduplicated annual statewide 4K enrollment counts are available from the [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#). Population data were 2014-2018 5-year estimates from [IPUMS](#) (the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series) which has custom estimates available based on U.S. Census data. Eligibility for Wisconsin Shares is complicated (a parent must be working, for example) and to be initially eligible for Wisconsin Shares, a family's gross monthly income must be equal to or less than 185% of the Federal Poverty Level for the size of their family. This was \$38,443 for a family of 3 in 2018¹⁴. Additionally, children younger and older than age four may enroll in 4K under some circumstances. Despite best efforts, not all factors can be matched for data on populations considered eligible for these programs. These population estimates may be an overcount, with the implication that participation rates could be higher than reported here.

Counts of Asian students and counts of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students were combined in these calculations (Asian and Pacific Islander). Though an average of 412 Native American children

¹³ A search of Group and Family providers rated 4-5 Stars was run on 12/3/2020, for counties and within 5 miles of Milwaukee.

¹⁴ <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/dhcaa/memos/18-01.pdf>

participated in 4K (average 0.8% of all children in 4K), data for this group is not presented in this report due to instability in the population estimates of Native American four-year-olds used for comparison.

Wisconsin Shares does not require applicants to provide race/ethnicity data in order to participate in this program. The proportion of children with race and ethnicity data missing has been rising (24.8% in 2017, 27.0% in 2018, and 28.4% 2019). The implication of this missing data is that participation rates may actually be higher than reported here for some racial/ethnic groups, and disproportionality results may be more moderate. For 4K, race/ethnicity data were missing for six children, in 2019-20. Additional analyses explored the impact on racial disparity calculations under the potential condition that all missing data was for children of one race. Racial disparities between Black and white children receiving high quality child care through Wisconsin Shares remained present when all children with missing race/ethnicity data were assumed to be Black (the counts of children with missing race/ethnicity data at each quality level were added to the counts of Black children at each quality level for analyses).



Acknowledgements

Kids Forward would like to thank the [Wisconsin Department of Children and Families](#) and [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#) for disaggregated data on children in Wisconsin Shares and YoungStar, and [Silver Lynx Consulting, LLC](#) for analysis and preparation of this report. This publication and our Early Childhood Education research are supported by the [Alliance for Early Success](#).