



Public Pre-K Access and Enrollment: Assessing Take-up of Missouri’s Early Childhood Education Funding Expansion

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KEY POINTS

Passed in 2014, Missouri House Bill 1689 provides a new funding source for traditional public school districts and charter schools to enroll low-income pre-K students. While public pre-K enrollment expanded in Missouri prior to the pandemic, many school districts have not leveraged this newly available state funding to support pre-K growth. I find:

- From 2015 to 2019, school district and charter school pre-K enrollment expanded 3.4% per year.
- Missouri House Bill 1689 was intended to further expand public pre-K access for low-income students through the provision of additional state funding.
- Schools serving more low-income students and schools with higher student-teacher ratios were more likely to access the new state funding.
- Rural schools were significantly less likely to access these new state funds in support of pre-K growth.

Introduction

In Missouri, public access to robust early childhood education (ECE) opportunities represents a prime area of opportunity to support economically disadvantaged and racial minority youth. Expanded prekindergarten (pre-K) access represents a particular area of focus, though the funding streams to achieve this growth often may be difficult to obtain. Public ECE opportunities are funded and administered through a diverse landscape of local, state, and federal providers. In recent years, voters have expressed mixed opinions on sales tax ballot initiatives in support of pre-K expansion on the local level. St. Louis City voters recently approved a modest tax increase¹ while voters in Kansas City rejected a more substantial tax increase two years ago.² At the state level, in 2019 Missouri announced it won a federal \$33.5 million “Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG B-5).” The grant required the state to spend the funds over three years to support regional early childhood service coordination.³ These efforts culminated in the creation of Missouri’s Office of Childhood, which consolidated nearly all early childhood programs across state government.⁴ This reorganization offers promise for future ECE access especially for low-income families.

In 2014, state lawmakers passed House Bill 1689 in what may amount to its most significant investment in ECE expansion to date. HB1689 expanded ECE funding to local school districts and charter schools, which serve large shares of economically disadvantaged students. Though preliminary 2020-21 data reflect

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 8

September 2021

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precipitous declines in pre-K enrollment amid the pandemic, in the 2019-20 school year, local education agencies claimed HB1689 state funding for over six thousand pre-K students. In this brief, I explore HB1689 state funding use in support of Missouri pre-K opportunities.

Providing Pre-K Opportunities

Similar to other states, state-funded ECE in Missouri public schools constitutes only a portion of publicly accessible ECE opportunities. Access varies by local and state contexts and often are determined through applicant income. For example, federally funded Head Start program eligibility is restricted to low-income families and provides about 7% of the enrollment of three- and four-year-olds nationwide.⁵ Head Start disproportionately serves economically disadvantaged and racial minority students and families; 37% and 30% of Head Start enrollees identify as Hispanic and Black, respectively.⁶ Therefore, Head Start serves as a critical resource to reduce outcome gaps among economically disadvantaged and racial minority populations. However, Head Start does not serve all disadvantaged students who could benefit from its services.

Many states and localities provide additional pathways to publicly accessible early childhood education; some restrict access through “means-tested” eligibility based on family income while others avail universal access.

HB 1689's Role in Missouri ECE

Unlike neighboring Illinois and Iowa, Missouri lacks universal access to pre-K.¹⁵ Instead, HB1689 provides LEAs funding to enroll low-income students in pre-K.

- 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) may receive state funding.*
- LEAs may receive ECE program funding for up to 4% of their total count of P-12 FRPL students.*
- LEAs must pursue this funding, however, providing the necessary ECE accommodations for interested students and families.*

Universal programs in Georgia and Oklahoma⁷ and means-tested programs in Texas⁸ and South Carolina,⁹ for example, have generated substantial gains in student academic outcomes. It is important to note that state-funded ECE expansion may have unintended consequences on nearby Head Start and private ECE providers which compete for enrollees.^{10, 11}

In addition to Head Start and state-funded programs, there exist several other providers

Table 1 : Missouri Public School Enrollment Trends

	LEA Pre-K Enrollment	YoY LEA Pre-K Enrollment Growth (%)	LEA K-12 Enrollment	YoY LEA K-12 Enrollment Growth (%)
2020-21*	28,795	-23.5%	859,171	-2.3%
2019-20	37,631	3.5%	879,455	-0.2%
2018-19	36,346	0.3%	881,022	-0.3%
2017-18	36,222	4.6%	883,408	0.0%
2016-17	34,628	4.0%	883,653	-0.1%
2015-16	33,291	4.4%	884,883	-0.2%

*Notes: *Includes preliminary 2021-2021 academic year LEA enrollment as of 1/29/21. Public pre-K enrollment indicates enrollment in traditional public school districts and charter schools.*

of ECE and related services. In Missouri, the Child Care Subsidy Program funds childcare services for low-income families to support economic engagement for parents and other caregivers. This funding is made available on a sliding scale depending on family income levels.¹² To coordinate its growing ECE offerings, Missouri received a \$6.5 million federal grant in 2019, in part to revise the state’s Early Childhood Strategic Plan.¹³ In their strategic plan, state leaders identified ECE access and financing as a top priority area for state

policy, with goals including to “ensure equity in the distribution of financial resources.”¹⁴ Expanded pre-K funding, such as that offered through HB1689, offers one such equity-oriented measure of ECE investment.

House Bill 1689 Funding Take-up

In the analyses which follow, I focus on pre-pandemic Missouri pre-K enrollment through the 2019-20 school year. Though pandemic-era enrollment trends are critical topics of study, they likely reflect a variety of factors beyond those over which HB1689 funding may exert direct

Table 2 : Comparison of LEAs Claiming and Forgoing HB1689 Funding, 2019-20 School Year

	LEA claimed at least some HB1689 funding	LEA did not claim any HB1689 funding
K-12 enrollment	2,397.8	1,222.6
Pre-K enrollment	120.2	41.5
Traditional public school LEA	164/516 or 31.8%	352/516 or 68.2%
Charter LEA	14/32 or 43.8%	18/32 or 56.2%
Low-income (FRPL)	61.8%	54.2%
Racial minority (non-White)	22.8%	12.9%
English language learner (ELL)	2.6%	1.7%
Disabled (IEP)	14.3%	14.2%
Urban	23/45 or 51.1%	22/45 or 48.9%
Suburban	23/49 or 46.9%	26/49 or 53.1%
Town	47/93 or 50.5%	46/93 or 49.5%
Rural	85/361 or 23.6%	276/361 or 76.4%
- Fringe	6/38 or 15.8%	32/38 or 84.2%
- Distant	45/195 or 23.1%	150/195 or 76.9%
- Remote	34/129 or 26.4%	95/129 or 73.6%
Student-teacher ratio	12.7	11.2
Total expenditures	\$13,437.20	\$14,472.50
Local revenues	\$6,252.80	\$7,436.90
State revenues	\$5,603.30	\$5,571.20
LEAs	178	370

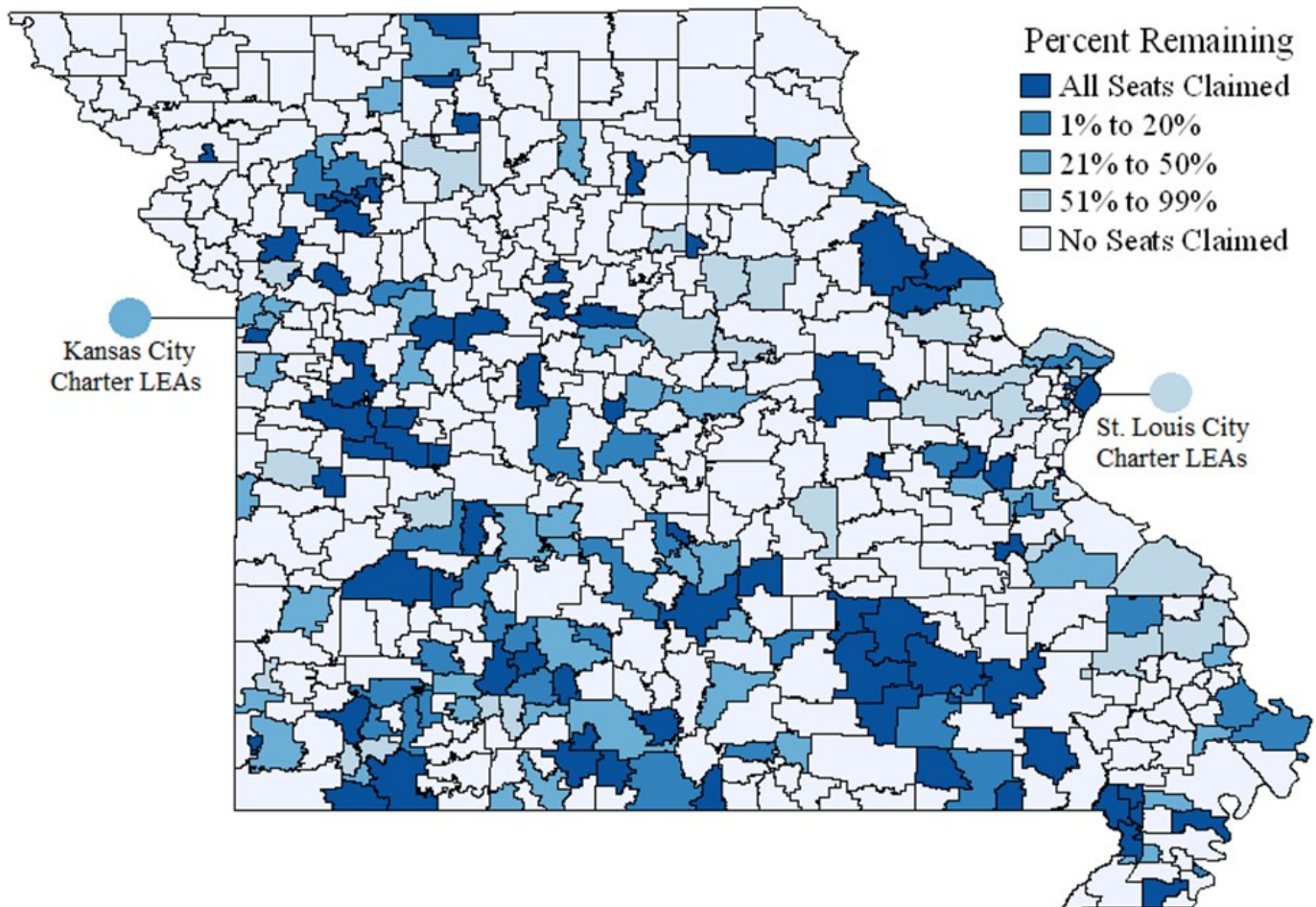
influence. It is difficult or impossible to disentangle the two phenomena using data from the 2020-21 school year. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, public school district and charter school pre-K enrollment (hereafter referred to as local education agency, or LEA, enrollment) followed a positive trajectory, increasing between 124 and 1,594 students per year between 2015 and 2019 (see Table 1). Conversely, the state’s entire K-12 enrollment declined between 245 and 2,386 students per year over the same time period.

Despite this pre-K growth, only a subset of the state’s LEAs elected to pursue HB1689 pre-K funding. LEAs using HB1689 funding tend to be larger, enrolling roughly twice as many students, and tend to serve large shares of economically disadvantaged students, as shown in Table 2. Across Missouri’s geography, urban, suburban, and town LEAs have pursued HB1689 funding in much greater proportion than their rural counterparts. Fewer than one in four rural LEAs received pre-K funding. LEAs accessing pre-K funding tend to spend approximately \$1,000 less per pupil per year, driven by lower local revenues (e.g., property taxes). The darker-shaded LEAs in Figure 1 are those that received some share of HB1689 funding in 2019-20. While much of rural Missouri did not access the state’s funding mechanism, some rural regions demonstrated high adoption rates.

I also conducted regression analyses to assess the LEA characteristics associated with HB1689 funding take-

up. These analyses help provide a more nuanced picture than the summary statistics in Table 2 because they enable the examination of multiple variables at the same time. The regression models consider the following predictors of funding take-up: school enrollment; school shares of low-income, English language learner and disabled students; school geography; student-teacher ratios; and per-pupil school funding.

Figure 1: Share of HB1689 State-funded Pre-K Seats Left Available, 2019-20



These analyses indicate:

- 1) The more low-income students an LEA serves, the more likely that LEA is to receive HB1689 funding. This makes sense, given the policy specifically targets low-income students.
- 2) Charter schools are less likely to receive HB1689 funding. This finding is a bit counterintuitive, given that a greater share of charter schools received funding relative to traditional public school districts. Lagging charter school take-up is likely attributable to other school characteristics including student make-up and geography.
- 3) Rural LEAs are over 20% less likely to receive HB1689 funding relative to suburban LEAs and even less likely relative to urban LEAs.
- 4) LEAs with higher student-teacher ratios are more likely to receive HB1689 funding.
- 5) School expenditures and revenues do not help predict the likelihood of funding take-up.

Conclusions

As state leaders and local education officials navigate pandemic-era challenges including enrollment disruptions prevalent among young students, it is likewise important to take stock of recent advancements. From the state's new Office of Childhood to federal grants in support of strategic planning, pre-K and other ECE offerings in Missouri are poised to expand in the years to come. HB1689 may serve a vital role in that process, though only if LEAs use as much of the funding made available to them as possible. Currently, some LEAs, particularly those in rural areas, lag their geographic neighbors in state funding take-up. If Missouri is to make significant gains in equitable access to ECE opportunities across a range of school types, it will be critical for policymakers and local leaders to evaluate where state funding is being left on the table and strategize ways to improve funding take-up.

About the Author

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Appendix

Table A1 : Regression Estimates of LEA Claim Status, 2019-20

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
FRPL (10pp)	0.041*** (0.108)	0.039*** (0.011)	0.030** (0.012)	0.025** (0.013)
Non-white (10pp)	0.007 (0.017)	0.009 (0.017)	0.011 (0.017)	0.017 (0.017)
Enrollment (100s)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Charter	-0.200 (0.200)	-0.200 (0.200)	-0.367* (0.208)	-0.381* (0.207)
Urban	0.058 (0.154)	0.057 (0.155)	0.168 (0.162)	0.18 (0.160)
Town	0.048 (0.103)	0.057 (0.104)	0.027 (0.110)	0.037 (0.111)
Rural	-0.205* (0.106)			
-Fringe		-0.241** (0.114)	-0.253** (0.119)	-0.255** (0.120)
-Distant		-0.194* (0.109)	-0.125 (0.121)	-0.121 (0.121)
-Remote		-0.178 (0.115)	-0.076 (0.128)	-0.071 (0.130)
Student-teacher ratio			0.044*** (0.011)	0.041*** (0.011)
Total expenditures (\$1,000s)			0.031 (0.030)	0.021 (0.030)
Local revenues (\$1,000s)			-0.038 (0.031)	-0.027 (0.031)
State revenues (\$1,000s)			-0.014 (0.034)	-0.002 (0.035)
Regional Fixed Effects				X
Observations	545	545	545	545

Notes: Each column represents a separate linear probability regression, each employing robust standard errors. Coefficients are statistically significant at the *10 percent, **5 percent, and ***1 percent levels. Geographic variable estimates are relative to the excluded category, suburban LEAs. Missouri regions included in regional fixed effects identify each LEA in one of the following regions: northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest.