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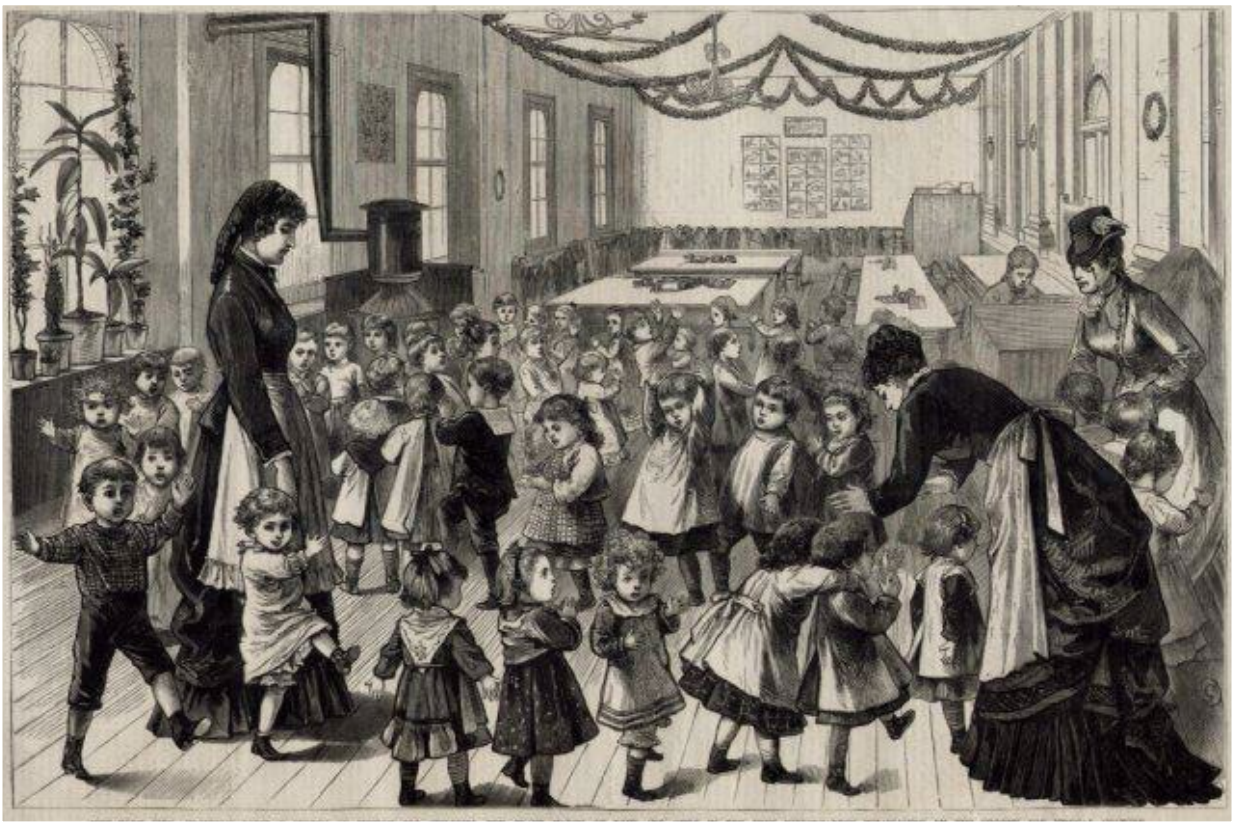
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Early Childhood History, Organizing, Ethos, and Strategy Project

The Kindergarten Lessons We Never Learned



By Marcy Whitebook, Claudia Alvarenga, and Barbara Zheutlin

CSCCE
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Cover image: The 1879 Grand March of Boys and Girls in New York City's Free Kindergarten, established by the Society for Ethical Culture.
Credit: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Granger.

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Introduction

Today, free public kindergarten for five-year-old children is available in every state and community throughout the United States, and public education is routinely referred to as K-12. But kindergarten did not start out this way. Kindergartens in the United States once served children as young as three and four years old. In fact, today's movement for public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) is a consequence of the gradual exclusion of almost all three- and four-year-olds from public kindergarten.

A century ago, the U.S. kindergarten landscape looked similar to preschool today. Kindergarten had limited public funding and was predominantly composed of private programs paid for by families and charitable donations. It took more than a hundred years to establish kindergarten as a public good.

Today, every five-year-old can go to a half-day of kindergarten for free in every community in the country.

In the mid-1800s, when it was new, kindergarten was a radical educational reform. Kindergarten was about children learning through play; it was about story time, building with blocks, and children drawing, singing, and playing together. Today, kindergarten is associated with homework, worksheets, and learning to read. Yet, in contrast to first- through twelfth-grade students, the children in kindergarten remain second-class citizens in the public education system. In most states, attendance is not mandatory and the kindergarten school day is shorter (Education Commission of the States, 2020b, 2020c). To make matters worse, kindergarten teachers are frequently paid less per hour than educators teaching older children (Kilander et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2021).

How did kindergarten become a public good? Why were children under age five excluded from public kindergartens? And how did that impact the evolution of services for younger children? How can the kindergarten story inform the establishment of free early care and education for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers today?

Kindergarten: A Cautionary Tale for Public Pre-K



Children playing "windmill" at the Free Kindergarten in New York City. Credit: Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 1876.

The kindergarten story demonstrates that it is possible to transform a private system into a public good, but it also offers a warning. St. Louis, Missouri, was the first city to include kindergarten in a public school, which inspired advocates across the country. However, conflicts arose in St. Louis over funding, decision-making authority, and the age children were eligible for kindergarten, foreshadowing problems other communities would face. These issues continue to challenge today's early childhood education system.

While kindergarten secured educational opportunities for five-year-olds, in most cases the needs of three- and four-year-olds, their families, and their teachers were sacrificed in the process. We're still dealing with the consequences.

In the early days of kindergarten, three- and four- year-olds attended kindergarten, and the term "early childhood" referred to three-, four-, and five- year-olds. Today, most people assume early childhood refers to children younger than five. Younger children's needs for care and education, although acknowledged, were (and still are) treated as the private responsibility of most families. While services for children eligible for public kindergarten gradually increased, "day nurseries" serving children of working mothers, private kindergartens, and "nursery schools" serving younger children struggled to survive because they remained primarily privately operated programs that were funded by family fees. Most importantly, the incorporation of kindergarten into the public schools has left the equally necessary early care and education for younger children as an unfulfilled need.

1870-1889: Kindergarten Introduced in the United States

Read more about this era →

Developed in Germany by Frederick Froebel and introduced to the United States by German immigrants prior to the Civil War, the kindergarten method shook up the educational world by introducing novel ideas about when and how young children learn. Kindergarten demonstrated that children learn through playing, which stood in stark contrast to the rote student instruction practiced across grade levels during the mid-19th century. And kindergartens showed that three- to six-year-olds have a tremendous capacity to learn, though formal schooling in most states did not serve children until they were six or seven years old.



Children playing the "weaving" game at the Free Kindergarten in New York City. Credit: Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 1876.

> *At the time that the kindergarten made its appearance in the United States, the school was a dreary place, and it is not surprising that the literature of education—what there was of it—should have been lacking in inspiration and value. (Vandewalker, 1908, p. 159)*

The kindergarten method sparked interest among a wide community of educators in primary, secondary, and higher education because it articulated a radical new approach to education:

> *That education is a process of development rather than a process of instruction; that play is the natural means of development during the early years; that the child's creative activity must be the main factor in his education; and that his present interests and needs rather than the demands of the future should determine the material and method to be employed—all these [are the] principles underlying kindergarten.... (Vandewalker, 1908, p. 245)*

The first kindergartens in the United States were established for middle- or upper-class White children. Free or charity kindergartens for children from working-class and immigrant families followed. Printed resources helped to popularize kindergarten. For example, an 1878 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* article described and illustrated a day in a New York City "free kindergarten," established "with a view to reaching and benefiting the children of the extremely poor and more especially those of the workmen in the Forty-Second Street gas factory, in whose neighborhood it was purposely planted" (Fryatt, 1878, p. 802).

In order for broader audiences to learn what a kindergarten actually was, a model kindergarten exhibit at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia provided the opportunity for thousands of visitors to observe the new educational approach in action. Additional kindergarten exhibits at other public events during this period further accelerated interest in kindergarten across the country. Notably, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 featured two kindergartens where visitors watched the young children with their teachers. There was also a Model Day Nursery, the term used for a child care center at the time, where parents could pay to leave their children while they toured the exposition (Michel, 1999; Pruett, 2013; Vandewalker, 1908; Weimann, 1981).



The instruction of children in the Kindergarten Cottage, under the auspices of the Woman's Department, Centennial Fair in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1876. Credit: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Granger.

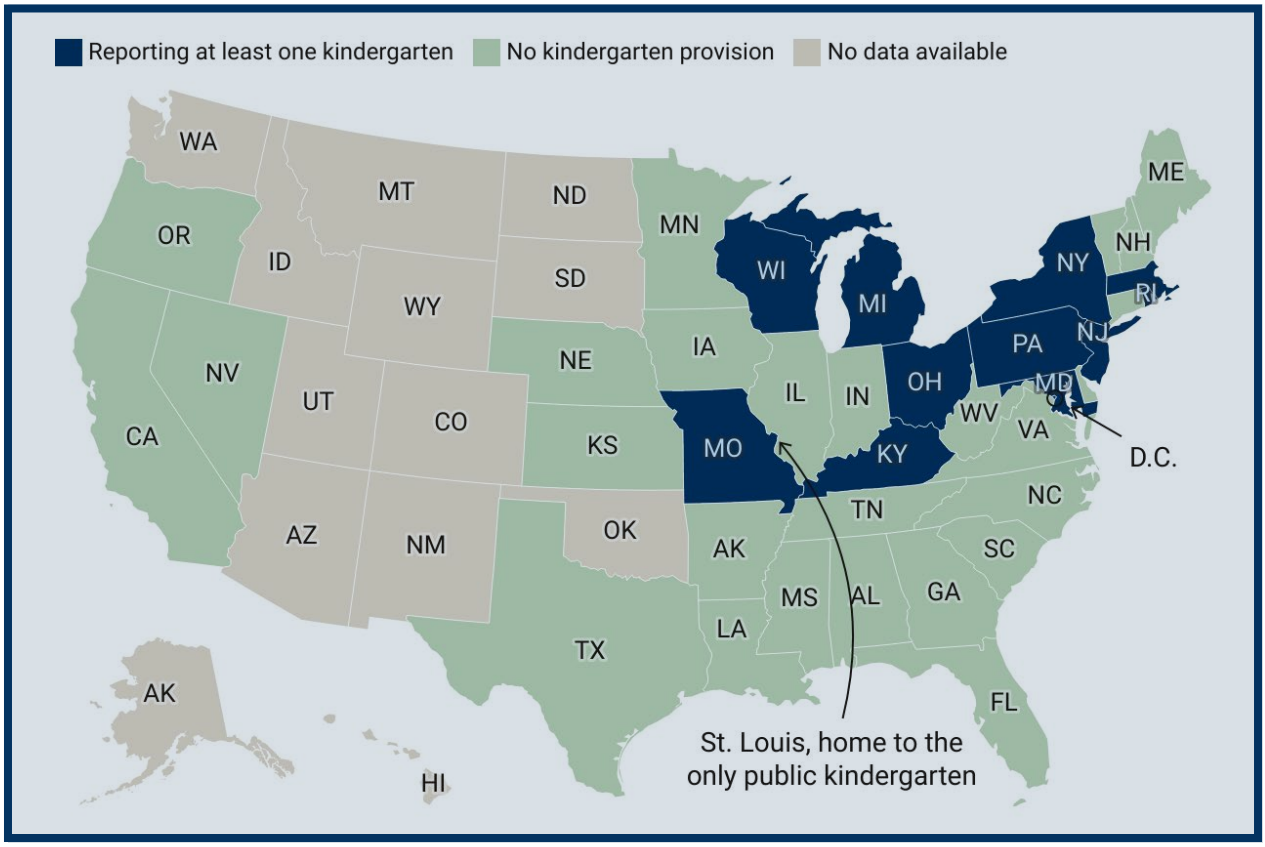
The federal government also played an active role in popularizing and promoting kindergartens by tracking the number of kindergartens, the number of children attending, their locations across and within states, and whether they were privately or publicly funded (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1874).[1] The 1874 annual report from the U.S. Commissioner of Education was the first document of its kind to include kindergartens. It identified 42 known kindergartens operating in 11 states and the District of Columbia (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1874). Only one of these kindergartens was publicly funded (see **Figure 1**). Read about this first public kindergarten in the box on page 10.

The number of children attending kindergarten between 1874 and 1892 spiked from 1,252 (1874) to 65,296 (1892). Of the 1,311 known kindergartens reported in 38 states and the District of Columbia, 35 percent (n=459) were publicly funded (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1894; see **Figure 2**). This growth strengthened the decades-long national grassroots movement aimed at establishing kindergartens in every public school.

Figure 1. All States Reporting at Least One Kindergarten, 1873

Only one kindergarten was publicly funded.

- 42 kindergartens
- 10 states
- 1,252 students



N=36 states and the District of Columbia.

N=10 states reporting at least one kindergarten: KY, MD, MA, MI, MO, NJ, NY, OH, PA, RI, and WI.

N=26 states reporting no kindergarten provision: AL, AR, CA, CT, DE, FL, GA, IL, IN, IA, KS, LA, ME, MN, MS, NE, NV, NH, NC, OR, SC, TN, TX, VT, VA, and WV.

N=13 no data reported or collected for U.S. territories and possessions in 1873: AK, AZ, CO, HI, ID, MT, NM, ND, OK, SD, UT, WA, and WY.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1874, p. CXIV. https://archive.org/details/reportofcommissi00unit_9/page/n3/mode/2up

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

St. Louis Creates the Nation's First Public Kindergartens

In 1873, St. Louis, Missouri, became the first city to successfully incorporate kindergarten into the public education system, inspiring advocates and educational reformers throughout the country. But early on within the St. Louis school district and later the Missouri state legislature, resistance to kindergarten arose related to the cost, funding source, and legality of serving three- to five-year-olds.[2] There were also questions about the alignment of kindergarten curriculum with what was taught in the early grades. St. Louis also struggled over who had authority in schools: the local community or the state. In addition, schools were often segregated, and there were few opportunities for Black children and limited training for Black teachers. These challenges foreshadowed inequities that endure in today's early childhood education system.

St. Louis was able to establish public kindergarten in part because the city's Superintendent of Schools, William Torrey Harris, was a champion of kindergarten. When he left St. Louis in 1880, the city's new leadership cut the costs of including kindergarten in the public schools by instituting a fee for families and raising the age for kindergarten to five, which decreased the number of students in kindergarten. The new leadership also curtailed the independence of the kindergarten department and curriculum. Soon after these changes were made, the state legislature passed preemptive laws to restrict Missouri cities from establishing and funding kindergarten for children under age five. Many pioneering teachers of the St. Louis public kindergartens resigned in protest, relocating to continue their efforts in more favorable climates.

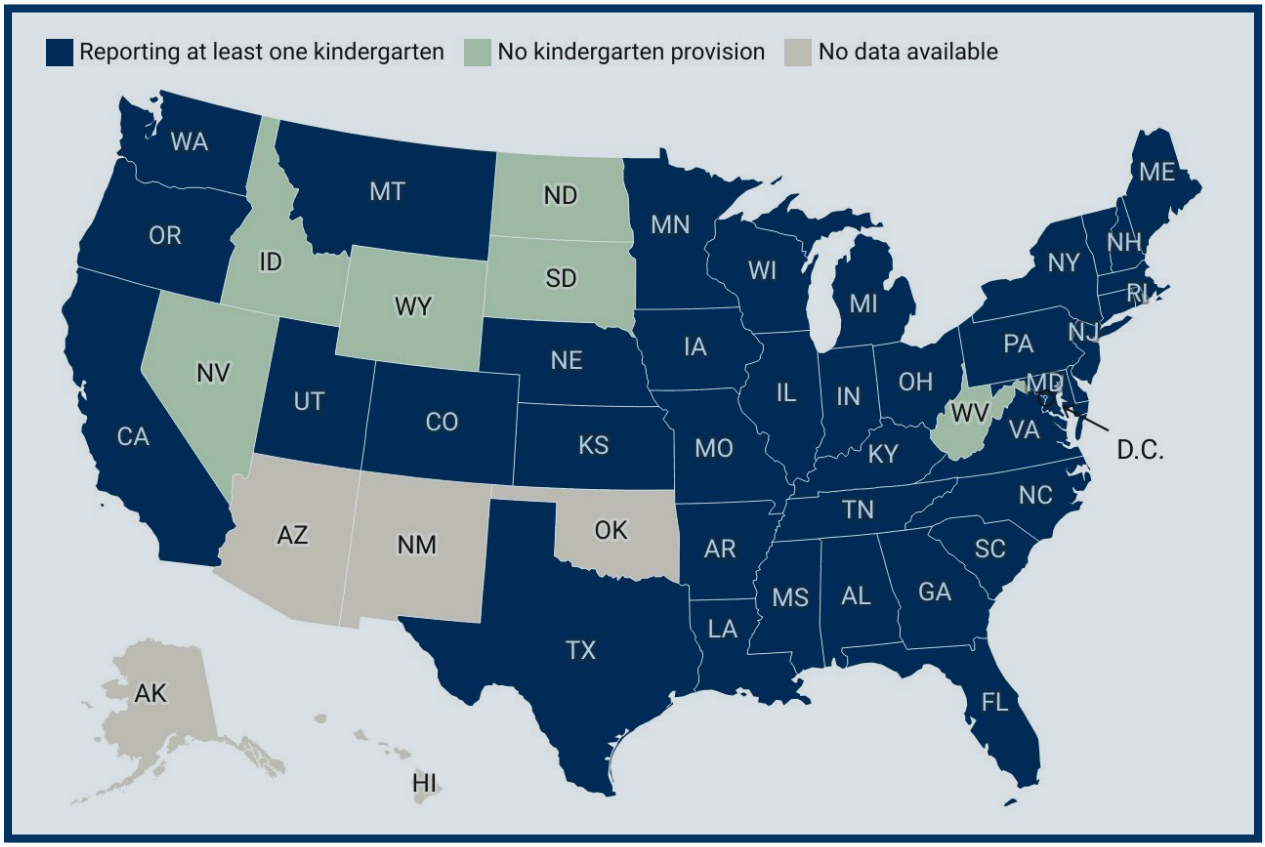
Similar resistance to kindergarten has surfaced again and again in many states and communities. These fights continue to focus on the related issues of funding and how old a child must be to attend kindergarten.

Sources: Adapted from Williams & Whitebook, 2021; see also, International Kindergarten Union, Committee of Nineteen, 1924, pp. 187-203; Snyder, 1972, pp. 59-85.

Figure 2. States Reporting at Least One Kindergarten, 1892

35 percent of all kindergartens were publicly funded.

- 1,311 kindergartens
- 39 states
- 65,296 students



N=39 states reporting at least one kindergarten: AL, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, NH, NJ, NY, NC, OH, OR, PA, RI, SC, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WA, and WI.

N=6 states reporting no kindergarten provision: ID, NV, ND, SD, WV, and WY.

N=5 no data reported or collected for U.S. territories and possessions in 1892: AK, AZ, HI, NM, and OK.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1894, p. 781. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015015375242

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

A Variety of Purposes and Aims

Broad embrace of kindergarten obscured differences in the objectives of its many adherents. Kindergartens were established for many purposes, depending on who founded them, when they were established, who taught in them, and the children who attended. The goals for kindergartens varied depending on whether the kindergarten was for children who were middle-class or working class, White, Black, Native American, or from immigrant families. A pointed example of these different goals can be seen in this excerpt from an unsigned letter from 1904 entitled "Impressions of a Kindergarten," addressed to Miss Burgess and Miss Staples at Joshua Bates School in Boston, Massachusetts:

> *Unless it disturbs others in the building, why not give the children perfect freedom (within reasonable limits) during play time, and let them make a noise and run about as they like for a few minutes without guidance? But I suppose that would have to be determined by the class of children which you happen to be dealing with—which must make a great difference in all your methods and work in the kindergarten. [...] I should think the best arrangement would be the exact reverse of the actual state of affairs, to have small kindergartens in the poorer districts so that the children might have three hours of distinctly personal guidance, out of the twenty-four hours in which they have so little care and thought given them. [...] And with the well-to-do children, to have larger kindergartens in which they could gain their first experiences in the beginnings of social service and gradually have their "corners" rubbed off and lose their idea of self- importance.*

A great many of the first kindergartens were called "free" or "charity" kindergartens by their founders, who were philanthropists, women reformers, and a few employers. These charity kindergartens aimed primarily to keep the children "safe," "clean," and "off the streets" in their communities, while their mothers worked in factories, in mills, or as household servants (Rose, 1999; Vandewalker, 1908; Watkins & Wheelock, 1939; Wheelock & Aborn, 1935).

> *The mere fact that the children of the slums were kept off the streets and that they were made clean and happy by kind and motherly young women; that the child thus being cared for enabled the mother to go about her work in or outside the home—all this appealed to the heart of America.... (Vandewalker, 1908, p. 19)*

A key objective of many of these kindergartens was to "Americanize" the children of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century. Conducted mostly in English, kindergartens taught children how to fit into and adapt themselves to what their founders interpreted as "the American way of life" (Allen, 2017; Barnes, 1923; Beatty, 1995).

Kindergartens for young Native American children were a component of a brutal government-sanctioned campaign. Beginning in the 1890s, the federal government funded more than 40 kindergartens,[3] often operated by missionaries and churches. The kindergartens were located on reservations or at boarding schools, which meant that some children as young as four-years-old were physically separated from their families and communities. These kindergartens stripped Native American children of their tribal language, dress, and customs, and used physical and psychological violence, in some cases resulting in death, if they resisted speaking English and adopting White Christian practices and norms, such as individualism. The resulting trauma of these experiences are carried across families and entire communities and tribes today (Beatty, 1995, p. 99; Lloyd et al., 2021; Ross, 1976, p. 40).



Native American children from the Hoopa Valley Tribe attending government-funded kindergarten, circa 1901-1906. Credit: Photo by Nellie T. McGraw Hedgpeth, Courtesy of UC Berkeley, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology.

The aim of Americanization did not encompass Black children, whose humanity and right to citizenship were historically denied. To counter aims of educating Black children for a racially and economically subordinate status and to address the dearth of kindergarten opportunities for Black children in the era of Jim Crow (Du Bois, 1909), Black women actively created kindergartens for Black children with more culturally relevant and affirming objectives (Williams, 2022).

When kindergartens were new, the teachers needed the mothers' support and cooperation. Teachers set up "mothers' groups" and "home visits" to teach mothers how to instruct and guide their children and to educate them about child development (Ross, 1976, pp. 42-43). The educational objectives for mothers also differed depending on their class, ethnic, and racial identification. Many of the early teachers were patronizing and saw these home visits and mothers' groups as a way to "improve" the mothers (Joffe, 1977).

In contrast, Black kindergarten teachers embraced a kindergarten philosophy that emphasized the importance of working with both mothers and children and also infused their own pedagogical aims into the kindergarten. Black women viewed kindergartens—and education more broadly—as a critical part of a broader strategy for racial uplift that included addressing the social and economic oppression of Black people (Robbins, 2011; Williams, 2022; Yates, 1905).



Free Kindergarten for Colored Children of New York City, 1901. Credit: Free Kindergarten Association for Colored Children, Sixth Annual Report.

Over the decades, the aims of kindergarten—and public education, generally—evolved in response to shifts in the cultural, political, and economic life in the country. During and after World War 1, for example, the aims of Americanization, democracy, and kindergarten were understood to run in parallel, and as a result, kindergarten focused on middle-class White children as well as those from immigrant communities (Barnes, 1923).

"Play"—the essence of the kindergarten method—also changed as new generations interpreted play in a variety of ways. Many kindergarten proponents emphasized the importance of teaching work skills and the work ethic (Allen, 2017).

> *Play, declared the [San Francisco] kindergartner Sarah Cooper to a meeting of women activists at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, was a kind of "restless activity" that could be constructively channeled into work. […] What Cooper called "industrial education" served not just to create an efficient labor force, but to stabilize society in the face of class and ethnic conflict…. (Allen, 2017, p. 117)*

White philanthropists advanced industrial education as a pedagogical and ideological approach that maintained Black subordination in the South by expanding educational opportunities designed to leave racial, political, and economic hierarchies undisturbed (Anderson, 1988; Dennis, 1998).

Educators such as John Dewey did not intend to promote low-level vocational education, but this was often the way their theories were applied, particularly in classrooms serving children from historically oppressed groups (Allen, 2017, p. 117).



Kindergarten knitters, 1918, Oak Park School, Des Moines, Iowa.
Credit: Des Moines Register.

1890-1919: A Slow and Bumpy Road to Public Kindergarten

Read more about this era →

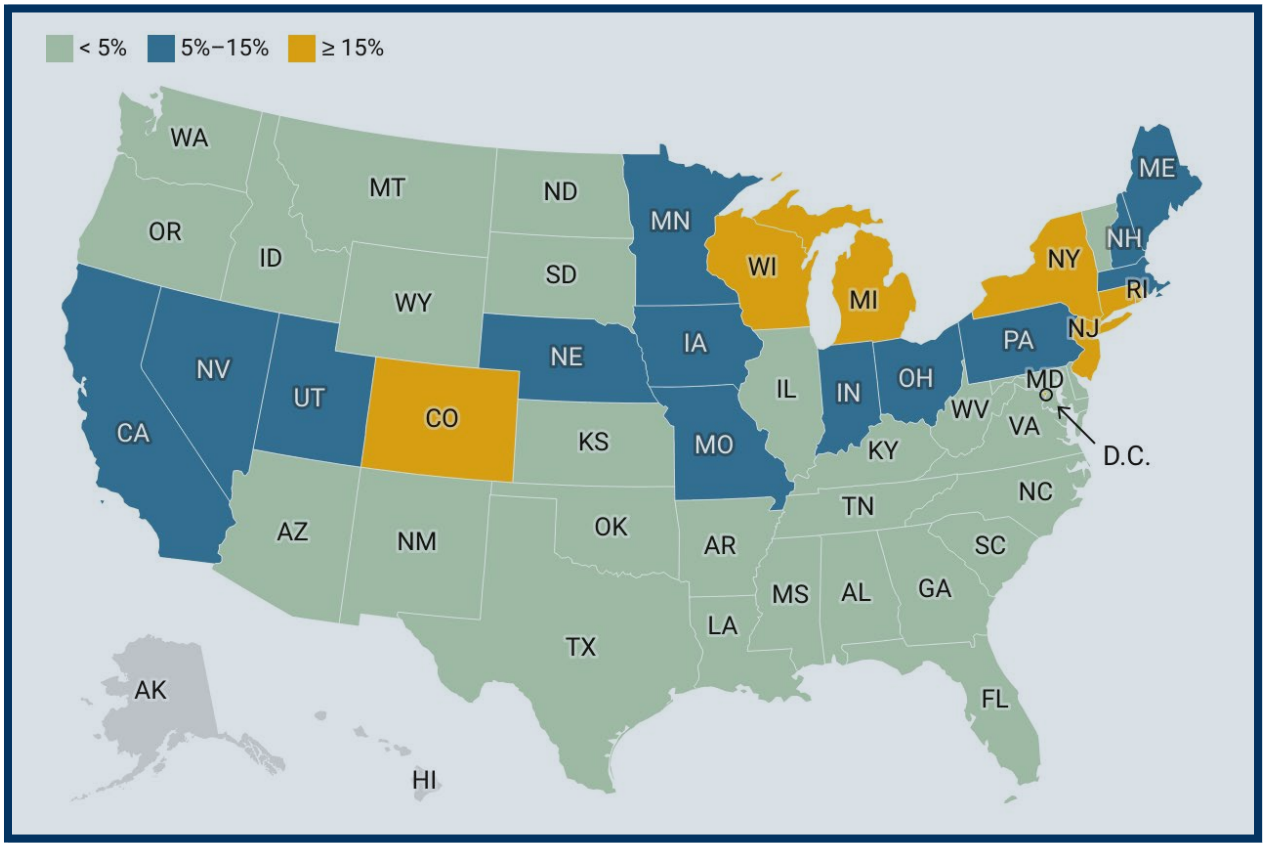
The crusade to establish kindergartens in public schools began in earnest during the Progressive Era and ushered in the transition of kindergarten from a predominantly private to a mostly public service (Ross, 1976). This change increased access to early education for hundreds of thousands of young children between 1890 and 1920. Greater access was a result of increases in the number of public kindergartens compared to private kindergartens. Public schools, particularly in cities, had more physical space and typically greater capacity to serve more children. Although public kindergartens struggled with insufficient and unstable funding and were always at a risk of being eliminated, they were generally financially more stable than the private kindergartens, which relied solely on parent fees and private donations.

By 1912, there were 7,557 kindergartens located in the 48 states and the District of Columbia, representing a nearly six-fold increase over two decades. Nearly nine out of ten kindergartens were public (87 percent; n=6,116), compared to one in three in 1892 (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1894). The number of children attending kindergarten increased more than five-fold, from 65,296 in 1892 to 353,546 in 1912 (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1914; see **Figure 3**).

Despite these gains "...the car of kindergarten progress did not always move as smoothly and rapidly as its friends could have wished" (Vandewalker, 1908, p. 132). **By 1912, only 9 percent, and by the end of the Progressive Era in 1920,[4] only 11 percent of four- to six-year-olds nationwide participated in any type of kindergarten, public or private.** The percentage of children enrolled in kindergarten across states ranged from 1 percent to a high of 28 percent in 1912 and a high of 38 percent in 1920 (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1923; see **Figure 4**).

Figure 3. Public and Private Kindergarten Participation Rates of 4-to 6-Year-Olds, By State, 1912

In 1912, on average, 9 percent of four- to six-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten.



N=48 states

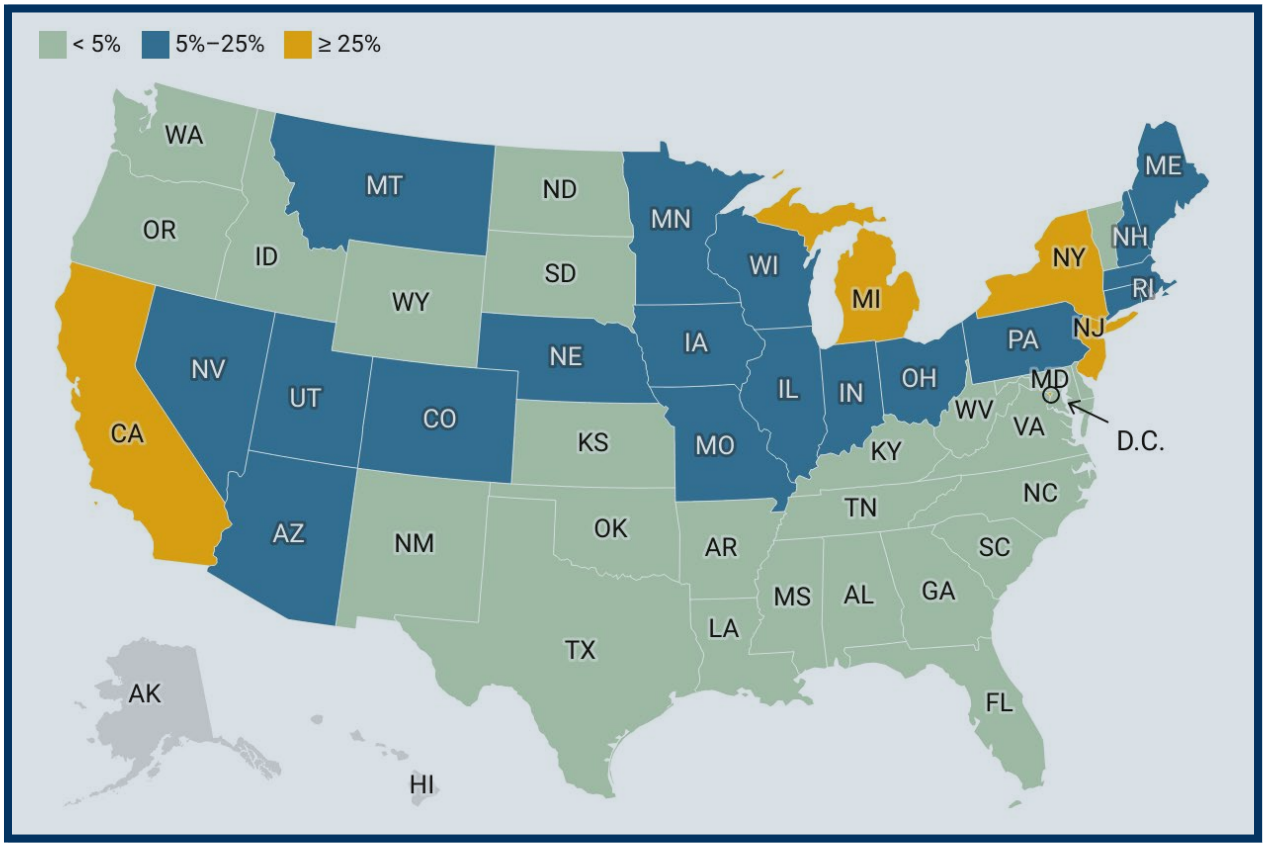
N=2 no data reported or collected for U.S. territories in 1912: AK and HI.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1914, p. 15. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.a0005541255

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Figure 4. Public and Private Kindergarten Participation Rates of 4-to 6-Year-Olds, By State, 1920

In 1920, on average, 11 percent of four- to six-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten.



N=48 states

N=2 no data reported or collected for U.S. territories in 1920: AK and HI.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1923, p. 586. https://archive.org/details/biennialsurveyofoobure_0

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

The National Grassroots Movement for Kindergarten

The movement to establish publicly funded kindergartens was multilayered. The most visible support came from educational leaders and the national organizations that adopted kindergarten as a cause. Among them were the International Kindergarten Union (known today as Childhood Education International), the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the National Congress of Mothers (known today as the National Parent Teacher Association), the National Education Association, the Southern Federation of Colored Women, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs. These organizations worked nationally as well as locally through chapters and branches, often in conjunction with religious, philanthropic, and community reform organizations (Allen, 2017; Beatty, 1995; Michel, 1999; Robbins, 2011; Rose, 1999; Ross, 1976).

At the heart of the movement were the kindergarten teachers, the mothers of young children, and the local activists in Black and White women's organizations and religious groups. These women established kindergartens in their communities when the idea of kindergarten was so new that people had to see a kindergarten in action to understand what it was. The local activists assumed multiple responsibilities to create these new learning experiences called "kindergarten," including:

- Identifying other supporters and volunteers and seeking community donations;
- Locating spaces for kindergartens to operate, including in churches or synagogues, settlement houses, workplaces (such as mills), or public school buildings;
- Raising funds to establish and equip the facilities, as well as to cover ongoing operational expenses;
- Establishing training opportunities for kindergarten teachers and groups for mothers to learn about kindergarten education;
- Spearheading campaigns carried out by parents to pressure local school boards to offer kindergartens;
- Advocating for public funding from local school boards and state officials;
- Proposing and working to secure laws favorable to kindergarten; and
- Protesting repeated efforts to cut back or eliminate kindergartens during periods of economic downturn.

Taking a Stand Against Cutbacks

During the Recession of 1909-10, the Mayor of Kenosha, Wisconsin, proposed dropping the kindergartens that were serving four- and five-year-old children to free up the classrooms for older children. The Superintendent of Schools, Mary D. Bradford, reminded school board and community members:

> *By the law of Wisconsin, all children over four years of age and under twenty years of age have a right to schooling at public expense. Now we are told we must shut the door of our schools to the faces of six hundred little ones and say, "No entrance here!" What do the voting fathers of these six hundred children say to this proposition? I believe that fathers had rather drive unpaved streets for a while longer than to see the things happen that was proposed in the Common Council last night. I believe that all tax payers of Kenosha realize that proper educational advantages for the children of this city take precedence in importance over all other interests…*

In response to Bradford's speech, "…public sentiment was aroused; the kindergartens were perpetuated and today kindergarten education is a vital part of the educational system of Kenosha."

Note: Women did not have the right to vote at this time. Source: Aborn et al., 1938, pp. 29-30.

Who Were the Kindergarteners?

In the late 19th and early 20th century, women who taught in kindergartens were called "kindergarteners," a word we now associate with five-year-olds. The German educator Frederick Froebel promoted the idea that women's "natural proclivities" made them the ideal kindergarteners but also required them to undergo specific training to assume the role. Their training was often quite rigorous compared to the preparation of teachers of older children. Kindergarteners developed a collective identity through ongoing professional experiences, association and club meetings, summer institutes and conferences, and professional kindergarten journals, as well as through their active involvement in advocating for and establishing kindergartens in their local communities (Vandewalker, 1908).

While most early kindergarteners came from middle-class White families, women from less-affluent backgrounds soon joined their ranks. The relative privilege of Black club women in terms of education, profession, and wealth shaped their faith in education as a critical part of a broader strategy for racial uplift. Black club women, in particular, fought to establish kindergarten training at historically Black colleges and universities as well as in typically segregated normal schools (Robbins, 2011; Whitebook & Williams, 2021; Williams & Whitebook, 2021).



A group of Black women sitting outside the Armstrong Manual Training School, Washington, D.C., 1908. Credit: Evans-Tibbs Collection, Smithsonian Institution.

Working with children was universally undervalued and underpaid because it was performed almost exclusively by women. Kindergarteners' work was even more devalued because of their students' young age and assumptions that their schooling was unnecessary and required little skill on the part of their teachers. Unfortunately, this notion established the rationale and convention of underpaying the women who taught kindergarten, which has endured across three centuries.

> *The earnestness and efficiency of the kindergarteners is out of all proportion to their compensation. (Brooklyn Free Kindergarten Society, 1897, p. 40)*

Although kindergarteners were paid higher salaries than day nursery workers, they were often asked to volunteer their services or were paid meagerly due to unstable and insufficient funding for private kindergartens.

> *The mission kindergartener often undertook her work as a labor of love and asked for no remuneration. If salaries were paid, they were wholly out of proportion to the services rendered. The kindergarteners' services therefore did not reach a true valuation in the educational labor market. When the kindergarten became a part of the public school system, this occasioned difficulties that in many places have not even yet been satisfactorily adjusted. Salary conditions are improving in the kindergarten world, but many kindergarteners are still suffering from the conditions that first determined the salaries paid.... (Vandewalker, 1908, pp. 125-126)*

Advocating for the inclusion of kindergartens in the public schools—a crusade many kindergarten teachers embraced—provided the avenue for them to improve their compensation and status, while simultaneously moving them closer to achieving their goal of expanding early education opportunities for young children (Ross, 1976).

> *The result of the extension of public school kindergartens in Greater New York and the high standard required by the examination, together with the higher salaries paid in the public school system, will result in drawing the best talent away from our work unless our salary schedule is maintained on the present basis and increased as time demands and opportunity offers. (Brooklyn Free Kindergarten Society, 1900, p. 22)*

The promise of better pay for kindergarten teachers was eventually realized in public kindergartens, but the work of establishing parity for kindergarten teachers with teachers of older elementary students took decades and still remains unfinished in many places throughout the country. Furthermore, public provision failed to relieve pre-existing racial wage penalties due to discriminatory tax and funding policies for Black schools and services not only in the South, but in typically segregated school systems in other parts of the country, as well.

Although public school kindergarten offered Black teachers better pay than private programs, their pay rates were set lower than the rates for White teachers performing the same work in the same school district, with very few exceptions, well into the later part of the 20th century (Taylor, 2017). Over time, as mothers' groups and home visits were eliminated, kindergarteners were assigned to two separate groups of children, each for a half-day, to cut costs.

Because public kindergarten systems typically did not accept three- and four-year-olds, these younger children remained mostly in private programs. Their teachers, who continued to work in privately funded and operated kindergartens, faced wage, working condition, and status penalties that persist. The prediction that public kindergarten would draw teachers from private programs did not take long to be realized in Brooklyn, New York:

> *The increasing demand for well-trained kindergarteners in our public schools has made the path of the Committee difficult at times. We have [been] obliged to accept the resignations of teachers during the school year, who, with good reason, desired advancement and increased salary. While we are interested in the welfare of all kindergartens, we were loath to see our particular ones suffer because of these changes. (Brooklyn Free Kindergarten Society, 1902, p. 23)*

Thus, the improved conditions for public kindergarten teachers exacerbated tensions among different types of programs, adding disparities among early educators based on the ages of children served, setting and program definition, and funding source. These disparities drove turnover within the early childhood sector then, and they continue to plague the sector today, posing serious challenges to building collective power among early educators (McLean & Caven, 2021).

Kindergarten activists in Black Women's Clubs worked locally to correct the racial disparities in kindergarten access and create culturally appropriate experiences for Black children, while facing additional challenges to secure funding and establish training opportunities for prospective Black kindergarten teachers. Because Black mothers were more likely to be employed than White mothers, Black women also worked to establish day nurseries. They recognized that integrated provision for care and education was important to ensure their children's access to early education experiences, which remains the case today.

Read more about Black club women's activism and the contributions of Haydee Campbell, Anna Murray, and Josephine Yates to early education. Learn more about the discrimination Black women encountered within the kindergarten movement (Taylor, 2017), as well as the exclusion of African Americans from the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (Wells et al., 1893).



This photo includes attendees at the first Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (MFCWC) Annual Convention, which took place in Butte, Montana on August 3, 1921. Courtesy of the Montana Historical Society. PAc 96-25.2.

Who Got to Go to Kindergarten in the Progressive Era?

Today, whether children are likely to participate in public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) or have access to any formal early childhood program depends on the policies of the state and the community where they live, as well as their age and their racial and class backgrounds. In the Progressive Era, access to kindergarten likewise depended on whether families could afford tuition if only private kindergarten were available, as well as whether the mothers worked outside the home and had access to a full-day kindergarten or a day nursery. These disparities in access to pre-K and other early childhood programs can be traced to the first kindergartens in the United States.

It Depended on Your Age

Private kindergartens generally served children as young as age three, in keeping with the original design of kindergartens. In 1899, 16 states and the District of Columbia had kindergarten laws establishing age eligibility criteria: of the 13 states that specified the age that a child could enter kindergarten, one set the age at five, nine set the age at four, and three states allowed children as young as three years of age to attend kindergarten (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1899, pp. 2539-2541).

But as kindergartens rolled out in more places—and especially as public funds were sought to support them—different policies about school funding in states and local communities often led to the prioritization of five-year-olds.

When public kindergartens opened in the District of Columbia in 1889, following successful advocacy by visionary Colored Women's League leader Anna E. Murray and other advocates, only five-year-olds stepped over the threshold into the separate classrooms for Black and White children. The district's school board trustees deemed it "safer to restrict the entrance age at five years" and proclaimed that "when all of the five-year-old children in a given neighborhood had been provided for, the admission of young children was permitted" (Watkins & Wheelock, 1939).

What happened in the District of Columbia happened in other schools, too. Many advocates compromised. Despite their aspirations to serve younger children, the advocates embraced the prioritization of five-year-olds in order to secure a foothold for kindergarten in the public schools. Younger kids were left out.

Only Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Oregon had a school-entry age of four years old. These three states did not require a change in law for children younger than six to be educated at public expense. Only Massachusetts and Rhode Island faced no legal obstacle because state law did not specify an age limit for school entrance (Vandewalker, 1922).

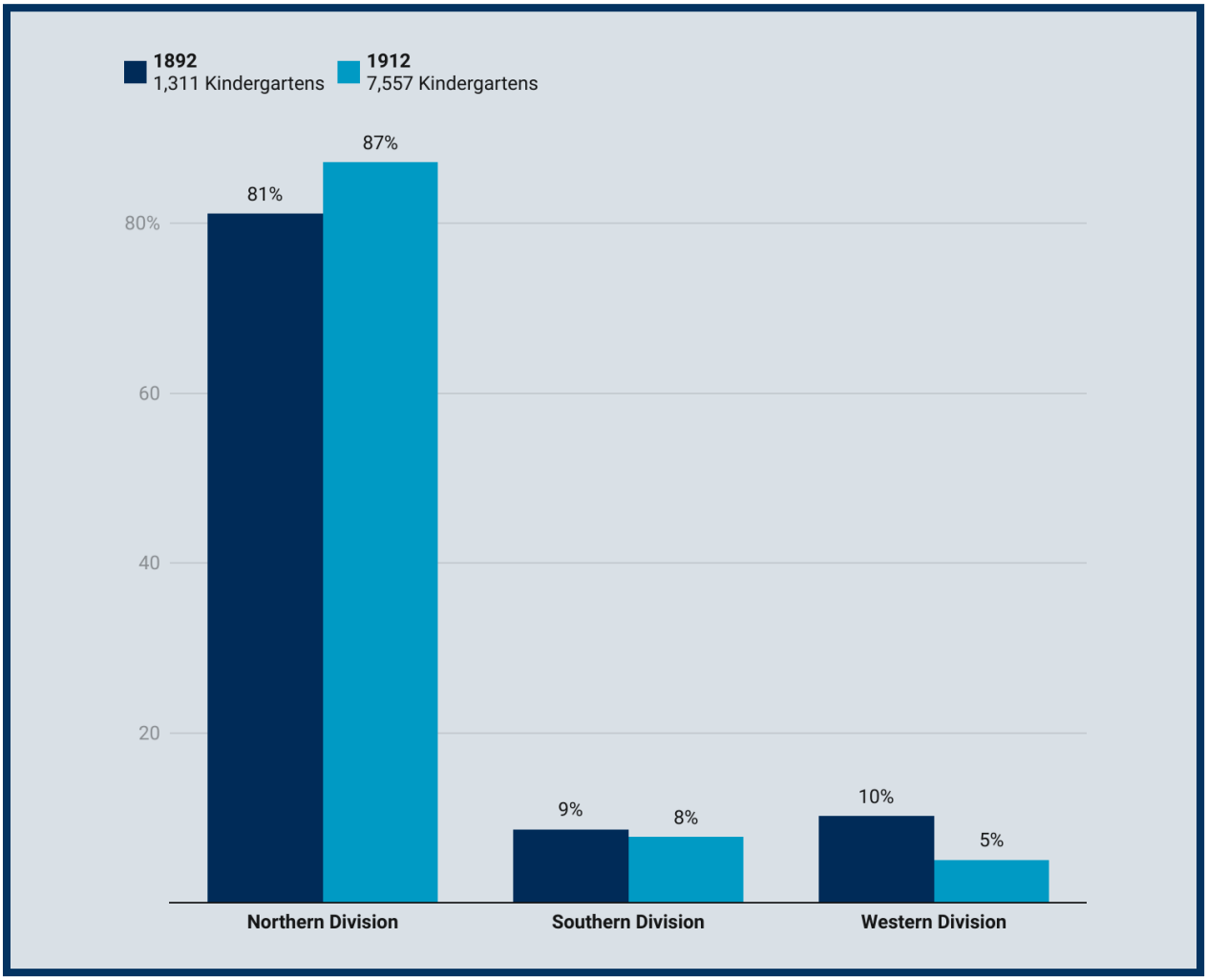
It Depended on Where You Lived

Access to kindergarten varied substantially throughout the country, by region and by population density. Children residing in the more industrialized and urban North Atlantic and North Central states had the greatest likelihood of attending kindergarten, compared to their peers living in smaller communities and rural areas in the South and West, which were predominantly more agricultural and less industrial regions.

Cities in the northern region were home to four out of five (81 percent) of the kindergartens in 1892 and nearly nine out of ten kindergartens in 1912. Fewer than 10 percent of kindergartens were located in the southern region during this period. The southern region represented only 8 percent of all public and private kindergartens in 1892 and 5.5 percent in 1912. The less-populated western states claimed 10 percent of all kindergartens in 1892 but only 5 percent by 1912 (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 5. Distribution of All Public and Private Kindergartens, By Region, 1892 and 1912

- Nearly 60 percent of all children in the United States age five and younger resided in the northern states in 1890 (59.3 percent), decreasing slightly in 1912 (55.6 percent).
- More than 90 percent of Black children resided in the South in 1892 and 1912.
- The western states were home to roughly 5 percent of children residing in the United States in 1890 (4 percent) and 1912 (6 percent).



N=48 states

N=2 no data reported or collected for U.S. territories and possessions in 1892 and 1912: AK and HI.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Education, 1899, p. 2549. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951d000234888; U.S. Bureau of Education, 1914, pp. 16-17. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.a0005541255

Chart: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

It Depended on Your Race

Racial discrimination and exclusion reflected and multiplied the geographical barriers to kindergarten participation for children from historically oppressed communities. Significantly, in the early 20th century 90 percent of the Black population resided in the southern states, where neither public nor private kindergartens had been established in most communities. Where kindergartens did operate, Black children's participation was often denied or restricted to segregated kindergartens. Racially segregated school systems commonly provided disparate access depending on race. In St. Louis, for example, White kindergartens grew to more than 50 classes by 1879, yet there was a seven-year gap between the establishment of the first White kindergarten (1872) and the first Black kindergarten (1879), and a 10-year delay to add a second Black kindergarten (1889). It took nearly 50 years to establish 31 Black kindergartens by 1938 (Williams & Whitebook, 2021).

Disparities in funding for Black and White kindergartens were common in public and private kindergartens. Then, as today, differences in resources undermined program stability, teacher-child ratios, and teacher salaries.

> *The most elaborate effort at systematic free kindergartens is that of the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association of Atlanta, Georgia. Some years ago, some colored people of the city started a free kindergarten association. It ran a kindergarten for two years and then getting into financial difficulties [...] the colored women rallied again, and the result has been five free kindergartens here in operation; four of them since 1905 and the fifth started last year. No aid is received from the State, although the white kindergartens receive such help. (Du Bois, 1909, p. 126)*



A public kindergarten class in the segregated school system of Kansas City, Missouri, circa 1902. Credit: G. N. Grisham.

In their 1908-1909 Annual Report, the Commissioners of the District of Columbia noted the average cost for White kindergarten pupils was $41.68 per year, compared to $37.11 for Black students (Washington, D.C., Board of Education, 1911). Such differences persisted over time. In their 1915 annual report, the Commissioners note that the teacher-child ratio for Black children was 1:37, compared to a ratio of 1:26 for White children (Washington, D.C., Board of Education, 1916).

Black children often received less fair treatment and less attention in public kindergartens that served both White and Black children, as noted in a 1915 report by the Public School Association of New York City, describing an integrated kindergarten:

> *In the kindergarten division, there were [...] on the four occasions it was visited, only ten or twelve colored children, and they were standing about listlessly [...] in the free play and in the kindergarten work, however, no attention whatever was paid to the colored children by the workers. The directors said it was difficult to interest them, but in the games witnessed, they were alert and often successful. (Blascoer, 1915, pp. 27-28)*

Five Decades On, Still Just a Toehold

> *The work of making kindergarten a part of the school system is only a question of time. The most eminent educators of the day recognize and endorse [...] its principles and methods, but the expense involved prevents its becoming at once the lowest grade of the public school system (U.S. Bureau of Education, 1887, p. 333).*

Despite the dedication and massive efforts of advocates during the intervening years, the statement above in the U.S. Commissioners of Education 1887 report on the eve of the Progressive Era also rang true as the era came to a close in 1919.

Nearly half a century after the federal government began tracking kindergarten participation, roughly only one in ten of four- to six-year-olds was enrolled in kindergarten.

Proponents of kindergarten were well aware that their goal for a kindergarten in every public school remained elusive. In 1908, kindergarten expert and chronicler of the movement, Nina Vandewalker echoed the Commissioner's assessment:

> *The main reasons for the slow march of kindergarten progress were two. One was the expense of maintaining kindergartens, which was supposed to be much greater than that of maintaining primary schools. This is due in part to the cost of kindergarten material, but in greater measure to the larger number of teachers supposed to be required for a given number of children. [...]* ***The bugbear of expense continued to frighten school boards for many years, however, and the objection continues to be raised even now...*** *The second reason for the slowness of kindergarten adoption by the school was more fundamental. The school laws of most states did not permit of the expenditure of public school funds for the education of children of kindergarten age. (Vandewalker, 1908, pp. 184-185, 187, emphasis added)*

Garnering support for the idea of kindergarten and its many benefits did not translate into a willingness to use public dollars to support them or to fund them sufficiently, a state of affairs all too familiar today when it comes to services for children under five. **Adding kindergartens to public school systems was complicated because responsibility for the provision of public education has always belonged to the states.** Each state establishes the laws that say how public funds for schools "may" or "must" be spent. Each state makes the laws that specify how old a child must be to attend public school. Each state makes the laws that determine who makes the decisions: local towns or the state.

The federal government plays a role in education, but since public education falls outside of its purview, it does not have authority per se over states' decisions about kindergarten, public pre-K, and many aspects of education. It can offer guidance and allocate funds for certain purposes, but its influence is limited by what the states choose to do.

Although the federal government provided no direct funding to states or communities for kindergarten, the federal Bureau of Education established a separate Kindergarten Division in 1913, signaling its continued role in promoting the expansion of kindergartens toward the end of the Progressive Era. In addition to collecting and publishing data about kindergarten participation in states and communities, the Kindergarten Division worked closely with the International Kindergarten Union and other national organizations to disseminate information to school leaders, parents, and teachers throughout the country. Notably, in 1915-1916, the division circulated a poster urging communities to step up efforts to establish more kindergartens as part of its display at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco (Ryan, 1916).

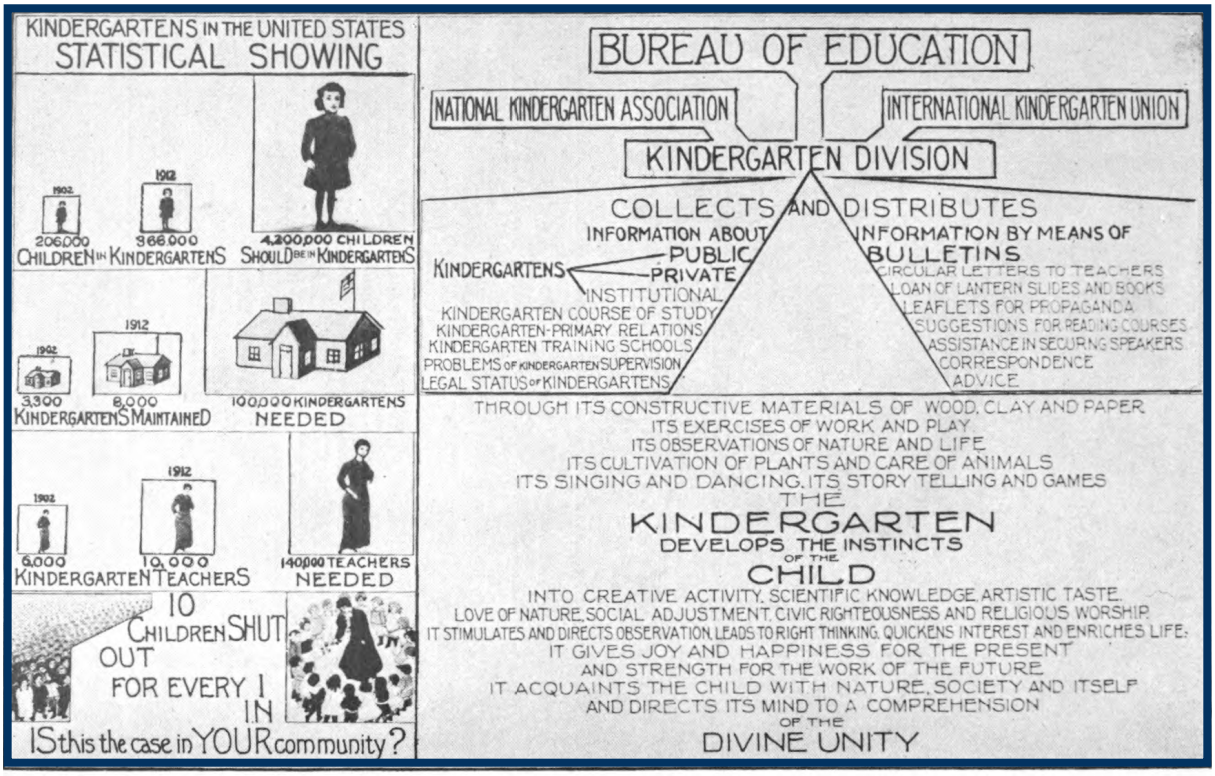


Chart illustrating kindergarten work from an education exhibit at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, California, 1915. Credit: W. C. Ryan.

1920-1945: Kindergarten Rolls Forward, Then Back

Read more about this era →

> *[K]indergarten should be extended and strengthened just now as never before because of the need for an orderly readjustment following the years of disruption through which we have just passed. (Barnes, 1923, p. 6)*

Everyday family life changed following World War 1 (1914-1918) and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, spurring the federal government and other kindergarten proponents to step up their efforts to integrate kindergarten into the public school system. Advocates sought new ways of engaging parents in efforts to remove funding and age barriers in state policies.

Between 1920 and 1930, kindergarten participation rates for four- to six-year-olds increased from 11 to 15 percent (see **Figure 4** and **Figure 6**). Still, disparities within and across states persisted, even as the percentages of children attending kindergarten edged upward between 1920 and 1930.

- Children living in the southern states in 1930 were still the least likely to participate in kindergarten, while opportunities for children living in western states, notably California and Colorado, increased. Opportunities for participation among children ages four to six living in the North Atlantic and North Central states remained high, although the individual ranking of states shifted.
- In all 39 states that provided city-level data, participation rates for four- to six-year-olds remained substantially higher for those residing in cities, compared to other parts of the state.[5]
- The 1930-1932 Biennial Survey of Education reported the slow expansion of kindergarten in rural communities: "In urban areas, 1 of every 22 pupils attending the schools is enrolled in kindergarten; in rural sections, only 1 pupil of every 147 enrolled is registered in kindergarten" (U.S. Office of Education, 1935, p. 65).
- In a survey prepared for the 1931 White House Conference on Child Health Protection, racial disparities in access to private kindergartens were documented nationwide. Only 8.2 percent of Black children under age five attended kindergarten, as compared to almost 30 percent of White children the same age (Anderson, 1936, pp. 266, 332).

Kindergarten Laws in Effect as of 1931

Reports issued by the federal government in 1932 and 1935 provide detailed information about kindergarten legislation in effect by 1931. The 1932 report explains common terminology used and includes the text of the laws for each state, noting when state law is silent about kindergarten (Davis & Keesecker, 1932). The 1935 report provides a more detailed summary of the laws and highlights their complexity, discussing how the provisions of each state law work in concert and how one component (typically funding) can render other provisions null. Considering each provision of the laws separately can be misleading (Keesecker & Davis, 1935):

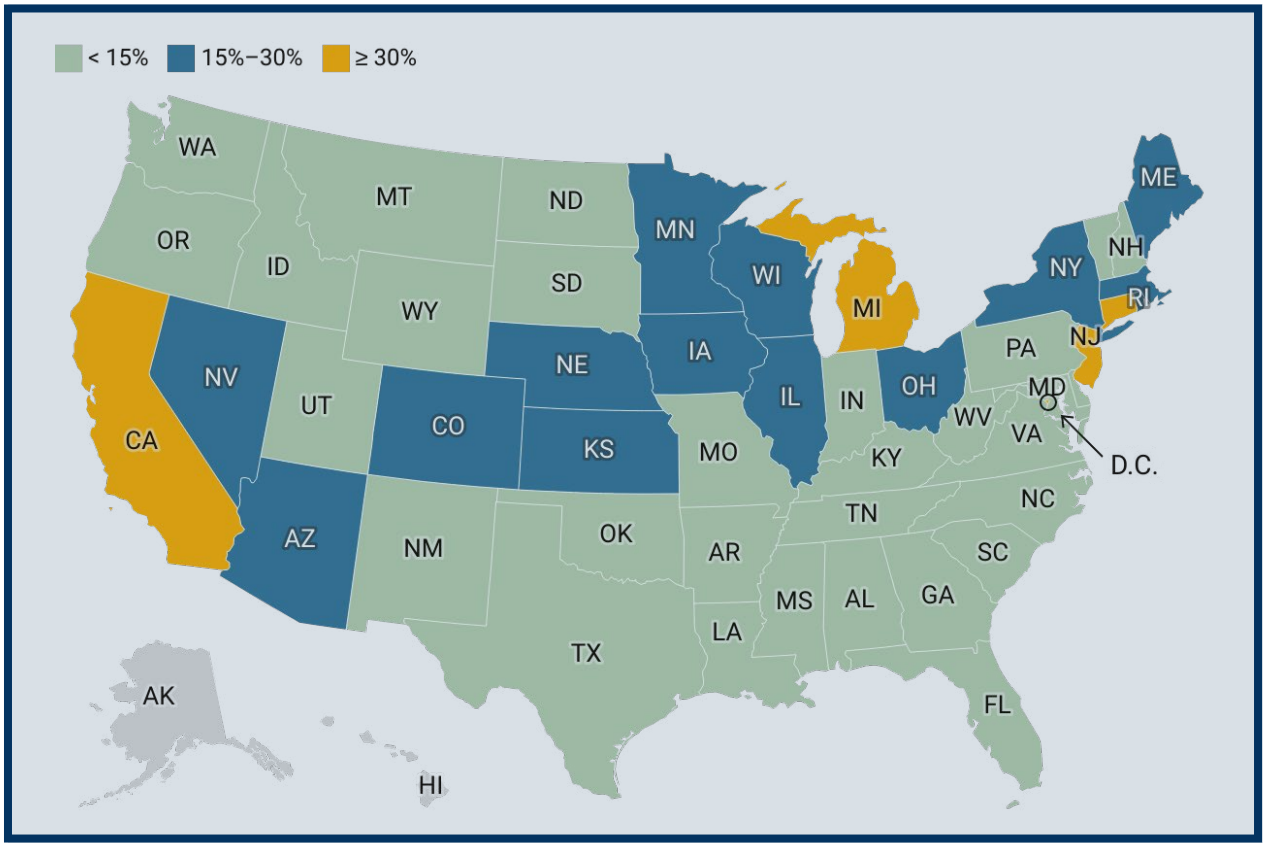
> *Existing kindergarten legislation falls under two general classifications, "permissive" and "mandatory." The chief difference between these two types of legislation lies in the use of the words "may," "must," or "shall." The permissive law authorizes school boards to establish kindergartens under certain conditions. The mandatory-on-petition law obligates a school board to establish kindergartens when a certain number of qualified citizens, generally parents, register a demand for them. (Davis & Keesecker, 1932, p. 1)*

Entry age permitted for public kindergarten spelled out in state law was not a guarantee that a community would offer public kindergarten or whether it would serve younger children. As late as 1931, 25 states still permitted four-year-olds to attend public kindergarten, and a few states even allowed three-year-olds (U.S. Office of Education, 1935). However, these laws were, in effect, guidelines. Local communities did not necessarily have kindergartens for any or all of the children they were permitted to serve with public funds.

Explore Your State Law →

Figure 6. Kindergarten Participation Rates of 4- to 6-Year-Olds, By State, 1930

In 1930, on average, 15 percent of four- to five-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten.



Author calculations based on data published by the U.S. government.
N=48 states

N=2 no data reported or collected for U.S. territories in 1930: AK and HI.

Sources: Davis & Keesecker, 1932, pp. 6-7. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435029542370; U.S. Office of Education, 1935, p. 62. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112075451143

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Table 1. Comparison of Statewide and City-Only Kindergarten Enrollment for 4- to 6-Year-Olds, 1930

		Overall Enrollment	Cities Only Enrollment
	United States	17%	-
1	Michigan	52%	78%
2	California	46%	68%
3	Connecticut	34%	49%
4	New Jersey	34%	42%
5	Maine	26%	70%
6	Minnesota	25%	57%
7	Nebraska	25%	80%
8	Wisconsin	25%	50%
9	Illinois	25%	35%
10	Rhode Island	24%	26%
11	Nevada	22%	64%
12	New York	22%	27%
13	Iowa	22%	61%
14	Colorado	19%	45%
15	Massachusetts	18%	20%
16	Arizona	18%	60%
17	Ohio	16%	25%
18	Kansas	15%	43%
19	New Hampshire	13%	23%
20	Indiana	13%	25%
21	Missouri	13%	29%
22	Pennsylvania	9%	14%
23	Maryland	9%	16%
24	Wyoming	8%	28%
25	Washington	7%	13%

26	Oregon	6%	-
27	Oklahoma	5%	19%
28	Louisiana	5%	-
29	South Dakota	5%	33%
30	Georgia	5%	19%
31	Kentucky	5%	20%
32	Texas	4%	12%
33	New Mexico	4%	-
34	Montana	4%	14%
35	Delaware	3%	7%
36	Vermont	3%	10%
37	Mississippi	2%	-
38	Virginia	2%	7%
39	Utah	2%	3%
40	North Dakota	2%	11%
41	West Virginia	1%	-
42	Florida	1%	-
43	North Carolina	0.4%	1.9%
44	Idaho	0.2%	-
45	Alabama	0.1%	-
46	Tennessee	0.1%	-
47	Arkansas	0.1%	-
48	South Carolina	0.1%	0.4%
49	District of Columbia		47%

Author calculations based on data published by the U.S. government.

N=48 states

N=2 no data reported or collected for U.S. territories in 1930: AK and HI.

Sources: Davis & Keesecker, 1932, pp. 6-7. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/osu.32435029542370; U.S. Office of Education, 1935, p. 62. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112075451143

Chart: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

The Power of State Kindergarten Laws

Whether children were likely to participate in public kindergarten depended on the policies of the state and community where they lived, as is the case with public pre-K today. During the 1920s, activists in many states pursued legislative strategies to alter the state policies that hindered local authorities from establishing and securing the resources necessary to integrate kindergarten into public school systems. By the 1930s, 42 states had amended or passed new legislation governing kindergarten, signaling its growing importance. More lay citizens, professional and civic groups, and national organizations like the American Federation of Labor and the American Association of University Women were drawn into the movement and mobilized their constituencies to rally support for the passage of the laws they hoped would facilitate kindergarten's integration into the public school system.

In most states, laws governed the age at which children could be educated at public expense and whether state school funds could be used for that purpose. In the early 1930s, 22 states restricted the use of state school funds to children age six and older, in alignment with their primary-school entry age. In 14 of these 22 states, local public funds could be used to serve children younger than five under certain conditions.

Among the other 26 states, general state school funds could be used to educate children younger than six at public expense under conditions defined by law. In 13 of these states, the funds could be used for younger children because the primary-school entry age was set at age five or younger. In the remaining states, state kindergarten laws spelled out the sources of funding that could be used to educate younger children at public expense, most commonly a local tax or special fund established by communities for the purpose. Furthermore, state kindergarten laws specified whether local communities, school boards, or the state held the authority to establish public kindergartens and what training and certification were necessary for kindergarten teachers. (See the previous box on kindergarten laws in effect as of 1931 to find your state's laws at the time.)

Kindergarten participation rates for children age four to six were higher in states with less restrictive laws and where the school entry age was set at age five or younger. In 1930, for example, participation rates for children age four to six averaged 10 percent or lower in 19 of the 22 states that restricted use of general state school funds to children age six and older. In contrast, in 18 of the 26 states that allowed general state funds to be used for children younger than six, participation rates for four- to six-year-olds were more than 10 percent. In 13 of those states, participation rates were 20 percent or higher.

> *At present, we lack teachers and money for public education, and there is a tendency everywhere to cut out expense. School boards are not often made up of educational experts, and they are prone to say:* ***"The little ones can wait; they will get it later."*** *(Barnes, 1923, p. 6, emphasis added)*

In many communities, these laws worked as advocates hoped they would—to increase investment of public resources and expand kindergarten provision—but they also contributed to pre-existing disparities among communities within states. These laws led to a complicated landscape of funding, eligibility, and program names and features for the "babies," as school officials often called children younger than "regular" school age. This landscape continues to be the setting of public kindergarten for five-year-olds today and it's the soil in which pre-K and other early childhood programs for younger children have grown. Significantly, kindergarten laws also enabled state and local officials to curtail or eliminate kindergarten services when state and local school budgets were under stress (Vandewalker, 1922).

Teachers Finance Their Own Kindergartens

Educators who minimize the value of the kindergarten might well ponder the recent action of the Miami, Florida, Kindergarten Association. When the Board of Education of Miami found that it could not financially support the kindergartens of the city, the teachers themselves assumed the responsibility of keeping them going.

The association, composed of only eight members, obtained permission to reopen the kindergartens, hiring seven teachers and operating six kindergartens. The children pay a tuition of four dollars per month. Generous parents are aiding the association to care for those who are not able to pay this tuition. The kindergartens have been opened several months now and have proven very successful. Over two hundred children are enrolled and the teachers have been paid their full salary.

This state of things, while highly creditable to the teachers themselves, makes thoughtful persons wonder what becomes of the money which must pour into the coffers of the city in floods from the thousands of tourists who flock there in the winter season. Surely the little people ought to benefit from the prosperity which their elders enjoy. We prophesy that it will not be long before the board of education will see its way clear to assume charge of this department again.

Source: Winship, 1922, p. 201.

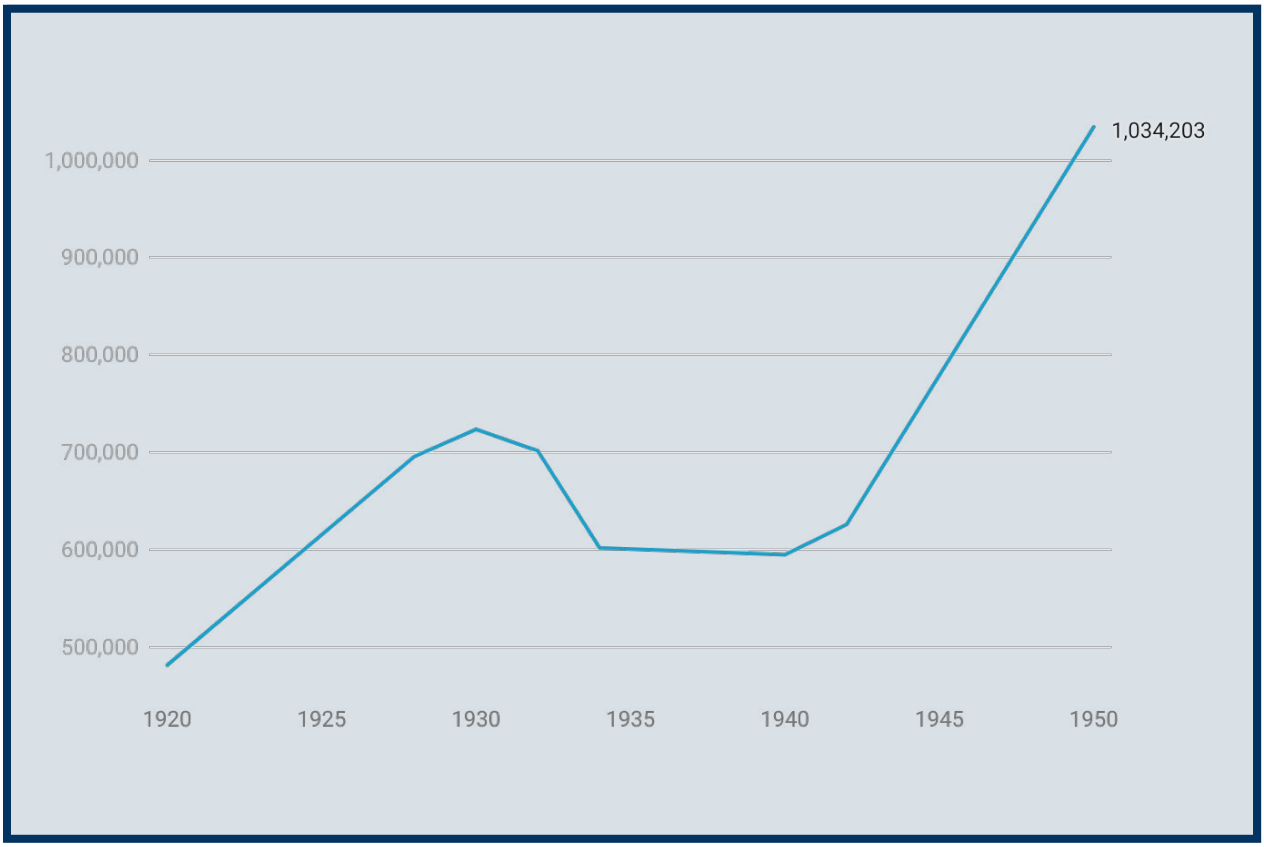
Progress Reversed

Much of the progress in kindergarten expansion between 1920 and 1930 would be reversed as a result of the Great Depression (1929-1941) and would not be regained until sometime after World War 2. Due to the economic crisis, kindergarten participation dropped in many states as public funds were reduced and private programs were no longer able to depend on tuition or secure donations. Because public kindergartens were funded separately from education for older children in almost every state, kindergartens traditionally were the first public educational services to be eliminated or have resources cut during tough times, as detailed in the regional histories from the Association for Childhood Education (ACE).

The Great Depression was no exception. The "babies" were sent home when kindergartens were shuttered across the country. The 1930-1932 Biennial Survey of Education remarked on the vulnerability of kindergartens early in the Great Depression, compared to services for older children. The report noted that the economic situation "affected kindergarten enrollment earlier than other types of public schools, and therefore, there were fewer children in kindergarten in 1932 than in 1930." The report suggests that the "decrease in kindergarten enrollment is due partly to changes in the age of admission [and also] to curtailments in the number of kindergartens within school systems and, in some cases, to their elimination" (U.S. Office of Education, 1935, pp. 16, 145).

In 1928, right before the Depression, about 32 percent of U.S. cities provided public kindergartens. Between 1931 to 1933, 19.8 percent of U.S. cities reduced or cut kindergartens, more than they cut music, art, or physical education (Beatty, 1995). More than 100,000 fewer children attended kindergarten in 1934 than in 1930, and the numbers would continue to fall until the end of the decade. As the nation prepared for war, economic conditions improved, and children returned to kindergarten. By the mid-1940s, the number of children attending kindergarten again reached the 1930 levels and would continue to grow after the war. More than one million kindergarten students were enrolled by 1950, and participation continued to steadily increase in the decades to follow (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1957).

Figure 7. Number of Children Enrolled in Public Kindergarten in the United States, 1920-1950



The percentage of children attending kindergarten in 1950 (16 percent) changed only marginally from 1930 (15 percent) (see **Figure 6**) due to the greatly elevated birth rate following WW2. On average 4.24 million new babies were born every year between 1946 and 1964. Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1953; History.Com Editors, 2010.

Sources: U.S. Office of Education, 1932, Biennial Survey of Education, 1928-1930; U.S. Office of Education, 1935, Biennial Survey of Education, 1930-1932; U.S. Office of Education, 1937, Biennial Survey of Education, 1932-1934; U.S. Office of Education, 1949, Biennial Survey of Education in the United States, 1942-44; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1957, p. 122. https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1957/compendia/statab/78ed/1957-03.pdf

Chart: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Short-Term Crisis Intervention by the Federal Government

During the Depression, for the first time, the federal government moved beyond tracking kindergarten developments and sharing resources and assumed responsibility for funding and overseeing services for children of kindergarten age through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Emergency Nursery School Program in 1933. Approximately 70,000 children—mostly three- and four-year-olds but also some five-year-olds—attended the almost 2,000 nursery schools established by the WPA (Arboleda, 2019; Dratch, 1974). The WPA Emergency Nursery School Program provided jobs for unemployed teachers, many of whom were well-trained and experienced kindergarten teachers. The federal government intentionally established some nursery schools in states with low levels of kindergarten participation, with an explicit aim to boost early education participation in states in the southern and western regions of the country and for children from historically underserved communities (Burlbaw, 2009). Almost all of the WPA nursery schools were located in public schools, and it was hoped that they would continue as part of public school systems after the crises of depression and war ended (Arboleda, 2019). In a 1940 speech to the Business and Professional Women's Club of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Florence Kerr, the Assistant Administrator in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Works Progress Administration, stated:

> *There is perhaps no human sight so enchanting as a nursery school. The committees usually never knew that such a thing existed, and they are charmed and thrilled, and they go away dazed—wondering why they can't have nursery schools like that for their own children. Well, they can, whenever they make up their minds to it, and someday we will have them in every community, not under the WPA but as a part of our regular school system. We are just carrying the torch, showing communities what they can do. (Kerr, 1940, cited in Arboleda, 2019, pp. 92-93)*

Although the program was phased out during the war, some 1,000 WPA Nursery Schools were repurposed under the Lanham Act. These nursery schools made up about one third of the approximately 3,000 Lanham Act Child Care Programs, which were also overseen and funded by the federal government from 1943 until the program was canceled shortly after the war ended (Dratch, 1974). The federal government then resumed its more restricted, traditional role of providing information and tracking kindergarten development (Dratch, 1974; Takanishi-Knowles, 1974).



Children playing outside a WPA emergency nursery school in Maryland, circa 1939.
Credit: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries.



A Lanham Act child care center was established for 30 children, ages two through five, of mothers employed in New Britain, CT, war industries, 1943.
Credit: Gordon Parks, Office of War Information.

Association for Childhood Education (ACE) Kindergarten Histories

Between 1935 and 1940, the Association for Childhood Education (ACE) published four regional histories of kindergartens that profiled each of the 48 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories of Alaska and Hawaii.[6] These accounts document the first communities to establish kindergartens in each state, as well as those that followed, and trace their progress toward incorporation into the public school systems up to the mid-1930s.

Each state or territory profile was written by an individual who was involved in the state kindergarten community and relied to a varying extent on historical documents, interviews, and anecdotes. The accounts differ in their degree of detail and are not consistently verified by citations. Nonetheless, they offer insight into the perspectives of the authors, all of whom were essential to the kindergarten landscape of their state at the time. Often named in these accounts are local activists, including kindergartners, the term for kindergarten teachers that was commonly used a century ago. These women were integral players in establishing, maintaining, and promoting kindergartens. In contrast, most histories of early education in the past spotlight primarily White leaders but overlook those who made up the ranks of the kindergarten movement.

Explore the ACE regional reports and original histories →

1946-1971: Kindergarten Gains a Firm Foothold in Public Schools After WW2

Read more about this era →

In the years following World War 2, kindergarten moved closer to becoming part of the public school system for children who were five or would turn five during the academic year. Starting in 1950, the federal government stopped reporting kindergarten enrollment for four-year-olds and reported only on five- to six-year-olds.[7] In 1950, only 16 percent of the five-year-olds in the country attended kindergarten (see **Figure 8**). By 1970, nearly three quarters (72 percent) of the five-year-olds in the United States were enrolled in kindergarten, reflecting a dramatic increase in the acceptance of public funding for kindergarten (see **Figure 9**). Kindergarten enrollment in the southern states, however, continued to lag behind other states.

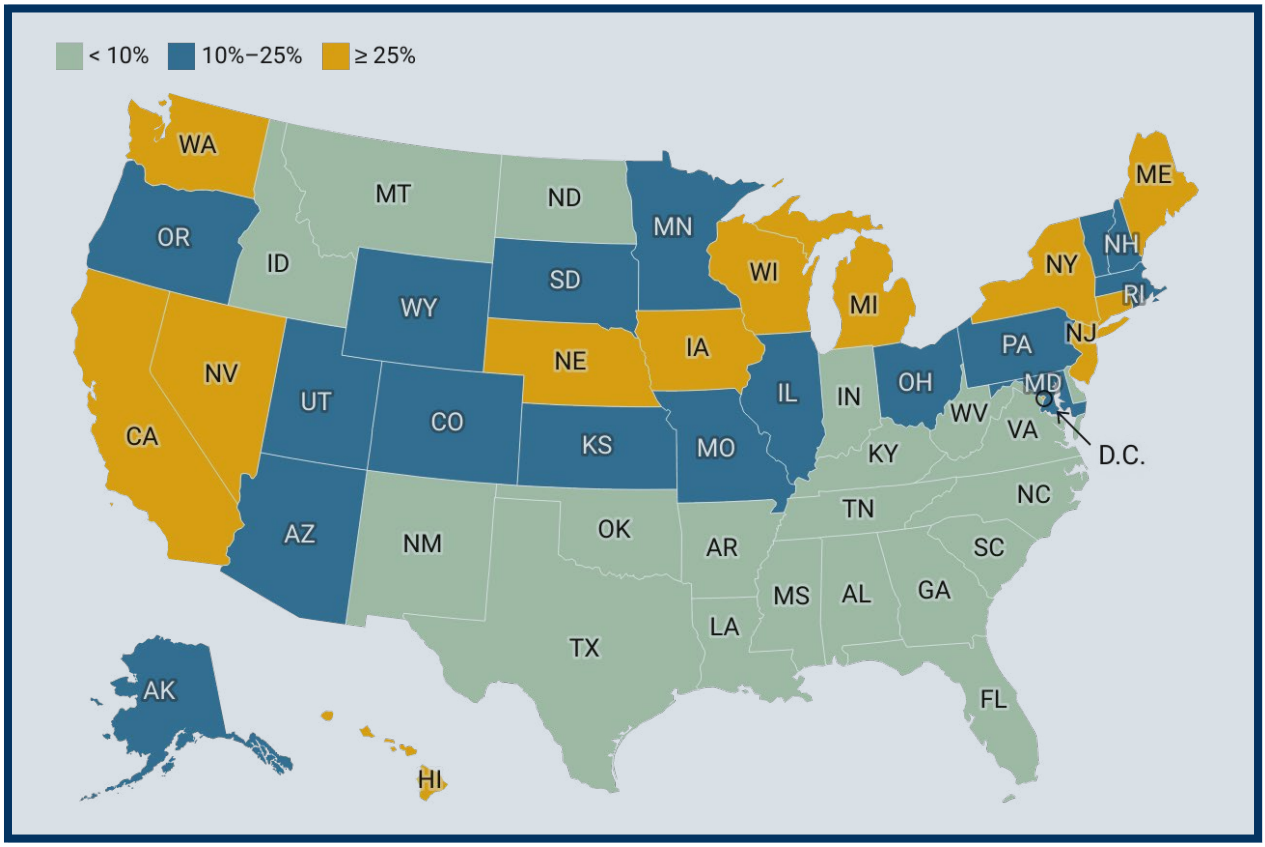
Kindergarten advocates had high hopes that the WPA nursery schools established in public schools during the Great Depression and their successor Lanham child care programs during WW2 would lead to the integration of educational programs for children younger than five in public school systems. However, these hopes failed to materialize, with the notable exception of California and a handful of cities in other states (Whitebook, 2012).

In 1970, only 12.5 percent of three- and four-year-olds participated in either public or private preschool, slightly less than the 16-percent rate for attendance of five-year-olds in kindergarten in 1950 and nearly six-fold less than the participation rates of five-year-olds in kindergarten in 1970 (see **Figure 10**). With the exception of a handful of state public pre-K programs and the federal Head Start program established in 1965 for children living below the poverty level, almost all early education programs for children younger than five were supported by parent tuition, as they are today (Barnett et al., 2003; Whitebook et al., 2018).

Eventually, state financing for kindergarten enabled kindergarten participation to rise. By 1960, state-level funding had been established in 26 states, and 14 additional states would follow during the 1970s (see **Figure 11**). Due to the post-World War 2 Baby Boom (1946-1960), the number of children under age five increased dramatically, leading to greater demand (and greater costs) for public kindergarten. Restricting younger children from participating would continue to be an effective way to control costs and would eventually drive up the age for kindergarten in almost every state (Allen, 2017; Beatty, 1995). This higher entry age was accomplished by establishing a cut-off by which time a child had to turn five in order to participate in kindergarten in a given academic year. By the mid-1970s, 30 states had set a cut-off period, and nine states set this date in September or earlier (Cascio, 2010).

Figure 8. Kindergarten Participation Rates of 5- to 6-Year-Olds, By State, 1950

In 1950, on average, 16 percent of five- to six-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten.



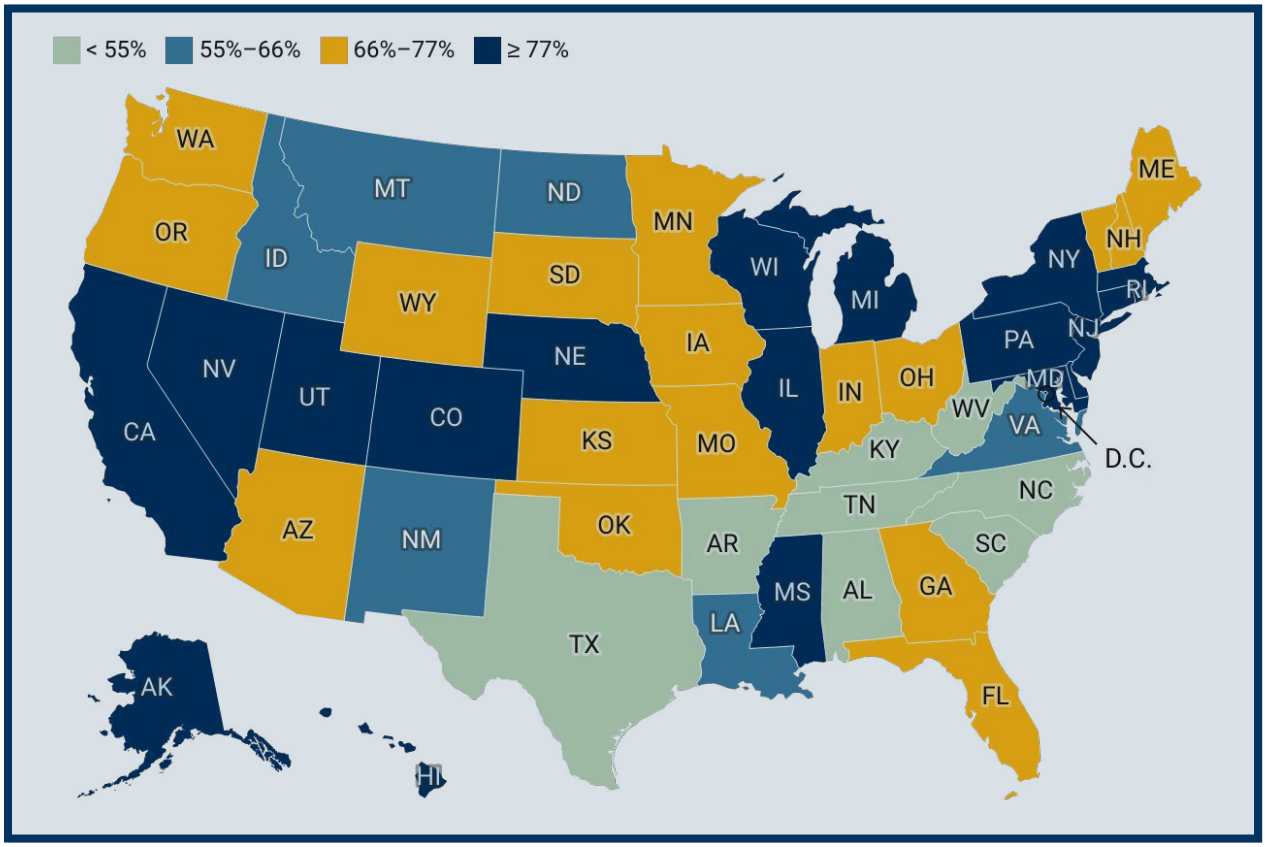
N=50 states

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1953, p. 2. https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/pc-14/pc-14-07.pdf

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Figure 9. Kindergarten Participation Rates of 5- to 6-Year-Olds, By State, 1970

In 1970, on average, 72 percent of five- to six-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten.



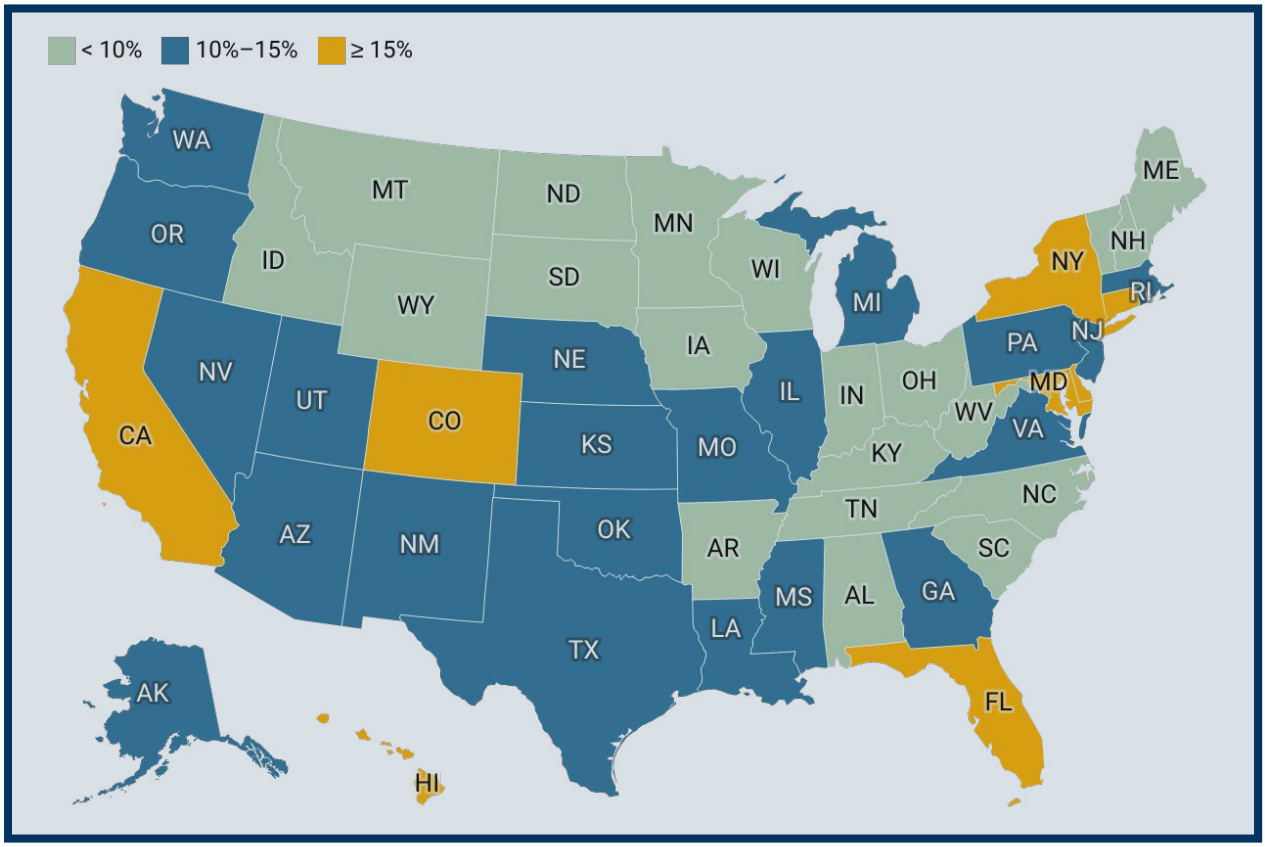
N=50 states

Source: Grant & Lind, 1975, p. 9. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED104018.pdf

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Figure 10. Preschool Participation Rates of 3- to 4-Year-Olds, By State, 1970

In 1970, on average, 12.5 percent of three- to four-year-olds in the United States attended preschool.

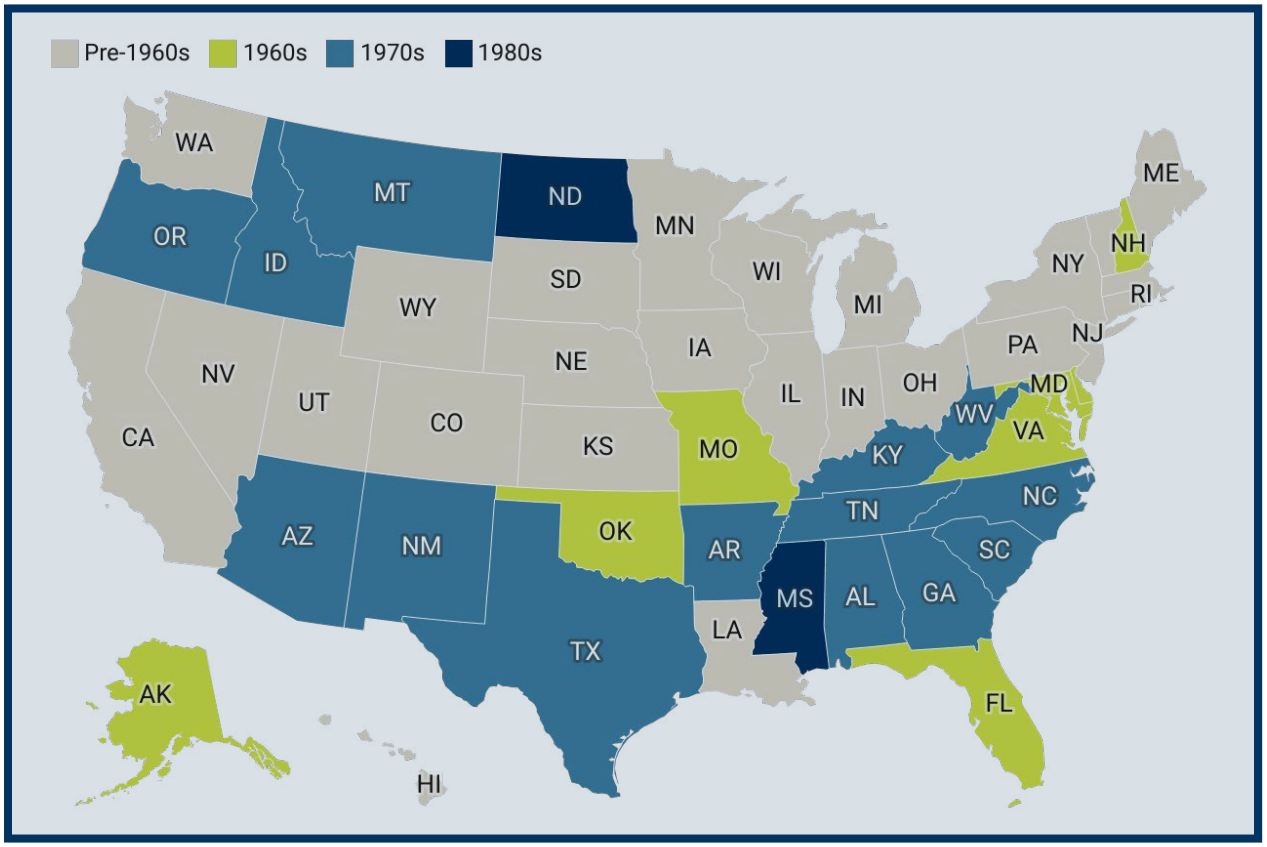


N=50 states

Source: Grant & Lind, 1975, p. 9. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED104018.pdf

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Figure 11. Commitment of State Funding for Kindergarten, All States, By Decade, Pre-1960 to 1980



N=50 states

Source: Cascio, 2010. https://www.educationnext.org/what-happened-when-kindergarten-went-universal/

Map: © Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

1972-2000: Kindergarten Is Part of the Public Schools, But...

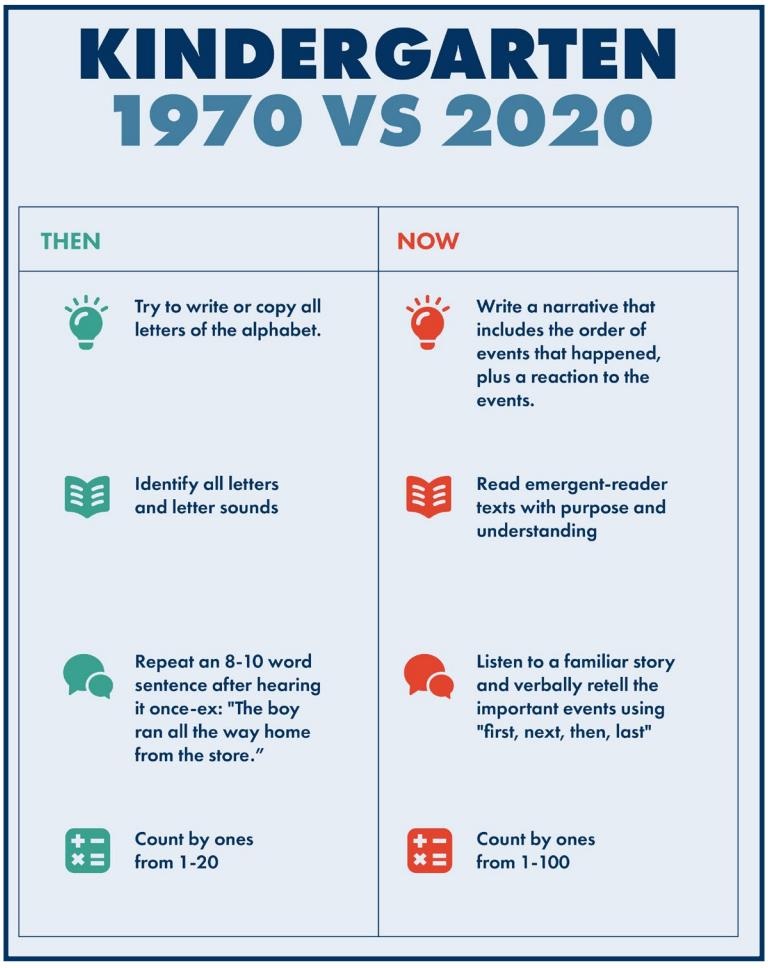
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Not until the end of the 20th century did all states assume responsibility for funding kindergarten. While there was less state funding for kindergarten than for older grades—which remains the case in many states today—it proved to be more generous than local funding for kindergarten in most states (see **Figure 11**). State funding led to a more stable existence for kindergartens, fueling a spike in kindergarten enrollment. By 2000, 92 percent of five- to- six-year- olds participated in kindergarten, nearly equaling the participation rate for first graders (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003). The ratio of kindergarten to first-grade enrollment had been less than 2:10 in the 1970s but rose to 9:10 by the century's close. Participation rates, however, continued to lag for Black children (Cascio, 2010).

During the last quarter of the 20th century, concerted efforts to privatize public goods and reduce public funding for education and other services contributed to long-standing pressure to contain school district spending on kindergarten. Methods of controlling costs were reflected in kindergarten students attending school for only half a day in many states. Kindergarten teachers in some public schools continued to teach two sessions per day, each with a different group of children, and they were often paid less than other elementary school teachers, even when their training and certification were equivalent.

To save states money, the entrance age for public kindergarten continued to rise. By the turn of the century, the number of states that moved the cut-off date for turning five to September or earlier had grown to 33 (Cascio, 2010).

Although kindergarten was embraced as part of the educational system—as evidenced by the widespread adoption of the term K-12 to describe public school offerings—in many ways, kindergarten remained an adjunct to the "regular" grades. Meanwhile, during the final quarter of the 20th century, advocates in many states—like kindergarten activists before them—began the hard work in their communities of securing public support for the education of four-year-old children at public expense. By the end of the century, four out of five states had established a public pre-school program, usually for four-year-old children considered to be "at-risk" for poor academic progress. Georgia established the first statewide universal pre-K (UPK) program in 1995, followed soon after by programs in Oklahoma. At the same time, advocates worked to build momentum for federal financing, as well (Barnett et al., 2003). Following the century-old strategy of incorporating the oldest of the babies first, three-year-olds' turn would come only after all the four-year-olds were served.



Credit: Snodgrass, A. (2021, February 2).

The Little Ones Still Wait: Kindergarten in the 21st Century

Read more about this era →

The age a child must be to attend kindergarten continues to rise in the 21st century. As of 2020, 45 states have a cut-off date for turning five in September and at least nine states have moved the date even earlier in the summer, essentially delaying education for a year for some children (Education Commission of the States, 2020a). Fiscal considerations drive age-of-entry decisions today, rationalized by arguments about how old a child must be to "really learn in school," bolstered currently by concerns about third-grade achievement scores.

The three- and four-year-olds sent home from the first public kindergarten operating in the United States in the 1870s, while their older peers got to stay at school, were only the first group of children this age to be excluded from kindergarten. In 1889 in Washington, D.C., three- and four-year-olds were not even invited to attend kindergarten. A small group of their peers finally received an invitation to public preschool in the 1960s, but it would take until recently for the invitation to be extended to all (Whitebook & Williams, 2021).

Nearly 150 years after the St. Louis public kindergarten experiment, most three-year-olds as well as most four-year-olds in the United States continue to wait.

Reversing the growth of preschool enrollment between 2010 and 2020, there was a significant decrease in pre-K enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jung & Barnett, 2021; Weisenfeld, 2021). Yet, adjusting for inflation, state preschool spending per child has not increased in two decades (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021), contributing to the persistent underpayment of pre-K teachers. Early educators employed in public-school preschools are paid $13,645 less on average than public-school K-3 teachers, and pre-K teachers in non-public preschools are paid $12,573 less on average than their school-based counterparts and are far less likely to receive health and retirement benefits or paid time off.

Kindergarten Inequities Continue

Kindergarten participation among age-eligible children still depends on the policies of the state in which a child lives, the income level of their families, and their race. Declines in kindergarten enrollment since the COVID-19 pandemic have been greatest among children living in low-income communities. During the pandemic, schools located in cities serving disproportionate numbers of low-income students of color were the most likely to close classrooms for extended periods.

State regulations and school district practices continue to differentiate kindergarten from higher grades. In most states, the kindergarten school day is still shorter, and attendance is not mandatory, in contrast to first through twelfth grade.

- Kindergarten attendance is mandatory in only 19 states and the District of Columbia (Education Commission of the States, 2020b).
- Full-day kindergarten is required in only 17 states and the District of Columbia (Education Commission of the States, 2020c).

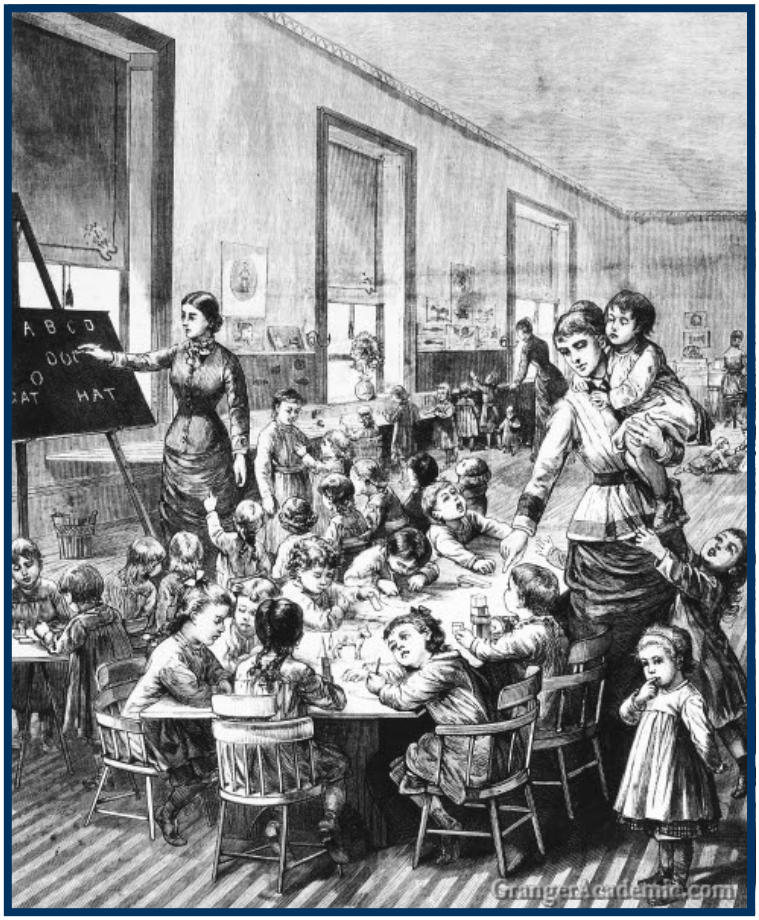
It's surprising to learn that in some states, the first half-day of kindergarten is free, but school districts may charge for the second half-day. For example, in Massachusetts in 2022, 38 school districts charged for a full day of kindergarten, and the amounts charged varied by district (see chart from Haywoode, 2022). More recent data are not available, but according to a 2016 report, only 37 states explicitly banned charging for a full day of kindergarten (Parker et al., 2016). Even if a state does not currently charge tuition for kindergarten, some states may be permitted to do so, and could, especially in times of budgetary crisis.

At the same time, kindergarten teachers still experience a pay penalty compared to teachers of older children in most states. In 2019, kindergarten teachers earned an average of $1.63 less per hour compared to other elementary school teachers—so kindergarten teachers earn about $3,390 less a year.

Establishing Early Childhood Care and Education as a Public Good: Lessons From the Story of Kindergarten

It took a century to establish kindergarten in the U.S. public school system, and kindergarten is still not fully integrated into what people consider "regular school." And regular school has changed kindergarten more than kindergarten has influenced the older grades.

Kindergarten is no longer **a radical education** reform, with its emphasis on learning through play. Today's kindergarten is more like the first or second grade of 50 years ago. To the dismay of many parents and educators, kindergartens are associated with homework, worksheets, and learning to read, rather than learning through block play and housekeeping corners, playing with peers, using scissors, singing songs, and hanging from monkey bars.



The kindergarten in the North End Industrial Home, Boston, Massachusetts, 1881. Credit: Charles Upham, Library of Congress.

While the goal in the beginning was to include three-and four-year-olds in public kindergarten along with the five-year-olds, advocates were forced to compromise. They hoped that with a foot into public school for five-year-olds, the exclusion of younger children would quickly be reversed. Just as today, advocacy for pre-K serving four-year-olds is predicated on the hope that the three-year- olds are next in line, and once this goal is accomplished, attention will turn to infants and toddlers. Kindergarten history suggests that the consequence of this piecemeal approach to early care and education is an underfunded and fragmented system of private services for children under age five that is riddled with inequities.

> "At present, we lack teachers and money for public education, and there is a tendency everywhere to cut out expense. School boards are not often made up of educational experts, and they are prone to say: *'The little ones can wait; they will get it later.'*"
>
> (Barnes, 1923, p. 6, emphasis added)

Public pre-K boasts many proponents—especially among parents, voters, and political leaders of many stripes—and proposals for significant federal investment continue to be put forward in Congress to boost state public pre-K programs. The debates and politics over policies for funding, authority and responsibility, and the age of children to be served in pre-K echo the challenges faced by the public kindergarten movement of the past. Yet, in many ways, the proposed solutions pursue many of the same problematic strategies. We are living through the second century of an effort to educate and care for the youngest of us. Meanwhile, as we continue to wrestle with the "bugbear of expense," the "little ones" must wait.

Endnotes

1. From 1867 to 1917, the Office of Education published the *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Education*. Kindergarten was mentioned first in the *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1870*, which contained a section titled, "Kindergarten Culture" (pp. 354-359). From 1874 to 1888, kindergarten data reported by the federal government was based on surveys sent to individual kindergartens that included questions about the kindergarten's location, the year it was established, whether it received any public dollars, the number of teachers, and the ages and number of pupils enrolled. Some known kindergartens failed to respond to the surveys or had closed, and some provided incomplete data. After the 1894 report, the data reported overall kindergarten statistics by state, rather than by the individual kindergarten.

2. Laws in many states prevented the use of state education funds for children five and under or those younger than the age of formal school entry, see discussion of kindergarten laws in the Power of Kindergarten Laws (p.37), and also 1920-1945 Kindergarten Rolls Forward Then Back (p.32).

3. The history of Native American kindergartens has been mostly erased from the history of early care and education. The records of Native American kindergartens, as in the case for boarding and reservation schools, are still being discovered in public archives and private collections throughout the country. As a result, many questions remain unanswered about these federally funded kindergartens, including the ages of children attending, the number of children removed from their families and at what age, and the variations among them. Read more about efforts underway to uncover this story and change our national narrative as key to justice for the American Indian and Alaska Native communities: Healing Voices Volume 1: A Primer on American Indian and Alaska Native Boarding Schools in the U.S. Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report.

4. From 1918 to 1958, the Bureau of Education restructured the annual reports into a series of biennial bulletins titled the *Biennial Survey of Education in the United States* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). See the full list of annual reports and biennial surveys here.

5. After the transition from annual reports to biennial surveys, the federal government began reporting kindergarten data for some years by town, village, or city population size. The definition of what was a city changed over time. For example, in 1930, a city was classified as a community with a population of 10,000 inhabitants or more.

6. The International Kindergarten Union, founded in 1892 to organize the Kindergarten Exhibit at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, was renamed and reorganized as the Association of Childhood Education (ACE) in 1931. The organization initially focused on the professional preparation of kindergarten teachers and spread awareness about kindergarten developments around the country by organizing biannual conferences, working in coalition with other national organizations, and printing resources for teachers and advocates. ACE called attention to how different local conditions produced varied strategies and different degrees of progress, as demonstrated by their different regional histories. In 1946, ACE became the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) to better reflect its aim, promote its many members from other countries, and its support for equity in early childhood education abroad. Known today as the Childhood Education International, this organization continues its work fighting discrimination in early education in the United States and abroad.

7. After 1958, data about kindergarten participation and the names of the reports changed again based on reorganizations of the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Kindergarten participation rates collected from household surveys reported in the Decennial Census and enrollment data based on reports from school systems were used to calculate participation rates.

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About ECHOES

ECHOES, Early Childhood History Organizing Ethos, and Strategy, is a project of CSCCE that explores the history of inequities within Early Childhood Education and the roots of teacher activism for a more just system.

About CSCCE

The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) was founded in 1999 to focus on achieving comprehensive public investments that enable and reward the early childhood workforce to deliver high-quality care and education for all children. To achieve this goal, CSCCE conducts cutting-edge research and proposes policy solutions aimed at improving how our nation prepares, supports, and rewards the early care and education workforce to ensure young children's optimal development.

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