

Jeff Bezos started a chain of free preschools. What does the Bezos Academy mean for early learning? ^[1]

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Excerpts

In 2018, Jeff Bezos, one of the richest people in the world, announced that he would create a network of free Montessori-inspired preschools. The move was met with surprise from some Montessori educators and a fair bit of skepticism from many in the early childhood education space. Bezos has said he was inspired by his experience as a child at a Montessori preschool in New Mexico to invest in high-quality early education.

Five years later, Bezos Academy is here. And it's expanding.

The network now has 16 preschools across Washington, Texas and Florida, with the goal of getting to nearly 20 by the end of the year.

Of course, that's not nearly enough to make up for the nationwide dearth of affordable programs offering high-quality care and education for young children. Half of Americans live in a "child care desert," or a census tract with more than 50 children under the age of 5 that has either no or very limited licensed care providers, according to estimates by the Center for American Progress. Nearly 16,000 child care programs across dozens of U.S. states permanently closed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a 2022 report from Child Care Aware of America, a national membership association that works to improve child care and the early childhood profession.

Programs that remain open often can't serve all interested families, in part because of difficulties hiring and retaining enough workers. Additionally, many child care providers are struggling financially due to high inflation. These trends have led experts to say that the early education system is still in dire straits, and it will take more than one billionaire to fix it.

"We're not going to solve our child care and early education shortage by depending on very wealthy people making schools," said Aaron Loewenberg, a senior policy analyst for education at the left-leaning think tank New America. "Early signs are good at the Bezos Academy, but we need to have a better long-term strategy as a nation to provide access to high-quality child care and pre-K, and a huge part of that has to be more significant federal funding for those types of programs."

Yet some observers also believe that Bezos Academy is a promising model in the few regions where it's operating so far, and that early results have been encouraging there.

How do Bezos Academy Preschools work?

Bezos Academy preschools are free for children ages 3 through 5 and open to families who make less than 400 percent of the federal poverty line. That's a bit more than \$92,000 annually for a family of three, according to Bezos Academy eligibility guidelines for this school year. They are open year-round and typically from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. They provide children with three meals per day, plus snacks.

The preschools are situated within other institutions, like elementary schools and community colleges, which provide space to the academies for free. The partnership can benefit host organizations by creating affordable child care options for the people that they serve. Rob DeHaas, vice provost of the School of Education at Dallas College, said this is the case for the college, which is hosting a Bezos Academy site.

"A lack of access to child care is one of those barriers that our employees, our students, and specifically these communities in the southern sector of Dallas County have experienced," he said. "We really feel like this is an opportunity."

The preschools take inspiration from the Montessori education curriculum, which was founded in Italy in the early 20th century. The focus is typically on allowing students to learn through experience rather than direct instruction and letting students choose their activities. Montessori is often associated with wealthy families at private schools, but there are programs aimed at low-income children.

"It provides a good structure. It's a program that encourages a child to use their language, to use their words, to look at processes," said Chris Duggan, executive director of the Florida chapter of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "It's a very highly respected curriculum."

The Bezos schools are distinctive when it comes to pay. The nationwide median for preschool teachers is just a little over \$30,000 per year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Hourly, that works out to less than \$15. And educators and caregivers who work with younger children earn even less, about \$13 an hour.

Jeff Bezos' main venture, Amazon, has drawn criticism from labor advocates for poor working conditions among delivery drivers and warehouse staff. Some have accused the company of union busting.

But his chain of preschools offers compensation packages that surprised experts. For an assistant Bezos Academy teacher in Washington state, for example, the bottom of the salary range is about \$50,000, with 10 days of paid time off and seven days paid sick time, as well as medical insurance.

"Oftentimes early educators don't have access to things like retirement or even health insurance," said Loewenberg, at New America – which means the benefits for Bezos Academy educators are noteworthy.

It's not clear how much is money the preschools have access to. Bezos' 2018 pledge about the schools committed \$2 billion to the effort, along with other work to help homeless families, but the nonprofit that supports the programs declined to say how much is allocated for the early childhood work.

'We need to have a better long-term strategy'

Many families make too much money to qualify for federally subsidized child care programs but still struggle to find an affordable option for children. If the Bezos Academy preschools can effectively target those children, the model could have a positive effect on the system.

There is evidence that that sort of targeting may not be happening to the best effect everywhere.

In Washington state, for example, home to eight Bezos Academy preschools, the model has real potential to bridge access to child care and early education for families who don't qualify for state-funded programs and can't afford other high-quality options, said Joel Ryan. Ryan is the executive director of the Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP, the state's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program. But most of the Head Start and ECEAP directors Ryan said he's spoken to feel that the Bezos Academy preschools compete with them for low-income students instead of targeting those middle-income families.

Competition for low-income students who have other options could also leave more middle-income families unserved, and lead to a decrease in funding at some Head Start and ECEAP centers, which are underenrolled and have room for more students. In addition, while families participating at private Bezos Academy preschools will still be getting an education for their children, they won't be part of the public systems that offer outreach and social services to parents and families. These can take the form of job, housing and education assistance.

"Bezos Academy is welcome, it's an important player. There's plenty of need and I think that they can absolutely serve a critical gap," Ryan said. "But the majority of people who responded to my queries on this have said Bezos operates on an island. They're not particularly collaborative."

Ryan said those who work for Head Start and ECEAP programs are interested in partnering with the Bezos Academy preschools to better serve families and target enrollment.

That's already happening in some areas. Michelle Rahl-Lewis, director of early learning for Tacoma School District in Washington state, said the two private preschools embedded at elementary schools in the system, serving about 100 children, work closely with the district.

"It's been going great," she said. "We've had lots of great communication about the best way to serve the most families within our community and making sure we're catching those families that are at that cliff where they don't quite qualify for Head Start or ECEAP which we offer but don't make enough money for private Montessori placement."

Michael Abello, chief education officer at Bezos Academy, said that the network is very thoughtful about where to place new preschools, using data to identify areas where there are not enough seats to serve children in the community.

"If we are entering a community and have an adverse effect on another program, that's counter to our mission," he said. "We've actually had a really positive reception from families and communities and frankly other early learning providers that we've had a chance to collaborate with on that admissions model."

One goal is to allow families to identify the right program for them and allow them to consider Montessori as an option, Abello said.

"In large part, our work is going to be dependent on partnership, learning from and learning with those leaders in the early learning space," he said.

The Bezos Academy preschools aim to serve 1,000 children by the end of the year, a relatively small figure considering there are 4 million 4-year-olds in the country alone.

But Bezos Academy is growing far more modestly than Bezos' main business: Amazon.

That means other entities have a huge role to fill when it comes to meeting the nation's early childhood education needs – if policymakers can agree it's a priority. President Joe Biden's proposed Build Back Better plan included significant investments in early childhood education, but failed to pass. (The president did sign an executive order in April asking federal agencies to find ways to make child care more affordable and accessible.) That's left it to states, including California, Colorado and New Mexico, to take on filling the void,

Loewenberg said.

“The issue of solving the child care crisis is multifaceted,” said DeHaas, from Dallas College. “There needs to be a multifaceted approach.”

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: child care desert ^[4]

space creation ^[5]

non-profit ^[6]

accessibility ^[7]

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