Strategies for Children

The Universal Pre-K Enrollment Processes:
Lessons Learned from Cities

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The city of Boston has been working for years to implement a truly universal Pre-K program that grants all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds in the city access to free quality early education. However, ensuring quality preschool is a multifaceted issue. Quality care does not stop with delivery and instruction. In order to improve quality, it is equally important that universal Pre-K enrollment systems are equitable, and accessible so that families from all backgrounds have equal access to services. If the enrollment process, and more specifically universal Pre-K applications, are too complicated they will act as a barrier to service. Furthermore, it is important that these applications collect information that can then be used to streamline the transition from preschool to kindergarten.

This policy brief summarizes findings from research conducted by the author. The goal of the research was to understand what steps administrators of Universal Pre-K networks in a variety of cities are taking to reduce the complexity associated with the application process. In order to answer these questions semi-structured interviews were conducted with six representatives from Universal Pre-K Programs in three Massachusetts cities (Cambridge, Northampton, and Springfield) and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Interviews were conducted with key informants who were identified by Strategies for Children through existing connections. Informants from Philadelphia were identified through researcher connections. All informants were public school or city employees, though each spoke about collaboration with partners implementing preschool at community-based organizations (CBOs). It is important to note that interviews were not conducted with CBOs in any sample city. Interviews were held on Zoom and lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour. Following the completion of interviews, transcripts were coded to find themes among data. Findings are presented below with interviewees and their communities de-identified.

Importance of Early Childhood Education

Universal Pre-K has been shown to boost college attendance as well as SAT test taking and high school graduation rates.
(Gray-Lobe et al., 2022)

Universal Pre-K children all showed positive learning gains across the Pre-K year.
(Weiland et al., 2022)

Access to comprehensive and quality Pre-K has been shown to produce long term benefits especially for our most underprivileged youth.
(Black et al., 2017; Dietrichson et al., 2020; Gray-Lobe et al., 2022; Heckman and Karapakula, 2019; Schweinhart et al., 2005)

Key Findings

1) Degree of Mixed Delivery Varied Greatly Between Cities

During interviews informants from all communities shared their commitment to offering services through a mixed delivery system. Like Boston, offering services through this mixed delivery system allowed cities to provide more seats for students**. A mixed delivery method is a vital component of ensuring that Pre-K education could be universal within the sample cities because there is not enough space in public schools alone**. However, the degree to which

Pre-K services were split between different locations (CBOs and public schools) varied greatly between cities. Philadelphia for example, although mixed delivery, offered the vast majority of their seats at CBOs and not within public schools. In contrast, an informant from a different sample city shared that they offer all of their seats at public schools, but that in the past they had a more mixed delivery system, and hopes to continue to build partnerships, "we're open to that [partnership with CBOs], and they have always been open to that." Although they do not currently have formal partnerships with CBOs, informants acknowledged that they are still vital to their Pre-K network. One informant expressed appreciation for the involvement of CBOs in their community. "I can say our community-based agencies really have developed quite a relationship where, if they are full, they will always recommend another agency to help support the families. People just want to do what's best for our families, so they really work together."

2) Informants were Concerned with the Confusing Nature of Their Current Application Processes

Although mixed delivery Pre-K systems are necessary to ensure service universality, mixed delivery can result in a complicated application process for families. In each of the cities interviewed, the application process was decentralized between CBOs and the public school system. As a result of this, informants reported that they felt like the current process for Pre-K application was overly difficult for families to navigate. One informant shared that the application process is "not as easy as we want for families to be able to navigate the system." Similarly, **informants expressed concerns with the overall accessibility associated with the application process**. One said "So it's not the most ideal situation right now, and it's difficult for families to physically get to [the physical location where they are required to go to complete a Pre-K application] sometimes. So that's kind of where we are in terms of the system that we have right now." In another sample city the process was equally as confusing, and informants expressed frustration with the process. "[CBO staff] have to sort through that [the application] at the site to know which application they're filling out. [Families have to answer the question] "Am I taking a Head Start seat?" which is super complicated. Families shouldn't have to know whether they're taking a Head Start seat, that's such nonsense lingo. They should just be focusing on what resource they're utilizing to get some important power and information. More importantly, what are the needs of you as a family?"

3) Informants are Committed to Finding Ways to Centralize the Application Process

As outlined in more detail above, it became clear through interviews that informants were concerned with the overall complexity of their current application processes. To address these concerns, informants **have begun thinking about ways to reduce the complexity of the process. Among all informants the consensus solution to this problem is centralizing the application process so that application to CBOs and public schools are handled with one single system.** One informant shared that "Having this centralized hub is something that's been really important to us. It's [importance], you know, based on feedback we gathered from the community." Another informant expressed their desire for a "hub" that houses a universal application regardless of site preference. "So I would like to create a platform where you know maybe [district] public school preschool options, preschool [CBO] options, and all our agencies are listed there." In another sample city the desire for this centralized application was an even larger priority. "So that's one of the core priorities of mine, along with the school district, is to have a universal enrollment system for families to see all their options. We could first of all know what demand looks like, and also what do families want? Also that way we can fill more of the seats."

4) Enrollment Data is Decentralized and Tracking is Split Between Several Offices

Because cities are utilizing mixed delivery systems, enrollment data is split between multiple different offices. **In all of the cities sampled the public school systems maintained their own data, and an entirely different office was**

responsible for tracking and maintaining data for CBOs. In some participant cities, data tracking was split between even more entities. Participants stated that they were often unaware of exact numbers because they only had access to specific sets of data. In one sample city an informant stated "The School Department maintains their data for students that apply directly through them. We maintain it for our students. The city maintains it for their students." A different sample city has a similarly complex data management network. "So the school district manages all of their sites. They have the same enrollment office that does the same features for the city's [community-based] program. We contract out an agency who does that work. So we subcontract that out. They keep all that information. Then for the state's investments, they have the resource and referral agency here." These themes were common across all informants' programs.

5) Families Must Re-enroll for Kindergarten Seats if They Were Enrolled in a CBO

All participants shared the importance of ensuring that applying is an easy process with many options available for families. However, because of the mixed delivery model, the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten can also be a confusing process. **In all sample cities, families who chose to enroll in a CBO had a lengthy application process to enroll their students in kindergarten. In contrast, families who were enrolled in public schools for Pre-K services were tracked through Pre-K, and therefore had a slightly easier time enrolling in kindergarten within the public school system**. The degree to which placement in a public school eases the transition to kindergarten varied greatly. For example, one informant said "If you're enrolled in a public school preschool, you automatically roll over to enrollment for kindergarten in the public school." The process in another sample city is not quite as streamlined and regardless of Pre-K placement you still have to reapply to kindergarten. "You'd have to re-register. But I'll say this, no matter whether you go to a public preschool or not you still have to register for kindergarten for your kindergarten experience to start." Another sample city was unsure, but expressed they will likely require students to go through an entirely different kindergarten enrollment process. "So the direction right now the district is going is that there will be a separate kindergarten lottery process." Simplifying the universal Pre-K application was one major priority for study participants. However, the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten should also be examined with the intention of easing complications for families.

Policy Implications

1) When Creating a Centralized Application, Prioritize Reducing its Overall Length

Currently, families in some communities are responsible for understanding in great detail what type of funding they are utilizing. This means that families not only need to decide what school they would like to attend, but also need to understand what funding source they are using in order to receive a seat at that site. In other cities even though this understanding is not put solely on the parents, it does require CBO staff to understand a multitude of funding sources and make a decision about what funding source makes the most sense for that family. City officials agreed that one solution to this problem is to create a universal application for families.

However, **it is important when creating this system to ensure that by creating it you are not making the process more complicated than it already is.** One sample city for example has seen a massive increase in applications to the community-based Pre-K program. While not entirely sure, city officials have hypothesized that this increase is correlated with the fact that the CBO Pre-K application is the shortest, and fastest to complete.

When creating this new singular application in Boston, it is important that the length of the application does not become a barrier in of itself. For example, one problem with this centralized hub is that a decision will need to be made about whether the federal Head Start application will also be included in this centralized application. New York City already utilizes a centralized application. However, their application does not include options for Head Start. In contrast, cities like New Orleans have created a centralized application that also includes Head Start. The inclusion of Head Start does provide additional services, but also drastically increases the length of the application.

A centralized application is a reasonable next step to continue to expand universal Pre-K. However, when creating this system, it is imperative to ensure that the application itself does not become an unnecessary burden for families. If this new application is too long, then the benefits of having it will be outweighed by the distress it puts on communities that have been economically and socially marginalized.

2) Prioritize Simplifying the Transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten

Creating a centralized application should inherently create an atmosphere that allows for a simplified transition from Pre-K to kindergarten. Easing that transition should be an important factor when creating this new application. Ideally, students would be provided with ID numbers when applying through this new application. Furthermore, the verification process would follow students from Pre-K to kindergarten. In other words, instead of needing to completely re-verify their Boston residency families could use the documentation that would already be on file in the centralized application. Changes like this could reduce the time it takes for families to reapply for kindergarten services and reduce inequity throughout the application process. As outlined in the findings section, many cities have systems that make it more difficult for families who attend CBOs to enroll in Kindergarten. This is especially concerning when examining the fact that minority students are more likely to be enrolled in a CBO (Weiland et al., 2022). Boston has taken steps to ensure that the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten is as simple as possible. However, there is much more work to be done, and reducing the complexity of transfer should be addressed when this new application is created.

3) Include Representatives from CBOs When Creating This Centralized Application

Strong mixed delivery systems require us to build strong and lasting relationships with community-based providers. In order to foster this relationship, CBO staff should be included in the process when creating this centralized application. Every CBO has their own internal requirements for enrollment at their specific sites. This can make the application process more confusing for families, as well as more confusing for site staff. For this reason, it is important that the new application has the information that sites need from families. This will allow sites to get the information they need directly from the application, instead of requesting that families submit additional materials following their completion of the application. Furthermore, one interview respondent noted that there were instances where CBOs attended initial meetings, but not later meetings dedicated to the creation of a universal application. In order to reduce the likelihood of CBOs feeling unheard they should be included to provide insight into what they view as most important to include in this new application.

4) Create a Working Group to Identify the Office Responsible for Maintaining Enrollment Data.

In Boston, as well as in all the sample cities examined, data is not maintained by one office. Instead, responsibility of data management is split between multiple different entities. As outlined in more detail above, this decentralization of vital enrollment data creates additional confusion for city staff, school staff, CBOs, and families. Centralizing the application

would inherently centralize enrollment data, and keep important information gathered through applications in one place. Therefore, the question remains of who would be responsible for maintaining the data that is collected through this singular application.

In order to answer this question, Boston Public Schools and other cities should create an enrollment data management working group. This working group would convene with the goal of identifying and outlining which department would be responsible for tracking and maintaining this enrollment data and how other city departments would assist in this maintenance. Furthermore, this committee should continue to explore ways to connect this Pre-K application to the kindergarten application to continue to explore ways to reduce barriers in the application process.

5) Conduct Additional Research to Better Understand Why Some Families Leave CBOs in Favor of Boston Public Schools.

One of the most important next steps is to continue to conduct research to better understand why families make the choices for service that they do. Anecdotal evidence in Boston shows that there are a large number of families that will register through completely separate applications for a seat at a CBO and at a public school. I hypothesize that many families do this as a way to ensure that they will have access to services within at least one option. However, oftentimes if a family is awarded a seat at both options, they will choose to accept a seat at a public school rather than a CBO. This is not an issue that was explicitly stated as an area of concern for other participant cities. The contrary was actually true, with one sample city expressing an impressive increase in enrollment at CBOs.

Double enrollment and leaving CBOs in favor of public schools is an issue. If a universal application is created and more advantaged families are disproportionately applying for public schools, then inevitably families will be turned away from their top choice schools. As a district Boston needs to better understand parent perceptions of universal Pre-K. **The goal of these further studies should be to understand in more detail the perspective of families who choose to either not enroll in a CBOs at all, or choose to leave their CBOs placement mid-year once they are taken off the Boston Public School waitlist.** It is important to understand and analyze whether negative perceptions of CBOs are influencing a family's decision on where to receive care, then the Universal Pre-K administrators can take steps to ensure that families are well-informed about the program and its benefits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ethan McClanahan (he,him,his), graduated with an M.A. in Educational Policy Studies from Boston University in 2023, and interned at Strategies for Children during the Spring 2023 semester. Ethan is passionate about educational equity, and has worked in a variety of roles dedicated to breaking down systemic barriers in education, Specifically, he served as an Americorps member for the College Advising Corps in Boston. As a College Advisor Ethan worked at the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science in Roxbury to assist high school seniors through the confusing college application process. This role exposed him to educational inequality during the post-secondary process. However, following the conclusion of his service and his own experiences listening to stories of his mother's difficulty in finding affordable childcare, Ethan decided to transition his focus to early childhood education. As a result, he served as one of the Boston UPK Enrollment Fellows for the 2022-23 school year. As an Enrollment Fellow, he has worked closely with community-based partners in order to enroll eligible families into Universal Pre-K services.

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