



RESEARCH REPORT

Expanding Preschool Access for Children of Immigrants

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Executive Summary

Children of immigrants are a growing share of the nation's future workforce, yet their enrollment in preschool—central to school readiness and success later in life—continues to lag behind that of their peers with US-born parents. In response to growing awareness of gaps in access, some policymakers have turned their focus toward strategies that make high-quality preschool available and affordable for immigrant parents. This can be accomplished by creating or expanding public programs so that more children, including children of immigrants, can enroll and by making programs more convenient and welcoming for immigrant families. These efforts are under way in select communities around the country, closing historic gaps in access while maintaining high levels of program enrollment for all children.

This report is one of two projects supported by the Heising-Simons Foundation to foster better understanding of the early educational experiences of children of immigrants. The first is a state and local data tool designed to inform policy and action,¹ which provides critical information on various characteristics of 3- to 5-year-olds in every state and over 800 micropolitan areas, including their enrollment in early education, family income, parental nativity, primary parental language, parental English proficiency, and so on.

This study is the second project, and it explores strategies in four communities with unusually high rates of enrollment among low-income immigrant families and negligible (or nonexistent) gaps in enrollment between children of immigrants and children of US-born parents. We focus on children's involvement in state-funded preschool initiatives, also known as prekindergarten, in Dearborn, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; King County, Washington; and Houston, Texas. These communities are situated within diverse preschool and immigration policy contexts and represent a mix of old and new immigrant destinations, homogeneous and heterogeneous immigrant populations, and countries of origin. We selected these communities to provide a range of perspectives, seeking to identify common themes and key strategies as well as site-specific adaptations to preschool enrollment barriers.

Understanding how to reduce barriers to preschool access for immigrant families is key to informing preschool programs and policies in states and communities nationwide. The analyses in this report are based on individual and group interviews with parents and stakeholders. Between November 2016 and February 2017, we spoke with 134 parents from immigrant families and 106 stakeholders across the four study sites. Most parents had children enrolled in public preschool, but we also recruited and spoke with parents of preschool-age children who were not enrolled despite sharing common backgrounds with and living in the same communities as the enrolled children. This comparative

approach made it possible to probe gaps in access and reasons for nonparticipation that remain even in high-enrollment communities. We also interviewed key stakeholders, including those directly involved in public preschool programs, such as school district administrators, school leaders, and staff, as well as partners in immigrant-serving community-based organizations that support immigrant families generally and, in some cases, deliver their own preschool programs using public funding. Despite this inclusive approach, our findings are limited by how many parents and stakeholders agreed to speak with us and the particular timing and conditions of our individual and group interviews. Additionally, our findings are descriptive rather than causal, suggesting strategies and resources that may support preschool access but not formally testing their effectiveness. Findings emerged across eight key themes:

- **Parental knowledge and preferences.** Interviews with stakeholders and low-income immigrant parents revealed two main sources of parental knowledge of preschool options: (1) word of mouth via family members, friends, and neighbors, and (2) school and district outreach efforts. In addition, some parents reported taking proactive approaches to locating prekindergarten programs or being referred to programs by other agencies. Their sources of information were diverse, going beyond the traditional school- and district-led outreach efforts documented in previous research. In all cases, however, parents and stakeholders emphasized the importance of trusted sources in facilitating parental knowledge of pre-K. Once informed of their options, most parents we interviewed felt positively about early learning in general and local pre-K programs in particular. Parents cited their children's growth and development as a key motivation for enrollment. Still, some parents shared concerns about enrolling their children in prekindergarten. These concerns generally pertained to program rigor and their children's behavioral readiness for preschool.
- **Language access.** The prekindergarten programs in Dearborn, Atlanta, King County, and Houston all benefited from robust approaches to translation, interpretation, and linguistically diverse staffing. Most of these approaches were targeted to parents, whose knowledge of and preferences for preschool often hinged on understanding the available offerings in their native languages. In some sites, however, language access extended into the classroom, where bilingual teaching staff, curricula, and learning materials supported children's first formal education experiences. Language access generally began with outreach and enrollment processes and extended throughout the pre-K year, providing continuous assistance to children and families.
- **Program logistics: operating schedules, location, and transportation.** Although the logistics of program access may seem mundane compared to parents' developmental goals for their

children, they routinely pose barriers to both initial enrollment and continued attendance. The four study sites varied substantially in their program operating schedules, locations, and transportation options, reflecting trade-offs made regarding resource investments and community needs. One logistical barrier all four sites had overcome completely was cost. Programs did not require tuition or fees, facilitating access for low-income families.

- **Welcoming efforts.** Welcoming efforts, both general and culturally tailored, were often important to immigrant families considering whether to enroll their children in pre-K. The study sites maintained bright, clean, attractive facilities and offered a variety of activities designed to build relationships with families and sustain parent engagement. They also developed staff recruitment and training activities and refined them over time so that teachers and other support personnel were well prepared to partner with immigrant parents and their broader communities.
- **Enrollment supports.** Enrollment processes varied substantially across sites but commonly included application, registration, and waitlist procedures along with health checks and vaccination records. Parents and stakeholders reported that enrollment was generally straightforward and actively supported by program staff but may still deter some families because of their undocumented or mixed immigration status, low levels of literacy, or misinformation about requirements. As a result, even administrators of programs with unusually high rates of participation described ongoing efforts to streamline and facilitate enrollment.
- **Program resources, financing, and leadership.** Stakeholders in all four study sites reported having sufficient resources to serve the children enrolled. They supplemented state pre-K allocations with funding from federal, local, and (in some cases) philanthropic sources. Programs were marked by a commitment to continuous quality improvement, and leadership from state and school district administrators remained mindful of expanding access for children of immigrants. Still, waitlists and uneven capacity observed in all sites suggest that resources were still inadequate to meet demand.
- **Organization and agency partnerships.** The four study sites made extensive use of partnerships with organizations and individuals to help expand preschool access. They varied in their use of and approaches to these partnerships, often contingent on the size of the community and the personal connections between pre-K administrators and leaders in other sectors. A diverse array of agencies and organizations partnered with pre-K providers,

including other education agencies serving children and parents, health providers, religious institutions, and immigrant-serving community-based organizations, and stakeholders identified additional opportunities for collaboration through two-way referrals.

- **Immigration policy contexts (local, state, and national).** Parents and stakeholders we interviewed expressed uncertainty and concern about rapidly changing immigration policy contexts and their potential to affect preschool enrollment. Stakeholders particularly noted growing fear among undocumented and mixed status families. Pre-K administrators described the trust they had built with families and communities and their desire to maintain that trust. Together, administrators and other local stakeholders were working to provide a sense of safety and inclusiveness.

Findings from this study support 10 recommendations for state and local policymakers working to expand preschool access for children of immigrants.

- **Building trust is essential.** Parents seek preschool options that are safe and welcoming, and their trust in staff and in programs grows when they are invited into classrooms, engaged in developing culturally responsive programming, and invited to help shape efforts to improve quality and expand access to new families in their communities.
- **There is no one best approach.** The programs we profile addressed multiple barriers to preschool access for children of immigrants, but they differed in which barriers they addressed and the strategies they adopted to do so. Their solutions often involved policy innovation, but they also refined basic program features and resource allocations over time.
- **Start small.** Two of the programs we profile started with a single school and grew as building space and resources became available. The other two programs had undergone recent expansions. They all began with dedicated staff and a commitment to serving all children. As immigrant families enrolled, those parents became ambassadors for the programs and immigrant enrollment grew rapidly.
- **Leverage all available resources.** Although this report profiles state pre-K programs, all four sites supplemented state pre-K funding with local school district funds. Some sites integrated federal resources available through Head Start and Title I, and some benefited from philanthropic gifts. Where funds were not available directly, program administrators also relied on staff and facilities funded from outside the pre-K system (e.g., from district departments for world languages or family engagement) to make the best use of pre-K dollars.

- **Preschool programs cannot do it alone.** Partnerships are essential for initial program outreach and also provide important supports for continued participation. Promising partners may come from other district and state education agencies, immigrant-serving community-based organizations, religious institutions, libraries, health and mental health agencies, and a variety of other groups, depending on the community.
- **Support the whole family.** Preschool focuses on the growth and development of young children, but the four sites reached out to parents and siblings as well. Staff connected families to community resources, collaborated with immigrant and refugee institutions, and think of enrolled children as their own. As a result, many parents we interviewed see preschool as an extension of their homes.
- **Commit to continuous improvement.** The study sites described a “customer service approach” they use to regularly gauge families’ satisfaction, adjust program features, and seek out new resources to meet evolving needs. Families we spoke to could sense this commitment and felt welcome to participate in the process.
- **Leadership is key and can come from any level.** This study focuses on school and district leaders who make innovative use of available funds to serve specific immigrant and refugee communities. But state leadership in both education and immigration policy can affect the resources and policy priorities that shape families’ preschool experiences too. Classroom teachers also have a role to play in engaging children and parents, especially those who are among the first in their community to enroll.
- **Mind the gaps.** Even in sites with unusually high preschool participation among immigrant families, we identify unmet need. New arrivals to the US often lack the type of social networks that share information about preschool. Families may learn about pre-K through elementary schools but miss out on enrollment for their firstborn. Waitlists observed in every site demonstrate uneven or insufficient capacity overall.
- **Consider preschool within the broader immigrant experience.** This study was conducted during a period of changing immigration policy and enforcement. We observed uncertainty regarding these changes but could not gauge additional effects because of the timing of data collection. Given the importance of building trust, these changes are likely to shape future efforts to expand preschool access and participation for children of immigrants.

Despite the challenges facing each of the four study sites, we find that these pre-K programs were able to expand access for low-income immigrant and refugee families. By engaging staff and parents in continuous quality improvement, stakeholders can provide a strong start for children of immigrants and become trusted institutions in immigrant communities.

Introduction

Children of immigrants are growing as a share of all American children, but their enrollment in early care and education continues to lag far behind that of their peers with US-born parents (Hanson, Adams, and Koball 2016; Karoly and Gonzalez 2011; Mamedova and Redford 2015). Although research has attributed lower participation to preferences among immigrant families for familial care, more recent work has shown that immigrant parents want early education for their children as much as other parents with similar levels of education and income; they are simply less able to access such programs (Huston, Chang, and Gennetian 2002; Zucker, Howes, and Garza-Mourino 2007). Persistent barriers to access include insufficient outreach by programs; oversubscribed programs; and inconvenient locations, hours, and schedules. In many communities, immigrant families also face challenges related to inadequate translation and interpretation services and a distrust of government institutions (Adams and McDaniel 2012a; Gelatt, Adams, and Huerta 2014; Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016; Park and McHugh 2014).

Expanding access for children of immigrants is important because these children are a growing share of the future workforce, and they may even reap greater benefits from early care and education than children from US-born families (Crosnoe 2007; Currie and Thomas 1999; Loeb et al. 2007; Magnuson, Lahaie, and Waldfogel 2006; Phillips et al. 2017; Votruba-Drzal et al. 2015). Children of immigrants are disproportionately more likely to grow up in less-educated and linguistically isolated families, causing them to enter school at a disadvantage (Hanson, Adams, and Koball 2016; Crosnoe and Turley 2011; Fortuny, Hernandez, and Chaudry 2010).

In response to growing awareness of gaps in access, some policymakers have turned their focus toward strategies that make high-quality early care and education available and affordable for immigrant parents. These strategies may involve creating or expanding public programs so that more children, including children of immigrants, can enroll, or making existing programs more convenient and welcoming for immigrant families. These efforts are under way in select communities around the country, closing historic gaps in access while maintaining high levels of program enrollment for all children. For example, a recent study of early care and education participation in Chicago found that low-income Latino children of immigrants were *at least as likely* as their non-Latino peers to enroll in any type of care and in any type of center-based care in the two years before entering kindergarten (López et al. 2017).

Although prior research investigated immigrant families' interactions with programs across the early care and education landscape (including private center- and home-based care and Head Start), this study focuses on sites with state-funded preschool initiatives, also known as prekindergarten. This

focus reflects three considerations: (1) that free, public programs are financially accessible for families and can be implemented across diverse contexts, (2) that state-funded prekindergarten has undergone a massive expansion in recent years, serving nearly 1.5 million children with \$7.4 billion in funding during the 2015–16 school year (Barnett et al. 2017), and (3) that prekindergarten programs may have fewer resources available to engage immigrant families than programs like Head Start and thus may derive particular benefit from new insights from the field.

Understanding how stakeholders are addressing barriers to access for immigrant families—and what kinds of approaches, resources, and leadership are required to expand enrollment—is key to informing preschool programs and policies in states and communities nationwide. This study explores strategies in four communities that, like Chicago, have unusually high rates of enrollment among low-income immigrant families and have narrowed (or closed entirely) gaps in enrollment between children of immigrants and children of US-born parents. These communities are Dearborn, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; King County, Washington; and Houston, Texas. These communities are situated within diverse preschool and immigration policy contexts and represent a mix of old and new immigrant destinations, homogeneous and heterogeneous immigrant populations, and high- and low-incidence groups (i.e., larger or smaller groups of immigrants from the same country of origin). We selected these communities to provide a range of perspectives, seeking to identify common themes and key takeaways as well as site-specific adaptations to preschool enrollment barriers. Where our findings differ across sites, we aim to provide clarification and context so that access strategies can be tailored to a range of preschool programs and community settings nationwide.

The analyses in this report are based on individual and group interviews with parents and stakeholders. Between November 2016 and February 2017, we spoke with 134 parents from immigrant families and 106 stakeholders across the four study sites. Most parents had children enrolled in public preschool, but we also recruited and spoke with parents of preschool-age children who were not enrolled despite sharing common backgrounds with and living in the same communities as the enrolled children. This comparative approach made it possible to probe gaps in access that remain even in high-enrollment communities. We spoke with all parents in their preferred language, employing bilingual research team members and professional interpreters as needed. Stakeholders included those directly involved in public preschool programs, such as school district administrators, school leaders, and staff, as well as partners in immigrant-serving community-based organizations that support immigrant families generally and, in some cases, deliver their own preschool programs using public funding.

Research Questions and Approach

This study synthesizes parent and stakeholder perspectives to answer two key research questions:

- Why do low-income immigrant families choose to enroll in public prekindergarten?
- What strategies, resources, and contextual factors promote enrollment?

To answer these questions, we analyze information shared in our individual and group interviews as well as program materials and other documents shared by respondents. In doing so, we aim to highlight common activities employed in multiple study sites alongside novel and emerging strategies for expanding prekindergarten access. The addition of parents' perspectives is a major goal of the study and an improvement over existing research (e.g., Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016), but we note that this approach is not without limitations. In particular, our findings reflect only the parents and stakeholders who agreed to speak with us; their perspectives may not represent those of other parents and stakeholders, and their responses—and nonresponses—may reflect the timing and conditions of our interviews. Additionally, our findings are descriptive rather than causal, suggesting strategies and resources that may support preschool access but not formally testing their effectiveness. It is possible that other sites have put forward similar efforts but still have low levels of enrollment among children of immigrants.

Because school districts are commonly the largest providers of state-funded pre-K, we focus on their outreach strategies and the experiences of families living in their catchment areas. District staff in each site recommended people, schools, and organizations for us to speak to, coordinated scheduling with those they knew, recruited parents of enrolled children to participate in our group interviews, and hosted us in their buildings. Our final sample of 106 stakeholders included school district administrators, principals, teachers, family support staff, social workers, and representatives from immigrant-serving community-based organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, and organizations running pre-K or Head Start programs. We also worked with key immigrant-serving organizations to recruit parents of 3- and 4-year-old children *not* enrolled in state-funded pre-K for our group interviews. We spoke with a total of 134 parents of unenrolled and enrolled children from a variety of countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mexico, Peru, Somalia, and Yemen. In recruiting parents for interviews and in our discussions with stakeholders, we defined “immigrant families” as those with at least one parent born outside of the United States. Children may or may not have been foreign-born.

Public schools do not ask about documentation status and neither did we, so we have no knowledge of the immigration status of our respondents.

Site visits took place between November 2016 and February 2017, lasting one week for each site. We conducted 3–4 group interviews with parents and 8–10 interviews with stakeholders in each site. Interviews were guided by standard protocols developed by the research team based on prior work in Silicon Valley and other areas with large immigrant populations (Adams and McDaniel 2012a; Gelatt, Adams, and Huerta 2014; Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016). After compiling and cleaning all transcripts, these data were analyzed using NVivo 10, a qualitative software program designed to help manage, structure, and analyze qualitative data through functions that support the classification, sorting, and comparison of text units. Additional information on data and analytic methods is included in appendix A.

What Is in This Report?

This report is divided into two main sections. The first provides background on each of the four focal sites, including their demographics and preschool policy contexts. The second presents our study findings. We divide findings thematically into eight subsections:

- parental knowledge and preferences for preschool
- language access, including translation and literacy supports
- program logistics, such as operating schedules, location, and transportation
- welcoming efforts
- enrollment supports
- program resources, financing, and leadership
- organization and agency partnerships
- immigration policy contexts (local, state, and national)

The report concludes with key recommendations for communities seeking to expand preschool access for children of immigrants.

This report is intended to inform several audiences. Its primary audience includes prekindergarten program administrators in state and local education agencies. Additional audiences include administrators in local and state education departments for world languages, multilingual programs, family engagement, community partnerships, and other early learning programs that collaborate with prekindergarten. School leaders and teachers may also find this work useful in their efforts to serve immigrant families. Immigrant-serving community-based organizations, including social services agencies, independent nonprofits, health and mental health agencies, libraries, and religious institutions are other audiences well suited to partner with prekindergarten programs serving children of immigrants. Finally, we aim to inform advocates and the research community conducting ongoing work with this population.

Study Sites

This study focuses on four sites with high rates of pre-K enrollment and negligible (or even nonexistent) gaps in access between children of immigrants and those with US-born parents. We chose Dearborn, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; King County, Washington; and Houston, Texas to represent a range of early care and education and immigration contexts. As described above, our units of analysis in each site are the school districts offering state-funded pre-K programs. In three out of four sites, community-based organizations also offer state-funded pre-K. Throughout the report, we focus on school-based programs but highlight differences between school- and community-based state-funded pre-K where they arise.

Site selection drew on several sources of information using a staged approach. We began by generating a preliminary list of options based on recommendations from experts in the fields of early care and education policy and immigration. We supplemented this with a list of states and localities used in prior studies of preschool access, then used online search tools to identify other sites engaged in activities in preschool and other public programs focused on welcoming immigrants into communities. We narrowed these options down by cross-checking them against data from the American Community Survey. The American Community Survey asks parents about 3- to 5-year-olds' enrollment in nursery school and preschool, and we used their responses to tabulate enrollment rates for all families in general and for low-income immigrant and US-born families in particular. Sites with low enrollment rates or sizable enrollment disparities by immigrant status were omitted from consideration. Finally, we gathered pertinent contextual information about the sites' demographics and pre-K landscapes from several sources, including the 2014 National Institute for Early Education Research *State of Preschool Yearbook* (Barnett et al. 2015), the Gateways for Growth interactive map, and the Urban Institute's Children of Immigrants Data Tool.² The data tool provided information needed to categorize sites as long-term versus new immigrant destinations, high versus low change, and high versus low diversity.³

TABLE 1

Study Site Characteristics

	Dearborn, MI	Atlanta, GA	King County, WA	Houston, TX
Share of children of immigrants with family income <200% FPL enrolled in preschool	51.4%	69.4%	54.4%	38.5%
Long-term destination	X		X	X
High-change destination	X	X	X	X
High-diversity site			X	X
US region	Midwest	Southeast	Northwest	Southwest

Source: Authors' calculations using 2013 American Community Survey data.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. **Enrollment in preschool** measures participation in nursery school/preschool, kindergarten, or grade school programs among 3- and 4-year-old children. **Long-term destinations** are those with a higher share of children of immigrants than the nation as a whole as of 2006. **High-change sites** had greater growth in the share of children of immigrants versus children of US-born parents than the nation as a whole between 2006 and 2013. **Site diversity** was captured in two measures: one indicates whether the majority of immigrant parents come from the same geographic region, and the second indicates whether each of three or more groups (as defined by geographic region of origin) make up at least 15 percent of the immigrant population.

Dearborn, Atlanta, King County, and Houston rose to the top of our list because of their preschool enrollment patterns, varied immigration contexts, and geographic diversity. We document these characteristics in table 1. Across all sites, preschool enrollment of low-income children of immigrants was higher than the national average of 37 percent (Hanson, Adams, and Koball 2016), higher than the national average of all 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-K (32 percent), and roughly equivalent to the enrollment of low-income children of US-born parents in the same sites (Barnett et al. 2017). Together, these communities allowed us to sample a range of different immigration destinations and pre-K contexts, as summarized in table 2. All four sites have state-funded pre-K programs that have been evaluated and found to have positive effects on participating children (Andrews, Jargowsky, and Kuhne 2012; Bania et al. 2014; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2014; Peisner-Feinberg, Mokrova, and Anderson 2017; Schweinhart et al. 2012).

TABLE 2

Pre-K Program Characteristics

	Dearborn, MI	Atlanta, GA	King County, WA	Houston, TX
State program	Great Start Readiness Program	Georgia's Pre-K Program	Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program	Texas Public Prekindergarten
Ages served	4-year-olds	4-year-olds	3- and 4-year-olds (preference for the latter)	3- and 4-year-olds (preference for the latter)
Eligibility	Targeted	Universal	Targeted	Targeted
Settings	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Schools
Hours and schedules	Monday–Thursday (school day)	Monday–Friday (school day)	Monday–Thursday (half day)	Monday–Friday (school day)
Aftercare available?	No	Yes	No	Yes
Costs/fees	None	None	None	None
Free transportation	No	Yes (local)	Yes	No
Student-teacher ratio	16:2	22:1	20:2	22:1

Sources: Email and in-person communications with pre-K program administrators in Dearborn, Atlanta, and King County. In Houston, “Eligibility, Applications and Registration,” Houston Independent School District, accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.houstonisd.org/Page/126445>; “Pre K Eligibility and Attendance,” Texas Education Agency, accessed February 5, 2018, https://tea.texas.gov/Academics/Early_Childhood_Education/Pre_K_Eligibility_and_Attendance.

Notes: **Eligibility** refers to the income or other qualifications required for participation. Targeted programs primarily enroll children from low-income families or those otherwise deemed “at risk,” and universal programs are open to all families regardless of background. **Hours and schedules** denotes the time during which children attend public preschool. School-day schedules run from about 8:00 a.m. through about 3:00 p.m., while half-day schedules have separate morning and afternoon sessions. **Aftercare availability** refers to whether activities and child care are offered at pre-K sites between the end of the school day and the end of the work day. **Free transportation** refers to public school buses that pick children up and drop them off each day at no cost to families. **Student-teacher ratios** note the number of children per preschool educator in each classroom, as set by state regulations.

Table 3 displays the characteristics of parents who participated in our interviews across all four study sites. This information was collected through a short survey (or parent information form) administered to each participating family. The majority of parents (60 percent) had children enrolled in public preschool, but more than one-third of respondents (40 percent) were unenrolled. Dearborn and Houston contributed the greatest numbers of parents (33 and 40 percent of the total sample), with smaller shares coming from Atlanta and King County (10 and 18 percent). Parents were in their mid-30s, on average, and the majority (86 percent) were married. Most had more than one child, with families having between one and seven children. Just over half of the parents interviewed (74 parents, or 56 percent) were engaged in work or coursework, and nearly all of these parents (62, or 84 percent) worked or took courses in the morning during preschool hours, with fewer parents working in the afternoon or evening. One-quarter of parents we spoke to (24 percent) were new arrivals, having lived

in the US for fewer than five years, and more than half (58 percent) had immigrated 10 or more years ago. Participants spoke a wide variety of languages at home, and 67 percent reported some English spoken in the home as well. Similarly, parents came from diverse regions of the world, with the most common being Central and South America (50 percent), the Middle East (30 percent), and Sub-Saharan Africa (11 percent). A small number of parent participants (4, or just 3 percent) were born in the US, meaning their child's other parent was foreign-born. To accommodate language needs and preferences, nearly all group interviews were conducted in languages other than English by trained bilingual members of the project team and professional interpreters as needed.

TABLE 3

Parent Characteristics

Summary of information collected in parent information forms

	All Sites	
	Count	Share ^a
Total number of participants	134	
With children enrolled	81	60%
With no children enrolled	53	40%
Dearborn, MI	44	33%
Atlanta, GA	13	10%
King County, WA	24	18%
Houston, TX	53	40%
Average age (range)	35 (18–65)	
Married	114	86%
Average number of children per family (range)	2.4 (1–7)	
Infants (0–2, range)	0.42 (0–2)	
Elementary school aged (5–11, range)	1.1 (0–4)	
Older children (12+, range)	0.24 (0–6)	
Preschooler is oldest child	20	15%
Participation in work or classes outside of the home	74	56%
Morning	62	47%
Afternoon	16	12%
Evening	2	2%
Years in US (respondent parent)		
0–4	32	24%
5–10	21	16%
10+	76	58%
Primary home language (other than English)		
Amharic	5	4%
Arabic	41	31%
Bengali	1	1%
French and Lingala	1	1%
Mam	2	2%
Nepali	1	1%
Oromo	3	2%
Punjabi	1	1%
Somali	4	3%
Spanish	63	48%

	All Sites	
	Count	Share ^a
Zapoteca	1	1%
English-speaking adult in the home	88	67%
Region of origin		
Central and South America (Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru)	66	50%
Middle East (Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen)	39	30%
North America (United States)	4	3%
South and Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia)	4	3%
Sub-Saharan Africa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, or other African country)	14	11%
Unspecified	5	4%
Group interview participation in English	20	15%
Group interview participation in other language	114	85%

Source: Parent information forms created and administered by the authors.

Notes: Forms were administered to each family rather than each interview participant.

^a Total participant and group interview language participation figures were computed from the total sample of 134, but substantive responses were derived from 132 completed forms. Percentages have been rounded and do not always sum to 100.

Dearborn, Michigan

Dearborn, Michigan, is a suburb of Detroit and a long-term destination for immigrants, particularly those from the Middle East. Dearborn has been a refugee resettlement destination since 1972. As of 2013, about 40 percent of immigrants in the Detroit metro area came from the Middle East or South Asia, with the share in Dearborn likely much higher. The concentration of these families has given rise to businesses and community organizations that make Dearborn a target destination for Middle Eastern immigrants and refugees nationwide. Stakeholders report seeing increases in the number of immigrants and refugees (and shifts in dominant countries of origin) during violent events in the Middle East, such as the current wars in Yemen and Syria. Between 2006 and 2013, the share of all preschool-age children from immigrant families in the Detroit metro area increased from 13 percent to 19 percent, with this increase largely concentrated in Dearborn (authors' calculation using the Children of Immigrants Data Tool).

Dearborn Public Schools serves about 20,700 students, a population that has been growing continuously for nearly 30 years. Approximately 45 percent of these students are English-language learners (ELLs), a majority of whom speak Arabic and come from Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria or Yemen. In 2016–17, total district enrollment increased by about 200 students, and about 150 of these were refugees or immigrants. ELLs make up 94 percent of the pre-K population, and 20 percent of the preschoolers have been in the United States fewer than three years. About 73 percent of the kindergarten cohort meets the qualifications for the federal free and reduced lunch program.⁴

Dearborn Public Schools provides free public pre-K to eligible 4-year-olds through Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). GSRP has been rigorously evaluated as recently as 2012 and found to benefit participants in the short and long term. For example, 58 percent of participants graduated high school on time, compared with 43 percent of demographically similar nonparticipants (Schweinhardt et al. 2012). GSRP is administered by intermediate regional school districts; Dearborn falls under the jurisdiction of a countywide organization called the Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency. The Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency manages GSRP in 32 school districts and over 100 public school academies (charter schools) and community-based organizations. About 70 percent of the county's GSRP slots are in public schools, and the rest are in community-based organizations such as child care centers.

Dearborn Public Schools has been offering GSRP since the mid-1990s, and community-based organizations have had GSRP programs for about four years. Eligibility depends on eight family risk factors: income, number of children, medical history, teen parents, absent parents, working parents, parents' high school graduation status, and emigration from war-torn countries. In the 2016–17 school year, 432 students were enrolled in GSRP in Dearborn public schools. The program runs from August through May, Monday through Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. There are 27 classrooms located across 11 elementary and intermediary schools along with a large, central pre-K site. A central office administrator oversees GSRP, and a preschool coordinator acts as the principal of the central site while managing the school-based sites. Each school with preschool classrooms has a social worker and a parent liaison. Each classroom is capped at 16 students and has a lead teacher and a paraprofessional, at least one of whom is bilingual in English and Arabic. Lead teachers are paid on the same scale as teachers of grades K–12, and paraprofessionals are contracted rather than paid hourly.

Stakeholders report that the school district contributes about \$650,000 to its GSRP program through Title I and general funds to help pay for staffing and other costs. The estimated total pre-K spending per child is about \$8,600, well over the \$6,291 per child allocated by the state of Michigan (Barnett et al. 2017). In the past few years, the state has allocated money for transportation to and from GSRP programs. The Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency receives about \$150 per slot for transportation and splits that funding among the localities that decide to offer buses. Dearborn Public Schools has offered buses for GSRP in the past but currently does not. Before-program care and aftercare are also not offered.

Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta, Georgia, is a relatively new destination for immigrants, with increased immigration spurred by the city's preparation to host the 1996 Olympic Games, according to stakeholders. A large majority of Atlanta's immigrants come from Spanish-speaking countries. The city and its surrounding counties have also become a refugee resettlement destination. In 2013, 37 percent of the Atlanta metro area's immigrants came from Mexico and 18 percent came from Africa. Between 2006 and 2013, the share of all preschool-age children from immigrant families in the metro area increased from 23 to 28 percent (authors' calculation using the Children of Immigrants Data Tool). Atlanta Public Schools serves about 52,000 students across 65 sites. About 2,200 students are ELLs, 76 percent of whom speak Spanish. Speakers of African languages, Chinese, and Arabic are also prevalent. Finally, three-quarters of Atlanta Public Schools students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.⁵

Atlanta Public Schools started offering free pre-K to 4-year-olds in 2007 through Georgia's Pre-K Program, which began a decade earlier. Funded through the state lottery system, Georgia's Pre-K Program serves children regardless of income or risk factors. In Atlanta, one-third of pre-K slots are for programs based in public schools, and the remaining two-thirds are for programs administered by community-based organizations. All settings are overseen by the state Department of Early Care and Learning. The program is undergoing a rigorous evaluation and has been found to have significant effects on school readiness skills (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2014, Peisner-Feinberg, Mokrova, and Anderson 2017).

Atlanta Public Schools' pre-K program more than doubled in size between 2014 and 2016 and now manages 52 pre-K classrooms across 36 elementary school sites serving approximately 1,260 students. However, stakeholders report that there are only enough available slots for about half of Atlanta's pre-K-eligible population, so parents apply online (picking up to three preferred sites) and are entered into a lottery. Each classroom has a lead teacher and an assistant teacher and serves up to 22 children. Atlanta Public Schools also partners with Head Start in some schools. A director of early learning and coordinator of early learning manage the program at the district level. Administrative and family support staff also play critical roles, with five part-time community engagement specialists and six staff members dedicated to enrollment and family support. In 2016, total pre-K spending per child in Atlanta was estimated at \$5,300.

Local funding allows pre-K teachers to be paid on the same scale as K–12 teachers. District policy provides transportation for pre-K students if they live within one mile of the school or are attending their zoned school. Transportation is funded in part by the state and is also heavily subsidized by district

general funds. Pre-K classes start in August and run through May. The programs operate Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and some schools offer before-program care and aftercare provided by third-party organizations. Fees for extended day services vary based on family income.

King County, Washington

King County, Washington, is a large and diverse county that includes suburban and rural areas as well as the city of Seattle. It is a long-term destination for immigrants and a center for refugee resettlement efforts. The refugee and immigrant population is highly diverse, with 22 percent hailing from East Asia and Pacific Islands; 21 percent from Europe, Canada, and Australia; 17 percent from Mexico; 15 percent from the Middle East and South Asia; and 10 percent from Africa, as of 2013. In addition, between 2006 and 2013, the share of all preschool-age children from immigrant families increased from 31 percent to 46 percent (authors' calculation using the Children of Immigrants Data Tool). King County includes several school districts, but our study focuses on Highline Public Schools, which serves large populations of Somali, Eastern European, and Latino immigrants and refugees. Highline Public Schools serves 19,702 students. Reflecting the diversity of the immigrant and refugee population, ELLs in the district speak Amharic, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese. In addition, approximately 64 percent of kindergartners are eligible for free or reduced lunch.⁶

Highline Public Schools offers pre-K through Washington's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). ECEAP began in 1985 and serves qualifying children (based on income and other risk factors) in schools and community-based organizations, with the vast majority of students participating through school-based programs. Three- and 4-year-olds are eligible, with priority given to 4-year-olds. Families apply at a central location, completing a paper application and interviewing with family support staff. ECEAP was rigorously evaluated in 2014 and found to have positive effects on reading and math test scores in third, fourth, and fifth grades (Bania et al. 2014). At present, stakeholders report that 570 of 1,250 pre-K-eligible children are enrolled, meaning that 54 percent of the eligible population is unserved.

In King County, Highline Public Schools manages two ECEAP sites, one at a central early childhood site and one at a high school, both located in the southern part of the district and managed by one principal. The two sites serve 226 students, Monday through Thursday, for 2.5 hours each day. (The central and northern areas of the school district offer Head Start-funded preschool programs.) Before-program care and aftercare is not available. Classrooms maintain a student-teacher ratio of 20:2. There

are six full-time and two part-time family support workers dedicated to ECEAP families, and a P-3 (pre-K through third grade) director oversees the program and its coordination with other early childhood programs and the early elementary grades. Alignment in professional development across the programs is funded by the Gates and Boeing foundations, and the region also won a Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grant to support P-3 work. The Puget Sound Educational Service District, which oversees 35 area school districts, including Highline, holds the grants for both ECEAP and Head Start. The agency provides guidance and support for program administration, particularly professional development. Transportation by buses is available to all ECEAP students, funded partially by Highline Public Schools.

Houston, Texas

Houston, Texas, has long been a destination for immigrants, particularly those from Mexico. In 2013, 53 percent of immigrants to Houston came from Mexico, with 16 percent coming from Central America and the Spanish Caribbean. Between 2006 and 2013, the share of all preschool-age children from immigrant families in the Houston metro area increased from 39 to 42 percent (authors' calculation using the Children of Immigrants Data Tool). Houston has several different school districts.⁷ The Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest in Texas, serves more than 216,000 students across 287 schools (HISD 2017a). More than 12,000 students are immigrants, and nearly one-third, or 69,000 students, are ELLs. They speak 87 home languages overall, with the large majority (92 percent) speaking Spanish.⁸ To serve these students, the district offers three bilingual programs and two English as a Second Language programs (HISD 2017b). Programs are offered in Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese (Mandarin), Urdu, Swahili, Telugu, Nepali, and French.⁹ The district also supplements its language supports with broader cultural and social programs for immigrant, migrant, and refugee students. Finally, 77 percent of all HISD students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.¹⁰

HISD offers pre-K through the state-sponsored Texas Public Prekindergarten program, which began in 1985 and is administered solely by school districts. The program serves eligible 3- and 4-year-olds, with a preference for 4-year-olds (Barnett et al. 2017).¹¹ Eligibility is determined based on family income, homelessness, military affiliation, or the child's limited English proficiency status (as determined through direct assessment). HISD also allows families to pay for a slot if they are not eligible and there is space available.¹² Texas Public Prekindergarten was evaluated in 2012, and participating children were found to have increased test scores and a decreased probability of being identified for special education services

(Andrews, Jargowsky, and Kuhne 2012). According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, it is estimated that the state provides \$4,071 in funding per child (Barnett et al. 2017).

HISD serves almost 14,700 pre-K students in 163 schools and early childhood centers (HISD, n.d.).¹³ The district partners with four Head Start grantees to serve students in pre-K dual-enrollment and standalone prekindergarten and Head Start programs (HISD 2018). HISD is a large, decentralized district; a district-level curriculum manager and grant manager work together to administer pre-K, but principals have substantial programmatic flexibility. Pre-K in Houston lasts the full school day, five days per week. Because Texas funds a half-day program for all children, Title I and district general funds cover the remaining expenses. The state requires that student-teacher ratios not exceed 22:1.¹⁴

Findings

Our interviews with parents and stakeholders reveal a broad set of strategies, resources, and contextual factors that support high rates of preschool enrollment among low-income immigrant and refugee families in Dearborn, Atlanta, King County, and Houston. We discuss each theme emerging from these interviews in turn while noting that they often operate simultaneously and interact in ways that compound benefits to program access and participation. We focus on eight themes:

- parental knowledge and preferences for preschool
- language access, including translation and literacy supports
- program logistics (including operating schedules, location, and transportation)
- welcoming efforts
- enrollment supports
- program resources, financing, and leadership
- organization and agency partnerships
- immigration policy contexts (local, state, and national)

Throughout the report, we explore perspectives common among parents and stakeholders, as well as differences between and within respondent groups. Although our study sample includes a relatively large number of parents (134 across all four study sites), their insights may not reflect those of their peers. We may not have heard from those with the most demanding work and education schedules or family responsibilities. In addition, we likely did not hear from any parents (undocumented or documented) who felt unsafe attending an event organized by an unknown research team seeking to speak with immigrants; although our site partners made great efforts to support parent recruitment for this study, it is likely that some families were unwilling to participate given changes to federal immigration policy during our data collection activities, and their perspectives are therefore not part of our data. Finally, samples of parents with *unenrolled* 3- and 4-year-olds were smaller than intended, particularly in some sites. Unlike parents of enrolled children, who have established ties to the schools we partnered with, it proved difficult to locate and incentivize attendance for parents whose children were not enrolled in preschool. It was also difficult to ensure that attendees met all of our sample-defining characteristics: a family with at least one parent born outside of the United States with a 3- or

4-year-old child who is eligible for public preschool but not enrolled. As a result, findings from the parents of unenrolled children may be even less generalizable than those from parents of pre-K participants. Stakeholders interested in expanding preschool access should be aware of this context.

For ease of reference, we write that “parents” expressed a certain sentiment, but readers should remember that we are always drawing from our limited sample. In addition, we use “enrolled parents” to describe parents of children enrolled in the focal public preschool programs and “unenrolled parents” to describe parents whose 3- or 4-year-old is not enrolled in preschool.

Parental Knowledge and Preferences

Preschool participation cannot occur without parents knowing about and valuing their options. Accordingly, we begin this study by exploring how parents we spoke to learned about available programs and whether they found these programs appealing. We then discuss how information efforts and parental knowledge shaped preferences for enrolling in pre-K.

Parental Knowledge

Our interviews explored the main sources of parental information, the less common ways parents learned about available programs, and the factors that shaped how they used information. We asked detailed questions about when and how they learned about public prekindergarten and probed beyond the traditional school- and district-led outreach efforts documented in previous research (e.g., Adams and McDaniel 2012a; Gelatt, Adams, and Huerta 2014; Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016). We also asked parents how others in their community might learn about pre-K and what additional efforts might help increase awareness and understanding.

Many parents learned about public preschool programs organically through **word of mouth**. One parent shared, “I lived in some trailers and learned about pre-K through a neighbor...[who] told me, ‘You have to enroll him in pre-K.’ I asked her how to do so because I didn’t speak English. She was the one who showed me how to do it.” Others described receiving similar advice from close friends or from family members who enrolled nieces and nephews in the program. Some participants said they informed other parents of the program and guided them through the process themselves. Nearly all the stakeholders we interviewed understood the importance of word of mouth and social networks in expanding parental knowledge and promoting prekindergarten access. In particular, they understood

the power of parents' confidence in the beliefs and values of their peers—both in the US and among peers enrolling in pre-K programs abroad. Shared one pre-K stakeholder, “We’re doing a really good job with our children and the parents know that, and they’ve been talking to each other and they say, ‘You need to get your kid in this program. It’s a really good program.’” Several pre-K administrators and staff described how engaging a small number of families from each immigrant community could snowball into increased enrollment. Confidence in programs can “spread like wildfire,” said one stakeholder. And as programs serve more immigrant families for longer periods of time, pre-K has the potential to become the norm for young children in immigrant communities.

Another common source of information was the school system itself. Several parents noted that they learned about pre-K from **traditional outreach efforts** like flyers sent home with elementary school students, direct contact from teachers and other school staff, and banners posted outside of pre-K sites. One father explained, “I drive by [the program] all the time to go shopping...back and forth, and there’s a big sign out there. And so I walked in, myself, and asked for information, and they let me know about the application. I went home and filled it out.” One school staff member shared her approach to direct outreach: “Quite often, it’s reaching out—‘Hey, I notice you have a younger one. Did you know we have a pre-K program?’” One mother described a similar experience from the other side: “I have my daughter, she’s in the elementary. She told me the teacher told her, ‘If you have a brother or sister who are 4 years old, tell your mom to take her to school.’” Other staff members discussed “knowing their communities and having relationships with formal and informal leaders.” These relationships developed through investments in staff time and outreach materials across the study sites.

“Go and talk to people. Figure out what the hearts of those communities are. Where do people grocery shop, go for fun, do laundry? Make a list of 10 places and bring somebody who speaks their languages.”

—Preschool stakeholder

In addition to traditional outreach efforts, stakeholders described several **other approaches** involving media, social media, external partnerships, and community canvassing in innovative ways. In Dearborn, for example, school principals connected with a local mosque and were able to have pre-K announcements included in Friday religious services during enrollment season. In Atlanta, district staff placed advertisements on Spanish-language television and radio stations. Atlanta pre-K administrators

also sponsored an ice cream truck in local government housing complexes. When children came outside for free treats, staff shared information about the program with their parents and guardians. Though we heard little about these efforts in parent interview groups, this is not surprising given that these groups were limited in size and scope.

The less common ways parents learned about pre-K reflected both parent- and district-directed strategies. A few parents reported using Google and other search tools to find local programs. Said one parent, “I looked it up online. I wanted my child to be successful, and since he had speech problems...I wanted to make sure he did well.” A second parent said he drove directly to his local public school to ask about preschool opportunities. Other families were referred through early intervention or other early learning programs; immigrant-serving community-based organizations, including refugee resettlement agencies; and school and district programs for adults, including language and literacy classes. Because all the pre-K initiatives in our study were well established, some parents knew about them because their older children had previously attended. In Atlanta, for example, one mother of a current student also had a high school senior who graduated from Georgia’s Pre-K Program.

The longevity and success of these four public preschool programs has created one factor key to generating parental knowledge: **trust**. Trust surfaced as an important underlying theme, regardless of the information sources parents accessed. Program administrators in the four study sites described actively cultivating community trust over many years and collaborating with trusted intermediary organizations to publicize their programs. One pre-K partner from an immigrant-serving organization emphasized the importance of this connection: “It doesn’t matter if the brochure is in Spanish. It doesn’t. And it’s not the brochure. It’s going through community, trusted sources. That’s going to give you the opportunity to create the importance of that pre-K.” Another expert based in an immigrant-serving organization explained, “Having that confirmation from somebody you trust—‘This was great for my child; it worked really well’—that speaks volumes to them.” Stakeholders said that outreach efforts quickly convinced even families who did not know about pre-K to enroll because parents “have a mentality of trusting schools. Once they are educated and someone tells them that we have this program, they all jump on board.” However, one unenrolled parent offered a different perspective on outreach coming from unfamiliar sources. She had received information about her local pre-K options but chose not to follow up. “You have to trust that person 100 percent,” she said. “If I only trust that person 90 or 80 percent, then there is fear.”

Remaining **gaps in parental knowledge** were related to insufficient information sharing, both through word of mouth and formal outreach efforts, and lack of trust. Although this study focuses on communities with unusually high rates of preschool enrollment (table 2), we found evidence of

knowledge gaps in every site. The scope of the remaining gaps varied across sites, but two groups emerged as particularly at risk: recently arrived families, who may lack the social networks that facilitate information sharing, and families whose oldest child is of preschool age and who may not benefit from outreach efforts operated through elementary schools or school districts because they are not yet engaged with these institutions (see also Adams and McDaniel 2012a for evidence of these gaps in Illinois). Among our interview sample, 24 percent of parents had been in the US for fewer than 5 years and 15 percent had an oldest child of preschool age, reflecting these gaps (table 3). Most parents and some stakeholders identified a need for additional efforts and resources targeting these two groups.

Whereas parents overwhelmingly expressed a need for additional outreach to address gaps in parental knowledge, stakeholders varied in whether they believed existing efforts were sufficient. In one study site, two pre-K stakeholders shared different understandings. “I think word has really gotten out,” one said. “I don’t think we have too many [families] enrolling in kindergarten [who] didn’t know.” Another acknowledged, “I think it’s really possible you could just have no idea. And because neither pre-K nor kindergarten is mandatory, no one is going to say, ‘You’re not going to school.’” Understanding the causes and consequences of remaining gaps in knowledge, even in high-enrollment sites, is central to expanding preschool access.

Parental Preferences

Once parents acquire information about public preschool, their perceptions, motivations, and concerns about available programs are likely to shape whether they participate. Our interviews explored initial impressions of pre-K and whether and how preferences evolved over time. We asked similar questions of both parents and stakeholders, allowing us to compare and contrast responses in ways that can inform future outreach efforts.

For many immigrant parents, preferences for enrolling their US-born children in preschool were **formed abroad**. Early learning initiatives have grown globally, and some parents had become familiar with preschool (both public and private options) while in their home countries or through family members who remain there. Some of these parents arrived in the United States and expected free public education to be available for children as young as 3 or 4 years old. Others expected that the only available preschools would be private and very expensive. Still others arrived having never observed school settings for children younger than 5 or 6 years old. These expectations shaped whether and how they considered preschool options in the United States.

Many families described how their preferences for preschool center on **school readiness**, including the early reading, math, and social skills that prepare children for kindergarten (see also Sandstrom and Gelatt 2017). Several families also built on the academic definition of school readiness by citing prekindergarten's benefits for independence and socialization. "The most important thing for us," one parent said, "was [for her] to learn to be social and independent." Another agreed, saying, "I wanted him to learn something because it's not enough with what I teach him. He can interact with other kids, and he was alone at home. Mostly that part—so he can socialize with other kids and know he is not the only one, and share and learn to share. That's what he is learning here." Many parents expressed and valued a broad understanding of preparation for kindergarten, but some shared specific interest in enrolling to begin early intervention for special needs. Several of our interview groups included parents with children who have (or were believed to have) language delays, fine motor delays, trauma-related disorders, or other disabilities. These parents were especially eager to enroll in pre-K and, in some cases, had received formal referrals from other early learning programs or pediatricians. They often had access to special education support staff and resources provided by state and federal programs while remaining in classrooms with their typically developing peers.

"I think preschool is very important to every single family. ...Preschool is one of the foundations of education. If you're building a house and your base is not that strong, it might not hold that much longer."

—Parent of a preschool student

Stakeholders across all four sites perceived parents' school readiness goals as central to their identities. One expert based in an immigrant-serving organization put it this way: "One thing I see that is very common is the idea that many parents view their children as their reason for coming [to the United States], and the opportunities for the children are the most important thing. Once parents start to believe that early childhood education gives their child a better chance or a leg up, they tend to be really receptive of it. It's a trait of our families, prioritizing that second generation and saying, 'We came here for their opportunity.'" A pre-K stakeholder explained that these beliefs can be heightened among parents coming from the most difficult backgrounds: "Some will directly say it: 'War stopped me from getting an education. I'm in a job I have to do but I don't love, but I don't want this for my children.'"

Parents also enrolled their children in preschool to facilitate **language acquisition**, particularly English language acquisition, and this was just as common a motivation as school readiness. One mother drew on her own experience to explain why she enrolled her daughter. “I cared about education, but mostly about her learning English,” she said. “If she didn’t go to pre-K and entered [kindergarten] like this, it would challenge her. ...I remember my first days of elementary—I didn’t go to [kindergarten]—and they were traumatic. Now imagine them without speaking the language.” Parents were more mixed on the importance of maintaining a child’s first language in the classroom. One parent explained, “For me, it was because the program is bilingual, so I chose to come here,” but others felt they could maintain first languages at home. Another parent said these considerations were largely irrelevant. “I would like [instruction in Spanish],” they said, “but I understand that I’m not in my country.” As we explain below, although instruction in diverse languages may not be central to expanding pre-K enrollment, language access supports for parents are crucial.

Several parents also raised the issue of **safety**, a concern that is likely common to all parents but was particularly pronounced among those coming from countries plagued by violence and war. Stakeholders described the importance of the security of school and center buildings and of staff who understand how to support children exposed to trauma. Parents said having the opportunity to visit programs before enrollment helped allay initial concerns and developed trust. As one parent stated, “Here, they have security cameras, the doors security locked. The doors is locked. Nobody coming in or out standing. They have to go in the office. Look how they have the cameras...[Here, they] protect [the children].” In contrast, a parent who had not visited her local programs said her son was not enrolled because “he [would be] alone in the school and won’t have an older sibling to look after him.” During several of our site visits, we observed robust security systems and procedures around building entry and exit explicitly designed to give parents peace of mind.

Both enrolled and unenrolled parents shared **other concerns** shaping preferences for preschool. In some cases, these concerns worked in opposing directions. For example, one enrolled parent shared the perception that prekindergarten may be “too much pressure” for young children, while another in the same site said members of her community believed that “school is only for play; all they do is play, they’re not really learning.” A few parents expressed concerns that program days were too long, but others (in the same sites) felt they were not long enough. One concern was less ambiguous: some parents feared that their children’s aggressive behavior would lead to phone calls and disciplinary actions, which they sought to avoid. However, one parent said that enrollment had not only resulted in no such actions for her child, it ultimately led to improved behavior at home. Still, this concern shaped

other parents' preferences for preschool and directly affected enrollment and participation for some of the unenrolled parents we interviewed.

Stakeholders often perceived additional parental concerns that were not reflected in our parent discussions. Numerous stakeholders across all four sites suggested that immigrant parents prefer to keep young children at home with their mothers or extended family. They felt this sentiment is particularly strong among recently arrived immigrant families and those who had endured the most challenging circumstances in their home countries or refugee camps. Stakeholders said some parents want their children to only learn their home languages and “don’t want them speaking English, necessarily.” Although we did not hear these concerns from the parents we interviewed, it is possible that other parents held these beliefs. Many stakeholders also felt that parents find school entry more appropriate at age 5 or 6 than during the preschool years. Although several parents did share that children younger than 3 may be too young for school, and many said they understood why other parents would want to keep their children at home, the majority of both enrolled and unenrolled parents felt that 3- and 4-year-olds were ready for school.

Even when knowledge and preferences align, families of all backgrounds may struggle with their children’s first structured experiences outside the home. As one parent shared, “She’s an only child, and the first day [of pre-K], she cried. And I cried—I think I cried more than she did. ...You’re used to being with her everywhere, and suddenly she isn’t with you. But I don’t regret it. [Pre-K] has helped her a lot. I know it’s for her well-being, and I know that when she’s a mom, she will go through the same.” Early childhood educators play an important role in supporting transitions to school and fostering trust among parents. Not only can teachers and administrators help create a safe and enriching environment, they can also care for children and parents in ways that teachers in later grades may not. When asked whether she had any concerns about enrolling, one parent in Dearborn said, “No, [I didn’t have any concerns] because I know [the teacher is] gonna love her like the same thing I love her. She’s gonna care for her the same thing I’m going to do for my daughter.” This level of shared responsibility and trust goes beyond parental knowledge and preferences to make pre-K a natural step in children’s growth and development.

Despite these positive perspectives, several interviews revealed **gaps in parental preferences** likely to deter families from enrolling. Here, the perspectives of unenrolled parents are particularly informative. They highlight concerns about separation from young children, beliefs that preschool is not educationally valuable (or that parents can deliver the same educational content at home), assumptions that preschool will be unaffordable, and anxiety about classroom factors like the number of other children or staff qualifications. Enrolled parents also suggested that members of their communities may

be concerned about children going to school when they are “too young for early learning.” Better information about the schedules and educational content of public pre-K programs may help address some of these concerns. Guidance from parents of older children may be useful too. As one unenrolled parent shared, “You say, ‘He’s so little and he’s going to be so many years in school.’ But now that I saw how challenging [kindergarten] was, I say, ‘No, my next one will go to pre-K.’”

Language Access

The prekindergarten programs in Dearborn, Atlanta, King County, and Houston all benefit from robust and diverse approaches to language access. Most of these approaches serve parents, whose knowledge of and preferences for preschool often hinge on understanding the available offerings in their native languages. In some sites, language access extends into the classroom, where bilingual teaching staff, curricula, and learning materials support children’s first formal educational experiences. Language access begins with sufficiently funded outreach and enrollment processes and may extend through the pre-K year, providing continuous assistance to children and families.

School and school district staff in all four sites clearly believed language access requires a deliberate approach to providing **resources**, setting **policy**, and seeking out innovative **strategies** to connect with families. Hiring bilingual, bicultural school staff, who communicate directly with parents, is one resource-intensive but effective strategy. Some schools recruit bilingual staff through traditional channels (e.g., neighboring districts and teacher preparation programs), but others create new pipelines through nontraditional means. One administrator explained how changes in hiring policies allowed her to recruit “the parents that speak a language we really need and...train them. Once they’re ready, on the list, they can come and offer the service.” This approach was common in King County and Dearborn and is common practice in many Head Start programs nationwide. Districts can also make interpretation and translation services available on-call and by appointment (in person, by phone, or by contract with outside providers). They may do so through dedicated language and communications departments or through the use of technology. In some cases, language access extends beyond interpretation and translation to include supports for parents with limited literacy through oral interpretation in their native language. “We come up with new strategies to reach out to them and be inclusive and sensitive,” explained one administrator, “and that includes technology like LanguageLine. We have a portable speaker system we use for schools that don’t have staff, that don’t speak other languages.” Although stakeholders felt that phone- or internet-based translations were less effective than regular in-person

supports, they agreed that even limited communication efforts could facilitate pre-K access and make parents feel welcome.

Beyond building knowledge and facilitating enrollment, stakeholders said language access efforts can shape **parental preferences** for preschool. These efforts are important for building the trust needed for parents to feel safe enough to consider pre-K for their young children. It “really makes them comfortable” and acts “like a bridge,” said one stakeholder. Even when program staff are not fluent, their efforts to speak languages other than English may prove useful. Said one pre-K staff member, “You learn little phrases like ‘no school tomorrow’ or ‘wash your hands,’ and when parents hear you saying that, they are ecstatic.” Another staff member at the same program concurred: “It shows them respect. It shows that you are willing to take that extra step.” In addition, initial outreach can progress into repeated collaboration and burgeoning relationships: “When they come and see somebody is there to help them get through the [enrollment] process, it’s less intimidating and they look forward. They know the translators by now; they have a history with us. And that’s to our advantage too.”

Parents and stakeholders considered translation and interpretation services central to **building knowledge** of existing programs and facilitating completion of **enrollment** requirements. Parents said that receiving information in their home languages and making initial contact with staff in these languages, or with easily accessible interpreters, was key to understanding prekindergarten offerings. Parents interacted with language access supports in the form of bilingual classroom, front office, and family support staff; translators in school district world languages departments; professional interpreters available by phone and in person; and translated materials. Translation may span multiple languages and multiple dialects of the same language. One parent noted the multiple avenues she could use to communicate with program staff. “You can also call the office and they can put the teacher on the line,” she said. “If [the teacher doesn’t] speak Spanish, they put an interpreter on. It’s very accessible.”

Parents often thought of **children’s access** to their home language at school as a separate issue. Though parents universally valued language access in their own communications, they were mixed on whether teachers should use their home languages in the classroom. As noted earlier, many parents enrolled their children in prekindergarten with the specific goal of English proficiency. These parents said they were comfortable with English-only classrooms. However, some parents we spoke with, primarily in Houston, were explicit about wanting bilingual instruction. Spanish-speaking parents in HISD, where transitional and bilingual pre-K is common, may expect lead teachers to be able to communicate in their children’s home languages (Houston ISD 2017b). “For me, it’s important,” said one parent, “since my child had language problems and we only speak Spanish at home.” Another Houston parent expressly supported bilingual instruction for developmental reasons: “It’s better that they learn

both language[s] because it helps them develop their brains better.” In Dearborn and King County, bilingual staff help ease the transition to prekindergarten. One administrator shared the story of a preschooler who struggled without this support:

We had a newcomer last year who had been in the classroom about two weeks, and he didn’t speak English. So he was picking things up slowly. ...[When the bilingual paraprofessional returned to the classroom], you would have thought he’d flown home. He looked at her and spoke to her for two or three minutes, and she smiled and smiled and said, ‘He just told me that you are all crazy. He was so excited to come to school but he doesn’t know what any of you are saying.’ So they all come to us without any [English], and then to watch that come to fruition and have dual-language learners is really fun.

Few parents outside of Houston prioritized learning in their home languages, but **bilingual instruction** is well supported by research, and stakeholders clearly saw this as a priority. Bilingual curricula and teaching materials were common in Houston, Dearborn, and King County, where formal and informal policies support the hiring of bilingual staff. These materials might be used at the beginning of each school year to ease the transition for new students or throughout pre-K to structure lesson plans and inform pedagogy. In King County, both school- and community-based pre-K programs used a locally developed approach called Soy Bilingüe that can be adapted to any language and includes cultural and linguistic supports.¹⁵ This approach and others like it were well regarded by teachers and program administrators and accompanied other interventions for ELLs. In contrast, stakeholders in Atlanta were limited by a state law that does not allow language testing and services before kindergarten entry. The district made great investments in language access for parents, but they were unable to institute parallel programming for students.

Despite widespread efforts in the study sites, some parents and stakeholders still reported **gaps in language access**. Specifically, in more heterogeneous sites, families speaking less common languages and dialects may be left out of translation and interpretation efforts. One pre-K stakeholder explained the challenge: “Some languages are really hard to find. So our communication with the parents might be limited because of that barrier. Sometimes you sit down with the parent and have to say everything you wanted to talk about this whole couple [of] months in one sitting because that’s all you get with an interpreter. Other times, you have to get by with body language.” Another stakeholder stated how difficult it is to support the first family from a new wave of immigrants, before sufficient language supports are in place. This challenge is similar to those facing school staff in new destination immigration sites, except that stakeholders in our study sites were able to rely on established ties to language lines, professional interpreters, and community institutions that can help fulfill language access needs given time and resources.¹⁶ Finally, even where language and literacy supports were readily accessible, some parents still did not know about these efforts before their first interactions

with pre-K and identified that lack of knowledge as a potential barrier for families who might not persist past their initial misconceptions.

The language access approaches described here did not evolve overnight. Stakeholders described ongoing and iterative attempts to reach immigrant and refugee families, as well as remaining gaps in access. One administrator reflected, “We’ve gotten more responsive than we’ve been in the past, and it seems to have made a difference.” Another stakeholder at an immigrant-serving community-based organization urged the need for continued effort: “Principals have to advocate that, ‘I need extra resources in my community because we’ve seen an influx of 20 new families this year,’ and legally you have to provide language access.” Programs and districts may face particular challenges reaching speakers of less common languages and those very new to the US. Routine needs assessments, technological solutions, and district-level investment can help programs reach more families and better engage and inform them throughout their experiences with pre-K.

Program Logistics: Operating Schedules, Location, and Transportation

If families have information about public prekindergarten, wish to enroll their children, and can communicate with program staff, their next consideration is often the logistical aspects of access and participation. This includes program operating schedules, location, and transportation. Although the logistics of program access may seem mundane compared to parents’ developmental goals for their children or staff training and curricula choices, logistics routinely pose barriers to initial enrollment and continued attendance (Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016; Katz, Adams, and Johnson 2016).

Operating Schedules

All four programs highlighted in this study run on a **school-year schedule**, but they vary significantly in their weekly and daily schedules. Dearborn and King County offer preschool Monday through Thursday, and Atlanta and Houston are open Monday through Friday. Programs in Dearborn, Atlanta, and Houston operate over the full school day, and the program in King County operates on a half-day schedule with morning and afternoon sessions. Aftercare is available at pre-K sites in Atlanta and Houston but not Dearborn or King County. Parent and stakeholder perspectives on program hours and

schedules varied according to these aspects of program design and by parents' work status and commutes (including to their other children's school and preschool programs).

As noted above, the majority of the parents attending our discussion groups had children enrolled in pre-K programs (table 3). All of these parents were able to configure their schedules to accommodate pre-K, but parents offered a range of experiences and opinions about how manageable this was. For many enrolled parents, program hours and schedules worked well. Families often had multiple children enrolled in school, and parents in locations with full-day schedules and Monday through Friday programming (Atlanta and Houston) organized their work, educational, and home responsibilities around the academic calendar. As has been found in other studies, many of the low-income immigrant and refugee parents we interviewed had one stay-at-home parent in their households, easing the need for full-day care (see Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016). Others worked part-time or during nontraditional hours, making both full- and half-day schedules feasible. Some families also benefited from the support of grandparents, extended family members, and close neighbors, who helped with drop-off and pick-up and allowed families to balance multiple and sometimes conflicting schedules.

For many families, however, conventional half- and full-day programming posed **challenges** and occasionally barriers to pre-K participation. Note that we held our discussion groups during the workday (on the advice of site partners), and it is likely that we did not hear from parents employed or in class during that time. Just over half of the parents interviewed (56 percent) were working or in school, with the majority of those engaged during morning hours (table 3). Parents of young children, both enrolled and unenrolled, who could not participate may struggle with schedules because of their work hours. One working parent told us that ideal hours for her family would run “from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.” Some parents gave up job opportunities or made extraordinary sacrifices to keep their children enrolled. “In the beginning,” one mother said, “I worked at eight o'clock [in the morning], about the same time as school, and she's supposed to start at 8:40. So I had to ask my bosses if I can be 40 minutes late. It cost me—it was cutting off my paycheck, those 40 minutes.” One father stopped working because of the logistical challenges: “I had to work night shift because my wife works. So I come home from the night shift and I can't even sleep because at eight o'clock I have to take the kids to the school bus. Then that's just two hours, and I can't sleep. ...So I had to leave that job because...I was too tired. Right now, my job is to take care of the kids. ...I need to find a job that will work—match with my kids' school.” Other parents described various conflicts between employment and pre-K participation, including those arising from variable-hours employment, that left them unable to work. Many families may not be willing or able to make these kinds of sacrifices and may instead forgo enrollment in early education or use informal care to maximize coverage.

Many stakeholders understood families' difficulties with program hours and schedules, though often not to the extent expressed directly by the parents. Those in sites with full-day programs generally saw the need for full-day schedules because of their direct observations of parent choice. An administrator in one site described what happened when the program changed from a half-day to full-day schedule: "At one time, I thought we'd have trouble filling out full-day classrooms, but that went like wildfire. Those full-time slots, families were really interested in that." Another administrator clarified, "Most of our families are one working parent. But that full day is still very intriguing for different reasons, whether it's a parent going back to school or being able to attend to their home easier or because by 3-and-a-half or 4 the kids want socialization." In a different site, one stakeholder explained how preschool and work schedules interact: "Those half-day programs are good, but not good for working parents." In a third site, one stakeholder said, "We don't really seem to have a huge demand for full-day, to be honest," while another reported, "We're trying to maintain a variety of models in the community so parents have some choice about what makes sense for them individually in their beliefs about what the educational system should do for their child." Similarly, stakeholders in sites with full-day programs often downplayed the need for extended day care. One stakeholder said parents fill gaps in coverage without questioning the scope of those gaps: "Our population has to be very resourceful and creative. ...Some families have a grandparent. Some families form partnerships with other families who have opposite schedules and hours. ...There are aftercare programs in some places but not all."

Programs' **financial constraints** affected families' experiences with program hours and schedules as well as the decisions of state and local administrators that established those schedules. Preschool program administrators made trade-offs between program coverage and the number of children served. More than one discussed the difficulty of serving half as many children in full-day programs compared with half-day programs, wondering which children and families would be left unserved. For many families, however, existing half- and even full-day schedules preclude the possibility of enrollment and the early learning opportunities preschool offers.

Program Location

Preschool access often also depends on the location of available seats. Although many families consider program location when weighing available pre-K options, the deliberations of immigrant and refugee families may be especially complex. Limited resources, high residential mobility, and persistent language barriers can force decisions in which children's early learning experiences play a relatively minor role.

Proximity to home is often key to program access. Many of the low-income immigrant families in our study relied on a single car. Some parents did not drive, and some preferred walking. As a result, parents often prioritized the geographic convenience of preschool offerings. One unenrolled parent explained why her child and others were not enrolled in pre-K: “There are other programs out there, but...location-wise—if they live here in this area and you’ve got a program over in the east end...who’s the person that’s gonna be responsible? It’s kind of sometimes easier to keep them at home then.” Another parent, enrolled in a program in her neighborhood, shared, “I always like to be close. That’s why I send my kid, because I can walk.”

Not only do these choices reflect logistical considerations, they also reflect some of the **safety concerns** of immigrant and refugee families described above. These concerns lead some parents to prefer school-based pre-K programs, where children of various ages can be in the same building and support one another. “I decided to enroll [my son] so he would be accompanied by his brother,” said one parent. “I was lucky that my son got in.” Another parent even preferred having her children in the same school over having her younger child in a pre-K program closer to home. Parents’ considerations may shift as their children grow, but family support and safety remain paramount concerns for families with very young children.

Stakeholders generally understood the location preferences of immigrant families. Said one program administrator, “It’s been my experience that parents send their children to their community schools. Mom wants to be close.” Another suggested, “If you had smaller sites situated in neighborhoods, you get to have both [good transportation options and connection with families].” Stakeholders saw the value of program choice for working parents. In one site with limited options, a stakeholder shared their firsthand experience with a mother for whom “it would’ve been more convenient to find somewhere near her work. ...If programs [offer that choice], that’d be more convenient. And I’ve seen a couple cases where they’re not registering their kids to pre-K because of that.” Similarly, a stakeholder in a different site touted her program’s policy, under which families are not tied to the zone in which they live and can choose a site closer to where they work. Another stakeholder shared a recent experience highlighting the challenges of program location. She explained, “I got a call from a dad yesterday. Mom doesn’t drive, and he’s afraid to move because they’re moving from a small apartment right here to their first home. And mom doesn’t speak English, and he’s afraid to buy this house...because he’s not sure how they’re going to get the child to and from school.” Stakeholders clearly recognized the importance of choice and flexibility, even if constraints in program funding and facilities result in inadequate offerings.

Transportation

Availability of transportation varied greatly across sites. In Dearborn and Houston, transportation was not provided by the schools, although some communities used neighborhood carpools, private bus services, and ride-sharing services to fill in gaps. In King County, free school buses were provided for all students enrolled in our chosen site. Atlanta provides free buses if families are enrolled in their zoned school. Our interviews across the study sites probed the importance of free transportation for families and the costs and benefits of providing school buses for preschool students.

Transportation was a **top priority** for many parents. In sites that provided busing, parents generally made use of the available options, and parents across sites often described the need for transportation access in stark terms. One parent who relied on school buses said, “I think education is first important and then transportation second. I think it’s very important. In any locations, any part of the country, if they have preschool available, they need to think back-to-back about transportation. If they can’t provide transportation, they can’t run the school.” Although this view may not be shared by all parents, it highlights the urgent need felt by some, especially those with demanding work or school schedules and without family or friends to relieve transportation burdens. One unenrolled parent explained the possible consequences of these burdens. “I have another friend who didn’t enroll due to transportation,” she said. “It’s easier to pay the babysitter than to take the child or to send them [to preschool] because there’s no one to take or pick them up.” Private-pay options or carpooling seemed to work well in some cases, but some parents described them as unsustainable or unaffordable. “The price of [private] transportation is not convenient,” one unenrolled parent said. “Who wants to pay \$30 weekly?”

Stakeholders had **mixed understandings** of families’ transportation challenges. Some were aware of the high cost of private transportation options and confirmed their limitations in solving districtwide transportation challenges. Some program administrators in the same sites had different perspectives on how much transportation issues affected enrollment. In one site, an administrator told us, “Because of the economic status, [some parents] don’t have a car, and we don’t have bus service to provide. So if their neighborhood school is full, they don’t attempt to bring them anywhere, unlike middle-class or affluent families that can bring their kids wherever they want to go.”

Another administrator in the same site disagreed: “I think you find a way. Especially with all this [public transit construction] going on now, you can easily get from one side [of town] to another...I don’t think it’s an issue, transportation.” A third administrator, working in a community-based pre-K program in the same region, noted the impact of transportation on continued participation. Even if transportation challenges did not preclude enrollment, they said, “whenever we have chronic absences, it mostly relates to

transportation. They have to take 2–3 buses. [Our city] is not very connective.” Limited public bus and train service in the study sites and often difficult traffic patterns compounded the transportation challenges. Some stakeholders also noted how legal status may affect a parent’s ability to provide their own transportation. In most states, including all study site states except Washington, undocumented immigrants are not able to apply for driver’s licenses. Undocumented parents therefore cannot legally drive their children to school, and doing so illegally would risk not just a citation but deportation.

Stakeholders also considered the **programmatic implications** of providing transportation. In particular, some program administrators noted the trade-off between the convenience of providing public school buses and the resulting decrease in face-to-face interaction with parents. A stakeholder in one site with public busing said, “It’s wonderful they’re able to come to the program [on buses], but we’re also noticing that it’s harder to access the family.” In another site without busing, an administrator explained, “It’s important they come in and drop off their children. It gives us a chance to have that daily communication with them.” Although transportation challenges can pose genuine barriers to access and participation, some stakeholders made clear that the available solutions could create additional challenges for the quality and continuity of children’s early learning experiences by loosening ties between home and school.

Finally, some stakeholders were concerned that parents would not make use of expensive investments in busing because of the **age and vulnerability of their children**. One administrator told us, “Some parents are sometimes a little nervous about having kiddos on the bus at age 4, so sometimes the barriers are more around that than getting access to a bus.” Although this perspective was rare among the parents we interviewed, others we did not speak to may have these concerns. At least one program was working on supports to minimize safety concerns and make school buses more attractive. Some administrators described accommodations for young riders that include seating them just behind the driver, providing bus drivers with age-appropriate professional development opportunities, and scheduling a ride-along “to [get to] know the route and bus driver and feel comfortable.” Thoughtful transportation supports like these may help allay concerns and maximize investments in transportation.

Other Program Logistics

We have focused on logistical issues related to program operating schedules, location, and transportation; how parents experience these issues; and how stakeholders understand them. For many immigrant and refugee families, however, these were not the only or even the primary logistical concerns surrounding preschool enrollment. These families were concerned with attending to other

children in the family, particularly those of compulsory school age, and meeting work, visa, and housing requirements as part of refugee resettlement. Program staff and immigrant-serving community-based organizations may need to help some families address these and other barriers before they can fully participate in public pre-K.

One key logistical barrier that we *did not* hear about in any study site was **cost**. Parents were never asked to pay tuition or fees for prekindergarten, which is not the case in some other parts of the country (Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016). Although administrators in some study sites sent home lists of materials for optional donation, others were not permitted to do so by state laws, regulations, or guidance. The commitment to serving low-income families and removing any access barriers related to cost in these sites was substantial.

Welcoming Efforts

Welcoming efforts, both general and culturally tailored in nature, can play an important role in immigrant and refugee parents' decisions to enroll their children in pre-K. These efforts include specific activities and broad approaches that build a positive classroom environment and establish connections between home and school. Like convenient program schedules or transportation options, welcoming efforts can attract parents to pre-K programs and encourage their continued participation.

All four study sites offered bright, clean, attractive **facilities**. In many cases, buildings and classrooms were designed especially for pre-K and included right-sized furniture, manipulatives stations, well-stocked libraries, and artwork and learning materials on the walls—often in multiple languages. Their creation and maintenance suggested substantial investment from school districts and other sources. In short, facilities seemed likely to make a positive first impression on prospective families and lead them to enroll. Pictures from all four study sites are included in appendix B.

Administrators paired attractive facilities with a set of specific **activities** designed to build relationships with parents during enrollment and throughout the year. Several study sites offered tours that allowed families to assess programs for themselves. They were able to see classrooms, talk with staff, and observe daily routines. One parent said, “[Feeling welcome is] really important because you feel safe to bring your child. My child had never gone to day care. It was the first time I would leave him. ...[But talking] with the social worker and the teacher, you feel like you are leaving him with family. That’s how they made me feel.” This sense of trust was shared by many of the enrolled parents we interviewed. Pre-K staff also built trust by visiting families in their homes (in Dearborn, Atlanta, and

King County). Home visits varied in timing and intensity, but they were generally conducted by teachers and family support workers. First visits often occurred just before or at the start of the school year, with follow-up visits made as needed and a closing visit in the spring. Two stakeholders described the evolution of home visits over the course of the school year: “Here, we do registration and home visits, and we really have a relationship with their families prior to the beginning when the kids come in...[in the spring], because you’ve built that relationship throughout the entire year, it’s like sitting down with a friend. It’s like catching up.”

“You’re trying to break barriers. It’s not a you. It’s not a me. It’s an us. And there’s a difference.”

—Preschool stakeholder

Staff also made concerted efforts to support **parent engagement** in their classrooms and programs. These efforts included holding parent-teacher conferences, having open-door classroom policies, incorporating home items and culturally relevant books and songs in the classroom, serving school meals in line with relevant dietary restrictions, connecting families to broader social services, and using parent policy and governance councils. Stakeholders described the importance of involving parents by asking, “How do you want us to represent your culture in the classroom?” Stakeholders surveyed parents about “[the] kinds of things they’d like to see in the classroom for their children. ...That’s how you get investment...because it’s their program.” In school-based programs, pre-K families also participated in schoolwide celebrations and other family events with children in higher grades.

Many parents we spoke with appreciated opportunities for **volunteering** and participated regularly. “You come here and feel at home,” shared one mother. “Many of us are volunteers. They try to get us involved.” Another mother found the opportunities empowering: “You enjoy [volunteering] because you are sharing with the director. They support you and applaud you. ...It feels good and you feel like you are important.” Some parents had mixed experiences with the clearance procedures required to volunteer, including fingerprinting and background checks. Although most parents said these procedures gave them a sense of security and supported their use, others said they may deter some potential volunteers, especially those from undocumented or mixed status families.

“Anything the center can do to assure them that their child is in a safe, loving, nurturing, healthy, competent, qualified environment...to help parents newly immigrating to our country, to hear people speak the language of their home or to try.”

—Preschool stakeholder

Teachers and support staff, including front desk staff and family support workers, also played key roles in welcoming efforts. They were often the face of pre-K and provided families’ first introductions to program offerings, school culture, and linguistic and cultural inclusion. For parents, having access to staff was key. As one parent said, “I like that we can communicate with teachers. The teacher gives you her personal number, and you can text her at any time.” Another parent emphasized the importance of feeling valued: “What I have seen in this school is that everyone’s culture is respected.” Parents were mixed on the value of classroom activities honoring language and culture, but many parents appreciated staff who would “stand on your side” and “help the family from the bottom of their hearts.” Stakeholders across the study sites described the value of recruiting and retaining these staff. One administrator said, “[It] is so simple and profound when you think about what works: being relational, culturally aware, thinking about what your system and structures are, hiring staff who look like families.” Another administrator offered a perspective on why pre-K is so critical: “For many parents, we are the first point of contact with a school system, so it’s our responsibility to model for them how this school wishes to partner with them and what it wishes not to be.”

Administrators described a set of intentional **recruitment and training** plans aimed at attracting and retaining welcoming staff members, including teachers, assistants, aides, family support workers, interpreters, front office staff, bus drivers, and parent ambassadors. These plans were often resource intensive and took one of two forms. First, depending on their location, pre-K programs may be able to recruit from within immigrant communities, including parents of young children. One stakeholder said, “Certainly in places where we have someone from the community teaching in the school, you are able to build better relationships.” One administrator expressed a strong preference for hiring and training pre-K parents, as Head Start and other early childhood programs have historically done. Programs also trained US-born teachers on families’ languages and cultures. One administrator described their approach to this type of training: “If you’re a teacher that didn’t grow up with a multiplicity of linguistic backgrounds around you—I think some of our teachers—that’s a stretch for them. They may not have experienced that. For some of them, that’s a learning curve, and we need to make sure we’re thoughtful

about how to support that.” US-born teachers discussed trainings on customs, holidays, and languages they found helpful, and some said teaching in the study sites was their first exposure to diverse students and families. They found openness, flexibility, and a willingness to try (and fail) central to their success in connecting with parents born abroad. One stakeholder believed teachers ultimately succeed by respecting the cultures of the families they serve: “There’s culturally responsive, which is okay. But at the core of it, being respectful to our families, recognizing they’re from areas that are rich and have much to share. It’s not brain science. It really isn’t. It’s not that there really isn’t complications to it, it’s just going back to the core. What is your purpose? It’s the children, and by serving children you’re serving families.”

“Once families and communities feel like they’re being heard, they’re going to invest. You’re taking the most precious things that they have—their children, a part of them they’re handing to you—and you need to gain that trust.”

—Preschool stakeholder

When successful, welcoming efforts benefit both children and parents. For children, welcoming programs make early learning joyful and enjoyable, an important first step in their educational trajectories. The same can be true for parents. One administrator explained, “[Parents] come in kind of shy, and when we say, ‘No, really, we need you to be leaders here,’ it’s fun to watch them open up and settle in. They change. The parents change as much as the kids do. It’s really exciting.” Although pre-K programs in Dearborn, Atlanta, King County, and Houston continue working to adapt their welcoming efforts to new immigrant communities, their commitment to creating engaging and appealing offerings seems likely to contribute to their high rates of enrollment and provide examples of promising practices to other sites nationwide.

Enrollment Supports

For families ready to enroll their children in prekindergarten, the final access point is enrollment. Enrollment processes can vary substantially but often include application, registration, and waitlist procedures, along with related requirements such as health checks and vaccinations. Parents and

stakeholders in all four study sites agreed that enrollment was generally straightforward and well supported but said that it may still deter some families. As a result, the administrators of these programs with unusually high participation rates continue pursuing efforts to streamline and facilitate enrollment.

We found **substantial variation** in enrollment processes both within and between the study sites (table 4). Applications are organized centrally by the school districts in Dearborn, King County, and Atlanta; in Houston, families apply at individual schools, which differ in their application timelines and leniency in assessing required documentation. Families apply in person in Dearborn, King County, and Houston; those in Atlanta complete an online application and then, if chosen by the program lottery, register at their selected school sites. Dearborn and King County have long lists of risk-related eligibility criteria requiring documentation or direct assessment. Atlanta's program is open to all children regardless of risk status, and Houston's program allows children to qualify based on their inability to speak or understand English, which many immigrant and refugee parents found easy to demonstrate. Dearborn closes its pre-K program for several days to allow staff to focus on enrollment; although the other programs stay open for extended hours during enrollment, they may have less staff available to support applying families. These variations have costs and benefits. For example, several parents found Atlanta's online application system (along with its supporting language access hotline) user friendly, but a few felt it could be difficult for people without internet access, those with limited English skills, and those with low levels of literacy in any language (see also Adams and Matthews 2013). Parents in other sites proposed moving more of the process online to solve the logistical burden of visiting programs in person. An enrollment process incorporating multiple approaches is likely to be most effective at meeting the needs of all families.

TABLE 4

Pre-K Program Application and Enrollment Processes

	Dearborn, MI	Atlanta, GA	King County, WA	Houston, TX
Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ eligibility determination paperwork and birth certificate ■ immunization record ■ proof of residency ■ proof of income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ proof of child's birth ■ parent ID ■ proof of residency ■ child's Social Security card or waiver ■ proof of health insurance ■ immunization record ■ screening records for vision, hearing, and dental 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ eligibility determination paperwork ■ proof of child's birth ■ proof of income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ eligibility determination paperwork (with included eligibility check by school personnel) ■ birth certificate ■ photocopy of parent ID ■ proof of residency ■ proof of income
Process	Families apply in person during one of two enrollment periods (May or September). Programs are closed to facilitate enrollment. Staff grant flexibility in collecting required documentation.	Families select up to three preferred schools, then complete an online application. If accepted, families are notified through email. To enroll, families bring in paperwork and register at school sites or at the pre-K office. Staff grant flexibility in collecting required documentation.	Families turn in applications and complete interviews with support staff during the enrollment period, then bring in any additional required paperwork. Families also complete goals, strengths, and needs worksheets with family support staff at the time of enrollment.	Registration occurs during the spring before the academic school year begins. Parents contact the school of interest to determine application due date. Schools vary in their enrollment timelines and processes.
Location	Central location	Online application online with enrollment at central location and school sites	Central location	School sites

Sources: Authors' email communications with preschool program administrators in Dearborn, Atlanta, and King County. In Houston, "Eligibility, Applications and Registration," Houston Independent School District, accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.houstonisd.org/Page/126445>.

Across these disparate systems, parents generally felt that enrollment was **clear, streamlined**, and even **"easy."** Paperwork and other documentation requirements often resembled those for higher grades, so parents with older children were accustomed to compiling the necessary materials and making time for submission. Parents reported generally clear and reasonable timelines and the ability to return if their application packages were incomplete. Many parents made use of language and other accessibility supports, such as in-person translation. One stakeholder described the importance of having multiple language accommodations: "We've learned they may not be literate in their home language, so it doesn't help that [enrollment documents] are translated because they're not able to read in their home language." A few parents reported insufficient support for peers with low levels of literacy in any language.

Stakeholders discussed the years of innovation that went into imbuing enrollment processes with **flexibility**. Specifically, although a discrete set of application materials were often labeled as requirements, parents made use of waivers, substitutes, or extensions included in official district policy. In Atlanta, family-friendly enrollment processes were intended to meet the needs of low-income US-born parents with high residential mobility but also worked well for immigrant and refugee families. Administrators in other sites developed accommodations specifically for children of immigrants who may have passports but not birth certificates, for example, or undocumented parents who have difficulty providing standardized proof of income. “We have policies and procedures in place,” one administrator said, “but we have ‘plan Bs’ in the event that immigrant families don’t have a document.” Another said, “We’ve purchased handheld scanners [to upload documents on the go] and everything to support families...we had the whole staff become notaries so that wouldn’t be a barrier.” When families are really struggling, said one administrator, “sometimes they will come to us with the empty forms and we’ll help them fill out those forms.” Another added, “Even if they miss [the deadline], we still have chances for them to make up enrollment. ...There’s always an opportunity to not miss out.” These efforts required substantial investment of resources and time, along with trial and error to gauge their effectiveness.

Despite these positive perspectives on enrollment, some **challenges** remain that parents experience directly or indirectly. Said one pre-K mother, “I laughed because they asked for everything. ...Social Security number, everything. I’m just going to enroll my child, not sell him.” Other parents pointed to the required health checks, vaccinations, and medical documentation and how meeting these requirements could pose a barrier to working families. “I do know of people for whom they are challenging because the mom and the dad work,” said one unenrolled parent. “Even getting a physical is challenging. It takes the whole day to go to the doctor.” Overcoming these barriers is difficult because they are connected to organizations and individuals far outside the pre-K system, including pediatricians’ offices and children’s health insurance providers, and may have financial implications depending on the parents’ insurance status. For other common barriers, including documentation of the families’ home address, parents felt that greater accommodation by pre-K administrators would be beneficial.

Stakeholders across the study sites acknowledged these and other enrollment barriers and affirmed their commitment to address them. Enrollment, one said, is “a real challenge for a lot of parents.” They added, “We try to streamline [the process, but that] was trading one set of barriers for another.” For example, moving enrollment online removes barriers related to having parents visit programs in person during operating hours but limits access for families without internet or with significant literacy or language challenges. Administrators mentioned future plans to expand enrollment supports, including

providing additional accommodations for undocumented families, moving more application and registration materials (if not procedures) online, and bringing laptops into residential communities to support these activities. This commitment to continuous improvement, more than any single approach, aligned with the recommendations and needs of parents in diverse and changing communities.

Finally, we note that all the programs we visited had **waitlists** for at least at some school sites and communities. Capacity constraints add an additional dimension to enrollment, and several families we interviewed had experienced, or knew peers who experienced, the challenge of meeting application requirements only to be denied a spot for their children. Stakeholders working to improve enrollment procedures should remain aware of parents' concerns about enrollment outcomes and gauge their willingness to apply for programs with limited capacity.

Program Resources, Financing, and Leadership

We selected the four study sites because of their high rates of prekindergarten enrollment among immigrant families and their dedicated efforts to achieve this outcome. This section examines what we learned about the resources and financing approaches and leadership in each of these sites that allowed them to carry out these strategies with qualified staff, appropriate facilities, and sufficient supplies.

Parents appreciated the benefits of sufficient **program funding**, including attractive schools and classrooms, abundant learning materials, and well-compensated staff, but had little context for the public and private investments that made their prekindergarten experiences possible. They especially appreciated that pre-K in the study sites is completely and in all circumstances free. Said one enrolled parent, "This is the best program. They don't ask for anything." Many others, both enrolled and unenrolled, said even small fees or charges would pose major barriers to access and continued participation for low-income immigrant and refugee families.

Stakeholders provided detailed descriptions of the **program design features and financing mechanisms** underlying these public prekindergarten initiatives. Some of these mechanisms were formalized by the original program creators, including past governors and state legislative bodies, and others arose to adapt to changing family needs. Programs in these sites generally supplemented state pre-K dollars with local district general funds, federal Title I and Head Start funds, district resources for family support workers and world languages departments, and philanthropic resources generated through district-led fundraising efforts. We heard from several stakeholders about the significance of local funding, which ensured pay parity for pre-K and K-12 teachers, transformed half-day slots to full-

day slots, and paid for public school busing. Importantly, these funding features also provided programs with the resources necessary to provide pre-K free of cost.

Stakeholders in all sites cited **leadership** from state and district officials in setting the policies and providing the resources that shaped their programs. In Texas, for example, state rules defined limited English proficiency status as a priority category for program eligibility, opening access to many children of immigrants. State and local leadership across the sites also aided the provision and targeting of resources to immigrant communities. Said one district pre-K administrator, “We are operating in an environment where our state has really put their energy behind creating a program that is successful and affordable.” Another stakeholder in the same site added, “When you have someone at the very top who is committed to early learning like our superintendent is, things will happen. We get a lot of support.” Several stakeholders, including district administrators and school staff, felt that motivated leaders were themselves resources for pre-K programs. They explained how such leaders established high expectations for personnel, secured and made efficient use of resources, and encouraged programs to use data for quality improvement. These approaches can benefit access and enrollment efforts by forming positive early impressions among families and were visible across all four sites.

“We’ve done customer service training for all our office staff...front office staff are the first face for families. We’ve done lots of work with secretaries, bus drivers, custodians about positive customer service. ...We acknowledge we’re not a perfect organization—we’re not perfect people—but I feel as if everybody is trying 100 percent every day to truly get it right for kids...and then we work backward from student to family in order to support families with whatever might be needed at home.”

—Preschool stakeholder

In addition to innovative approaches to funding, a commitment to **continuous quality improvement** defined all programs in this study. Leaders in one site were particularly vocal about this commitment and the central role that families played in setting the goals of quality improvement efforts.

Despite having unusual access to resources, pre-K programs in the study sites still had to make **trade-offs** in how they served children and families. All programs offered services at no cost but generally had an insufficient supply of open slots, leading to waiting lists and instances where slots were

available only in locations inconvenient for immigrant families. They emphasized investments in quality over quantity and lobbied for increased resources to fund both but sometimes came up short. Constraints were generally caused by a lack of space or funding for slots, rather than a lack of qualified teaching staff. In community-based pre-K programs, stakeholders and families often missed out on resources provided by school districts or gained through district collaborations, including those with other early learning programs, that brought additional funds to school-based settings.

Despite state pre-K funding nationwide reaching record levels (Barnett et al. 2017), interviews with stakeholders and parents suggest that current resources are still inadequate to meet demand—even in sites like King County that benefit from support from the Gates Foundation and others. The four study sites illustrate promising practices in braiding and blending public funds and leveraging outside resources for further supplementation. As we describe in the next section, they also make use of external partnerships to secure additional resources.

Organization and Agency Partnerships

The four study sites made extensive use of partnerships with organizations and individuals to help expand access to preschool, a strategy also used by other programs across the country (Adams and McDaniel 2012b; Gelatt, Adams, and Huerta 2014; Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016). The sites varied in their approaches to these partnerships, which were often contingent on the size of their communities and personal connections between pre-K administrators and leaders in other sectors.

Parents described **direct and indirect experiences** with partnerships, with some variation in whether they felt organizations and agencies outside of pre-K helped promote enrollment. For several families, their encounters were seamlessly integrated into everyday life. Parents had referrals to and from partner agencies, including immigrant-serving community-based organizations, early intervention specialists, and Head Start. One parent explained how she learned about a variety of early learning options: “Whenever I go to the clinic...I like to take a look at the flyers to see what type of information they’ve put up.” Many other parents discussed their experiences with partnerships within school districts between pre-K and birth-to-3 programs, elementary schools, and adult literacy initiatives. Houston’s Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters program, administered by the school district, offers a particularly successful example of integration across educational agencies. There, home visiting for parents of 3- to 5-year-olds, with services available in Spanish and English, provided a pipeline to pre-K.

As stakeholders explained, a wide variety of **trusted organizations** engaged in two-way referrals with pre-K. Immigrant-serving groups were natural collaborators; as one administrator said, “Their families are our families. They’re kind of a gateway for many families relative to services, food, shelter, clothing.” A leader in one of these groups situated in the same site concurred: “There is that communication back and forth. That took some time too, but we realized early on we need to take our services outside of our physical space...we need to go into the schools.” In addition to outreach and direct service, immigrant-serving community-based organizations also provided trainings for pre-K administrators and staff, filling gaps in school and district knowledge. Stakeholders in several sites found religious organizations to be “a great untapped resource” both for sharing information about pre-K programs and for facilitating continued participation after enrollment (see also Adams and McDaniel 2012b). They also noted “the expanding role that libraries are playing in new American integration,” along with the resources available through organizations that supply basic needs (e.g., food pantries and clothing donation sites), health and dental programs, mental health networks, Women, Infants, and Children offices, local colleges and universities, and nonprofits like United Way and the YMCA. Confirming what we heard from parents, pre-K administrators cited numerous partnerships with adult ESL programs, other early childhood programs (especially Head Start), world languages departments, and so on. In several sites, administrators found local businesses to be a valuable source for funding and donations as well.

“I don’t think there’s ever an organization I’ve approached about doing something that’s ever said no.”

—Preschool stakeholder

Refugee resettlement agencies stand out as a potential partner for prekindergarten stakeholders, though their involvement with pre-K is uneven (see also Morland et al. 2016). Although they have direct access to families with young children, they also have competing demands on their time and resources. A stakeholder in one site said, “[Refugee resettlement workers] are firefighters. ...So for them to even stop and think, ‘There is this additional thing [pre-K] that is very beneficial for clients; it doesn’t have to do with an apartment or employment, but in the long run it will benefit them’...[requires a] shift in perceptions.” Additional outreach by schools and districts, keeping in mind the legal requirements of resettlement and the voluntary nature of pre-K, may be required to improve connections with refugee families. Resettlement agencies can also provide other services. Another stakeholder said partnerships

between the school district and these agencies “inform us about placement trends in refugee kids.” Strategic information sharing can make the best use of available resources without taxing resettlement staff already struggling with large caseloads and program requirements.

Stakeholders leveraged **social networks** within immigrant and refugee communities as often as they did formal organizational partnerships. In Dearborn and Houston, several generations of immigration and upward mobility have created a wealth of resources available through personal connections. As one pre-K administrator shared, “The adults that lead these organizations are local residents, businessmen and women [who] came to this country many years ago or recently or were born here. ...They want to celebrate their heritage and give back to families.” Pre-K staff often leveraged ties to agency and organizational leaders for maximum benefit. Said one staff member, “I think we’re fortunate that we have a really good team. We reach out to each other first when needing a resource. Some people have better strengths in finding resources for homelessness or food, whatever. It’s using who you have in our community.” Though personal ties may be challenging to develop and ultimately temporary, coming and going as individual partners change positions, they can also be highly effective.

Despite their general success, many stakeholders identified **gaps** in their approaches to **forging connections** with outside organizations. This was especially true for larger sites, where ties between district administration and schools, among school district departments, and across education agencies and other institutions may be weakest. Partnerships were more prevalent and easier to establish in a small, tight-knit suburb like Dearborn than in a large, sprawling city like Houston. Stakeholders in both settings, however, suggested that schools and school districts consider pursuing partnerships in tandem, maximizing resources available at the neighborhood, county, and even state or national levels. In the four study sites, as in communities nationwide, additional institutional collaboration can help address the needs of immigrant and refugee families and remove barriers to pre-K access.

Immigration Policy Contexts: Local, State, and National

We conclude by examining the implications of changing local, state, and federal immigration policies during our data collection period. The implications were far-reaching, affecting the families we studied, the programs that served them, and our research efforts.

Data collection for this project occurred between November 2016 and February 2017. It began the week after the 2016 presidential election and continued through President Trump’s inauguration and

the subsequent shifts in federal policies on immigration and refugee resettlement. Changes during the study period included

- one executive order that expands priority categories and enforcement around deportation, expands collaboration between Immigration and Customs Enforcement and local law enforcement, and threatens funding for “sanctuary jurisdictions”;¹⁷
- one executive order focused on increasing security on the southern border;¹⁸ and
- the repeated proposal, stoppage, and restart of travel bans on immigration from some majority Muslim countries.

As a result of these changes, we interviewed parents and stakeholders in a policy climate primarily characterized by uncertainty—one likely to affect their children’s home lives and mental health both directly and indirectly (Cervantes and Walker 2017). During this period, state immigration policy contexts shifted too. In particular, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas withdrew from the federal refugee resettlement program in September 2016 and endorsed Senate Bill 4, which enlists a variety of public agencies in immigration enforcement and allows agency officials to ask for documentation; the bill passed in May 2017, but most of its provisions were subject to preliminary injunction in August 2017 following a lawsuit raised by Houston and other cities. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals heard the case in November 2017, and a decision was pending at time of publication.¹⁹

Many parents expressed **fear** in response to current policy rhetoric at the national level and, in Georgia and Texas, at the state level. Whether this fear posed a barrier to enrollment and participation in prekindergarten seemed to vary across sites and individual families, and what we heard was likely shaped by which parents were willing and able to attend our interviews. Across all sites, local communities, including local schools, were seen as safe and trusted places. Likewise, parents with whom we spoke, particularly in Dearborn and King County, expressed trust in American government, compared with the governments of their home countries. In the United States, “nobody is above the law,” said one King County father. “You’re not supposed to care about [who the president is]. You’re not supposed to be scared to send your kid to school. ...This is the United States...everybody is protected by the law, no matter where they come from, religion too...everybody is protected by the law.” Other parents argued that current contexts made education, including pre-K, even more important for their children’s futures. However, we also heard concerns about requests for documentation during application and about driving to school. One mother discussing enrollment said, “You have to drive. What if a cop stops me? Or what if there are cops near the school?” Another parent in the same focus group added, “And it’s not required, so why risk it?” These parents had already enrolled in pre-K, but

they suggested that others—this year and in future years—may weigh risks differently as policies and enforcement procedures continue to evolve.

Stakeholders largely understood parents' fear and distrust and differentiated between safe local communities and schools and the changing federal context. Those in Dearborn and King County felt proud of their welcoming state and county approaches to immigration and refugee resettlement. In Atlanta and Houston, stakeholders explained that state contexts made it more challenging for them to be welcoming toward immigrant families. Those in Atlanta described a long history of restrictive state immigration policies, including House Bill 87 (2011) and the implementation of E-Verify, as well as ongoing tensions between state and city leaders around Atlanta's own welcoming efforts. Stakeholders in Houston cited several recent immigration and refugee policy changes, summarized above, as well as growing talk of immigration raids in neighborhoods across the city as a result of recent executive orders from the federal government.

In all sites, pre-K administrators expressed **uncertainty** and **concern** about how preschool enrollment might change next year despite no observable drops at the time of our interviews. They described the trust they had built with families and communities and the desire to maintain that trust. "Things have moved pretty quickly," one said, "and we really want to sort of encapsulate our families and keep them safe as much as we can and as soon as we can." Nevertheless, one pre-K administrator reported, "One parent told me she volunteers at the elementary school, but with the background check and fingerprints, she won't go back any more. That would be something she thinks twice about...to protect herself." Stakeholders noted growing fear particularly among undocumented and mixed status families. Those in immigrant-serving community-based organizations described efforts to educate parents by bringing in attorneys to explain recent changes and their implications for children and families. For their part, preschool program administrators have launched information campaigns to clarify that pre-K is administered by the state and local school districts despite often receiving federal funds. Together, local stakeholders were working to provide a sense of safety and certainty within rapidly changing immigration policy contexts.

Conclusion

Even as children of immigrants grow as a share of all American children, they continue to follow historic patterns of underenrollment in preschool in many communities nationwide (Hanson, Adams, and Koball 2016; Karoly and Gonzalez 2011; Mamedova and Redford 2015). This study focuses on four unusual communities where gaps in access have narrowed or even closed: Dearborn, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; King County, Washington; and Houston, Texas. Interviews with parents and stakeholders in these sites provide insights on promising practices and highlight remaining barriers related to expanding prekindergarten access through parental knowledge and preferences; language access (including translation and literacy supports); program logistics (including hours and schedules, locations, and transportation); welcoming efforts; enrollment supports; program resources, financing, and leadership; organization and agency partnerships; and immigration policy contexts (local, state, and national).

Our findings demonstrate that state and local pre-K programs can expand access for low-income immigrant and refugee families. By combining innovative and traditional strategies with a commitment to continuous quality improvement, programs can reach a large number of families and begin building what is effectively a network of parent ambassadors and program advocates. Enrollment rates are likely high in the four selected study sites because of success along several access dimensions. But other programs need not attend to all dimensions at the same time. Instead, focusing on any one dimension—for example, language access, welcoming efforts, or organization and agency partnerships—before addressing others is likely to increase enrollment and foster continued participation.

We find that there is no single best approach to expanding preschool access. Instead, a mix of strategies and a willingness to revisit and adapt them to changing populations and conditions is key. But even in sites with unusually high rates of preschool participation, some barriers are harder to overcome than others. Families very new to the US are particularly likely to lack the social networks that commonly spread information and recommendations about public pre-K. Families whose first children are of preschool age may not yet be linked to schools and school districts that typically conduct outreach. Families from low-incidence immigrant and refugee groups and those with undocumented or mixed status members may approach public programs like pre-K with greater distrust and fear than families from larger and less vulnerable communities. Trust underlies many of the most successful strategies profiled in this report, and trust can be undermined by changing political contexts, even when these contexts are set by policymakers at the state and national level.

Key Study Recommendations

Findings from this study support 10 recommendations for state and local policymakers working to expand preschool access for children of immigrants.

- **Building trust is essential.** Parents seek preschool options that are safe and welcoming, and their trust in staff and in programs grows when they are invited into classrooms, engaged in developing culturally responsive programming, and invited to help shape efforts to improve quality and expand access to new families in their communities.
- **There is no one best approach.** The programs we profile addressed multiple barriers to preschool access for children of immigrants, but they differed in which barriers they addressed and the strategies they adopted to do so. Their solutions often involved policy innovation, but they also refined basic program features and resource allocations over time.
- **Start small.** Two of the programs we profile started with a single school and grew as building space and resources became available. The other two programs had undergone recent expansions. They all began with dedicated staff and a commitment to serving all children. As immigrant families enrolled, those parents became ambassadors for the programs and immigrant enrollment grew rapidly.
- **Leverage all available resources.** Although this report profiles state pre-K programs, all four sites supplemented state pre-K funding with local school district funds. Some sites integrated federal resources available through Head Start and Title I, and some benefited from philanthropic gifts. Where funds were not available directly, program administrators also relied on staff and facilities funded from outside the pre-K system (e.g., from district departments for world languages or family engagement) to make the best use of pre-K dollars.
- **Preschool programs cannot do it alone.** Partnerships are essential for initial program outreach and also provide important supports for continued participation. Promising partners may come from other district and state education agencies, immigrant-serving community-based organizations, religious institutions, libraries, health and mental health agencies, and a variety of other groups, depending on the community.
- **Support the whole family.** Preschool focuses on the growth and development of young children, but the four sites reached out to parents and siblings as well. Staff connected families to community resources, collaborated with immigrant and refugee institutions, and think of

enrolled children as their own. As a result, many parents we interviewed see preschool as an extension of their homes.

- **Commit to continuous improvement.** The study sites described a “customer service approach” they use to regularly gauge families’ satisfaction, adjust program features, and seek out new resources to meet evolving needs. Families we spoke to could sense this commitment and felt welcome to participate in the process.
- **Leadership is key and can come from any level.** This study focuses on school and district leaders who make innovative use of available funds to serve specific immigrant and refugee communities. But state leadership in both education and immigration policy can affect the resources and policy priorities that shape families’ preschool experiences too. Classroom teachers also have a role to play in engaging children and parents, especially those who are among the first in their community to enroll.
- **Mind the gaps.** Even in sites with unusually high preschool participation among immigrant families, we identify unmet need. New arrivals to the US often lack the type of social networks that share information about preschool. Families may learn about pre-K through elementary schools but miss out on enrollment for their firstborn. Waitlists observed in every site demonstrate uneven or insufficient capacity overall.
- **Consider preschool within the broader immigrant experience.** This study was conducted during a period of changing immigration policy and enforcement. We observed uncertainty regarding these changes but could not gauge additional effects because of the timing of data collection. Given the importance of building trust, these changes are likely to shape future efforts to expand preschool access and participation for children of immigrants.

Looking Forward

We conducted this study during a period in the history of US immigration policy likely to have long-term consequences for immigrant and refugee families. In both parent and stakeholder interviews, participants’ responses—and nonresponses—often reflected uncertainty, with differences by site and (likely, though we cannot confirm) by parents’ documentation status. Our findings are also shaped by the context of our research. As one enrolled parent shared, “When I got the letter inviting us here [to the focus group] as immigrant parents, my husband was telling me, ‘Don’t go! Maybe it’s immigration.’”

He even called me this morning telling me, ‘If you are going to go, bring your green card.’” In another site, a stakeholder explained, “I think families feel safe in the community, but...even when I was asking families to participate in [the focus group], they had to think twice. I had to use another way to explain it to them instead of using immigrants because they automatically associated it with the [current] situation.”

Despite these changing contexts, the enrolled parents we spoke with unanimously advised their peers in other communities to enroll in public pre-K—and stakeholders agreed. Said one parent, “Lose the fear. That way they won’t lose a whole year of learning.” Another parent shared the importance of preschool to children’s long-term growth and development, saying, “You come from another country to succeed, so your children don’t live what you are living. It’s your responsibility to have an objective for them so they can succeed in life.” The stakeholders in our study take this responsibility seriously. “As soon as those kids walk into your classroom, they are your children,” said one program administrator. “They are your family forever. I think that’s important to remember.” Another emphasized the human connection inherent in early childhood education: “Know that you’re there to serve them and provide a service to them and their families and that we’re all human...we all want someone to help us, be honest with us, be supportive of us...embrace [us], be willing to work with them with integrity and honesty.” They added, “When you’re committed and demonstrate that passion to support [pre-K] families, it is contagious.”

Appendix A. Data and Methods

Once we selected the four sites for this study, we worked to identify the most relevant stakeholders in each site to become our partners in this research. Because school districts are commonly the largest providers of state-funded pre-K, we focused on their outreach strategies and the experiences of families living in their catchment areas. Over several months, we reached out to key staff in district pre-K and English-language learner offices, held initial discussions about their programs and the children they serve, went through official research review processes, and began planning our week-long site visits. All four sites we approached agreed to participate, and key staff supported our information gathering and planning phases. These staff recommended people and organizations to add to our interviewee lists, coordinated scheduling with those they knew, recruited parents of children enrolled in their programs to participate in our small-group interviews, and hosted us in their buildings. Our final sample of 106 stakeholders included school district administrators, principals, teachers, family support staff, social workers, and representatives from immigrant-serving organizations (those targeted at specific populations, those serving immigrants from a variety of countries, and those serving a general population that included a large number of immigrants), refugee resettlement agencies, and community-based organizations running pre-K or Head Start programs.

School districts helped us identify up to three schools in each site to focus on, informed by their pre-K classroom locations, immigrant populations, and willingness to participate. We then worked with school leaders to recruit respondents for our small-group interviews with parents whose 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in pre-K and to identify convenient dates and times. We also worked with key immigrant-serving organizations to recruit parents of 3- and 4-year-old children not enrolled in pre-K. These organizations reached out to clients fitting this description, helped us select convenient dates and times, and hosted the small-group interviews. We spoke with a total of 134 parents from a variety of countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mexico, Peru, Somalia, and Yemen.

Site visits took place from November 2016 to February 2017 lasting one week for each site. We conducted 3–4 small-group interviews with parents and 8–10 interviews with stakeholders in each site. Interviews were guided by standard protocols developed by the research team based on prior work in Silicon Valley and other areas with large immigrant populations (Adams and McDaniel 2012a; Gelatt, Adams, and Huerta 2014; Greenberg, Adams, and Michie 2016). Interviews began with a broad overview of the study and informed consent procedures. Researchers then proceeded through main questions, each with subquestions and points for probing, to gauge both broad and deep perspectives

on strategies and opportunities for enrolling low-income immigrant families and any remaining barriers to preschool participation. In addition, researchers responded flexibly to participants' insights, often reordering the protocol, requesting clarification, or eliciting additional information. Accordingly, interviews were semistructured to best and most efficiently use stakeholders' and parents' expertise. Small-group interviews with parents were conducted in Arabic in Dearborn and in Spanish in Houston and Atlanta. In King County, we conducted one small-group interview in Spanish; the other two were conducted in English with the help of professional interpreters in Somali, Amharic, and Punjabi. Two junior researchers took verbatim notes on almost all stakeholder interviews, which were later cleaned. A few stakeholder interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a junior researcher, and a small number were conducted over the phone. All small-group interviews with parents were digitally recorded then transcribed (and translated, as needed) by a junior researcher.

Data were analyzed using NVivo 10, a qualitative software program designed to help manage, structure, and analyze qualitative data through functions that support the classification, sorting, and comparing of text units. We imported all cleaned transcripts into NVivo and coded all documents using a coding scheme matched to the protocols. Our coding structure was developed based on our past work in Silicon Valley and modified to accommodate the large volume of data collected for this project. When necessary, we reshaped or added codes to capture emergent themes in the interview data. In addition, many passages were classified under multiple codes to signify their relevance to more than one theme.

Analysis began with a junior researcher reviewing each code, tabulating responses, and synthesizing shared perspectives and insights while identifying contextual factors specific to each site. This informed an analytical document summarizing respondent thoughts on each topic, broken out by specific types of respondents. The research team created an outline based on these analyses and discussed this outline both internally and with our project officer. Her questions, points for clarification, and initial reactions guided the refinement of the draft outline and the preparation of this report. Experts both within and outside our study team shared insights on the initial version, spurring additional discussion and improvements.

Appendix B. Photographs from the Study Sites



All photos of study sites taken by the research team.



All photos of study sites taken by the research team.

Notes

- ¹ Cary Lou, Devlin Hanson, Gina Adams, and Audrey Singer, “10 Characteristics of Preschool-Age Children,” Urban Institute, September 2017, <http://apps.urban.org/features/characteristics-of-preschool-age-children/>.
- ² “Gateways for Growth,” Gateways for Growth, accessed February 1, 2018, <http://gatewaysforgrowth.org>; Devlin Hanson, and Karina Fortuny, “Children of Immigrants Data Tool,” Urban Institute, accessed November 2017, <http://datatool.urban.org/charts/datatool/pages.cfm>.
- ³ Long-term destinations are those with a higher share of children of immigrants than the nation as a whole as of 2006. High-change sites had greater growth in the share of children of immigrants versus children of US-born parents than the nation as a whole between 2006 and 2013. Site diversity was captured in two measures: one indicates whether the majority of immigrant parents come from the same geographic region, and the second indicates whether each of three or more groups (as defined by geographic region of origin) make up at least 15 percent of the immigrant population.
- ⁴ All statistics provided through email communications with district administrators in July 2017.
- ⁵ All statistics provided through email communications with district administrators in September 2017.
- ⁶ All statistics provided through email communications with district administrators in September 2017.
- ⁷ “School District Locator,” Texas Education Agency, accessed February 5, 2018, https://tea.texas.gov/Texas_Schools/General_Information/School_District_Locator/School_District_Locator/.
- ⁸ “Student Profile 2016-2017,” Houston Independent School District, accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.houstonisd.org/cms/lib2/TX01001591/Centricity/domain/8269/districtdataanalysis/schoolprofiles/2016-2017/Student%20Profile.pdf>.
- ⁹ “Multilingual Programs,” Houston Independent School District, accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.houstonisd.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=8037&ModuleInstanceID=173021&ViewID=047E6BE3-6D87-4130-8424-D8E4E9ED6C2A&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=192920&PageID=31871>.
- ¹⁰ “Student Profile 2016-2017,” Houston Independent School District.
- ¹¹ “Eligibility, Applications and Registration,” Houston Independent School District, accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.houstonisd.org/Page/126445>.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ “Student Profile 2016-2017,” Houston Independent School District.
- ¹⁴ “Pre K Eligibility and Attendance,” Texas Education Agency, accessed February 5, 2018, https://tea.texas.gov/Academics/Early_Childhood_Education/Pre_K_Eligibility_and_Attendance.
- ¹⁵ For more information, see “Soy Bilingüe,” Center for Linguistic and Cultural Democracy,” accessed February 5, 2018, <http://www.culturaldemocracy.org/soy-bilingue/>.
- ¹⁶ Languages lines and professional interpretation services are available through local, national, and international firms. Stakeholders and parents noted trade-offs between in-person and by-phone options related to cost, quality, and accessibility of services. Many companies allowed for the direct request of specific languages and the option to put new clients on the phone so that professionals can help identify their preferred languages and match them with appropriate interpreters. These services are not new but have recently expanded in many locations to meet the needs of increasingly diverse populations.

¹⁷ “Executive Order: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States,” The White House, January 25, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-enhancing-public-safety-interior-united-states>.

¹⁸ “Executive Order: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements,” The White House, January 25, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-border-security-immigration-enforcement-improvements>.

¹⁹ For more information, see Julián Aguilar, “Texas back in federal court over anti-‘sanctuary cities’ law,” *Texas Tribune*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/11/07/texas-sanctuary-cities-law-federal-court/>.

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