



# Expanding Preschool Access for Children of Immigrants

## Executive Summary

*Erica Greenberg, Gina Adams, and Molly Michie*

*February 2018*

**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 study 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 study 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 study 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.

## About the Authors

**Erica Greenberg** is a senior research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population and the Education Policy Program at the Urban Institute. Her research spans issues of access, quality, and effectiveness across early childhood programs and policies, including state prekindergarten, Head Start, subsidized child care, and home visiting. She also examines inequality in K–12 education and the ways early intervention can address it.

**Gina Adams**, a senior fellow in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population, is a national expert on factors that shape the affordability, quality, and supply of child care/early education services and the ability of low-income families to benefit from them. She codirects the Kids in Context initiative.

**Molly Michie** is a former research associate II in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population, where she contributed to research on early care and education and other publicly funded programs designed to support children and youth.

## Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or influence scholars' conclusions. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at [urban.org/fundingprinciples](http://urban.org/fundingprinciples).

We are grateful to Chhandasi Pandya Patel for her insights and support, as well as to Hannah Matthews and the members of our larger project team—Heather Koball, Devlin Hanson, Audrey Singer, and bilingual team members Ellen Paddock and Juan Collazos—for their thoughtful input on study design and comments on earlier versions of this paper. Three professional interpreters in King County, Washington, were integral to this project as well. We would also like to thank the parents and stakeholders in early care and education, immigration, and social service provision in Dearborn, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; King County, Washington; and Houston, Texas, who shared the insights at the heart of this study. We are grateful for their time and reflections.

Thank you also to our colleagues at the Urban Institute who provided graphics, editorial, and dissemination support: Daniel Matos, Maura Friedman, Laura Greenback, Kate Villarreal, Katy Napotnik, Alexandra Tilsley, Rob Abare, and Stu Kantor.



2100 M Street NW  
Washington, DC 20037

[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

### ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Copyright © February 2018. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.