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**Massachusetts Universal  
Pre-Kindergarten (UPK)  
Pilot Program:  
FY08 Evaluation**

**Executive Summary**

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Massachusetts Department of Early  
Education and Care  
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# Executive Summary

In Fiscal Year 2007, the state budget included funding for the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) to pilot the Universal Prekindergarten program with the goal of ensuring that all children in the state have access to quality preschool and, as a result, promoting school readiness and positive outcomes for children, especially those at risk of poor developmental outcomes. All types of providers are included under the ‘umbrella’ of the state’s universal pre-kindergarten program, including child care centers, Head Start centers, public school district programs, and family child care. To achieve its goals of access to high-quality care, EEC has adopted the strategy of providing funding, through grants to eligible sites to spend in areas hypothesized to link to quality and, ultimately, to child outcomes. Exhibit 1 depicts the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Pilot Program, and the causal pathway leading from a comprehensive statewide system of quality preschool to child outcomes.

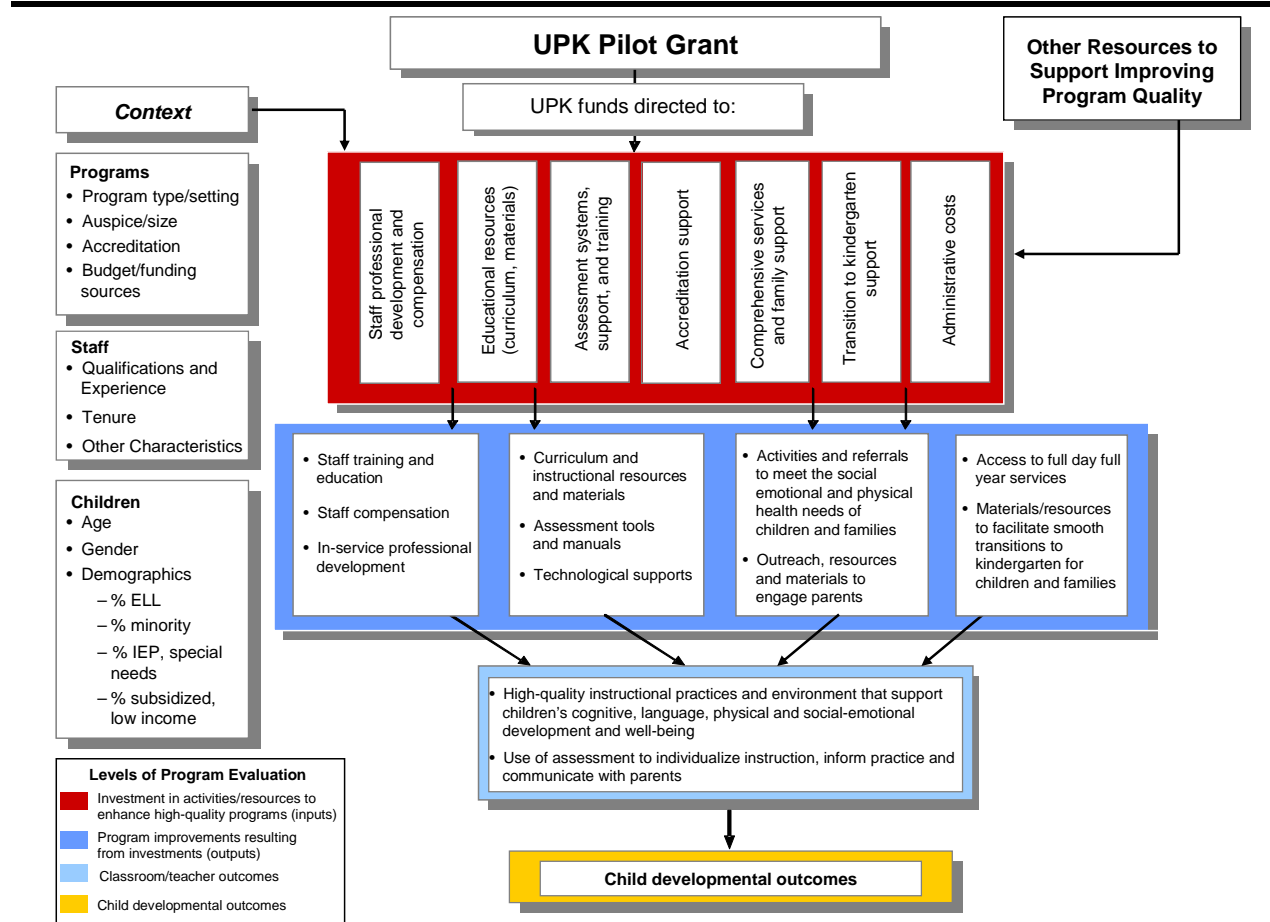
For the UPK Pilot Initiative, EEC established a set of specific eligibility criteria for the grants and solicited applications from early education programs and school districts across the Commonwealth through a competitive process. The grants were targeted to sites that demonstrated evidence of a commitment to higher quality practices, including use of a developmentally appropriate program, use of an approved assessment system, and national accreditation. In the first round of grants in FY07, 131 entities were selected to receive Classroom Quality grants; the first cohort of grantees included agencies representing child care centers (public and private, including Head Start centers), public school districts, agencies representing family child care homes, and independent family child care providers. The first cohort of grantees received continuing funding in FY08, assuming that they still met the eligibility criteria. In addition, a second cohort of 105 program sites and agencies received Classroom Quality grants in FY08. Grant amounts were based on the number of children served by the grantee and the proportion of children who were subsidized along with the hours of operation of the program. The state legislature appropriated \$4.6 million in the Fiscal Year 2007 budget for the Pilot Initiative, which was expanded to \$7.1 in Fiscal Year 2008, and further expanded in Fiscal Year 2009 to \$12.1 million.

EEC also funded this external evaluation of the implementation and early outcomes of its pilot grant program for UPK. The evaluation focuses on three primary questions about the grants:

- How did program/system administrators choose to allocate their grant funding to improve the quality of the program?
- What were the perceptions of administrators, teachers and family child care providers about improvements in quality since the grant funding was received; and, if there were improvements, how were they potentially linked to the grant funding?
- What are the areas where program needs remain?

The sample for the current evaluation are the grantees who received Classroom Quality grants for both of the first two years of the Pilot Initiative—a total of 126 program sites including 82 child care centers, 5 public school district prekindergarten programs, and 39 family child care homes. The data for the evaluation came from telephone and in-person interviews with respondents at both the agency level and site level (teachers and family child care providers) who received funds for quality improvements.

## Exhibit 1. Logic Model for the Massachusetts UPK Initiative



## Findings

### Characteristics of Grantees

The UPK grants were intended to target not only sites with higher quality but also sites serving children who could be considered at risk for poor developmental outcomes because their families were low income and programs in districts deemed to be underperforming by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). Overall, the majority of the children being served by the grantees (64%) were receiving financial assistance.<sup>1</sup> About 30% of the children were from homes where English was not the primary language spoken, and half of these children were characterized as having limited English proficiency. About 10% of the children were diagnosed special needs. The family child care homes had the highest proportion of subsidized children (over 80%) and the highest proportion of children from second language backgrounds (47%). The school district programs served fewer subsidized children (20%) but the highest proportion of special needs children (21%).

The UPK grants were intended to target sites with staff with relevant training and education. Among classroom teachers, the majority (75%) had a college degree. Among family child care providers,

<sup>1</sup> Financial assistance included vouchers, contracts, CPC funds, and Head Start funds.

although only a quarter had a college degree, the majority (67%) had a CDA certification. Also, nearly 70% of the family child care providers reported being able to speak the language of the children who came from second language homes.

### **Distribution of Grant Funds**

Grantees were given guidance on areas in which they were allowed to use their UPK grant funds, including curriculum and materials, professional development, staff compensation, expanded services, and some administrative costs. In the first year of the pilot program, funds were released late in the year, which meant that grantees only had two months to spend their awards. As a result, the largest proportion of the grant funds (46%) was used in areas where funds could be expended quickly, specifically educational materials and resources such as books, mathematics materials and gross motor equipment (Exhibit 2). The other area where a substantial proportion of grants were spent was staff compensation (24% of funding). Given more time to plan for and disperse their second year of funds (Fiscal Year 2008), the grantees allocated their grants differently. In the second year, expenditures for materials and curricula dropped to 28%, while expenditures for staff increased, including both staff compensation (31%) and professional development activities (16%). The most commonly reported professional development training topics were use of assessment systems, use of specific curricula, general child development, classroom management strategies, and serving children with special needs.

The center-based programs and the family child care providers allocated their grant funds somewhat differently. In the second year of funding in both child care centers and school district programs, half of the grant funds were allocated to staff and just over a quarter of the grant funds were used to buy materials or curricula. For the family child care homes, 40% of grant funds were used for materials and curricula and 40% of funds for staff expenditures. Notable was the spending by public school programs on extending the classroom day. This was not an area of expenditure for child care centers and family child care homes, which typically provide full-day care. Also, only the public school programs spent more than 10% of their grants to purchase assessments.

The majority of grantees reported that the grant funds resulted in improvements in the quality of their programs, in the areas where funds were allocated. The one exception was the area of staff expenditures, where grantees reported some improvement in their ability to hire staff or to compensate staff adequately but also felt that their programs were not able to finance their staffing needs sufficiently.

### **Remaining Program Needs**

Grantees were asked about how they would spend additional funds if they were to become available. Overall, the largest proportion of grantees indicated that they would use additional funding to invest in staff as the area of greatest need. Staff compensation was identified as the area of greatest need by 50% of family child care providers, 60% of public school programs, and 70% of child care centers. Professional development was also cited as an area of need for 48% of child care centers and 60% of family child care providers, although not for public school programs. In general, family child care providers identified more areas of need, including comprehensive services (possibly because homes are serving a high proportion of at-risk children) and material resources.

**Exhibit 2. Percentage of UPK Grant Funds Allocated to Quality Improvement Areas by Type of Grantee<sup>a</sup>**

Expenditure Category	Overall (All Grantees)		Center-based Grantees		Family Child Care System Grantees		Public School Grantees	
	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008
<b>Expenditures for education/instruction</b>	46%	28%	46%	26%	45%	40%	47%	27%
Assessment	16%	10%	15%	10%	13%	7%	34%	17%
Curricula/educational materials	29%	14%	30%	13%	29%	27%	13%	6%
Support for obtaining accreditation	1%	4%	1%	4%	3%	5%	1%	5%
<b>Expenditures on staff</b>	34%	48%	38%	49%	17%	40%	22%	48%
Staff compensation	24%	31%	27%	32%	11%	20%	20%	44%
Professional development	9%	16%	11%	17%	6%	20%	2%	4%
<b>Expenditures for program operations</b>	12%	17%	10%	18%	19%	10%	25%	23%
Comprehensive services	6%	9%	6%	10%	11%	4%	3%	13%
Full-day/full-year services	3%	2%	2%	2%	0%	0%	20%	6%
Administrative costs	3%	6%	2%	6%	8%	6%	2%	4%

<sup>a</sup> Percentages do not add to 100% across education, staff and program operations because respondents did not always have access to all necessary records.

## Implications and Next Steps

Overall, grantee attitudes about the Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten Pilot Program were extremely positive. Reports by grantees indicate that the grant monies went to the program areas most likely to lead to meaningful differences for children—high-quality curricula, systematic assessment, and staff support through professional development and compensation. Based on grantee responses, the UPK pilot initiative is successful in its implementation and achievement of its initial goal of promoting high-quality early childhood education for children in the Commonwealth. The evaluation also highlighted aspects of the UPK program that merit additional consideration, including raising parent awareness of UPK and its benefits, potential shifts in the targeting of funds, addressing widespread concern about staff compensation, training around child assessment and use of curricula, and developing strategies for raising quality in specific types of early childhood care settings, including those not ready to participate in UPK.

### Targeting Allocation of Funds

The fact that, given sufficient planning time, grantees allocated more of their funding to professional development for staff and for staff compensation, underlines programs' recognition that (a) staff are a critical, if not the most important feature in determining the quality of a program, (b) investments in staff require some long-range planning, and (c) unlike materials, needs in the area of support for staff cannot be met on a one-time basis but are a continuing part of quality. It also suggests that, over time, programs can become more sophisticated about targeting their funding to what are, arguably, the area of highest priority for quality—investments in staff. The findings suggest the need for consideration of different

allocation guidelines for different stages in funding, with more flexibility initially for grantees and requiring a more targeted spending plan in later years of funding.

### **High Priority for Investments in Staff**

Many respondents said the ability to invest in staff compensation had a noticeable effect on morale and job satisfaction as well as staff retention of current teachers and providers. A direct implication for program quality is the ability for agencies to retain more highly educated staff. Many programs gave bonuses to teachers with bachelor's degrees which had a two-fold effect. First, the bonuses were an incentive for teachers to stay in their programs instead of looking for higher paying jobs elsewhere. Second, bonuses to bachelor's-level teachers may have created an incentive for teachers with associate's degrees to obtain a bachelor's.

With regard to hiring of new staff, grantees reported being able to offer more competitive salaries to more highly educated/qualified teachers. Respondents also described the effect of adding staff to the classrooms as lowering child-teacher ratios, increasing personalized attention to children, addressing diversity/language/cultural needs, hiring substitute teachers so that teachers could more frequently participate in professional development opportunities, and hiring education coordinators and coaches/mentors to provide assistance for improving teaching skills.

### **Promoting High-Quality Practices in use of Assessment and Curricula**

Respondents were pleased with the improvements the UPK grant funds afforded in the areas of assessment and curriculum. The updated assessments allowed for better individualized instruction, better communication with parents and suggestions for lesson plans. Increased documentation resulting from the upgraded assessments resulted in a deeper understanding and insight by the teachers and the parents. Program administrators were able to see larger trends in educational needs within centers, and the information was less piecemeal and more effective in higher-level decision-making.

With regard to curricula and educational materials, respondents were very outspoken about their appreciation for the enhancements to the classrooms and programs overall. They said that the new materials are helping to support children's learning in the areas of math, science and literacy. Many of the materials not only replaced outdated and broken equipment, they also help with accreditation requirements.

Research tells us that high-fidelity implementation of scientifically-based curricula is most likely if staff are given in-class mentoring and coaching as well as group training. Further, increasing program use of assessments does not guarantee appropriate administration of assessments and use of data for planning instruction. Down the road, more attention to the best use of these resources and assistance in doing so may be necessary to move quality to the most meaningful levels.

### **Differences between Grantee Groups**

One of the goals of the MA UPK Program is to distribute grant funds through a mixed service delivery system—to child care centers, Head Start programs, public school districts, and family child care systems. Results from the implementation study suggest that there are some differences between the grantee groups on a number of dimensions:

- Populations served—family child care providers served a greater number of children coming from homes in which English is not the primary language or who are English language learners themselves and public school programs served a higher percentage of children with special needs
- Allocation of grant funds—relative to public school programs and family child care systems, a higher percentage of center-based programs allocated UPK funds to assessments, staff compensation and professional development. Further, relative to the other grantee types, a lower percentage of family child care systems allocated UPK funds to accreditation and full-day/full-year services. Lastly, a lower percentage of public school programs allocated funds to curricula and educational materials

Perceptions about impacts on quality improvement—relative to the other grantee types, a lower percentage of public school programs perceived quality improvement in professional development and comprehensive services resulting from UPK funds. Further, relative to center-based and public school programs, a lower percentage of family child care systems perceived quality improvements in curricula/educational materials and accreditation support resulting from UPK funds.

There were also differences in the degree of communication between the grant administrators and those working within the programs/systems, and, ultimately, the level of awareness of the source and goals of the grant funding. Family child care providers tended to have less information about the UPK pilot program than classroom teachers in center-based and public school programs. To realize the maximum benefit, programs might gain from further guidance about how to allocate funds in a way that targets the different populations served by the different agencies and systems.

### **Outreach to Parents**

Parental decision-making about child care and early education is a mix of pragmatic factors (cost, convenience, hours) and personal preferences (home-like, provider who speaks the same language as the family). While nearly all parents are very concerned about the quality of care for their children, their definition of quality does not match closely with aspects of the early childhood field’s definition. If we want parents to press for more quality, as part of a unified push toward environments that maximize children’s development and school readiness, we will have to develop better strategies for bringing them into the process. This is likely to be a long-range and important goal for the UPK program down the road.

### **Next Steps for UPK Initiative and for Evaluation**

According to grantees, the Massachusetts UPK Pilot Program was well received, funds were targeted to appropriate areas of need, and the implementation of the program was well executed. The vast majority of grantees reported quality improvements in all allowable expenditure categories, and in most cases, the grantees reported “substantial improvement in quality.” UPK funds were described by respondents as helpful, but in many cases they were reported to be insufficient to address pressing quality improvement needs.

## Recommendations for Programmatic Next Steps

As the UPK program moves out of the pilot phase, decisions will have to be made about (a) prioritizing continuing grants to current grantees versus adding new grantees, (b) targeting use of funds differently over time to grantees with continuing funds, (c) expanding funding to try to address the needs for deeper professional development, curriculum implementation, and provision of comprehensive services, (d) developing different strategies for programs not yet ready to participate in the UPK program, and (e) systematically informing and engaging parents. Recommendations for programmatic next steps are highlighted below.

### *Provide more quality-related technical assistance and training to all programs*

- Continue funding for high-quality program to ensure support for the level of program quality that research shows is necessary for positive child outcomes
- Continue to implement and align supports so that lower-quality programs become UPK-eligible

### *Refine guidelines for allowable areas of spending*

- give grantees more flexibility in initial years of funding
- require more targeted spending plan in subsequent years

### *Develop a plan specifically for family child care*

- First step—work with agencies to involve and educate providers about the UPK program and investment in quality care and education
- Next steps—devise a quality rating system and provide training and technical assistance based on ratings

### *Develop a plan for involving parents and the public*

- provide program materials and information

## Recommendations for Evaluation Next Steps

As experienced by UPK programs across the country, the question of impacts on children is asked earlier or later, by legislators, policy-makers and, potentially, the early childhood providers. If understanding the link between the UPK program and children's school readiness is a goal, it will require a commitment to designing and implementing an assessment process that will provide meaningful information about impacts. Recommendations for evaluation next steps are highlighted below.

### *Begin collecting data on the effects of UPK funding on program quality to better understand longer-term outcomes for early care and education systems*

- Document the level of quality of care in all programs and separately in UPK and UPK-eligible settings
- Examine accessibility of quality care for all children, especially those at risk



*Design and conduct an evaluation of child outcomes*

- Longitudinal data collection to provide a picture of long-term growth in children’s skills, involving tracking children’s skills at the beginning (baseline) and end of pre-k, kindergarten and first grade
- Track outcomes across developmental domains—language and concept development, early literacy, math, social adaptation and self-regulation
- Compare the status of children in Massachusetts (general population and at-risk populations) and changes over time relative to national norms
- Compare the status of children in UPK and UPK-eligible programs with children in other programs.