



# **Universal Pre-K:** **How Can We Improve Enrollment Systems?**

By: Ethan McClanahan

# Table of Contents

01

## Background

An overview of UPK in Boston, and why UPK is so important.

02

## Research Questions

How can we improve our enrollment processes?

03

## Methods

Interviews and coding

04

## Findings and Implications

What can we take away from sample cities?

# Why is Universal Pre-K important?

- Quality early childhood education has been shown to increase students' long term academic achievement.
- Universal Pre-K was shown to boost college attendance as well as SAT test taking and high school graduation rates (Gray-Lobe et al., 2022).
- Furthermore, enrollment at a Boston preschool increased on-time college enrollment by 8.3 percentage points (Gray-Lobe et al., 2022).
- Perry Preschool Project (Weikart, 1971)
  - Higher academic achievement
  - Reduced rates of incarceration
  - Higher wages
- Quality early childhood education is a vital part of reducing educational inequality.

# Boston's Preschool History

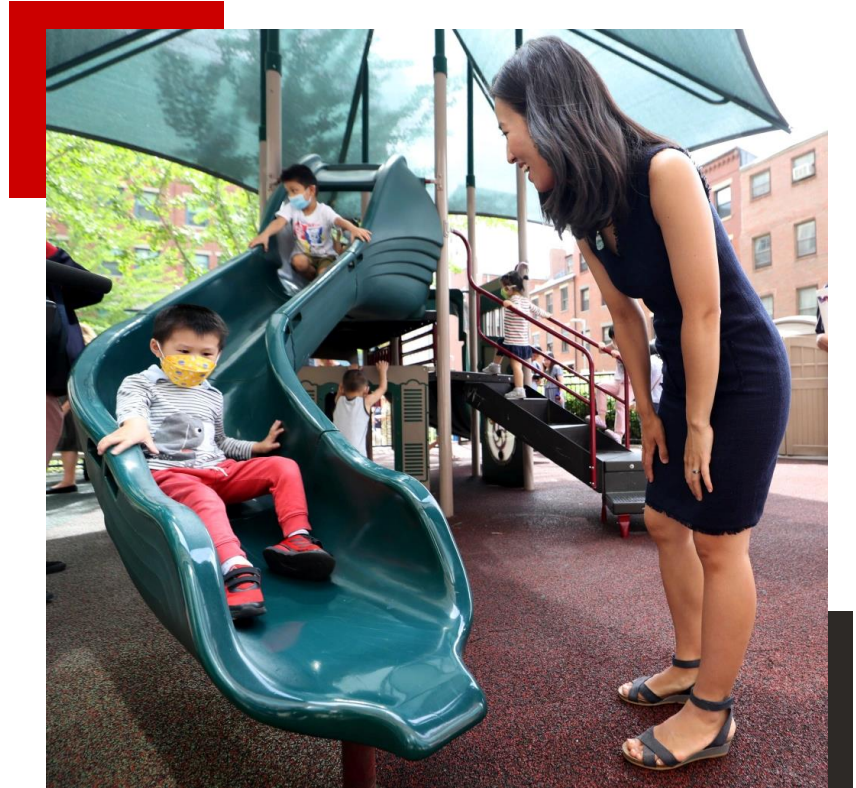
- Free preschool programs were first offered by Boston Public Schools in the early 1970s.
- In 2019 Marty Walsh announced the \$15 Million Quality Pre-K Fund
  - Provided start-up funding for community based organizations
- Since then Boston has offered UPK services through a mixed delivery model.
  - Families can apply for a seat at a community based organization, at a public school, or at both.
- Currently Boston has 32 community based partner organizations.



Credit: Max Larkin/WBUR

# Where is Boston now?

- In the past few years alone Boston has expanded the UPK program to include a limited number of 3 year old seats.
- Just last year Boston Mayor Michelle Wu committed \$20 million toward the city's pre-K programs.
- As part of this continued improvement Boston is looking at ways to centralize the application process so families can apply to one application and see all of the options at their disposal.
- **This research study looks to inform Boston's decision makers as they work to develop this new application system and improve early childhood education in the city.**



Mayor Michelle Wu greets children at the Acorn Child Care Center after announcing a \$20 million investment in early education through Boston's Universal Pre-K program during a press conference on Wednesday, July 6, 2022 in Chinatown, MA. (Staff Photo By Nancy Lane/MediaNews Group/Boston Herald)

# Policy Problem: Why do we need to improve enrollment systems?

- Current application process can be confusing for families as well as CBO staff.
  - UPK seats
  - Voucher seats
  - Head Start seats
- Transition from Pre-K to kindergarten
- Students applying to both CBO's and public schools

# Research Questions

- 1) What enrollment systems are other cities using for Universal Pre-K, and what are the costs and benefits of these systems?
- 2) How are these systems connected with the public school system and how does this impact kindergarten enrollment?
- 3) Who is responsible for collecting, and maintaining data within the Universal Preschool system?
- 4) What concerns do other cities have with their current Universal Preschool System?

# Methods

- Sample cities and informants were identified in conjunction with Strategies for Children
- Interviews (n=6) took place with representatives from Springfield Massachusetts, Cambridge Massachusetts, Northampton Massachusetts, and Philadelphia Pennsylvania.
- Each of these cities has substantial differences in demographic characteristics, and are in different stages of UPK development.
- Interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour.
- Following the conclusion of interviews, video recordings were transcribed and coded using NVivo to identify themes within the data.







# Findings

## Degree of Mixed Delivery Varied Greatly Between Cities

- All of the sample cities had committed to using a mixed delivery method in order to achieve universal instruction. However, the degree to which services were mixed differed substantially between cities.
- At the time of time of this research none of the sample cities were offering universal delivery
  - Including community based organizations and family child care centers was a necessary step to get closer to universal delivery.
- Examples: Philadelphia had 370 public preschool options. Of these 370 options, 300 were at community based organizations or family child care centers. In contrast Springfield offered all of there preschool seats within public schools, but has in the past worked with community based organizations, and hopes that a formal partnership can start soon.

# Participants were Concerned With the Confusing Nature of Their Current Application Processes

- In each of the cities interviewed, the application process was decentralized between community based organizations and the Public School system.
  - Families are tasked with applying to Pre-K through multiple different application processes.
- Why is this a concern?
  - Confusing for families
    - Families have to understand complicated processes
    - One of the cities studied saw a huge influx of applications to CBO based Pre-K. Representatives from the city hypothesized that families could be avoiding other applications because they're long and difficult to understand
  - Complicated for CBO and Public School staff

*"The enrollment process is not as easy as we want for families to be able to navigate the system."*

*"So it's not the most ideal situation right now, and it's difficult for families to physically get to SAS sometimes."*

*"They [community based organization staff] have to sort through that at the site to know which application they're filling out."*

## Enrollment Data is Decentralized and Tracking is Split Between Several Offices

- Families are not applying for services through one application process.
  - Different applications are necessary for each delivery method.
    - CBO applications
    - Public school applications
    - Head Start applications
    - Private pay applications
- This results in enrollment data being split between many different offices.
- Why is this a problem?
  - Platforms don't communicate with each other
  - City officials are given incomplete enrollment information

## Cities are Committed to Finding Ways to Centralize the Application Process

- All of the sample cities were committed to reducing the overall complexity of their application processes with the hopes of reducing barriers to service.
- Representatives from sample cities have identified that the next step is to create a new application process that allows families to choose what providers they prefer without having to fill out multiple applications.
- However, none of the cities examined had taken concrete steps to centralize the application, and they are in the beginning stages of planning this new system.

*“Having this centralized hub is something that’s been really important to us.”*

*“I would like to create a platform where you know maybe [school district] public school preschool options, [CBO] Preschool options, and all our agencies are listed there.”*

*“So that’s [creating a centralized application] one of the core priorities of mine”*

## Students need to reapply for kindergarten and this can be harder for families who attend CBO's

- Because of the mixed delivery model, the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten can be a confusing process.
- In all sample cities, families who chose to enroll in a community based program had a lengthy application process to enroll their students in kindergarten.
  - Some sample cities expressed that if a student attend Pre-K at a public school they would automatically roll over into kindergarten at that school.
  - Other cities shared that enrollment isn't automatic, but the district already has information on students who were enrolled at public schools and therefore the transition can be easier



**Policy**

**Recommendations**

# 01

*When creating a centralized application, prioritize reducing its overall length.*





# 02

***Prioritize simplifying the transition  
from Pre-K to kindergarten.***

# 03

***Include representatives from community based organizations when creating this centralized application.***

# 04

***Create a working group to identify what office will be responsible for maintaining enrollment data.***

# 05

***Complete additional research to better understand why some families leave community based organizations in favor of Boston Public Schools.***



**Questions?**

## References

Gray-Lobe, G., Pathak, P., & Walters, C. (2021). The long-term effects of universal preschool in Boston. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* . <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28756>

Weikart , D. P. (n.d.). Early Childhood Special Education for Intellectually Subnormal and/or Culturally Different Children. *National Leadership Institute in Early Childhood Development*.