

Massachusetts Families' Preferences and Implementation of the Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program

Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten

In 2005, Massachusetts made a statutory commitment to provide “a program of voluntary, universally accessible high-quality early childhood education to all preschool-aged children in the commonwealth” through the Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten program (MA UPK).¹ The Legislature also committed to deliver MA UPK through public and private providers of early education, and directed the Department of Early Education and Care to ensure that the options available to parents are “sufficiently flexible to serve families with various work schedules.”²

To advance these commitments, the Legislature asked Strategies for Children to estimate the cost of universal access to high-quality early education in Massachusetts. As a prerequisite to quantifying costs, and to assist the state in meeting the varied needs of families through MA UPK, Strategies for Children initiated a survey of Massachusetts households with young children.

2006 Early Education Massachusetts Household Survey

Strategies for Children commissioned the Opinion Dynamics Corporation to conduct a survey of Massachusetts households regarding early education, the first survey of its kind in more than 30 years. The 2006 Early Education Massachusetts Household Survey compiled data from almost 600 English- or Spanish-speaking families with children under age seven. The goal of the survey was to identify families' current use of early education and care programs and to better understand their preferences under MA UPK.³

Strong Demand for MA UPK

The survey shows that 70% of preschool-aged children⁴ are enrolled in a formal early education and care program, attending pre-kindergarten in a private center, public school, private school, or licensed family child care home.

Fully 85% of families with 3- and 4-year-olds express interest in enrolling their preschool-aged child in a universal, high-quality early education program like MA UPK. Interest in a program like MA UPK is especially strong among Massachusetts families earning between \$60,000-\$75,000 per year, those earning less than \$25,000 per year, and Latino and African-American families.⁵

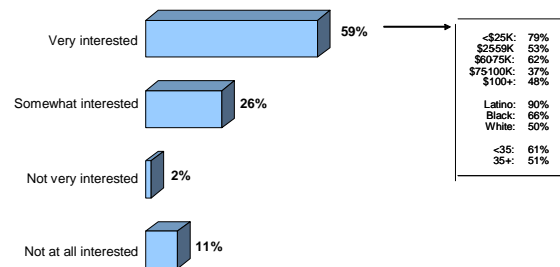
What Massachusetts Parents Want from MA UPK:

- Fully 85% of families with pre-schoolers express interest in enrolling their preschool-aged child in a high-quality early education program like MA UPK.
- Parents want *higher quality* early education opportunities for their children than they receive today.
- Parents want *lower cost* early education opportunities for their children than they have today.
- Parents want *flexibility* to choose to enroll their children in MA UPK for a range of hours per day, days per week, and weeks per year.

Source: Early Education Survey of Massachusetts Households, Opinion Dynamics Corporation, 2006.

8-in-10 Families are Interested in Universal Pre-kindergarten

There is currently a proposal at the Massachusetts State House to make high quality early education programs available for free for all 3 to 5 year olds in Massachusetts. How interested would you be in enrolling your (child/children) in a free, high quality early education program?



Remainder depends or not sure

Flexible MA UPK Enrollment Options Essential to Meet Families' Demand

Today, 92% of Massachusetts' young children are in early education settings for an average of 27 hours, or 3.9 days per week, which is equivalent to 1,082 hours per year.⁶ These figures reflect a wide range of choices that parents make to balance the needs of their children and families. Some choose to make part-day, part-week, part-year arrangements

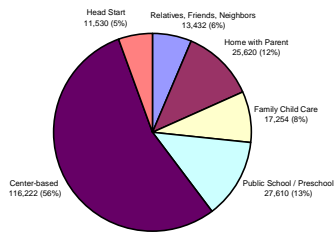
for their children, while others choose full-day, full-year programs.

This diversity of need for early education is mirrored in families' preferences for enrollment of their children in the MA UPK program:

- **Hours per day:** 53% prefer that MA UPK be offered for five or more hours per day while 38% want four or fewer hours per day.
- **Days per week:** 54% prefer that MA UPK be offered at least five days per week and 43% prefer three or fewer days per week.
- **Time of year:** 49% want MA UPK throughout the calendar year and 46% prefer a program that operates throughout the school year.

These survey findings show that families need flexible and diverse enrollment options in a program of universal early education. Flexible program structures, such as those represented in the current diverse, mixed-delivery system of public and private providers, will be critical to meeting the needs of young children and their families. A wide range of program structure options will help to serve to meet families' needs, interests, demands, and priorities.

Who is Educating and Caring for Massachusetts Pre-Kindergarteners?



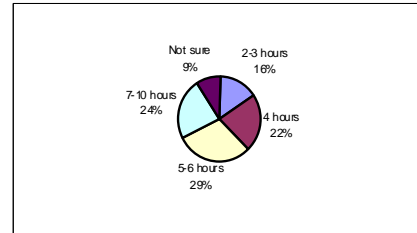
There are approximately 240,000 three-, four-, and five-year-old children in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Department of Education estimates that among preschool-aged children:

- 56% are in center-based programs;
- 13% are in public preschools;
- 8% are in family child care homes;
- 6% are cared for by relatives, friends or neighbors; and
- 5% are in Head Start programs.^{7, 8}

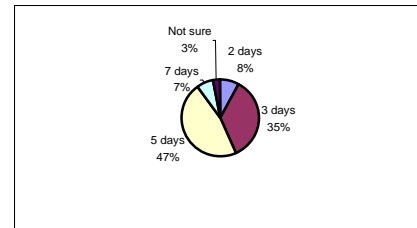
Given families' demonstrated utilization rates and preferences for flexible options, a mixed-delivery system will be essential to meeting their needs. A mixed-delivery system provides flexibility by offering varied hours, scheduling, curriculum, and enrollment options. In states using a mixed-delivery system, such as New York state, parents report higher levels of satisfaction and kindergarten teachers report that children arrive better prepared for school.⁹

Families' Preferences for Enrollment in a MA UPK Program

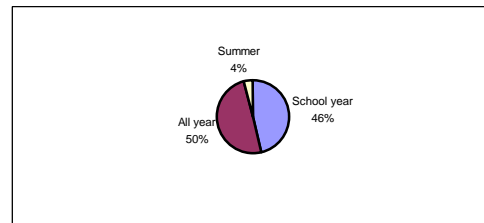
Hours per day



Days per week



Time of year



Program Quality is Key

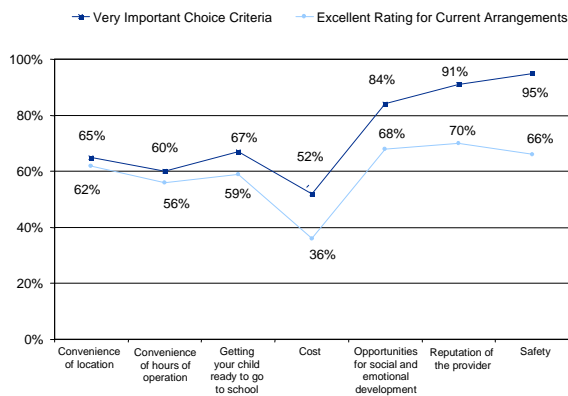
...parents are focused on the quality of an early education experience ...

Parents are especially concerned about the quality of the early education programs in which they enroll their children. Overall, 84% of parents of preschool-aged children say that "opportunities for social and emotional development" are very important to their selection of an early education arrangement. Sixty-seven percent of parents say that "getting your child ready to go to school" is a very important consideration, with special attention

to school readiness by parents making under \$60,000 (80%) and Latino parents (96%).

Many parents of preschool-aged children cite a gap between the quality of their current early education and care arrangements and the characteristics they deem “very important” for their children. The survey shows differentials between parents’ actual and desired experiences on “opportunities for social and emotional development” and “getting your child ready for school,” suggesting that parents perceive a need for higher quality early education programs for their preschool-aged children than what is presently available to them.

Gaps Between Desired and Actual Early Education and Care Arrangements



The survey further revealed that parents are focused on the quality of an early education experience under a program like MA UPK. The most common questions parents have about early education offered through a MA UPK-designated provider relate to the curriculum and educational content and teacher and staff qualifications.¹⁰

Cost to Families Matters

...the financial burden is heavy for lower- and middle-income families, those earning between \$26,000 and \$100,000 per year.

On average, Massachusetts parents report paying approximately \$6,000 per year per child for preschool education. For those enrolling children in a full-day, full-year early education program, the average cost is estimated to be more than \$10,668 per year per child, placing the Commonwealth fourth in the nation for “least affordable” access to early education according to a recent national study.¹¹

Of families enrolling their preschool-aged children in early education and care programs, 73% report paying for the program out-of-pocket, 21% say that their program is free, and 5% state they are assisted in paying for the program by government subsidies.

Families earning less than \$25,000 report paying \$257 per month on average while parents earning \$100,000 or more report paying an average of \$670 per month.

Survey findings suggest that the financial burden is heavy for lower- and middle-income families, those earning between \$26,000 and \$100,000 per year. There is little variation in average payments for early education across families earning in this range, meaning that those earning low salaries report paying as much for early education as those earning three times as much.

While some Massachusetts families earning less than 50% of State Median Income (less than \$42,710 for a family of four in FY2008) may be receiving government subsidies and paying according to a sliding fee scale to access an early education program for their child,¹² the survey findings suggest that existing resources are insufficient to ensure universal access to high-quality early education for the preschool-aged children of the Commonwealth.

Almost two-thirds of families earning below \$60,000 say cost is a very important consideration when choosing early education arrangements for their preschool-aged child, and 52% of parents overall say the same.

Moreover, the survey showed significant variation in early education-related expenses across regions of the state. Families living in the Boston suburbs and in Boston report paying more for preschool on average (\$636 per month and \$600 per month, respectively) than families living elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

...cost is a very important consideration when choosing early education arrangements....

The survey shows a sizeable difference between parents’ actual and desired experiences relative to the cost of early education (a 16% gap). And parents most frequently cited cost as the element of their current arrangement that they would most like to change under MA UPK.

Conclusion

The needs, experiences, and preferences of Massachusetts’ families with young children should play a paramount role in defining policies under MA UPK relative to program design, quality, and cost.

Massachusetts' families of preschool-aged children are overwhelmingly interested in enrolling their children in an early education program under MA UPK. They want flexibility to choose between arrangements that meet the needs of their children and families. Parents are also interested in high-quality educational content delivered by prepared staff under MA UPK. Many families would also like relief from the high out-of-pocket costs they presently bear.

These preferences are consistent with the vision articulated by the Commonwealth for MA UPK. Moreover, state policymakers are positioned to draw from the experiences of 18 other states that are moving toward universal, high-quality early education already. With families' needs and preferences as a guide, and the benefit of learning from other states, Massachusetts is well-situated to meet its dual goals of providing universal *access* to *high-quality* early education under MA UPK.

Recommendations for Successful Implementation of MA UPK

- Implementation should earnestly reflect the dual goals set forth by the Commonwealth in the Acts of 2005: high-quality early education and access to it;
- Provider participation standards should emphasize the importance of developmentally appropriate curriculum and educational content that supports young children's socio-emotional needs. MA UPK should also emphasize and provide resources to support the qualifications of teachers and other staff;
- Information about MA UPK for parents should highlight the high-quality standards that participating providers must meet;
- Participating families should pay according to a sliding fee scale which is revised to ensure access to MA UPK by children from lower- and middle-income households;
- Program design should offer parents a wide range of enrollment options in order to meet the varied needs of Massachusetts' families with preschool-aged children.
- State policymakers should look to the experiences of the 18 other states that are moving toward universal access to high-quality early education to inform decisions relative to program quality, cost, and design.

¹ M.G.L. Chapter 15D Section 3(a) and *An Act Making Appropriations for the Fiscal Year 2007*, line item 3000-5075 referencing M.G.L. Chapter 15D.

² *An Act Relative to Early Education and Care, H.3766, Section (42)1. Passed unanimously by the Legislature as H.4755 in the 2004-2006 session and vetoed by Governor Romney without time for an override. Refiled on January 11, 2007 as H.3776.*

³ *The Early Education Survey of Massachusetts Households*, Opinion Dynamics Corporation, 2006. Interviews conducted between April 13 and May 10, 2006 of 585 families with children under age six. Ninety-seven percent of caregivers interviewed were parents or step-parents and three percent were grandparents.

⁴ A preschool-aged child is defined as a child aged two years and nine months through kindergarten eligibility which is usually at age five. See 102 C.M.R. 7.02. For the purposes of this document, unless otherwise noted, we report data provided by a subgroup of 170 respondents who were parents of three- and four-year-old children at the time of the *Early Education Survey of Massachusetts Households* referenced supra.

⁵ Analysis of *The Early Education Survey of Massachusetts Households* data file focused on households with three- and four-year-olds by Opinion Dynamics, 2006. Differences reported between subgroups may not be statistically significant because subgroup findings are based on a small sample size.

⁶ *The Early Education Survey of Massachusetts Households*, Opinion Dynamics Corporation, 2006. Average enrollment data pertains to children ages zero to six.

⁷ Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001. "Securing Our Future: Planning What We Want for Our Youngest Children." *Future Trends – Volume VI*.

⁸ That percentages do not add up to 100% may be due to families utilizing more than one early education and care method and DOE data collection methodology.

⁹ Pre-K Now, "A Diverse System Delivers for Pre-K: Lessons Learned in New York State, July 2006. Available at: http://www.preknow.org/documents/DiverseDelivery_Jul2006.pdf

¹⁰ Thirty four percent of parents of preschool-aged children asked about curriculum and educational content and 28% about teacher and staff qualifications.

¹¹ National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, "National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 2007 Child Care in the State of Massachusetts. Average, annual fees paid for full-time center care for 4-year-old. Nationally, the cost ranges from \$3,794-\$10,920. Available: www.naccrra.org/randd/data/docs/MA.pdf

¹² EEC Financial Assistance: Income Eligibility Table, Department of Early Education and Care <http://www.eec.state.ma.us/docs/PolicyGuideFINAL.pdf> (July 17, 2007, see Appendix A (relying on State Median Income Estimates FFY2008, 72 CFR 59 pp. 14579-14581)).

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