



# EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION COLLECTIVE

a PHMC program



## Building a Strong Foundation: Systems to Support City Preschool Programs

By Theresa Hawley, PhD

Preschool is now widely recognized as one of the most effective investments that a community can make to ensure that children from all economic backgrounds develop the academic and social-emotional skills that they need to succeed in school and in later life.<sup>1,2</sup> Consequently, cities across the country are launching exciting new initiatives to greatly expand access to high quality preschool for young children. Philadelphia recently embarked upon one of the most ambitious of these plans: a major new effort to provide affordable access to high quality preschool to every 3- and 4-year-old in the city.

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Successful implementation of these city-level initiatives requires establishing many systems to support high quality programs. This paper outlines these needed systems, and provides examples of effective efforts in many cities, including some foundational work that is already in progress in Philadelphia. While these systems are presented here as separate and distinct, in practice they operate together as parts of an overarching system that drives results. And, because preschool is only one part of a larger system of early childhood education and care that extends across the birth to kindergarten years, these systems are best

implemented in strong coordination with similar efforts supporting child care, Head Start, home visiting, and other services for families with very young children. Fortunately, in most cities, and certainly in Philadelphia, there is a great deal of early childhood infrastructure to build upon as the community moves toward universal preschool.

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## Governance, Oversight, and Overall Management

The first and perhaps most important system that needs to be established for a city-level preschool initiative is the governance and oversight system. Frequently, the authorizing ordinance or ballot initiative that establishes the program will specify a governance approach. Sometimes responsibility for implementation is given to an existing city agency, but often there is a new governing board that is charged with policy development, implementation oversight, disbursement of funds, and reporting on the success of the initiative. For example, to implement Pre-K 4 SA, San Antonio created the Early Childhood Education Municipal Development Corporation. This board is composed of 11 members appointed by the Mayor and City Council members, and is responsible for overseeing the Pre-K 4 SA initiative. Philadelphia's Pre-K program will be overseen by the Mayor's Office of Education, which provides leadership to a wide range of initiatives that improve education in the city.



The governing entity must ensure that all of the other systems described here are developed and implemented in support of the preschool initiative. It may do this directly, by hiring a robust staff to implement the initiative, or it may contract with an intermediary organization to manage the day-to-day work of launching and sustaining the new preschool program. The governing board or agency must develop and approve the program standards to which providers will be held accountable, and periodically update and adjust those in response to what is being learned through evaluation of its programs and research in the field of early childhood education more broadly. Either directly or through its

intermediary, the governing body must provide guidance to providers on how to meet these standards, and should communicate frequently with providers about expectations for their programs.

The governing entity is also responsible for ensuring that providers are given adequate financing to operate a high quality program, and it must develop a clear and transparent mechanism for disbursing and accounting for funds in the preschool initiative. Whether providing tuition scholarships for individual children or grants for whole classrooms, the governing entity needs to set appropriate per-child or per-classroom funding levels and institute a way to track how funds have been allocated and spent. It is especially important that policies are developed to guide the “blending and braiding” of preschool funding with other sources of early childhood funding, such as child care assistance and Head Start. Programs commonly use multiple sources of funding in combination to provide a high-quality, full-workday, year-round program for young children. In order to maintain transparency, clear policies and guidance should specify how preschool funds can and cannot be used in combination with other sources of funding, and what cost allocation and reporting procedures are required for expenditures. In

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some cases, different per-child or per-classroom rates might be developed to account for other sources of funds with which some, but not all, providers are operating their programs. Policies around adequate compensation and benefits for staff are also important, to ensure that programs are able to attract and retain highly qualified staff. The governing entity should develop cost allocation, staff compensation, and allowable expense policies in coordination with the state preschool program, the child care assistance program, and local Head Start grantees.

Given the important responsibilities of the governing entity, it is important that it be adequately staffed. In addition to a highly qualified director, there should be staff with expertise in early childhood program design, provision of implementation technical assistance, professional development, and data systems and analysis. If the governing entity itself is not already a board with diverse stakeholder representation, it is best practice to convene an advisory board for the initiative. This advisory board should include representation from the local public schools, charter school operators, Head Start grantees, child care providers or associations of child care providers, institutions of higher education with early childhood teacher preparation programs, child care resource and referral agencies, professional development providers, early childhood advocacy organizations, parent organizations, and other relevant stakeholders. The advisory board should meet several times per year, be staffed by the governing entity or its intermediary, and may want to form committees that will provide input and help shape each of the various systems described below.

### **Allocation System—Making sure high-quality programs are accessible for children and families**

Ensuring universal access to high quality preschool requires that programs be located in neighborhoods throughout the city in sufficient number to meet demand. This can be quite challenging, especially in the “ramp-up” years when program resources are intended to be prioritized for children with the highest needs. It requires a sophisticated system of mapping the population of young children and their risk profiles, and estimating the participation rate of families. In Philadelphia, the Reinvestment Fund has created a highly comprehensive mapping tool (available at [ChildCareMap.org](http://ChildCareMap.org)) that includes data on the population and the availability of early learning services at multiple levels of geography, including details as fine-grained as Census Block Group. This geographically analyzed data can be combined with data on the prevalence of risk factors in each neighborhood to develop a “heat map” of need that can inform the allocation of program resources.

As the program is launched and expands, there is also a need for a transparent and efficient process for selecting providers. A Request for Proposals process

## Alignment with other early childhood systems

Preschool initiatives are best understood as just one part of a larger early childhood system that is designed to meet the needs of all young children and their families. It is important that cities consider how their preschool initiative will coordinate with and complement existing systems, such as child care subsidy, state preschool, Head Start, and the Quality Rating and Improvement System. Community agencies and schools are very often already engaged as providers in one or more of these existing systems. It is best practice for the city initiative to either mirror or “raise the bar” on the quality standards of these systems to ensure that providers hear consistent messages about what constitutes high quality early childhood education.

In addition to coordinating standards, it is critical for city preschool initiatives to establish clear policies regarding the layering of funding streams, such as combining city preschool funds with child care subsidy to provide an extended-day, year-round program, or combining with Head Start to provide comprehensive family engagement services. A strategic approach to layering funds is key to ensuring that an appropriate range of consistently high quality services is available to meet families’ needs. For example, in San Francisco, programs can combine Pre-K resources with child care assistance, state pre-k, or Head Start. The city provides clear guidance on cost allocation, and varies the amount of funding per child based on whether the program already draws on one of these funding streams.

ideally supports providers in documenting the need for services in their community using information gathered both from the mapping tool and from their own assessment of the community. Prospective providers can be given training in how to use and interpret the data from the mapping tool and how to gather additional information about the families in their immediate community, preparing them to better match their services to local needs. The RFP should also ask providers for their expertise in providing high quality early learning services (including through their attainment of a high Quality Rating and Improvement System rating). It is helpful if the RFP review process takes into account the other sources of funding that the proposed providers currently use to serve children and families (e.g., child care assistance or Head Start), as well as the existing availability of preschool services in the community. In 2012, Chicago conducted a competition for its state-funded preschool and Head Start services through this type of RFP process, resulting in a better match between the availability of services and the need in neighborhoods across the city.

A related but separate need is for a system to ensure that adequate facilities exist in every community for preschool programs. This is a difficult challenge, especially in city neighborhoods that are experiencing rapid demographic changes. Neighborhood gentrification or the demolition of dense public housing can lead to excess program capacity in some parts of the city, while influxes of large numbers of immigrant families may result in severe shortages in other areas. Programs like the Reinvestment Fund’s Child Care Facility Loans are critical for creating or renovating appropriate space for early childhood programs.

## Recruitment and Enrollment Management

Any significant expansion of preschool services requires a substantial investment in recruiting eligible children and families for the program. Basic communication and public awareness about the program is the first step in this process, but in order to reach children in very high-need families, a more intensive strategy is likely required. One effective approach in a large city like Philadelphia is creating



community-level early childhood collaboratives and tasking them with developing and implementing intensive outreach campaigns. For example, a collaboration may work together to get information about preschool programs to local pediatricians and faith-community leaders, along with guidance on how to help parents sign up for services. Other collaborations may decide to do door-to-door canvassing, or work with public housing officials to include preschool registration information in the materials shared with families when they move into a new home. These collaborations will be most successful if they have financial support to hire a dedicated collaboration director, and are given training and ongoing technical assistance as they develop community-specific approaches to finding and enrolling young children in preschool. For example, in Chicago, several communities received support as “Innovation Zones” through Illinois’ Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant and were able to dramatically increase the enrollment in local high quality early learning programs of children who were homeless, involved in the child welfare system, and/or in extreme poverty, by forming strong referral networks with health and social service providers. Philadelphia has three Innovation Zones as well, which may serve as models for development going forward.

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An effective preschool initiative also requires an easy-to-navigate enrollment system. In a mixed-delivery system, families will have many different options for high quality preschool, including local public and/or charter schools, Head Start programs, and community-based child care programs. A well-designed enrollment system will help parents learn about their options and rank their preferences for the programs that would best meet their needs. The enrollment system can then match families with programs, and allow community

collaboration recruitment teams to track whether programs are full or still seeking additional students. It can even manage a consolidated waiting list that will allow programs to efficiently replace students who leave during the program year. New York City created an easy-to-use online application portal, where, during a registration period in mid-winter, parents can enter their preferences for which program their child will attend the following school year. Children are matched to programs through an algorithm and parents and programs are notified of program assignments in early spring. Parents can continue to locate and enroll in programs with availability throughout the summer and fall. Importantly, the website and application portal are available in multiple languages, and enrollment counselors are available by phone to help guide families through the process. This type of transparent enrollment process—whether done through an online application, call center, or mail-in application process—is essential to ensuring programs are full and families are aware of and able to access the services that will best meet their own needs: Head Start, Pre-K Counts, or PHLpreK, for example. In addition, the data generated through the enrollment system will be very helpful in informing the future allocation of expanded resources by documenting where children have remained unserved throughout the year.

## Support for Continuous Quality Improvement

Delivering high quality early childhood care and education is a complex enterprise, and like all teachers and social service professionals, early childhood providers need support to continually improve their programs. Providing high-quality professional development opportunities is important, but by itself is not likely to be sufficient to support consistently high-quality services. Approaches that include job-embedded professional development and intensive coaching/mentoring have been shown to be more successful than traditional training in helping teachers and program administrators to strengthen their instruction and program implementation.<sup>3</sup> Program leaders in particular can benefit from training in how to use classroom- and child-level assessment data to support teaching staff in reflecting upon and strengthening their instructional practices. A robust system of coaches and professional learning communities for program leaders can help ensure that programs are able to meet high standards for teaching quality. A system of mini-grants and other material supports is also critical for ensuring that programs have the learning materials they need and are able to provide an appropriate classroom environment for young learners.

Many cities have chosen to build upon quality supports already available through the state's quality rating and improvement system, the Head Start training and technical assistance system, and other similar existing early childhood professional

development systems. Given that new preschool classrooms are frequently operated by community organizations that are already participating in these systems, it is typically both more efficient and more effective to incorporate the preschool quality supports into these existing systems, which may require expanding and deepening the resources available through these systems to support high-quality services.

As cities develop their systems, and especially as they consider the per-child allocations they will provide for services, they should consider how functions like coaching and instructional leadership—the “engine” of continuous quality improvement—will be supported at the level of individual programs. Budgets should include resources for dedicated staff to support professional learning communities and intensive job-embedded professional development. For example, Illinois requires a ratio of one instructional leader per 10 classrooms for its Preschool Expansion programs. An even more intensive ratio may be appropriate for programs that do not have teachers with bachelor's degrees, as they are likely to need more support in consistently implementing high quality teaching practices and a rigorous, developmentally appropriate curriculum.

### Curriculum as a lever for supporting quality

Most city preschool initiatives require programs to implement a research-based curriculum that is aligned with their state's early learning and development standards. Programs are typically allowed to choose among a wide range of curricula, and professional development providers are expected to present mostly “curriculum neutral” workshops and coaching for providers. However, in a few cities, officials have decided to promote or even require a specific curriculum (or small set of curricula) so that professional development can be more tightly tied to curriculum content. For example, Boston requires all programs to use a locally modified version of the Opening Worlds of Learning, and New York City recently launched an optional locally developed set of curriculum modules that are content rich and developmentally appropriate. These cities have heavily invested in developing teachers' skills in implementing these curricula, and the results are promising.<sup>4</sup> In Boston, this focus helped the school district's programs dramatically improve quality over just a few years.<sup>5</sup>

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## Monitoring

A rigorous and transparent system to monitor providers' compliance with the program standards is another essential component of any successful local preschool initiative. Regular (annual or bi-annual) onsite assessments of classrooms and programs, using valid, research-based tools administered by reliable assessors, will help identify providers who need additional support

to implement high-quality instruction and family engagement services. For example, San Francisco's Preschool for All (PFA) program assesses each program with the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) every two years, and visits programs at least annually. The program has developed a clear procedure for corrective action for programs that are found to be out of compliance with the required standards, and there is a formal process in place to suspend or terminate PFA providers who persist in not providing services at the expected level of quality.

A local preschool initiative may find it advantageous to tie its program monitoring system into an existing Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). For example, Indianapolis's Indy Pre-K program requires providers to maintain at least a Level 3 or Level 4 rating in the Indiana Paths to QUALITY system. By linking to this system, which already requires regular onsite monitoring visits, the program is able to avoid costly duplicative assessments and minimize the burden placed upon providers by repeated monitoring visits. In Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Keystone STARS is a robust and longstanding QRIS that already conducts onsite quality assessments for programs at Stars 3 and 4. It is important that the preschool monitoring system be well-coordinated with this state system to maximize efficiency and maintain coherence with the overall state policy and systems for early childhood. Coordinated monitoring is a key strategy for reducing administrative burden on early childhood providers while supporting high quality.<sup>6</sup>

## Workforce Development Supports

A significant expansion in preschool services requires an adequate supply of well-trained teachers, assistant teachers, and other program staff. According to the recently released Institutes of Medicine report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*,<sup>7</sup> teaching preschool demands the same level of knowledge and skill as teaching elementary school; at a minimum, a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early childhood pedagogy. In most cities, there are not enough highly skilled potential staff—especially staff that matches the linguistic and cultural diversity of the children to be served—to meet the expanded demand. Often, the staff in existing early childhood programs has only minimal formal education and training in child development and early childhood education, and because of low pay and limited benefits, there is typically high turnover, especially among those teachers who do have formal credentials. For these reasons, a comprehensive and intensive effort to build the supply of well-

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qualified staff is another critical element of any successful local preschool initiative. As noted in the Governing Entity section above, one part of this effort is establishing a more equitable compensation package for teaching staff so that programs can attract and retain the staff they need. However, quickly building the supply of teachers will require many additional strategies, including scholarships to support existing early childhood staff in completing coursework and degrees in early childhood education.

Cities may also find it important to invest in the strengthening of the higher education system, as often there is a significant lack of appropriate coursework available for preschool teachers. Early childhood teacher preparation programs, while nominally preparing students to teach a wide age span, such as preschool through fourth grade, tend to focus on pedagogical strategies that are most appropriate for the early elementary years. Early childhood education programs in institutions of higher education are often small and lack full-time faculty with strong expertise and experience in preschool teaching. And students seeking to articulate from two-year to four-year programs frequently face significant challenges in having all of their earlier coursework fulfill requirements towards their bachelor's degree. All of these challenges have been identified in Philadelphia,<sup>8</sup> where the Early Childhood Education Workforce Transformation Initiative has called for the development of a local coalition of higher education institutions to work together to implement, test, refine and promulgate best practices in the preparation of early childhood teachers.

One of the most successful approaches to increasing the supply of degreed teaching staff is to create cohort-based degree programs, with relatively small groups of teachers progressing through coursework—often offered onsite at their place of employment—together over multiple semesters.<sup>9</sup> This approach has the advantage of simultaneously supporting strong participation in the courses and building the actual supply of available courses. Courses can be tailored to maximize the recognition of teachers' current knowledge, skills and competencies, and therefore may allow for more rapid progress of teachers towards degrees. At the same time, the program can be tailored to provide the specific supports, such as training in use of online technology or coaching in college-level writing, that students may need to succeed in the coursework.

New York City launched a comprehensive and intensive effort to build the early childhood workforce as part of its implementation of universal pre-k. The system, overseen by the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, includes academic planning and advisement for students, widely accessible coursework in early education, an online tool to help locate degree programs, an online job board for positions in a wide range of early childhood programs, opportunities to do student teaching while still employed in a child care program, and scholarships to cover the costs of coursework. As a result of these intensive efforts, 80% of New York Pre-K for All providers reported that staff recruitment





was not a problem in the first year of the program.<sup>10</sup> This type of comprehensive approach to workforce development is an essential foundation for success as a city ramps up its preschool program.

## Program Evaluation

To inform and support system-level continuous quality improvement, it is essential that local preschool initiatives include a robust, ongoing evaluation. Independent and well-qualified evaluation experts should be engaged from the early stages of the design of the initiative so that a comprehensive

evaluation of program implementation and child progress can be woven into the overall plan. It may also be helpful to form a technical advisory committee for the evaluation that includes national experts in early childhood program evaluation to inform the design of the evaluation and to help interpret results. At a minimum, the evaluation should track the degree to which the program is being implemented with fidelity to the intended model, including measures of classroom quality; child enrollment and attendance rates; and racial/ethnic, economic and geographic equity in participation in the program. Parent and provider satisfaction with the program, including the enrollment process, supports for implementation, and quality of the services received, is also important to continually assess. Finally, the evaluation plan should include a rigorous and comprehensive assessment of children's growth in learning and development while in the program. The Denver Preschool Program (DPP) invests in tracking all of these measures annually, and has found the information gathered to be very helpful as they continuously refine their program. It is critical that the evaluation be seen by the program leadership and local political leadership as a tool for continuous program improvement, rather than a mechanism for simply demonstrating satisfaction with the services. This approach by DPP leaders has resulted in a system that has made very substantial and consistent quality gains across a broad range of community-based and school-based programs over the past decade.

Another key example of the importance of using program evaluation to drive improvement is the Boston Public Schools (BPS), which launched a successful and sustained continuous improvement effort when its preschool classrooms were found to be not of high enough quality to effectively close the achievement gap for at-risk children. BPS installed a rigorous, research-based preschool curriculum across all of its schools, provided intensive coaching for teachers in its implementation, and required all schools to go through the comprehensive NAEYC accreditation process to institutionalize a continuous quality improvement mindset in every program. The approach was very successful, and resulted in dramatic improvements in both classroom quality and child outcomes that have been sustained for several years.



## Conclusion

Successful implementation of a city-wide preschool initiative requires careful, coordinated planning and development of many systems that will support providers as they start up and sustain their services. Many of these systems already exist to some degree at the state and federal levels, and coordinating local efforts with state and federal initiatives like the Quality Rating and Improvement System, state pre-k and Head Start, and state workforce development supports, is critical for maximizing efficiency and coherence in the early childhood system. With a significant expansion of preschool services, however, the local community will need to establish and support effective local mechanisms for governance, slot allocation, recruitment and enrollment, support for continuous quality improvement and workforce development, program monitoring and evaluation. Building these strong systems right from the start will ensure a strong foundation for a successful preschool initiative.

<sup>1</sup>Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., et al. (2013) *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. Society for Research in Child Development and Foundation for Child Development. Available at <http://fcd-us.org/resources/evidence-base-preschool>

<sup>2</sup>Friedman-Krauss, A. Barnett, W. S., and Nores, M. (2016) *How Much Can High-Quality Universal Pre-K Reduce Achievement Gaps?* NIEER and Center for American Progress. Available on the web at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/01115656/NIEER-AchievementGaps-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Pacchiano, D., Klein, R., and Hawley, M. S. (2016). *Job-Embedded Professional Learning Essential to Improving Teaching and Learning in Early Education*. Ounce of Prevention Fund. Available at <http://www.theounce.org/resources/publications>

<sup>4</sup>Weiland, C. and Yoshikawa, H. (2013) *Impacts of a Prekindergarten Program on Children's Mathematics, Language, Literacy, Executive Function, and Emotional Skills*. Child Development, 84:6, pp 2112-2130.

<sup>5</sup>Sachs, J. and Weiland, C. (2013) *Boston's rapid expansion of public school-based preschool*. Young Children, September 2010, pp 74-77 Available at <http://www.naeyc.org/files/academy/file/YCSept2010.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Maxwell, K. L., Sosinsky, L., Tout, K., & Hegseth, D. (2016). *Coordinated monitoring systems for early care and education*. OPRE Research Brief #2016-19. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>7</sup>Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC). 2015. *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>8</sup>Early Childhood Education Workforce Transformation Initiative (ECEWTI, 2016). *Early Childhood Education Teachers 2.0: Strategies to Transform the Profession*. Available at [http://melc.org/wp-content/uploads/WPF-report-march-16\\_formatted2.pdf](http://melc.org/wp-content/uploads/WPF-report-march-16_formatted2.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Whitebrook, M., and Ryan, S. (2011) *Degrees in context: Asking the Right Questions about Preparing Skilled and Effective Teachers of Young Children*. Preschool Policy Brief, Issue 22. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

<sup>10</sup>Westat, Metis Associates and Branch Associates (2016). *Pre-K for All: Snapshot of Student Learning*. Report to the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity and the New York City Department of Education.



## THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION COLLECTIVE

The Early Childhood Action Collective (ECAC) is an initiative of [Public Health Management Corporation](#), sponsored by the [William Penn Foundation](#). ECAC is a multi-disciplinary consortium comprising researchers, policy experts, and practitioners who share a commitment to creating a better future for Philadelphia's children by informing policy and practice decisions to help move Philadelphia's early childhood education sector forward.



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