

Strengths and Challenges with a Diverse Delivery System for Early Education

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Thank you for this opportunity to address the New York City Council Commission on CFE regarding the implementation of early education programs for three and four year olds. My topic this afternoon is the diversity of an ECE delivery system, and specifically the strengths accruing from and the challenges involved with a diverse delivery system.

For the sake of clarity I define a diverse delivery system as one that includes a variety of program sponsors or auspices (school district, city government, federal government, private providers) delivering services of varying durations (half day, school day, full working day) in a range of locales (school buildings, community centers, housing developments, etc.). A homogeneous delivery system would limit sponsorship to a single entity; for instance, the state education department through local school districts. Eleven states, almost 30% of those offering prekindergarten services, provide those services only in public school settings.¹

The Cornell Early Childhood Program has been conducting implementation studies of New York's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program since its inception in 1997. The studies have included surveys of school district UPK coordinators, a survey of the directors of community-based UPK sites, in-depth case studies in four UPK school districts (1 in New York City), and interviews with county child care resource and

¹ Barnett, S., Hustedt, J., Robin, K., and Schulman, K (2004) *The State of Preschool: 2004 State Preschool Yearbook*. Rutgers University: The National Institute for Early Education Research, pg. 34.
<http://nieer.org/yearbook/>

referral staff to uncover any unanticipated consequences for ECE services to infants and toddlers.

Our studies conform with state reports indicating that more than 60% of UPK children in the New York City school districts and more than half of UPK children in upstate programs are receiving services in non-school, community-based settings.²

Figures 1 and 2 show the diversity of those settings in the Wave 1 school districts – those beginning UPK in the first year of its implementation (1997). Community-based settings include day care centers, nursery schools, Head Start sites, Special Education programs, and even some family child care.

Figure 1: New York City

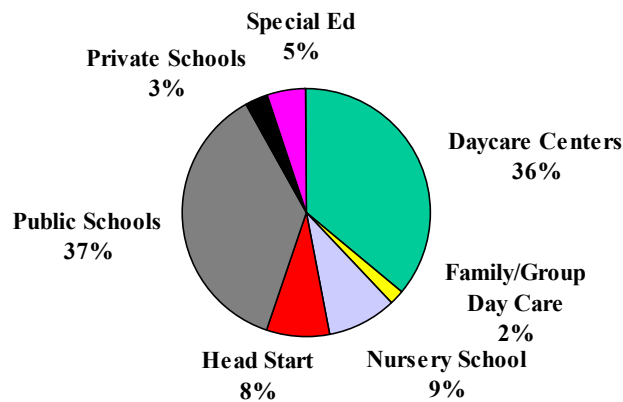
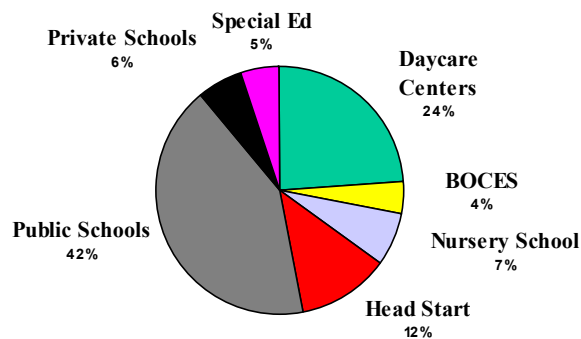


Figure 2: Upstate New York



² Lekies, K.S., & Cochran, M. (2001). *Collaborating for Kids*. These distributions have not changed much since 2001 because the funding level for UPK has leveled off.

Strengths

Our research has identified a number of strengths associated with this diversity of program sites:

- *Collaboration rather than competition with full-day child care.* If UPK classrooms were limited to public school sites, they would draw children away from existing child care settings. This would threaten the existence of those programs, including their services to 0-3 year-olds.
- *Space.* The public schools don't have enough space to house all the classrooms needed for UPK. Community-based settings provide this space at reasonable expense.
- *Access.* Use of community-based sites allows parents needing full-day care for their children direct access to UPK, and brings the service closer to families through sites located in their immediate neighborhoods.
- *Improvement in quality of the overall ECE system.* UPK is the largest source of funding for participating community-based sites in New York City and is exceeded only by parent fees in the upstate programs.³ These funds are being used to beef up the curriculum (educational materials and equipment, field trips) and strengthen the teacher corps (hiring lead, assistant, and substitute teachers and increasing salaries). Thus UPK funding is having a significant, positive impact on aspects of ECE programming that have been shown in large-scale national studies to predict improvements in cognitive development and school readiness.
- *Community ownership of education.* Use of a diverse range of community sites for UPK classrooms extends the public education system into the community, expanding its reach and political base.
- *Cost.* UPK funding to child care centers reduces the fees paid by parents for early childhood services. The cost of delivering UPK services is also lower in community-based sites than in school-based sites, due to lower teacher salaries (also see below, under Challenges).

³ In conducting this analysis we excluded federal Head Start funding, which goes only to agencies that are Head Start grantees. In that sub-set of responding programs this was their primary source of funds.

Challenges

Provision of prekindergarten programming in a diverse range of settings also brings with it challenges. These include:

- *Quality Assurance.* This assurance is enhanced by the legislative requirement that all UPK teachers be state certified. Site monitoring by the school district is critical. It takes various forms, including direct classroom observations and visitations, district resource teachers that visit classrooms regularly to model developmentally appropriate practices, help with lesson plans, and enhance the classroom environment, and the mentoring of staff by experienced teachers. Ongoing staff development for all UPK teachers (both community-based and school-based) is a primary strategy for assuring a consistent level of quality across sites.
- *Teacher Salary Inequity.* Our data show a significant difference – averaging \$10,000 or more – between the salaries of UPK teachers working in public school sites and those working in community-based sites. One result is much higher turn-over rates in the community-based UPK sites. Some of that turnover involves teachers shifting from community-based to school-based teaching positions when the school district has openings.
- *Program Administration.* Administering an educational program that is spread across a diverse range of settings, with differing expectations and histories, is a challenge. Especially demanding is the development and management of the sub-contracts required with each of the participating community-based programs.

In summary, our research indicates that the directors of community-based UPK sites are generally very pleased to be involved with the program, and that UPK school district personnel feel positively about the relationships they have formed with community-based early education settings. The case studies we have conducted show that the quality of the education provided by these sites can be very good. We conclude that the advantages to including a diverse range of settings in Universal Prekindergarten far out way the challenges.

References

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