

FCC & Pre-K Policy Guides

Issue 2: Program Evaluation: Design Considerations

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Summary

This *Data Snapshot* outlines considerations for program evaluation design when family child care (FCC) programs are included in state-funded pre-K systems. Many states have undertaken extensive efforts to evaluate their preschool program, including their implementation, quality, and impacts.¹

This *Data Snapshot* of program evaluation efforts specifically attends to ways programs can more thoughtfully incorporate FCC into evaluation to guide evaluation decisions as states develop plans to expand mixed-delivery systems inclusive of FCCs.

Introduction and Program Evaluation Background

Many states regularly collect data to evaluate their mixed-delivery state pre-K program. Evaluation is a systematic process used to understand the implementation and effectiveness of a policy, program, strategy, or curriculum in a specific context. Preschool program evaluations often focus on implementation and quality, but also can assess impacts on children's growth and learning. Rigorous preschool evaluations conducted through prospective randomized trials, such as the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project, have been widely cited as evidence of the value of high-quality early childhood education. Preschool program evaluations can inform continuous improvement for PreK systems, guide program design and spending decisions, reveal system supports needed for PreK teachers, and even inform major policy changes to increase effectiveness, as well as assure the public of the integrity of the PreK investment.² However, evaluations of large-scale public programs have produced highly variable outcomes across programs, indicating that intentional evaluation is necessary to have confidence that programs produce the desired outcomes for all children.³ To date, FCC program participation in state-funded preschool program evaluations has been highly limited; this snapshot

¹ See a list of preschool evaluations here: <https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/pdf-31.pdf>

² Metz, A. (2007). [Why conduct a program evaluation? Five reasons why evaluation can help an out-of-school time program](#). Child Trends.

³ Puma, M., et al. (2010). Head Start Impact Study. Final Report. *Administration for Children & Families*. Barnett, W. S., & Jung, K. (2021). Effects of New Jersey's Abbott preschool program on children's achievement, grade retention, and special education through tenth grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 56, 248-259. Gormley, W. T., & Gayer, T. (2005). Promoting school readiness in Oklahoma: An evaluation of Tulsa's pre-k program. *Journal of Human resources*, 40(3), 533-558. Woodyard, H., Sass, T., & Fazlul, I. (2023). Assessing the benefits of education in early childhood: Evidence from a Pre-K lottery in Georgia. *Economic Inquiry*. Lipsey, M. W., Farran, D. C., & Durkin, K. (2018). Effects of the Tennessee Prekindergarten Program on children's achievement and behavior through third grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 45, 155-176. Gray-Lobe G, Pathak PA, Walters CR. 2023. The long-term effects of universal preschool in Boston. *Q. J. Econ.* 138(1):363-411

seeks to offer guidance to state teams seeking to design a program evaluation approach for mixed-delivery PreK systems that include FCC.

Considerations When Designing and Conducting Evaluations in Family Child Care

Home-based settings differ in important ways from classroom-based settings, and these differences have implications for evaluation. For example, a state-funded pre-K program may require that all classrooms be observed each year with a tool designed specifically for school/center-based settings (e.g., The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Third Edition (ECERS-3)) - a practice that would need to be revised for evaluation results to be meaningful to FCC educators. This also means that FCC program implementation may look quite a bit different than implementation in a school-based setting. The following areas of consideration represent some key considerations when designing evaluations that are inclusive of FCCs:

- Evaluators should use tools to measure quality that are valid and reliable for use in home-based settings. As most quality measures were developed for classrooms, they may not be valid or reliable when applied to FCCs. Evaluations using these tools alone may not capture features that are associated with quality in FCC settings.⁴ See Appendix A for more information on tools used in evaluations of programs that include FCCs.
- If programs opt to use a separate tool for FCC programs (e.g., using the FCCERs in FCCs and the ECERS-3 in center/school-based programs), they need to plan for having observers trained and reliable on all tools used.
- Research finds that evaluation data are often not used in meaningful ways.⁵ Engaging intended users in an evaluation – including activities like formulating the system outcomes to be measured, defining the questions to be answered by evaluation tools, and offering input about the interpretation of findings – increases meaningful use of the evaluation data. If FCC providers and the families that use FCCs are intended users of the evaluation data, then they should be included in the evaluation process.
- Engaging users in evaluations is easier said than done. Demands on their time as providers and parents may not leave them much time for participating in an evaluation. Public comment periods and advisory boards are common approaches to engagement. Another with the potential for more widespread engagement is to employ brief surveys that, for example, ask respondents to identify outcomes of greatest interest (e.g., accessibility, barriers to participation, bureaucratic hurdles, quality, and various impacts on children). When asking for input, recognize that there may be interests in potential consequences (intended and unintended) for the broader ECE system.
 - As an example, the Seattle Preschool Program evaluation engages with users through an advisory committee of families, community members, program directors, and educators to give feedback on evaluation design, measures, and questions asked, and how the findings will be shared.⁶
- Typically, subgroup analyses will be necessary to assess whether overall findings generalize to FCCs and whether there are some findings that apply only to FCCs. Evaluations should be designed to ensure that sample sizes for FCCs provide adequate statistical power to detect FCC-specific outcomes. Too

⁴ Doran, E., Li, A., Atkins-Burnett, S., Forde, J., Orland, J., Ragonese-Barnes, M., ... & Klein, A. K. (2022). *Compendium of measures and indicators of home-based child care quality*. OPRE Report #2022-28. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁵ Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. Sage publications.

⁶ Education Northwest (2024). [Seattle Preschool Program Evaluation 2024](#). Education Northwest.

often, FCCs are inadequately represented in evaluation samples (when not entirely excluded), and overall findings are not usable for FCCs.

- Coaches who have experience or training in FCC settings can use program evaluation results to coach in a way that is specific to the FCC setting. For example, coaches with the [Maryland Family Child Care Alliance](#) all have master's degrees and are trained in working with FCC educators.
- Programs can use evaluation findings to improve their systems year over year. For example, Philadelphia conducts classroom quality observations in all PHLpre-K classrooms each year, and uses the data for coaching and decisions around professional development offerings for providers.

Spotlight on Evaluation: Multnomah County

The Preschool for All (PFA) program in Multnomah County, Oregon dedicated the first year of program funding to planning the program's design and evaluation, rather than launching immediately into implementation. Program administrators seek stakeholder input along the way, including using focus groups, interviews, and surveys to understand what families, preschool providers, and educators want and to solicit input on how program effectiveness should be measured and understood. In addition to PFA's own internal evaluation efforts, they also have a research-practice [partnership with the Boston University Wheelock College of Education](#). Together, they have been able to develop an evaluation plan that defines success through measures that are important to community leaders, preschool providers, and families. The PFA Evaluation includes five domains:

- **Implementation Quality.** PFA has been successful in reaching the program's priority groups (e.g., low-income children, children experiencing homelessness). In the first two years of the program, around 90% of children enrolled were from at least one priority group; and in year three, around 75%.
- **Classroom Experiences.** PFA has opted to use the [Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale \(ACSES\)](#), a pre-K through third grade classroom assessment tool that measures equitable sociocultural teacher-child interactions.
- **Workforce Development.** In the 2023-2024 school year, 226 educators participated in coaching through a partnership with Multnomah County's local Child Care Resource and Referral. However, many workforce development services are too new to see trends in outcomes data.
- **Infrastructure.** The PFA Facilities Fund launched in the spring of 2024 has awarded more than \$20 million for projects such as inclusive playgrounds and opening new early learning centers.
- **Child, Family, & Community Outcomes.** PFA created Family Navigators to help reach families who have the least access to quality, affordable preschool; through these community-based organization partnerships, families have been connected through the application and enrollment process and connected to community resources.

To date, the PFA evaluation has used an Implementation Science Framework, focused on rapid cycles of inquiry and using data to refine evaluation tools and approaches. All of this will help PFA, in partnership with their evaluation partners, to begin an outcome evaluation in the coming years, focusing on answering the question: "How is Preschool for All changing the landscape of the local community when it comes to early learning and care?"

Conclusion

The preschool evaluation process allows funders, families, and the community to understand implementation, quality monitoring, and impacts of publicly-funded programs. Evaluations that are inclusive of FCC educators should incorporate perspectives from FCC educators in the evaluation design process, and findings should be used to provide coaching and professional development that is meaningful and relevant to FCC educators in their unique setting. Furthermore, future evaluation efforts should include preschool program impacts on child outcomes in all settings in a mixed delivery system – including in FCC programs.

Annotated Resources

Craig, A., & Bhatt, P. (2020, November). [Preschool for All: Translating equity-driven policy into practice](#). SeeChange. This report outlines findings from focus groups and interviews with community partners to provide recommendations to inform how the policy intent of PFA could translate to practice when implemented.

Curenton, S. M., Iruka, I. R., Humphries, M., Jensen, B., Durden, To., Rochester, S. E., Sims, J., Whittaker, J. V., & Kinzie, M. B. (2019). Validity for the assessing classroom sociocultural equity scale (ACSES) in early childhood classrooms. *Early Education and Development*, 31(2), 284-303. doi:10.1080/10409289.2019.1611331 This peer-reviewed article outlines the validity of the ECSES scale in early childhood classrooms.

DuBoise, D. J., Nazaire, O., Demeo Cook, K., Moran, S., McQueen, E., & Curenton, S. M. (2024). [Family perspectives of Multnomah County Preschool for All: Insights from focus groups](#). The Center on the Ecology of Early Development (CEED), Boston University. This policy to practice research brief includes findings from focus groups with families in PFA pilot sites, focusing on how they define “success” in the program.

Ferguson, D. (2018). [State preschool program evaluations and research: Research-to-policy resources](#). *Child Care & Early Education Research Connections*. This brief provides a list of evaluations and research of state preschool programs identified in NIEER’s [State of Preschool Yearbook 2015](#).

Fischer, A., Keily, T., & Weyer, M. (2020). [Exploring new research on pre-K outcomes. Policy brief](#). Education Commission of the States. This policy brief provides information on recent research studies examining the effectiveness of pre-K in programs across the country.

Harmeyer, E., Weisenfeld, G., & Frede, E. (2023). [Including family child care \(FCC\) programs in publicly-funded pre-K: Conditions for success](#). National Institute for Early Education Research. After reviewing the limited research base, the authors developed a set of *conditions for success* as a starting point for policymakers seeking to guide quality in publicly-funded pre-K programs in home-based settings.

Preschool for All (2025, April). [Preschool for All program update](#). Multnomah County. This program update includes selected findings from the implementation of PFA in the first three years of programming.

Weisenfeld, G., & Harmeyer, E. (2024). [Including family child care in state-funded pre-k systems: An update](#). National Institute for Early Education Research. This report is an update to the 2021 report, [Including Family Child Care in State and City-funded Pre-K Systems: Opportunities and Challenges](#). In both reports, 24 states allowed FCCs to participate in their pre-K systems, however, the enrollment of children in FCC/pre-K settings has increased, but remains relatively low as compared to other settings.

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About NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Evaluation strategies in publicly-funded programs that include FCCs.

State/city program	Program name	Number of FCC programs in the 2022-2023 school year	Classroom quality tool	Child assessment tool	Additional evaluation details
Philadelphia	PHLpreK	27 FCCs/Group FCCs	Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Second edition)	Teaching Strategies GOLD	An external coaching organization uses the classroom observation scores to inform coaching.
Seattle	Seattle Preschool Program (SPP)	22 FCCs	CLASS	Teaching Strategies GOLD; Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS)	SPP developed the evaluation questions in collaboration with the Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL) and an evaluation advisory committee.
Multnomah County, Oregon	Preschool for All (PFA)	57 FCCs	Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES)		PFA has taken input from the parents and community members to help inform the evaluation process, which aims to improve systems, rather than individuals.