



Components to Consider When Planning City Preschool Programs

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Abstract

Over the last several years, a growing number of cities have invested in early care and education for 3- and 4-year-old children, known as “preschool.” This paper aims to aid cities in planning preschool programs by outlining a range of factors to consider. We largely do not make recommendations, but rather try to identify a range of options so communities can choose a course that best meets their needs.

We focus on nine major components:

Governance and Administration – Some cities govern their program through a new agency, and others add the program to an existing city agency. Some assign responsibility to the school district. Cities also need to determine whether to administer the program directly, contract out the services, or run a hybrid model.

Financing and Cost - Most localities have identified revenue on top of their state preschool funding. They have employed a range of strategies, including ballot measures, property taxes, and general funds.

Eligibility and Pace of Scale – Some localities strive for universal access, while others target eligibility based on income. Local programs also differ in how rapidly they plan to scale.

Enrollment and Outreach – Cities should mount serious efforts to reach out to families and maximize enrollment; a number of design dimensions and enrollment pathways are presented.

Structural Program Features – When planning for preschool programs, local leaders will consider several structural design questions.

Workforce – Building a high-quality workforce is critical to the success and sustainability of a preschool initiative; several factors are presented.

Program Standards and Supports for Program Implementation – Local leaders will decide what program standards and supports will be a part of preschool programs.

Continuous Improvement and Evaluation – Many programs have implemented systems of quality improvement. Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) and research partnerships are two elements.

Integration with Other City Services – Cities have created models that help families access other services more easily by integrating preschool with other local services.

Key Takeaways

- Investment and innovation for preschool programs is growing at the local level.
- Various design choices have been made by city and/or county leaders in planning and implementing local preschool programs across a number of components.
- There is no “right way” to design a local preschool program; numerous examples provide city leaders with ideas for consideration in their own initiative context.

Introduction

Over the last several years, a growing number of cities and counties have invested in early care and education and, in particular, programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, commonly known as “preschool.”¹ This trend is in response to a number of factors. Though locally-funded provision of early care and education is not a new phenomenon, there is an increased focus on improving children’s health and education outcomes.² The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic highlighted early childhood education as an important support for child development, and a tool to address educational inequity. The pandemic also laid bare the longstanding child care crisis as the demand for care soared from families and employers beyond the supply.³ Though federal action through the 2022 Build Back Better Act has largely stalled, localities are marching ahead; cities and counties are allocating funds to move forward with major preschool expansion efforts, sometimes building on state support, but often ahead of their states.

Cities and counties can look to a growing list of examples as they plan. Over the past decade, a number of high-profile city initiatives have emerged that are expressly focused on improving outcomes for children, notably:

- Boston was one of the first cities to introduce a large-scale public pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds and established a strong evidence base for the program’s effectiveness.⁴
- Tulsa built a strong preschool program in coordination with a local Head Start program and similarly established a compelling evidence base for success.⁵
- Washington, DC, combined several funding streams to establish a universal pre-kindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-olds, the first to serve both age groups at scale.⁶
- New York City’s Pre-K for All program, which expanded to serve all 4-year-olds in under two years and is on a pathway to serve all 3-year-olds, has seen evidence of early success in health and education outcomes, especially for Black and Hispanic/Latinx students.⁷
- Philadelphia funded its pre-kindergarten program through a tax on sugary drinks, establishing a precedent of funding early care and education initiatives through fees that could also drive better health outcomes.⁸

- San Antonio implemented a sales tax initiative to fund preschool services in school districts and developed new model preschool centers for the broader initiative.⁹
- Seattle voters approved a property tax to fund and expand its program.¹⁰

There are countless other examples.¹¹ Our goal for this article is to showcase a range of preschool initiatives, though this is by no means a comprehensive list of all locally operated, publicly funded programs. The initiatives highlighted are as varied as the localities themselves, but all were motivated by common concerns — the importance of early learning for school success and love of learning, positive child and family development, and lifelong health combined with concerns about inequality of access to preschools and the high cost of good preschool programs.

When planning a new preschool program or enhancing an existing program, city officials and other stakeholders must consider program policies and options across several components:

- Governance and administrative structure
- Financing and cost
- Scaling and eligibility
- Enrollment and outreach
- Structural program features
- Workforce
- Quality standards and supports for program implementation
- Continuous improvement and evaluation
- Integration with other city services

As this article illustrates the range of choices that local leaders might make in their program design for each of these components, we describe key considerations as well as give examples of decisions that have been made in different cities. Except in a few cases where warranted by research, we steer away from overly prescriptive guidance, as so much of program design is dependent upon local context. As such, this is not a how-to guide to increase quality or implement a program; no matter which choices a city or county makes against the variables outlined here, leaders will need to make investments that are responsive to their unique communities, institutional and political constraints, and opportunities to work toward high-quality preschool for all children.

Governance and Administrative Structure

Governance

A variety of governance structures are in place across preschool initiatives. This may be determined by existing structures or may depend where the impetus for pre-K expansion is coming from. The funding source often drives governance, particularly with new taxes or school millages.

Some cities govern and administer their program within city government, as in Seattle and Albuquerque. Either a new agency is created for early childhood education; responsibilities are delegated to an existing agency, such as a department of social services; or services are overseen directly by the mayor's office.

In San Antonio, a separate board appointed by the mayor and city council governs the county-funded Pre-K 4 SA program. This kind of structure is especially common in places with multiple school districts within city limits that have little to no oversight from the mayor. In cities with numerous early learning initiatives, a person inside the mayor's office often helps coordinate across existing services, like in San Diego. Given the number of different agencies involved in the provision of services, mayor's offices often form interagency coordinating councils to help manage implementation and speed decision-making.

Other mayors assign responsibility to the school district with oversight from the city, such as in Boston, Chicago, and New York. School districts are typically successful in operating the program when there is a dedicated person with ECE expertise tapped to oversee the initiative, like in Dallas.

In some localities, the county is the primary driver and overseer of the initiative. This is often the result of how funding flows from the state to localities or because of the respective local governance structures. For example, MECK Pre-K in North Carolina is a Mecklenburg County-funded program that offers high-quality, preschool to 4-year-olds. Pima County in Arizona has used local, state, and federal funding to create preschool classrooms in Tucson public schools and enhanced the quality of preschool throughout the county. Multnomah County, Oregon, pushed forward a ballot measure for a new tax to support preschool and will take on a stronger role in governance of the program, which largely encompasses the city and school districts of Portland.

Advisory Groups

In addition to formal governance bodies, or perhaps as part of them, many localities also form advisory groups to represent voices of the parents/families, unions, private providers, and other key constituencies such as higher education, pediatricians, mental health agencies, and others. Advisory groups can help make programs more effective by identifying areas for improvement, collaborating on planning, and advocating for additional resources.

In some cases, the work of advisory groups has resulted in important changes to programs that directly affected program participants. For example:

- In New York City, advocates, providers, and unions won significant wage increases for teachers and other staff, which addressed a longstanding inequity and will reduce staff turnover and improve quality over time.¹²
- A community-driven design effort in Multnomah County, OR, fueled the campaign to fund the program and a successful ballot initiative that put Portland on the path to universal preschool.¹³
- Detroit's Hope Starts Here created a stewardship board of parents, providers, educators, philanthropy, local and state government, and community leaders to guide program design. This help inform a potential upcoming expansion funded by philanthropy and state government.
- School districts that participate in the Colorado Preschool Program are required to establish a district advisory council (DAC), responsible for monitoring the quality of services offered. The DAC ensures that decisions about the program are made locally and community stakeholders have input.

Administration of services

Regardless of governance structure, cities also need to determine which agencies and/or organizations will provide services to children and families. Several models currently operate:

1. The school district administers the program and operates all services within its preschool program. This is becoming less common though; in Boston this was the case originally, but expansion efforts now include other providers in service provision.

2. The school district administers the preschool program and may offer some services itself, as well as contract out direct services to other providers. In Chicago, service administration is split largely based on which children are served – public schools serve 4-year-olds and contracted providers serve infants, toddlers, and 3-year-olds, with some overlap. In New York, 3- and 4-year-olds are served by both schools and private providers to meet demand.
3. The city administers the program but contracts out all direct services. Seattle’s Office of Education and Early Learning sits within city government; administers the preschool contracts; and provides fiscal, program and other support to providers, including Seattle Public Schools.
4. The city contracts out administration of the program. Denver established an independent, non-profit organization to operate the Denver Preschool Program.
5. The city provides vouchers to parents to be used in selected programs, such as the San Francisco Preschool for All program.
6. The city directly operates the preschool program and employs the staff. The City of Albuquerque staffs and operates 25 early care and early learning centers that deliver Early Head Start, Early Pre-K, Pre-K and Preschool services across the city.

Cities may include a range of service providers in their preschool programs, including public schools; Head Start agencies; private center-based providers, including small community non-profits, large social service agencies, and for-profit providers; charter schools; private and parochial schools; and home-based providers. Most program models include a mix of provider types, often called “mixed delivery.” Many variables determine whom to include. The planned timeline may be a factor, as it can be faster - and in many cases, less expensive - to include existing providers rather than only new district-operated classrooms. Some cities can expand without utilizing non-public school space, but for others this capacity is critical. There is also an equity component; many private providers are minority- and women-owned and staffed businesses who have been operating for decades and with established community ties. How they are considered in a preschool expansion can have significant ramifications - positive or negative - for their business and livelihood.

Programs that include private providers can address consistency by investing in quality improvement efforts. Where there is meaningful investment in coaching, professional development, and other supports, quality can be equivalent across all center-based settings, as was the case in the Abbott districts in New Jersey.¹⁴

Head Start programs represent a large portion of publicly funded preschool slots in many geographies, offering a comprehensive early care and education option for low-income families with services to benefit the entire family.¹⁵ Some Head Start grants are administered by local school districts; for example, Detroit and Milwaukee’s public school systems are Head Start grantees. Some Head Start grants go to city agencies, which then contract with other organizations, like in Chicago and in Los Angeles County. Most Head Start funding goes directly to nonprofit organizations, which may provide pathways to build connections with a city’s preschool initiative. In mapping all local options and how they might fit together, leaders should consider the specific benefits of Head Start and the distinctive services they offer to families, while also considering what kind of relationship between Head Start and other preschool services might be beneficial.

Research is still emerging about preschool in family child care (FCC) settings, which are often preferred by families for linguistic and cultural reasons. In many cities, home-based providers offer a majority of available infant and toddler care, though the ability to also offer preschool services is often important to their operational stability. If the city can commit to providing support, helping providers access training and development opportunities, and compensating providers fairly, this is a promising avenue to explore and evaluate.¹⁶ New York City, for example, contracted with networks of FCC providers for services for 3-year-olds. Cities like Philadelphia, Seattle, San Francisco, and Denver have supported preschool enrollment in FCC homes, though the numbers are still relatively low. San Francisco includes FCC providers in quality improvement efforts, through professional development, coaching, and curriculum support.

Financing and Cost

Some city preschool programs are funded fully by their state's preschool initiative, though this is often insufficient for all components that lead to high quality. Recognizing the benefits of preschool for their community, many localities have used city, county and/or local school district funds to expand and/or improve the state funded program. Some state funding requires cities to contribute a local match. Regardless of the impetus, communities have used different mechanisms for raising or allocating these funds:

- The use of ballot measures to fund preschool services is increasingly common, with several successful revenue raises in the past year alone. Voters in San Antonio and Denver approved a local sales tax to support preschool expansion, and Multnomah County, OR, passed a high-income earners' tax.
- So-called "sin taxes" on soda, alcohol, and nicotine have been popular at the state and local level. Philadelphia has a specialized tax on sugary drinks to fund its pre-K program. A tobacco tax in California funds county First 5 agencies to provide services for families and children, 0-5. A challenge with these funding streams is their potential decline over time as consumption decreases, such as in California.¹⁷
- In Miami-Dade County, Seattle and San Francisco, voters approved local property tax levies to fund preschool. A parcel tax increase was passed in Alameda County, California. Property taxes have also been used to increase preschool funding directly to the school district, such as in Fort Worth.
- In other cities like New York, the city government approved the use of general local funds to augment state funds.
- In Charlotte, NC, the state preschool program is paid for with state lottery receipts, federal funds, and a required contribution from local sources, which is typically property taxes.
- St. Louis prioritized use of their Title 1 funding to support a full-day pre-K program, allowing them to leapfrog the state in the scale of expansion.
- Some school districts run the state preschool program and add a local match as part of the school funding formula, as in Pittsburgh.

Many communities augment local funds by requiring family contributions on a sliding scale,

Potential Financing Mechanisms

- Ballot measures
- "Sin taxes"
- Property taxes
- General local funds
- State lottery receipts
- Federal and/or state funds

based on income. In some cases, the family fee is a prerequisite of state or federal funding streams. Other localities use family fees to open access to families above their typical income threshold. For example, ten percent of San Antonio's Pre-K 4 SA slots are reserved for children from families who do not meet the state's income eligibility criteria and pay tuition on a sliding scale, ranging from \$64 to \$6,000 per year.

Some cities have opted to blend or braid multiple public funding streams together, including state and/or local preschool, child care, and Head Start funds. Layering funds together does not necessarily mean more preschool seats, but it can lead to a more integrated program. In Washington, D.C., a subset of the slots in the city's universal preschool initiative are specifically for children who are Head Start eligible, though all children participate in the same admissions process. Blending and braiding funds can allow for more streamlined access for families and some efficiencies for providers, though it can also increase the administrative burden.

Lastly, philanthropic groups have been instrumental both in advocating for increased local funding and in partnering to fund specific initiatives. In Oakland, the Packard Foundation funds coaching in targeted preschool classrooms. In Seattle, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funds a partnership between the city and schools to support inclusion of children with disabilities as well as to improve strategies for dual language learners. In NYC, the Foundation for Child Development funds various research and evaluation projects. Atlanta receives foundation funding for a collaborative literacy coaching program offered to teachers in public schools and other community providers. These services all augment the core program.

Scaling and Eligibility

Determining Eligibility

Some localities strive for universal access, meaning all children within the defined age group are able to enroll in the program. In some cases, the state has a universal pre-K program, such as Florida, Georgia, and Oklahoma, but many cities have pushed for this access without the requirement or resources from the state.

Cities that are expanding slowly or that implement means-tested access need to identify who is eligible for enrolling in the preschool program. One of the first delineators is age. Typically, cities define age eligibility as 4-year-olds, the year prior to kindergarten entry. Over time, some have expanded; New York City and Boston both added programs for 3-year-olds after seeing success for 4-year-olds. Others may give priority to 4-year-olds but allow 3-year-olds who meet certain characteristics to enroll – such as those living in poverty or dual language learners.

Some cities determine eligibility based on income, either because it is a requirement of the state or federal funding source or as a local policy decision. These are often referred to as “targeted” programs. For example, North Carolina’s state preschool program has eligibility criteria based on income and other risk factors that trickles down to all participating cities, unless they augment their local program with other funding.

Measuring Demand

Before determining the scale of services, it is important to understand likely demand and to calibrate supply. There are often local nuances as well as common factors, such as families are typically less willing to travel with a younger child and parents may have a preference to enroll their child near work versus home. Most localities conduct a comprehensive needs assessment at the outset of their expansion efforts. Some have found it helpful to model possible universal pre-k enrollment patterns using kindergarten enrollment patterns.

Scaling

Local programs differ in how rapidly they plan to scale and to what extent.

New York City’s Pre-K for All program stands out as the most ambitious scale-up. In January 2014, approximately 19,000 4-year-old children were enrolled in full-day pre-kindergarten in NYC. By September of that year, nine months after a new administration took office, enrollment rose to 53,000, approximately 51% of the city’s 4-year-old population. Enrollment grew steadily over the next two years to 68,647 children in 2015-2016 (66.6%); and 70,430 children (68.3%) in 2016-2017.¹⁸

In contrast, Seattle, Columbus, and Philadelphia are all working toward universal access, but ramping-up more slowly, while focusing initially on children who are the most at-risk. Boston is also scaling its successful program up to serve all 4-year-olds in the city. Fort Worth is in the process of expanding its state pre-k program, which targets low-income families, to one that is inclusive of all 4-year-olds regardless of family economic status.

For some cities with a more targeted program, there may not be a goal to ever reach universal service provision; for others, it is a question of resources and capacity. Stakeholders often make eligibility and scaling decisions based on the perceived capacity of the current community to serve the children. They consider whether there are adequate facilities and qualified staff to meet the needs of the population to be served.

In many cities, scaling has been facilitated by city-led cross agency planning, including transportation, parks and recreation, city planning and zoning, social services, safety, and others

Enrollment and Outreach

Approaches vary to reaching out to families and caregivers and enrolling children in preschool programs. These strategies are essential components of any effort to use early care and education as a tool to advance meaningful equality of opportunity. Families and caregivers of children in the most marginalized and underserved communities often have the least time to navigate enrollment systems, trust government programs the least, and face structural barriers to engaging with typical applications, such as lack of computer access or language barriers.

When thinking through design of outreach and enrollment systems, cities face important choices along five main dimensions:

1. **Family/caregiver choice:** Many policymakers value giving families and caregivers as much choice as possible in which program to enroll. For example, Denver, New Orleans, and New York have all sought to give families the opportunity to fill out one central application that would allow them to choose from all the available programs in their cities, both school-based and community-based.
2. **Lowering barriers:** Many programs have experimented with quick online and call-in enrollment methods in order to make it easier for families to enroll. Chicago partners with local organizations to help families navigate the process with support offered in their native language.
3. **Determining eligibility:** Many of the funding streams for preschool have strict income and/or activity requirements for enrollment. This often requires proof of income, proof of work or other activity, and perhaps the collection of sliding scale fees. While programs may make an effort to simplify this process, this is an area ripe for innovation and some places are trying new strategies – many cities use state Medicaid and food stamp data to determine whether families are eligible for services without needing to ask them for additional information. Washington, D.C. enrolls all children up-front and then determines Head Start eligibility on the back-end, rather than requiring families to enroll in a specific seat type at the outset.
4. **Program autonomy in mixed delivery systems:** Private providers, and Head Start in particular, often favor program-based outreach and enrollment efforts. Efforts to

centralize processes can be seen as a threat to program autonomy – and even survival.

5. **Compelling messages and building trust:** Communities have experimented with different approaches to “getting the word out” about program availability. Chicago, for example, runs a dedicated marketing campaign each year that includes flyers, posters, and pamphlets. Others build relationships with community organizations, including religious groups, that families and caregivers know and trust in order to transmit the message about preschool through “trusted messengers.”¹⁹

<u>Design Dimensions</u>	<u>Enrollment Pathways</u>
1. Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent • Centralized • Hybrid system
2. Lowering barriers	
3. Eligibility	
4. Program autonomy	
5. Messaging & trust	

In efforts to balance among these five sometimes competing dimensions, cities have settled into three main enrollment pathways. Cities can choose among these options depending on how they view the five principles and which they – and their critical stakeholders – want to prioritize.

- **Independent enrollment:** In some city initiatives, such as Cleveland’s PRE4CLE, programs enroll children independently and directly and report the number of students they serve.
- **Centralized enrollment:** Some cities, such as New Orleans, moved to a single, centralized enrollment process that includes preschool programs administered by schools and community-based organizations. Families list a number of programs in order of preference, and a computer system matches the family to the highest ranked available program.
- **Hybrid systems:** Some cities use a centralized application for school-based programs (and some private providers), while allowing other providers to continue enrolling students independently. San Francisco uses a centralized eligibility list, but providers may also enroll families directly.

Structural Program Features

When planning for a preschool program, local leaders will need to consider several critical design questions about program structure, including:

- How long will the instructional day last – half day, full school day, or longer to accommodate child care needs? Will this vary by site, family characteristics, age of child, or other factors?
- What class size and child-to-teacher ratio will be set, and will this vary by child or classroom?
- What differentiated offerings will be available to meet the needs of English language learners and children with developmental delays and disabilities?
- What will be the staffing model? Will it include coaches, mental health consultants, bilingual and special education specialists, or others?

As these questions all have funding implications, program planners take time to consider the costs and benefits. The Seattle Preschool Program Action Plan included a cost calculator and ran multiple scenarios, with a thorough review of options. In San Antonio, the planning group commissioned a menu of program options.

Weighing different design choices

Some cities rely on their state’s guidance for these decisions. In other places, decision-making is pushed down to the local level. And still in others, localities choose to go above and beyond what their state requires. For example, some of Texas’ largest school districts have policies that exceed state requirements; Dallas Independent School District that has set policies lowering the student to teacher ratio. In Virginia Beach, all pre-K programs are housed in public schools and meet staffing requirements above those set by the state.

There is a growing research body to support cities in making evidenced-based decisions with regard to these structural design questions. For example, research indicates that students benefit much more from a full-day program than a part-day program; in a study in Colorado where students were randomly assigned to full- or half-day programs, those in full-day programs made greater gains in literacy skills and vocabulary.²¹

Some choices are informed by family need or preference. For example, full-day programs may also better meet the needs of working parents. Some cities are able to achieve this by integrating Head Start into preschool, like in Washington, D.C., and New York. Pittsburgh’s Early Childhood Education Department established formal partnership agreements with a number of childcare agencies to provide extended-day programming.

For some other considerations, there is a minimum level that all cities should aim to meet; moving beyond that floor requires weighing the resources available and the programmatic trade-offs. For example, evidence suggests that preschool classrooms should have a maximum of 20 students with a maximum ratio of 1 adult for every 10 children.²⁰ Other cities may be able to strive for even smaller class sizes or lower ratios.

Supports for diverse learners

Localities currently offer a range of programs to meet the needs of children who speak a language other than English at home. Because bilingualism confers immediate and life-long benefits, systems should strive to consider multilingual support for all children. In practice, most programs at least try to provide targeted language support for non-native English speakers. Leaders should consider both the research and the specific needs of their student population in approaching this aspect of program design and, at a minimum, implement strategies to integrate students’ home languages and cultures in the classroom and to ensure all families are able to engage with the program.²²

Preschool special education is another area for thoughtful consideration. Many places already offer services for the youngest children with delays and disabilities because of state and federal requirements and dedicated funding streams. There is a risk as cities, states, and counties expand preschool services that special education remains a separate service model. Wherever possible, operators should seek opportunities for integrated services that allow them to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environments, learning alongside their peers. For example, in Stockton, California, the school district utilized a state grant to create inclusive classrooms, Title 1 dollars for additional classroom supports, and First 5 funds for ASQ screenings. The school district also works with the local university to provide behavioral supports.

Workforce

Building and maintaining a high-quality workforce is critical to the success and sustainability of a preschool initiative. Some of the considerations include:

- What required qualifications will be set for preschool teachers? How might that differ from the requirements for child care or elementary school teachers? Will there be variation among settings?
- How will the city approach compensation for preschool teachers? Will there be parity between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers? Will there be parity between preschool teachers working in different settings?
- What partnerships can the city enter into to build a pipeline of qualified teachers? Will the city subsidize the cost of certification to expand the workforce?
- What are the specific staffing considerations for special populations? What additional requirements might be put in place for dual language classrooms or special education classrooms?

Workforce Considerations

- Teacher qualifications
- Compensation
- Workforce pipeline partnerships
- Staffing for special populations

State level preschool programs have a range of certification requirements, which may differ by setting. For example, preschool teachers in public schools may have to meet the same certification requirements as public elementary school teachers, whereas requirements may be lower in private child care centers. Many cities match their state's requirements for preschool teacher qualifications, though there are examples of places that go further. Boston exceeds its state UPK teacher requirements; teachers must initially have a BA and obtain an MA within five years with Early Childhood Certification, covering pre-K to 2nd grade.

For places undertaking a large preschool expansion, they may find it challenging to meet these sorts of requirements initially. Leaders

should consider pathways to help current preschool teachers meet new requirements over an appropriate period of time and with relevant supports so the existing workforce is not lost in the process. The Seattle Preschool Program, for example, provided teachers with funding to get their credentials and also worked with area colleges on the process steps.

Compensation is one of the bigger challenges that cities face; preschool teachers are often paid below elementary school teachers, and salaries are typically lower in contracted programs than in schools. This can contribute to high turnover, which impacts program costs and student learning. Early childhood educators are far more likely to live in poverty than elementary school teachers. There are significant racial equity implications given that early childhood educators are also more likely to be women of color than is the rest of the teaching workforce.²³

More and more, programs are taking steps to address these disparities. At the launch of Pre-K for All in New York City, teachers working for contracted providers were paid a lower wage than the unionized public school teachers. In the first years of the expansion, teachers working for contracted providers were eligible for retention bonuses to augment their pay. In the program's fifth year, the city reached an historic labor agreement to bring all certified lead preschool teachers' salaries up to the starting salary for public school teachers.²⁴ In Alabama, the state introduced a salary parity policy to bring preschool teachers across settings to the same starting pay scale as K-12 teachers with comparable roles and certification requirements. After the policy was put into place, the state saw an increased interest from teachers to join the workforce, as well as increased retention.²⁵

Many localities across the nation are seeing a huge shortage in qualified early childhood educators. Some are working with higher education and the larger ECE community to design teacher pathways to quality. At Albuquerque's Central New Mexico Community College, for example, there are pathways for several ECE careers, including assistant teachers, lead teachers, and coaches in English and Spanish.

Program Standards and Supports for Program Implementation

In addition to structural features, there are a variety of approaches to program standards and support for program implementation. Some of the common elements to consider include:

- Curriculum requirements and support for fidelity of implementation
- Assessment of child progress and outcomes
- Assessment of classroom-level outcomes
- On-going professional development requirements and support for in-class coaching

There are three basic ways that cities typically respond to the need for program standards:

1. Provide little to no guidance or expectations;
2. Mandate curriculum, assessment tool use and professional development expectations; or
3. Provide guidance with a limited number of choices for each of these elements.

The starting point for each city is different – some states have stringent requirements for curriculum and assessment built into their standards; others leave much more discretion to localities. Cities might not choose to add requirements on top of state minimums because the funding they are offering is so limited or they believe that these decisions are better made at the program level.

Cities may mandate specific program elements when the program is administered by the school district. For example, Austin, Fort Worth, and Houston require specific curricula and offer support for implementing it. Dallas, Oakland, and San Antonio require programs to provide coaching.

Some locations, like Seattle and Philadelphia, choose to provide a limited set of choices for curricula. New York City provides programs with a limited choice for student-level assessments.

Many cities have taken state requirements and expanded upon them; for example, Lincoln, Nebraska, expanded the state's support to pilot the Pyramid Model for social emotional competence in some preschool classrooms to all of its preschool classrooms.

Typically, the reason for mandating a curriculum, assessment and professional development system is to increase coherence and integration across these elements, to ensure that children come to kindergarten having been afforded the opportunity to learn the same skills and content, to streamline fidelity of implementation, and reduce costs. Further, alignment between Pre-K and K-3 curriculum creates greater cohesion in student learning.²⁶

Most programs offer some kind of formal professional development for teachers. This can be focused on specific instructional skills or particular curricula or materials used in the program. Professional development is typically focused on those in lead teacher roles, yet some take a more expansive approach; for example, in two Texas cities, Arlington and Corpus Christi, the district's professional development offerings are inclusive of assistant teachers.

In multiple research studies, coaching for preschool teachers has been tied to improvements in teacher-child interactions and to overall quality improvements.²⁷

Some cities have a central resource to provide coaching to preschool programs, such as Tulsa and Boston where coaches from their central offices are deployed to work directly with teachers on classroom practice. Until 2022, New York City employed instructional coaches as well as social workers, who provided coaching to teachers and leaders on appropriate social-emotional practice. Other cities may assign this function to school and program leaders; this may be more cost-effective, though potentially less consistent.

Similarly, some cities might administer classroom-level assessments, like the CLASS tool, on a periodic basis. Others direct program leaders to engage in self-assessment or work with independent evaluators.

Continuous Improvement and Evaluation

Many programs, including those in Fort Worth, New York, Philadelphia, Sacramento, and San Antonio, have implemented systems of quality improvement. This suggests a comprehensive feedback loop between program requirements, support for implementation, quality assessment, and support for quality improvement.

From its inception, Boston Public Schools (BPS) has built its early childhood programs with the expectation of meeting high quality standards. For example, BPS has supported 36 schools with pre-K classrooms to become NAEYC accredited and is currently working with 13 more, representing over 60 percent of elementary schools. In other places, such as Lincoln, Nebraska, all pre-K classrooms are required to be NAEYC-accredited.

New York City uses a comprehensive set of quality measures, including family and teacher surveys and performance on nationally-normed assessments CLASS and ECERS-R, to understand where programs have room to improve. Programs receive more or less coaching based on their quality rating. This information is packaged in a way that it can be shared with families to help them understand the comparative quality of their program choices during the application and enrollment process.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Some city preschool programs are required to participate in their state defined quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). Oakland, CA, strongly encourages its pre-K classrooms to participate in QRIS, even though the state does not require it; most, if not all, participate. Denver Preschool Programs (DPP) must participate in Colorado's QRIS, Colorado Shines, to promote quality. All sites are required to be working toward at least a Colorado Shines Level 3. Aurora, CO, takes it one step further and requires all providers to have a Level 4. This trend is true in other states as well; the city operated pre-K programs in both Cleveland and Columbus must be at a level 3 star rating, which includes that curriculum must be aligned with Ohio's early learning and development standards.

QRIS are not all created equal. Some focus solely on the ratings of programs, without providing support to improve quality. In some localities, the QRIS is used in a punitive way; programs with lower scores may be eligible for a lower

reimbursement rate or may be unable to participate in certain procurement opportunities, but do not have access to any specific support for improvement. Implementation decisions like these can have significant unintended consequences for access and quality over time.²⁸

Research partnerships

There are two principal types of research that a program may want to take on in the early years of implementation, each with potential risks and rewards. These two types of research are not mutually exclusive and can be useful to programs at different moments of their development.

Research Types
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Impact (or outcomes study): to determine or measure the effect of the preschool program• Implementation: to answer questions that can guide teams about whether or how to make changes or operate preschool programs

The first type of research is an "impact," or outcomes study, in which researchers attempt to determine or measure the effect of the preschool program. To do this in a rigorous way, researchers must collect large amounts of data about many participants over an extended period, as well as identify and collect data from a group that does not participate in the program as a "control group" against which to compare those that did attend.

Such a study can have many benefits if it shows positive results, including validating the local approach to program design, spreading best practice in the field, bolstering support for expansion, and adding to the growing number of studies making a case for the effectiveness of ECE. But such studies can be expensive and take significant amounts of time and effort to implement. And, of course, if the results do not show significant program benefits, while this can help to advance the field by adding to the store of knowledge about which approaches are effective, policymakers may decide to withhold further investment. Therefore, it is important that a program wait until it is confident that it is running as designed before taking on such a study.

The second type of research is broadly termed "implementation research." These studies are designed to answer questions that can guide teams as they make decisions about whether and how to make changes or additions in how they

are operating their programs. For example, a study may look at whether a particular course of teacher training had a measurable impact on classroom practice as measured by a reliable rating scale, or whether boosting outreach efforts in a particular linguistic community increased enrollment in that area. Generally speaking, these studies are shorter and require fewer resources. They can be useful to other communities as well.

Regardless of the approach that a team decides to take with research, many programs have found it invaluable to develop a research partnership with an academic institution. For example, Boston Public Schools has had a long productive partnership with researchers from the University of Michigan. Tulsa has benefited from a partnership with a team from Georgetown. Seattle and Philadelphia both partnered with the National Institute for Early Education Research to provide implementation research initially and then impact research. New York City built a strong alliance with two separate teams from New York University from the first days of implementation work.

In the most successful cases, researchers can become partners of the program, helping leaders to make decisions based on the best research in the field, as well as advancing studies of their own program as it develops. For example, NIEER, in collaboration with Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington, conducted a four-year evaluation of the Seattle Preschool Program. Information from the study, including classroom observation information and child assessment data were used in continuous improvement processes. This informed not only classroom coaches but also the city early learning leaders as the program continued to expand.²⁹

Integration with Other City Services

Cities have the opportunity to integrate preschool with other local services more readily than states or private preschool providers.

The types of services to coordinate include:

- Developing methods for ensuring seamless transitions both from infant/toddler programs and into kindergarten,
- Conducting developmental and health screenings,

- Identifying children with behavioral or mental health issues and providing their teachers with consultative coaching,
- Establishing a medical home for all children, and
- Coordinating other social services such as housing and employment.

These connections can be most meaningful for highly vulnerable populations, like children living in homeless shelters and those with significant developmental delays and disabilities, as several examples demonstrate. Seattle built on an already strong system coordinating health and mental health services between city offices and the county's Public Health Seattle & King County Child Care Health Program to provide mental health and health services on-site at preschool locations as well as specialized consultation to teachers. The Cincinnati Preschool Promise program provides access to school-based health centers, school nurses and other supports to students in public schools. New York City created a transition team to help families make a smooth transfer from early intervention services, managed by the city's health department, to preschool special education services, overseen by the education department.

Closing

With many city preschool programs now operating at scale, municipalities looking to launch or expand their program offerings now have many different examples to look to. Program design must be responsive to local context, including the funding and policy environment and the needs of specific student and family populations. As cities and/or counties make critical design decisions, they should consider the trade-offs between access, quality, and equity. Emerging examples can help to guide this process.

Note: This article references design choices made by several dozen city and county preschool initiatives. All included information was found on public websites or in select instances, through discussions with current or former city leaders. Information is up to date as of fall 2022. If you identify a reference that is outdated or incorrect, please contact the authors at info@nieer.org. Where specific research studies were referenced, they are included in the report citations.

Acknowledgements

Funding for this report was provided by CityHealth. The authors are solely responsible for content of this brief. We would like to thank Tara Ryan for her work on reviewing California information, copy editing, and formatting the report.

About NIEER

Since 2002, the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) (NIEER) has provided independent, research-based analysis and technical assistance to inform policy supporting high-quality early education for all young children. NIEER is committed to providing nonpartisan research that enhances the early childhood education field and encourages policies and practices promoting the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development children need to thrive in school and beyond.

Suggested Citation

Liss, E., Wallack, J., Weisenfeld, G. G. & Frede, E. (2023). *Components to consider when planning city preschool programs*. National Institute for Early Education Research.

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End Notes

¹ We primarily use the term “preschool” throughout this article to refer to early care and education services offered to 3- and 4-year-olds. Different localities may apply different names to their programming.

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¹¹ See Appendix A for a full list of city and county preschool initiatives mentioned in this article.

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Appendix

Throughout this article, we highlighted the work of many different city and county preschool initiatives. You can find a full list of the programs referenced below. Where relevant, we have cited research studies on these programs throughout the article. This is by no means a comprehensive list of all city and county operated preschool programs in the country; we included these programs because they provide a variety of different models and design choices.

To read more about large city pre-K initiatives, including an assessment of their quality, please explore reports from CityHealth: <https://www.cityhealth.org/our-policy-package/high-quality-accessible-prek/> .

Programs referenced:

- Abbott Pre-K program, NJ
- Alameda County, CA
- Albuquerque, NM
- Atlanta, GA
- Aurora, CO
- Austin, TX
- Boston, MA
- Charlotte, NC
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC
- Chicago, IL
- Cincinnati, OH
- Cleveland, OH
- Columbus, OH
- Corpus Christi, TX
- Dallas, TX
- Denver, CO
- Detroit, MI
- Fort Worth, TX
- Lincoln, NE
- Los Angeles, CA
- Miami-Dade County, FL
- Milwaukee, WI
- Multnomah County, OR
- New Orleans, LA
- New York, NY
- Oakland, CA
- Philadelphia, PA
- Pima County, AZ
- Pittsburgh, PA
- Sacramento, CA
- San Antonio, TX
- San Diego, CA
- San Francisco, CA
- Seattle, WA
- St. Louis, MO
- Stockton, CA
- Tulsa, OK
- Virginia Beach, VA
- Washington, D.C.

This article also references some statewide pre-K initiatives. To read more about state-run public pre-K, please explore the NIEER State of Preschool Yearbook, published annually: <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks>.