

UPK Policy Brief

Building a Coherent System for UPK: Differences by Setting and Auspice

Jeanne L. Reid, Sharon Lynn Kagan, and Samantha A. Melvin

National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University

As early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs have expanded across the country, policymakers are trying to build coherent ECEC systems that promote quality, equity, and efficiency.¹ A challenge to implementing such efforts is that ECEC services are often overseen by diverse ministries, departments and/or agencies, such as those with responsibility for education, human service, community development, welfare, and/or social services. This lack of administrative cohesion often translates into services for youngsters that may be of less than optimal quality, inequitably distributed among children, and inefficiently operated. Causing confusion for families, policymakers, and practitioners, such uncoordinated governance is facing increased challenges as programs for young children expand under divergent auspices. Long concerned about such inhibitors to quality, the National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) at Teachers College has conducted an empirical study of one such mixed-delivery system in New York City (NYC), where an ambitious policy initiative, Pre-K for All (PKA), has confronted the persistent challenges posed by a bifurcated administrative structure. The results of the analyses and their policy implications can inform policymakers across the country who are striving to create equitable, effective, and efficient ECEC systems.

Launched in the 2014-15 school year, PKA seeks to provide high-quality universal pre-k (UPK) in the city's schools and Community Based Organizations (CBOs). The initiative inherited New York City's mixed-delivery system in which UPK program oversight is distributed between the city's Department of Education (DOE) and Administration for Children's Services (ACS), agencies that historically have been characterized by programs with divergent missions, histories, and capacities. In this context, the city employed substantial resources, including cross-agency policy documents, increased professional development (PD), and enhanced funding offers to improve teacher salaries, intended to align quality across programs that were administered by these diverse administrative entities.

The purpose of the NCCF study was to identify variation in PKA implementation by setting (schools vs. CBOs) and auspice (CBOs with only UPK funding; CBOs with UPK and Child Care funding; and CBOs with UPK and Head Start funding) during the 2016-17 school year.² Designed to discern lessons regarding quality, we used a mixed-methods approach with data collected from 57 UPK sites and 66 lead teachers: 1) UPK administrator surveys; 2) UPK lead teacher surveys; 3) Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) observations; 4) DOE site-level child demographics. After determining the statistical significance of comparisons by setting and auspice, we identified structurally rooted differences in PKA implementation and program quality.³

Key Findings

- CBOs and schools enroll different populations of children and render different services for their families.
- Classroom quality and teacher views of pedagogical expectations vary by setting and auspice.
- Compensation and working conditions vary by setting and auspice.
- Head Start sites offer the most family services but struggle the most with UPK implementation.

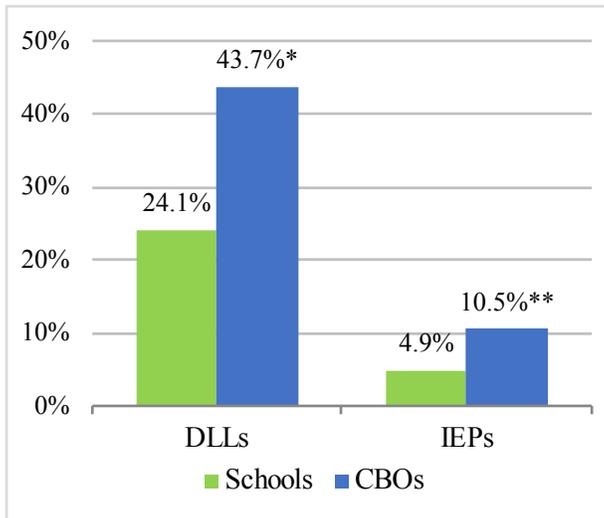
¹ Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Weisenfeld, G. G., Kasmin, R., DiCrecchio, N., & Horowitz, M. (2018). *The state of preschool 2017: State preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER; Phillips, D. A., Anderson, S., Rupa Datta, A., Kisker, E. E. (2018). The changing landscape of publicly-funded center-based child care: 1990-2012. *Children and Youth Services Review, 91*, 94-104.

² CBOs with Head Start funding typically had Child Care funding too.

³ For all data comparisons, schools are the reference category.

Results

Figure 1. Percentage of Children in UPK Programs Who Are DLLs or Who Have IEPs by Setting (n=57)



Note: ~p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

with government applications. Head Start sites offered the widest array of family services (5.7 on average; p<.01) and were most likely to provide them on site (p<.10). CBOs were further open more hours each day than schools (an average 9 hours daily at CBOs vs. 7 hours at schools; p<.001). CBOs were typically open year-round, while schools were open only during the school-year (p<.001).

Classroom quality and pedagogical expectations. School classrooms had higher overall scores on the CLASS than CBO classrooms, reflecting higher scores on the domains of Classroom Organization (6.1 in schools vs. 5.7 in CBOs; p<.05) and Instructional Support (3.6 vs. 2.9, respectively; p<.01). In contrast, no difference was found on the Emotional Support domain (6.5 and 6.4). Head Start classrooms had the lowest overall scores on Classroom Organization (5.1; p<.01) and Instructional Support (2.7; p<.05). Regarding UPK's pedagogical expectations, CBO teachers were less likely to say their classroom practices match what is expected of them (on a scale of 1 to 4 to measure agreement, an average 2.0 for CBO teachers vs. 2.4 school teachers; p<.05). Many CBO teachers said that the demands of UPK, particularly related to assessment and documentation, took away from time they wanted to spend with children and that children's behavioral/social-emotional needs prevented them from meeting UPK's requirements within the time constraints of the UPK day.

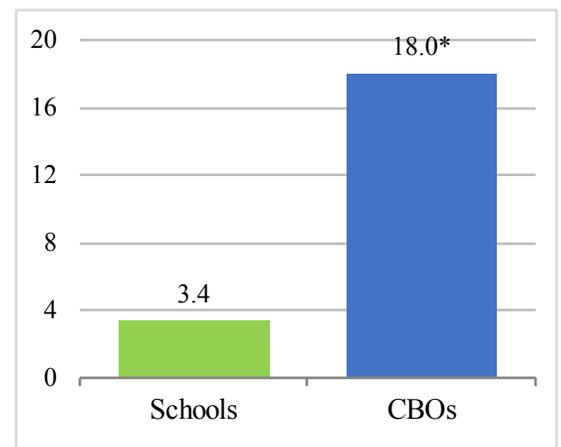
Compensation and working conditions. CBO administrators were paid less per year than school administrators (an average \$64,016 vs. \$117,044, respectively; p<.001) and were less likely to have health insurance (71.4% vs. 90.9% respectively; p<.10) and retirement plans (57.1% vs. 95.5%, respectively, p<.01) through their employer or union.

Administrators in the two settings also worked under different conditions. CBO administrators and their staff spent many more hours per week on budgeting and cost allocation (Figure 2). Unlike schools, most CBOs must meet multiple

Enrollment and services: CBOs serve a higher-need population of children than schools. CBOs were more likely to enroll children who were Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and who had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (Figure 1). Half of the children enrolled at Head Start sites were DLLs (51.7%; p<.10). In addition, the enrollment of black children was higher in CBOs (38.0% of UPK children in CBOs vs. 24.8% in schools; p<.10), while the enrollment of white children was higher in schools (7.3% in CBOs vs. 18.6% in schools; p<.05). In Head Start sites, only 1.9% of the children were white. Overall, in most CBOs (82.9%), at least 90% of the children were racial/ethnic minorities, compared to about half of school sites (54.6%; p<.05).

CBOs offered or referred their UPK families to a wider array of services (an average 4.8 services in CBOs vs. 2.8 in schools; p<.01) and provided more of them on site (p<.05). Such services included mental health, food and/or housing, employment and education, parenting classes, and assistance

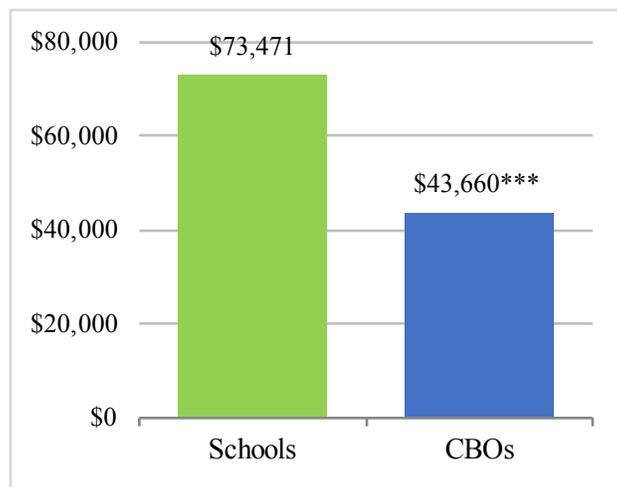
Figure 2. Average Weekly Staff-hours Spent on Budgeting and Costs by Setting (n=51)



Note: ~p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

program requirements. Head Start administrators were most likely to report difficulty complying with multiple standards and regulations, citing conflicts between agency expectations as a primary cause. Additionally, almost half of Head Start administrators (46.2%; $p < .10$) said that meeting UPK’s early learning standards was difficult, and over a third (38.5%; $p < .10$) said that complying with UPK’s curriculum requirements was difficult.

Figure 3. Average Annual Teacher Salary by Setting ($n=61$)



Note: $\sim p < .10$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

CBOs also reported more difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified UPK teachers, citing lower pay, and longer work-days and work-years as the primary causes. Indeed, the results indicate that CBO teachers had lower salaries on average than school teachers (Figure 3) and were less likely to have health insurance (47.7% vs. 86.4%, respectively, $p < .01$) and retirement plans (61.5% vs. 86.4%, respectively, $p < .05$) through their employers or unions. At the same time, teachers in CBOs were less likely to have a master’s degree (65.9% of CBO teachers vs. 100% of school teachers; $p < .001$) and to be certified in early childhood education (54.5% vs. 81.8%, respectively; $p < .05$). CBO administrators described a *de facto* career ladder in which teachers attained higher qualifications and then sought school-based jobs for higher pay and fewer hours, directing a flow of teaching talent from CBOs to schools.

Policy Recommendations

The results indicate structural differences between schools and CBOs that hinder the quality, equity, and efficiency of UPK programs. Disparities in classroom quality reflect structural differences that will not be solved solely by programmatic changes. Indeed, years of ECEC experience in NYC, across the nation, and internationally, indicate that these deeply embedded structural issues defy short-term policy fixes. Yet, with the commitment of sufficient resources and governmental support, they are very policy amenable. We offer several policy considerations.

➤ **Create transcendent government entities that articulate policies for all settings.**

The results indicate that program settings, which have been guided by different governance and sets of policies for decades, differ in the fiscal and professional resources they possess and require. To address the systemic dimensions of these distinctions, policymakers should examine their governance structures and consider creating a consolidated ministry or boundary-spanning entity that has jurisdiction over all ECEC programs. Policies that transcend settings should also be developed. This has been done successfully in other locations so that the durable entity has the authority to implement transcendent policies, often supported by policy documents that apply to all settings.⁴ A coherent set of policies could include guidance regarding: i) quality standards, ii) aligned curricula and assessments, iii) workforce qualifications, compensation, and development, iv) program monitoring, v) transitions; vi) family engagement; vii) child data systems; and viii) funding sources and obligations. No easy task, these innovations require a “deep-think” among ECEC policymakers, constituents, and scholars. The creation of a high-level commission that engages multiple perspectives to explore ways to address these challenges could provide critical guidance to policy leaders who seek to create such entities and build a coherent system.

⁴ Kagan, S. L. (Ed.) (in press). *The early advantage II: Building systems that work for young children: International insights from innovative early childhood systems*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- ***Establish equitable compensation for UPK teachers and administrators that apply to all settings and build system-wide career ladders for teachers that offer rising compensation.***

The results indicate that qualified teachers are leaving CBOs to pursue jobs in schools that pay more for fewer working hours. To staunch this flow of talent, policymakers should establish hourly wages that apply to UPK teachers and administrators *in all settings*. The wage level could vary by teacher and administrator education, certification, experience, responsibilities, and continuing education, and could be phased in over time (and embedded in union contracts). Differences in health insurance and pension plans should also be addressed and will require the identification of durable funding mechanisms that will render additional resources. To further develop and retain teaching talent in CBOs, policymakers should build career ladders with job titles and financial incentives that apply *in all settings*. Often done in other countries, the ladder would guide the professional trajectories of UPK teachers and reward them for developing their skills.⁵

- ***Recognize that high-quality settings provide both exemplary pedagogy and comprehensive services.***

The results indicate that while CBOs, and particularly Head Start sites, have struggled with PKA implementation, they also possess important strengths. Indeed, the pursuit of uniformly high outcomes requires a recognition that quality is reflected in both high-quality pedagogy and the provision of comprehensive family services. While in this example, Head Start sites appear to be the most challenged by PKA implementation, they simultaneously represent exemplars of how to serve disadvantaged children and families. Policymakers need to address the strengths and weaknesses of both school and CBO modalities, providing greater resources to programs that serve more high-need families. A two-pronged strategy of building capacity for 1) a workforce that can offer high-quality pedagogy and 2) the provision of comprehensive services *in all settings* should guide these efforts.

- ***Create opportunities to reduce the concentration of high-need children in CBOs.***

The results indicate that high-need children are more concentrated in CBOs, and particularly at Head Start sites, which makes achieving equitable child outcomes more challenging.⁶ To promote more diversity within sites, policymakers could strengthen their UPK enrollment systems to give ample information, diverse choices, and enrollment preference to parents who seek programs outside their neighborhoods, which may foster greater program diversity than staying close to home in neighborhoods that are segregated by race/ethnicity and/or income. Programs in high-resource areas could simultaneously give enrollment preference to children who are income-eligible for Child Care and/or Head Start programs.

Conclusion

In sum, this study points out distinctions between UPK settings, both positive and negative, which should be fully understood as the UPK expansion continues in NYC and elsewhere. These distinctions are rooted in structural issues, far from unique to NYC, and are amenable to carefully considered policy changes. Addressing them will require innovative policies, the identification of funding mechanisms, and a recognition that uniformly positive outcomes for children and families depend on coherent systems for ECEC services.

⁵ Kagan, S. L. (Ed.) (2018). *The early advantage I: Early childhood systems that lead by example*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁶ Reid, J. L. (2015). The racial and ethnic composition of pre-kindergarten classrooms and children's language development, *Pennsylvania State Law Review*, 119(3), 645-685; Reid, J. L., & Ready, D. D. (2013). High-quality preschool: The socio-economic composition of preschool classrooms and children's learning, *Early Education and Development* 24(8), 1082-1111; Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2014). Does higher peer socio-economic status predict children's language and executive function skills gains in prekindergarten? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 35, 422-432.