UPK Policy Brief

Enhancing the Quality of UPK Programs: 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

With accumulating evidence that high-quality universal preschool could reduce the disparities in skills among sub-groups of children at kindergarten entry, policymakers are focusing considerable resources on the development of quality preschool programs.[1] Yet, attaining uniformly high-quality programs is challenging among the multiple and diverse providers that characterize the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) at Teachers College has conducted an empirical study of one such pursuit in New York City (NYC), where an ambitious policy initiative, Pre-K for All (PKA), seeks to provide high-quality universal pre-k (UPK). The results of the analyses could inform policymakers nationwide who are trying to enhance ECEC program quality across diverse settings.

Launched in the 2014-15 school year, the PKA 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 sought to align program quality across settings by creating cross-agency policy documents, offering funding to CBOs that could be used to increase teacher salaries, and joint providing professional development (PD) workshops and instructional coaching.

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 differences in the implementation of policy efforts to enhance quality.[3]

Key Findings

- Classroom process quality varies by setting and auspice.
- The relationship between PD and teachers' changes in practice differs by setting, frequency, and content.
- CBOs and schools use different curricula and assessments, with varying degrees of alignment.
- CBOs and schools enroll different child populations and render different practices and services for them.
- Higher teacher turnover and lower compensation at CBOs affect working conditions at CBOs.

Results

Classroom quality. Overall, school classrooms had higher average scores on the CLASS than CBO classrooms, reflecting higher scores on the domains of Classroom Organization and Instructional Support (*Figure 1*). Head Start classrooms had the lowest overall average score of any setting (4.6 in Head Start classrooms; $p<.01$),

[1] Phillips, D. A., et al. (2018). The changing landscape of publicly-funded center-based child care: 1990-2012. *Children and Youth Services Review, 91*, 94-104; Cascio, E. U. (2017). *Does universal preschool hit the target? Program access and preschool impacts*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research; Yoshikawa, H., et al. (2013). *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. New York: Society for Research in Child Development and the Foundation for Child Development.

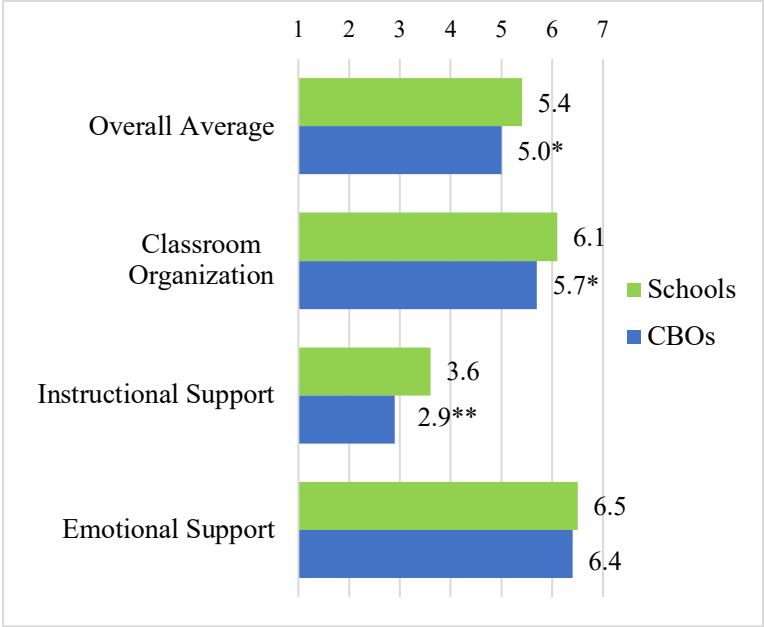
[2] CBOs with Head Start funding typically had Child Care funding too.

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

reflecting lower scores on Classroom Organization and Instructional Support. Notably, Instructional Support scores were relatively low in all settings. No significant differences were found on the Emotional Support domain.

Professional development. Overall, teachers across both settings were more likely to say that coaching changed their classroom practice "a lot" (52.4%) than did PD workshops (34.9%; p<.05). Among CBO teachers, the frequency of coaching was associated with these self-reported changes in their practice (*Figure 2*). However, less than half of teachers in both settings received coaching at least monthly (45.5% of CBO teachers and 36.4% of school teachers).

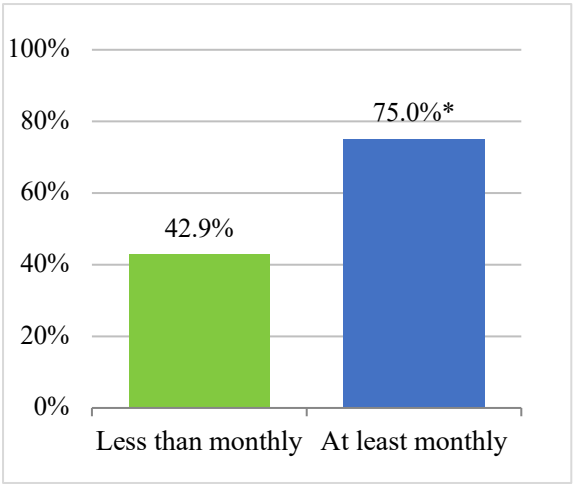
Figure 1. Differences in CLASS Scores by Setting (n=66)



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

The match of PD content and teachers' PD needs was also associated with self-reported changes in practice. Among school teachers, those who said their PD workshops matched their needs were more likely to say that the PD changed their practice "a lot" than those who did not (66.7% vs. 25.0%; respectively, p<.10). Yet, most teachers in both settings said that workshop content (54.5% of CBO teachers and 59.1% of school teachers) and coaching content (61.4% and 40.9%, respectively) did not match their needs. Most teachers also said they have no choice in the PD they receive (65.9% of CBO teachers and 72.7% of school teachers). Regarding PD for administrators, only about half of administrators in both settings said they could choose the PD that meets their needs (57.1% of CBO administrators and 54.6% of school administrators). Few differences in PD implementation were found by auspice.

Figure 2. CBO Teachers' Reported Changes in Practice by Coaching Frequency (n=66)



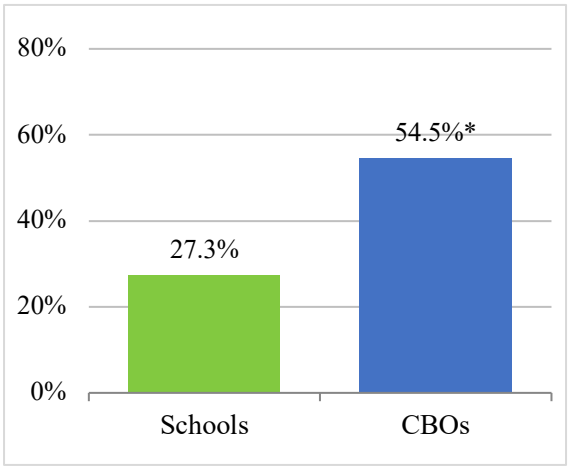
Note: ~p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Curriculum and Assessment. Differences in curriculum and assessment use were also evident.[4] Schools were more likely than CBOs to use one or more of the curricula that the DOE had developed for UPK sites or offered to them, such as the Building Blocks curriculum (72.7% of schools vs. 48.6% of CBOs; p<.10), while CBOs were more likely to use the Creative Curriculum (18.2% of schools vs. 74.3% of CBOs; p<.001). Schools were also more likely to use a curriculum they had developed themselves (22.7% of schools vs. 8.6% of CBOs; p<.10). For assessments, schools were more likely to use Work Sampling (77.3% of schools vs. 17.1% of CBOs; p<.001), while CBOs were more likely to use Teaching Strategies GOLD (22.7% of schools vs. 85.7% of CBOs; p<.001). CBO administrators were more likely than school administrators to say that the content of their assessments was very or extremely consistent with their curricula (85.7% vs. 63.6%, respectively; p<.10).

[4] PKA does not mandate the use of a particular curriculum or assessment, though the curriculum must be research-based, validated, and aligned with the UPK early learning standards, and the assessment must be authentic, research-based, and multi-domain.

Enrollment, instructional practices, and services. CBOs were more likely to enroll children who are dual language learners (DLLs) (43.7% of children at CBOs vs. 24.1% of children at schools; p<.05) and children who have Individualized Education Plans (10.5% at CBOs vs. 4.9% at schools; p<.01). With DLLs, CBO teachers were more likely to practice bilingual instruction (*Figure 3*), even though CBO and school teachers were equally likely to be bilingual in English and another language (63.6% and 54.6%, respectively). For children with special needs, CBOs and schools were equally likely to offer (i.e., refer or provide) speech and occupational therapy (95.5% of CBOs and 86.4% of schools), but CBOs were less likely to provide it on site (11.4% vs. 50.0%, respectively; p<.01).

Figure 3. Bilingual Instruction by Setting (n=66)



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

Teacher turnover, compensation, and working conditions. CBOs were more likely than schools to experience teacher turnover. Two thirds of CBO administrators (68.6%) vs. one-third of school administrators (36.4%) reported that at least one of their UPK teachers had left in the prior year (p<.05). Head Start sites were more likely than any other setting to experience teacher turnover (84.6%; p<.05).

CBO administrators said that turnover was fueled by differences in teacher compensation. School teachers had higher salaries on average than CBO teachers ($73,471 vs. $43,660, respectively; p<.001) and were more likely to have health insurance and retirement plans through their employer or union. Salary differences may be explained in part by differences in qualifications; school teachers were more likely than CBO teachers to have a master's degree (100% vs. 65.9%, respectively; p<.001) and to be certified in early childhood teaching (81.8% vs. 54.5%; p<.05). Even so, most CBO teachers had a master's degree, including 73.3% of Head Start teachers.[5] CBO teachers worked more hours for less pay; CBOs were open an average 7 hours per day, while schools were open an average 9 hours per day (p<.001).

Higher turnover affects the conditions in which administrators and teachers work. CBO administrators reported being caught in a cycle of hiring and training new teachers. Staffing shortages meant that CBO administrators could not always allow teachers to attend off-site PD trainings. CBO teachers reported a lack of designated time to prepare lessons and document children's progress. In contrast, school teachers were guaranteed five such prep-periods each week under their union contract. Although CBO and school teachers reported similar levels of morale at their sites, many CBO teachers expressed frustration or "burn-out."

Policy Recommendations

The results indicate significant differences in PKA implementation and program quality. To bolster the effectiveness of policy efforts to enhance and align program quality across settings, we offer several policy considerations:

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

The results indicate that CBOs possess important strengths. Indeed, the pursuit of uniformly high outcomes requires a recognition that quality is reflected in *both* high-quality pedagogy and comprehensive family services. While the data indicate that Head Start sites are in some ways challenged the most by PKA implementation, they simultaneously represent exemplars of how to serve disadvantaged children and families.

[5] Master's degrees may be in any field, including--but not limited to--education.

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.

- ***Build workforce capacity for high-quality pedagogy in all settings.***

The results indicate that teachers and administrators have little say in the PD they receive and that the match between PD content and teachers' needs is associated with whether teachers report changes in their practice. To promote the efficacy of PD, policymakers should employ more needs-driven PD that engages teachers in its planning. This could include beginning-of-the-year self-evaluations of teacher PD needs, followed by joint PD planning with instructional coaches and administrators, and by year-end self-evaluations of teachers' progress. The results also suggest that increasing the intensity of coaching could improve its impact; policymakers should consider reducing the caseloads of coaches to allow them to devote more time to each teacher. Policymakers should further guarantee that teachers in all settings can attend offsite PD trainings and have adequate prep-time to develop reflective practice. Finally, while differences in curriculum and assessment choices are not by themselves a concern, the lack of alignment between them reported by administrators is very much so; policymakers should assure that these tools are aligned with each other and the UPK early learning standards.

- ***Establish equitable hourly wages 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, years of experience, and responsibilities. To further retain teaching talent in CBOs, the city should build career ladders that again adhere *in all settings*. Often done in other countries, the ladder would guide the professional trajectories of UPK teachers and reward them financially for developing their skills.[6]

- ***Provide support to assure that administrators in all settings have adequate time and resources to exercise effective program leadership.***

The results indicate greater administrative challenges for CBO administrators, particularly related to teacher hiring and staff shortages, which undermine the continuity that supports children's learning. Directing a UPK program in any setting is no easy task, but the results suggest that greater demands on CBO administrators restrict their ability to nurture high-quality pedagogy, innovative programming and services, and their own skills. These challenges appear to be particularly steep at Head Start sites. Policymakers need to assure that all administrators have the staffing they need to devote themselves to these foundations of a high-quality program.

Conclusion

In sum, this study points out distinctions between UPK settings, both positive and negative, which should be fully understood as policymakers extend UPK. While these distinctions are deeply rooted in the policy landscape, they are nonetheless amenable to carefully considered policy changes. The pursuit of uniformly high-quality UPK programs depends on quality-enhancement policies that address the varied needs and strengths of the diverse UPK settings.

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