Trying Together

Increasing Early Care and Education Opportunities in Pittsburgh:

A Review of Pre-Kindergarten Expansion in U.S. Cities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High-quality early learning lays the foundation for future success— and cities across the nation took notice.

The push for expanded early care and education now extends across social and political lines; researchers and policymakers alike tout the value of early childhood education (ECE) at federal, state, and local levels. While many may point to the potential outcomes for our children—increased capacity for educational achievement, social competence, improved health, and greater productivity throughout their lives—we cannot reach that potential without a committed investment of our time and our community resources.

While the years between birth and age eight mark many milestones in the learning continuum, pre-kindergarten (pre-k) focuses intently on the transition to elementary education. Cities often choose pre-k as a natural "first step" to engage young learners and increase the potential for future academic success.

Pittsburgh's initial pre-k momentum mirrors that of many other cities. Mayor William Peduto and the Pittsburgh City Council continue to champion the needs of children, their families, and those across the community who work to support our youngest citizens. The Pittsburgh Public Schools Office of Early Childhood Education provides pre-k in district schools and partners with community-based child care programs to meet the needs of families. A recent report highlights promising practices of the early childhood education program such as inclusion, consistent curriculum, and convening of teachers and literacy staff.[1] The Early Childhood Education Fund Task Force convened a group of diverse stakeholders who are working to develop an implementation plan for pre-k expansion. Pittsburgh is well-positioned to expand access to its pre-k offerings.

The Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children (Trying Together) viewed the information from other city pre-k expansions through a regional lens, aiming for a comprehensive overview that would highlight opportunities and identify potential challenges for Pittsburgh to consider. Below is a complete list of cities reviewed.

Boston
Chicago
Cleveland
Columbus
Denver
Fort Worth
Jacksonville
Los Angeles
New York City
Philadelphia
Phoenix
Salt Lake City
San Antonio
San Francisco
Seattle
Washington, D.C.
West Sacramento

While some cities have been working toward universal pre-k for a decade, many are still in the initial implementation phases of their plans. Trying Together reviewed outlines and reports by school districts, city government offices, and early childhood education task forces to identify the foundational objectives used to expand pre-k and establish a city-wide system. This executive summary provides a brief overview of how cities expanded access to high-quality pre-k and outlines key considerations from our findings of strategies that worked for other cities across the country.

Read Trying Together's full report here:

www.tryingtogether.org

Common components of city pre-k expansion:

Gaining public awareness and community support

Securing sustainable funding

Establishing a governance structure

Designing program characteristics to meet local needs

Monitoring quality

Efforts to expand pre-k hinge on a well-devised outreach plan to build *public awareness and community support*, particularly among families with children eligible to enroll in seats provided by a pre-k expansion. Both Cleveland and New York City hired specialists to recruit families and help enroll their children in pre-k.[2,3] Opportunities for *meaningful family engagement* during the pre-k experience retains and expands this support. Boston created leadership pathways for parents to participate throughout their child's pre-k experience.[4] A successful engagement plan reaffirms a commitment to the community and a willingness to remain responsive to its needs.

The expansion of city pre-k requires that we identify "who pays" and "how" early in the process. Successful pre-k implementation depends on *blended funding streams* from federal, state, and local governments—no city uses one single funding source. Cities followed a plan to acquire adequate funding for an effective expansion, maximize and supplement existing revenue streams, and leverage private dollars to sustain programs. San Francisco, Los Angeles, and West Sacremento use state dollars from the "First Five" Early Childhood Cigarette Tax and blend with locally generated taxes or philanthropic dollars.[5,6,7] Chicago and Salt Lake City utilize Pay For Success models which use private investments to fund pre-k with expected return on investments for desired outcomes.[8,9] Another option is sliding scale tuition credits. Denver, Seattle, and San Antonio use a sliding scale method based on family income and size.

A *governance structure* establishes authority, accountability, and cohesion among policies and services. The city decides who may make decisions on a budget, data, resource management, monitoring, and implementation. This process may present opportunities to connect with partners at the state, county, or neighborhood level and/or form public-private partnerships to support pre-k expansion. Some cities modified existing structures by adding a pre-k position to the mayor's office or school district, while others needed to design a new structure to meet local needs. Boston Public Schools partnered with the local United Way, regional foundations, and the Massachusetts State Department of Early Learning and Care. The group launched Boston K1DS and the Preschool Expansion Grant program, with the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood functioning as the lead organization. The city's Department of Early Childhood managed curriculum, coaching, professional development, and support for instructional quality in the school and community-based programs.[10] The City of Seattle's Department of Education and Early Learning, housed in the mayor's office, manages the investment, engages and convenes stakeholders, and transforms community recommendations into policies.[11]

Program characteristics refer to the options for the delivery system, location, duration, and the particular needs of children, families, and targeted neighborhoods. Nearly all of the cities reviewed operate programs in a mixed-delivery system, offering pre-k classrooms in public schools, charter schools, community-based centers, family child care homes, and private providers. Cleveland's existing model included public, private, charter school partners, and community-based providers. Cleveland expanded the capacity of pre-k classrooms from 14 to 20 students by adding a teacher's aide.[12] The city also worked with existing child care centers to expand the number of seats, add additional classrooms, or enroll children in unused slots in high-quality community-based centers. Boston Public Schools expanded and replicated its pre-k model to 14 community-based classrooms in targeted neighborhoods, focusing on a five-mile radius of the most distressed city neighborhoods.[13] Similar to Boston, many other cities expanded pre-k in incremental phases using a targeted approach. This approach allows the program to stay responsive and flexible while building capacity and reaching children with greater needs. Philadelphia identified family "at-risk" factors and Cleveland targeted two underserved city neighborhoods to create new high-quality slots.[14,15] Many programs also prioritized four-year-olds for preschool to ensure successful transitions to kindergarten the following year. While preparing four-year-olds for success in elementary school acted as the driving force for many cities, pre-k is one stage in a developmental continuum that begins at birth. New York City recently announced an initiative that acknowledges learning begins at birth – the city plans to expand its pre-k for All program to three-year-olds and submitted a proposal for its Department of Education to oversee early learning programs that serve children as young as six weeks old.[16] City expansion plans also considered family needs, as issues like hours of operation, cultural relevancy, and transportation barriers greatly impact access and participation levels.

An expanding body of research indicates that *high-quality* early learning environments offer young children greater opportunity to succeed in school and in life. In order to

ensure efficacy, a pre-k initiative must expand access while maintaining a solid commitment to quality. The cities reviewed took a comprehensive approach to quality, establishing a multi-faceted classification evaluation plan and aligning program oversight to existing state systems. Much of the development of policies and standards were derived from one or more nationally recognized/commonly used tools: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), and brain research.

Most cities identified well-trained, supportive early educators as the foundation of quality. New York City implemented universal pre-k with a particularly sharp focus on classroom educators. The city committed to heavily investing in recruitment, support, and retention to ensure a strong early childhood workforce.[17] In order to maintain quality, most of the country's universal pre-k programs commit to a multifaceted quality assessment plan in which the programs and each individual classroom must undergo comprehensive periodic assessment. San Francisco uses both the CLASS and Environmental Ratings Scale, in addition to other methods of program monitoring such as child observational assessments, developmental checkpoints, and health screenings.[18] The Philadelphia Commission on pre-kindergarten uses an existing monitoring system from Pennsylvania's Pre-K Counts program to evaluate city pre-k classrooms. This decision ensures cohesion for each set of quality standards and certification visits while subsequently reducing costs and maximizing the number of children served by funding slots through a combination of state and local programs.[19]

While the review focuses on efforts to expand programming for three- and four-year-olds, Trying Together acknowledges that pre-k represents just one component of the birth-through-age-eight early learning continuum. Environments including child care, home visiting/family services, and early intervention provide essential support and invaluable opportunities that impact the development of our children throughout their lives. In order for the impacts of high-quality early childhood programs to reach their full benefits—and for children to continue to reach their full potentials—high-quality early education experiences must continue throughout the educational journey, particularly in kindergarten through third grade. A successful journey for each child compels early elementary grades to build on what children learned in preschool—to sustain the gains made in pre-k and lead to better developmental and learning outcomes overall.

Cities across the country—despite differences in size, scenery, and social construction—share one notable value: they recognize the strength of children and families as the key to regional growth.

Still, in Pittsburgh, an estimated 1,140 three- and four-year-old income-eligible children lack access to early education.[20] The progress of the pre-k initiative, and its great potential for community impact, depends on our ability to equip all of our children with the cognitive, social, and emotional skills they need to keep the city growing and thriving. Pittsburgh is Kidsburgh. As a resilient city grounded in grit and a strong sense of community, Pittsburgh has the opportunity to do what's in the best interest of children by providing them with love, care, and education because every Pittsburgh child is our child.

The following page contains a summary of key considerations from the cities reviewed. The full report further explores examples of city pre-k initiatives in an effort to build public awareness and support, secure funding, adopt a governance structure, determine program characteristics, and ensure high-quality environments.

Read Trying Together's full report here:

www.tryingtogether.org

Summary of Key Considerations

I. Building Public Awareness and Community Support

A. Develop a formal plan to build community support and mobilize stakeholders.

B. Conduct direct outreach to actively engage families and encourage enrollment in programs.

C. Build opportunities for meaningful family engagement throughout the pre-k experience.

II. Securing and Maximizing Funding Streams

A. Blend funding sources to expand access and increase impact.

B. Maximize existing public funding programs and sources.

C. Supplement, rather than supplant, existing sources of revenue.

D. Consider revenue models that incorporate private funds as a supplement to public funding streams.

III. Adopting a Governance Structure

A. Use existing structures or decide if additional structures are needed to initiate and implement expansion.

B. Identify the most responsive governance model for the city's unique composition.

C. Coordinate with relevant structures at the state, county, and neighborhood levels.

D. Consider the potential for public-private collaboration.

IV. Determining Program Characteristics

A. Build capacity in existing programs to provide high-quality pre-k experiences across diverse settings.

B. Expand pre-k in incremental phases through a targeted approach to ensure:

   1. Responsiveness to the needs of children, families, and communities;

   2. Time to build capacity while maintaining continuous quality improvement; and

   3. Strong connections between pre-k and other early learning environments across the birth-through-age-eight continuum.

C. Design a comprehensive approach to logistical, socioeconomic, and societal factors that responds effectively to: family work schedules; cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity; and transportation barriers.

V. Ensuring Quality Environments

A. Identify a comprehensive framework for defining and constructing high-quality environments.

B. Apply a thorough evaluation process that promotes continuous quality improvement.

   1. Assess family engagement indicators as an essential component of quality.

C. Align program monitoring with existing state evaluation systems, adapting constructs to meet local needs.

D. Invest in early childhood education professionals as the foundation of quality.

   1. Prioritize recruitment and retention planning.

   2. Develop a comprehensive support structure for professional development, continuing education, and responsive, needs-based coaching.

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