



Overview of Georgia's Pre-K Program

Georgia has one of the few state-funded universal pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds, with no fees for program participation regardless of family income level. Offering one of the first universal programs, beginning in 1995, Georgia's Pre-K Program served over 89,000 different children in 2011–2012 and nearly 88,000 different children in 2012–2013¹. Children are served in a variety of settings across the state, including local school systems, private providers, and blended Head Start/pre-k classrooms. About 45% of the classrooms are located in public settings and about 55% in private settings. Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) oversees the pre-k program at the state level and provides operating guidelines for local programs. Each local program designates an overall program administrator to serve as Project Director and a Site Director to serve as the local administrator for each individual site. Local programs are responsible for implementing all aspects of the recruitment, application, assignment, and waitlist procedures with children and families prior to entering the program as well as the actual operation of the pre-k program services within the guidelines specified by DECAL.

Overview of the Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to gather information to understand local variations in implementation of recruitment, application, assignment, and waitlist procedures. Questions addressed in the current report include:

- What are the methods of recruitment used by local sites?
- What are the application processes for families?
- How are assignment decisions for the program made?
- What are the waitlist procedures and outcomes?

Results were examined to determine the extent to which local Georgia's Pre-K Programs used common or different procedures, particular processes that were considered useful, barriers to families accessing the program with the current processes, and recommendations for improvement.

The study included two components: an electronic survey sent to all programs operating in the 2012–2013 year, and a supplemental phone interview conducted with a selected group of programs based on survey responses. Project Directors were the primary respondents for both components. The electronic survey was designed to gather information about variations in the processes used by local programs in the areas of recruitment, application, assignment, and waitlist. A total of 806 Project Directors completed the electronic survey, with responses to selected survey items from an additional 366 Site Directors for multi-site programs (92% program response rate). Programs were selected for inclusion in the phone interview if they had a significant waitlist the previous year. Phone interviews were conducted with 175 Project Directors (99% response rate) to gather more detailed information about the nature of, implementation of, and timelines for recruitment, application, assignment, and waitlist processes.

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¹ These numbers were determined by calculating the total number of different children served throughout the program year, excluding any potential duplicate entries (i.e., children with matching name, birthdate, and gender).



Results

Recruitment

- Programs use a variety of recruitment methods, including both personal (e.g., open house) and impersonal (e.g., road signs, website) forms of communication.
- Many programs (over 60%) offer recruitment materials in languages other than English; conversely, about 40% do not.
- Most Georgia's Pre-K Programs report collaborating with other agencies to recruit families.
- The most commonly reported barrier to recruiting more families is the lack of enough classrooms or programs in the area to serve additional children.

Application Process

- There are barriers for families with regard to the application process, including the number of forms, application format and language, the submission process, and the availability of support staff for non-English-speaking families within local Georgia's Pre-K Programs.
- About half of the programs gather additional application information about children and families beyond the standard state registration form to help inform the services they provide.

Assignment Process

- Most Georgia's Pre-K Programs make assignment decisions independently from other types of pre-k programs.
- The majority of programs use the first come-first served method for assigning children to Georgia's Pre-K, although many programs also report incorporating other considerations, primarily priority for 3-year-olds already attending their program.
- Programs vary when they make assignment decisions (most mid-spring to mid-summer), with families typically informed by phone and bilingual staff available in some programs.

Enrollment and Waitlist

- Programs served an average of above 70 children and about 10% withdrew before the end of the school year (typically because families moved), although these numbers varied widely.
- Programs eventually served a number of the children who were on their waitlists at the beginning of the year, although this varied greatly across programs.
- Programs tend to update waitlist information either when rosters are due or when slots become available, rather than on a more regular basis, with children typically removed from the waitlist because the family moved or the program was unable to contact them.
- Programs suggested some recommendations for changes to the waitlist system that could help provide a better process for serving families when slots become available.



Conclusions

Local Georgia's Pre-K Programs comprise a variety pre-k settings, including for-profit and non-profit child care centers, school districts, and Head Start. Although there are some common procedures that are followed statewide with regard to recruiting and selecting children into Georgia's Pre-K Program, there also is a great deal of variation in the processes used by local programs. The specific procedures local Georgia's Pre-K Programs use for recruitment, application, assignment, and waitlist vary, given the flexibility provided by DECAL in local decision-making, what they have found useful in their area, and the particular barriers they have encountered.

A particular question of interest from these findings was whether a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, which would entail randomly assigning children to the pre-k program or to a control group, would be possible for future studies. Given the relatively small size of the waitlists compared to the number of children enrolled in general, as well as the difficulty of ensuring that a child who would be assigned to the control group would not attend Georgia's Pre-K at a different site (given that families are often on multiple waitlists), it was determined that an RCT design would not be a feasible approach for studying program effectiveness. However, these findings do provide useful information about the extent of local variations in recruitment and selection processes and about potential barriers to services for some populations and with regard to some processes.

Programs use a variety of methods for recruiting families, depending on what works best for them; across programs, no single method has been found to be most effective. There is often good collaboration with other agencies during the recruitment process, though not often with other early care and education programs. Assignment decisions for Georgia's Pre-K generally are made independently, however, and are not constrained by joint decision-making with other types of pre-k programs. Overwhelmingly, the biggest barrier to both recruiting and serving more families in Georgia's Pre-K Program is the availability of slots. There are substantial numbers of children on the waitlists for individual Georgia's Pre-K Program sites, and many programs believe that they could recruit even more children if there were more slots available to serve them.

In most programs, the majority of children are chosen during the initial assignment process, with both limited child turnover and limited opportunity for children on the waitlist to obtain a slot, although there is variability across programs. In many programs, the best way to ensure a slot is to have attended as a 3-year-old, given the high proportion of Georgia's Pre-K participants who attended the same site as 3-year-olds and the preference for enrollment often offered to these families. While many programs do have resources to support non-English-speaking families during recruitment and/or enrollment processes through the use of bilingual staff and/or materials in families' home languages, these often are limited to Spanish, and some programs do not have access to such resources at all. A recurring issue that could result in more disadvantaged families being less likely to be served is the ability for the programs to contact them at all stages—recruitment, application, assignment, and waitlist maintenance.

Recommendations for changes to the waitlist system may help provide programs with a better process for serving families on the waitlist when slots become available. However, the biggest challenge that still remains is ensuring that there are enough slots to meet the demand for this universal program. From the perspective of program providers, there are many more families who would like to see their children benefit from Georgia's Pre-K Program.

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