

Family Outreach for Early Education Enrollment: A Powerful Programmatic and Political Tool

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*For the past year, we have been running a learning cohort known as the **Early Care and Education Implementation Working Group**, a set of 18 city and county birth-to-five and preschool programs that began meeting in 2022 to help one another expand services quickly and equitably. The group convenes monthly to share experiences on various topics and learn from one another and improve. To amplify the impact of this collective effort, we are disseminating the findings from this cohort more broadly, beginning with what we learned about the role of outreach in enrollment.*

Early Education Enrollment Challenges and the Role of Outreach

More U.S. elected officials and policymakers are embracing early education as an important public good that should be available to all children because of the enormous social and economic benefits it creates for all of us. Children **benefit cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically** from earlier developmental experiences; **families and communities gain** from the support that programs provide to working families; **the economy thrives**

because parents have the support they need to work and care for their families; and **all of society benefits** because children go on to thrive in school and beyond. Cities, counties, and state governments have responded to the growing call for high-quality early education services by increasing public investments, and though early education in the United States is far from universal, **significant progress has been made in providing prekindergarten access** to young children.

However, despite growing demand for services, some areas struggle to enroll families in programs —especially **some of the most marginalized and underserved**. The COVID-19 public health emergency deterred many families from signing up, and the return to pre-pandemic levels is uneven. Outreach campaigns can play a critical role in program recovery and launching new programs.

Outreach strengthens childhood programs.

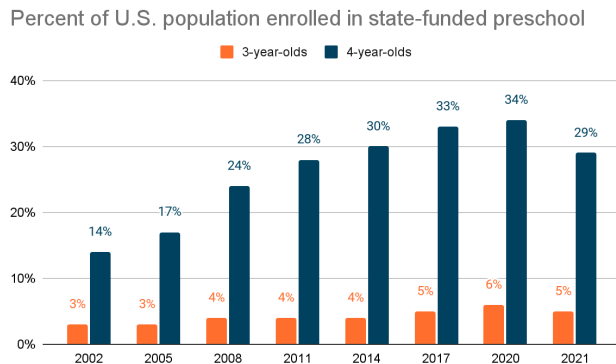
First, investing in central outreach and facilitated enrollment programs strengthens early childhood programs in a number of ways, especially at this critical moment. Enrollment in early childhood programs has declined across the country (see below), in part because families chose to keep children home during the pandemic. Without a renewed effort to reach out and enroll the newest cohort of families and enlist them as word-of-mouth recruiters for the next cohort, we risk leaving seats empty for a prolonged period.

Outreach builds public confidence.

Second, filling programs and classrooms is vital to building public confidence in and support for early childhood programs. Especially in areas where the funding for programs is not secure, it is important to demonstrate demand constantly to show that the funding is being used well and that there will be political consequences if it is reduced. While enrollment drives public confidence, it also relies on public confidence that is built and sustained by delivering high-quality programs that families want to enroll in, creating a feedback loop where one success continuously reinforces another.

Outreach builds public confidence.

Finally, using these outreach strategies is essential to any effort to use early care and education as a tool to advance equity. 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. Proactive outreach programs help overcome these barriers and allow children from underserved communities to benefit from the advantages of early education.



The pandemic erased a decade of progress in preschool enrollment nationwide.

Source: Courtesy of National Institute of Early Education Research, used with permission.

Best Practices for Family Outreach for Enrollment

1. Hire the right leaders.

To manage a successful outreach campaign for early childhood, team leadership needs a considerable set of skills. Ideally, they will be able to:

- Identify and reach families with young children;
- Formulate an effective message;
- Organize an operation to connect the message to the audience;
- Build a system to capture the information about families; and
- Move families from engagement through program enrollment.

While some early childhood staff may have some of these skills, in many cases teams will need to hire staff or consultants with campaign, media, and data analytics experience to lead the work.

As with all major decisions and investments, it will be most effective to include providers and families in leading the campaign—either as staff on the team, as members of a Board overseeing it, or both.

NYC built a central team with a campaign manager as its leader, along with deputies with campaign experience in and from NYC’s historically underserved neighborhoods. They also hired an outside firm with technical expertise and relevant experience to work with other city agencies to build out needed data systems quickly.

Not every group will need to, or have the resources to, hire an entirely new in-house team. Several teams in the Working Group succeeded by bringing in new team members or consultants with select skills needed to complement existing staff. For example:

- Chicago hired an outside firm to formulate their message and their marketing materials and hired community organizations to run geographically targeted outreach efforts. They saw a 5 percent increase in pre-K enrollment in 2022–23.
- In **Denver**, all media—paid, earned, and social—is executed through contracts with various consulting firms, including those with expertise in communications strategy, branding, advertising, direct marketing, and digital content.
- After a comprehensive community survey, **Dallas ISD and area nonprofits put together a campaign** to enlist community members in outreach efforts to boost preschool enrollment. The nonprofits paid experts to help design the core messages of the campaign and assemble the data systems. The nonprofits running the activities day-to-day were then able to target the outreach effectively and track the information that canvassers gathered.
- The **Atlanta Early Education Ambassadors program**—run jointly by Atlanta Public Schools and **Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students** (GEEARS) and funded with philanthropic dollars—trains about 30 community members each year to help their neighbors in underserved communities enroll in pre-K programs. Each cohort of Ambassadors is paid a stipend and given robust training to respond to a range of questions and concerns. Year over year, program vacancies have decreased since the initiative launched.



Members of Atlanta’s Early Education Ambassadors Program.

Source: Courtesy of Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students and Atlanta Early Education Ambassadors Program, used with permission.

2. Establish a concise, clear, compelling message.

Learn directly from families which messages are most likely to move them to enroll in a program.

Many Working Group members agreed that it can be easy to default to language used by advocates, policymakers, and educators in conversation with one another. But many families are learning about early education for the first time. It can be difficult for those who are steeped in the work and industry terminology to step into the shoes of families, identify what is most important to them, and break the case down into the short bites that fit on a bus shelter ad or a 15-second radio spot.

In NYC, the program team used the information gathered directly from families in a number of ways across the campaign.

- **Run focus groups with families to learn and test messages.** NYC hired a public relations firm to run professional focus groups and phone surveys to determine what messages were already circulating and which would be most likely to inspire action. For example, families reported that the term “universal” did not translate well and sounded like the program would be mandatory. They preferred “Pre-K for All.”
- **Set one core message and repeat it constantly.** Family engagement played a critical role in identifying the three most important features of the program to emphasize. These features were distilled into a slogan and included in every ad, media interaction, and phone script: “Free, full-day, high-quality.”
- **Understand the audience and meet them where they are.** Families come to pre-K with a range of ideas and expectations that are rooted in their backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. While not every idea or message that resonates with families will make it into a campaign, it is important to understand their priorities and concerns. For example, many NYC families hoped pre-K would instill “discipline” in their children, while many educators on the team felt that term was not developmentally appropriate. So, while discipline was not a lead campaign message, the outreach team was trained and ready to discuss that with families.
- **Translate the message.** The outreach team developed campaign materials in all eight of the most spoken languages in NYC, and made sure partnering organizations had the right materials for their families (see below).

- **Defend vulnerabilities.** When families were asked what their biggest concerns were, they flagged program safety as a consideration. The team prepared scripts to answer any questions and respond rapidly to any media inquiries on the topic. They also held a press conference with the commissioners of police, fire, buildings, sanitation, and environmental protection agencies detailing the proactive steps they were taking to ensure that each child care facility would be safe and ready for the first day.

Establishing a pattern of soliciting regular feedback from families can also segue into improving the experience of applying and enrolling in early education programs. This information can be used to improve applications, websites, and other touchpoints families may have.



Pre-K for All palm cards in English, Kreyòl, and Russian.

Source: Courtesy of New York City Department of Education, used with permission.

3. Develop a media strategy.

Investing in getting the message out, both through earned media (working to get positive accounts out in the press) and paid media is critical, especially to communicate with families in the most underserved and marginalized communities. While not all of these examples will apply in every area, hopefully some will spur new thinking for teams.

Teams can create events for reporters to cover positive news related to implementation. If this is a priority for the enrollment team, they can enlist communications professionals for help. Some examples that may be useful:

- **Announce the opening of applications** along with the number of new seats created for that enrollment season.
- **Make the first official offer of early childhood program seats to a family each spring** and invite them to accept the invitation at a live event. NYC held this event at a school or community based organization (CBO) every year, and often found a family with twins (or even more multiple births!) to receive the offer live.
- **Create opportunities for community engagement and education.** In 2013, Denver Preschool Program (DPP) began hosting Preschool Showcase events designed to educate parents about DPP and connect them to preschools in their neighborhood. While the Showcase events have evolved over time, they remain an important marketing tool for DPP and for the preschools themselves.

In each case, getting senior officials to attend draws more press to the events and increases the odds of coverage.

If it is applicable, work closely with local media, outlets that cover neighborhoods, and/or carry stories in a language other than English. By building partnerships with these outlets, teams can earn translated coverage, often from trusted voices in hard-to-reach communities.

NYC leadership supported investing in getting the core message out to families in effective ways. While aiming to communicate throughout the city, the team prioritized reaching families in underserved communities. As noted above, Chicago made a similar investment, and hired an outside firm to design and place ads.

The NYC team created a media package every year with photos of children in programs, the core message for the program, and simple instructions for how to begin to apply. These images were placed in physical and digital locations:

- Bus shelters and subways;
- Banners in each public park and playground;
- Banners near the entrance of each school and CBO offering the program;
- Community newspapers, with an occasional run in a citywide paper as applications opened;
- Social media (targeted ads on Twitter and Facebook); and
- Text messages to families that signed up for updates on early care and education.

Chicago also invested in bus and train ads, radio and streaming ads, paid social media, and billboards.



Billboard in Chicago for Early Learning Enrollment.

Source: Courtesy of Chicago Early Learning, used with permission.

4. Build a call operation.

In order to get the word out effectively, **NYC set a goal to contact each family that would have a four-year-old child each fall.** The team hired 50 full-time, permanent staff, many with public outreach campaign experience. The call operation staff included members who were fluent in commonly spoken NYC languages and had knowledge of and experience in the neighborhoods targeted for enrollment outreach. A well-designed call operation will:

- Offer personal assistance to families that want advice about choosing a program.
- Create opportunities to reach families who have not heard about early education and explain the benefits.
- Enable family enrollment over the phone while families are focused and motivated.

- Create capacity to work with families who do not have computer access or the ability to go to an enrollment center during business hours.
- Help capture information about which areas have information about the program and where more work is needed to get the message out.

This operation became one of the central strategies each year, both for maximizing overall enrollment and for facilitating enrollment within some of NYC’s most marginalized communities. Not every team will have public resources available to replicate this strategy—New York is somewhat unique in the scale of the effort the team could mount—but this may be a focused area for which to ask for philanthropic support (with measurable impact).

5. Develop key partnerships.

In order to attract and enroll groups facing additional barriers to enrollment, several Working Group members set up partnerships with organizations or directly with families to act as trusted validators for the program. Several examples illustrate this approach:

- Several nonprofits in Dallas partnered with the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) on **a project to hire 24 canvassers from neighborhoods with low preschool enrollment**. Starting in January 2022, they began knocking on doors in four targeted zip codes to talk with people in their communities about the benefits of the program. DISD’s pre-K enrollment is now rising across the board, including in those zip codes. Overall, enrollment in Dallas County is above the statewide figure.
- In Multnomah County, Oregon, the Department of County Human Services is piloting a program to contract with a group to serve as a Family Connector Organization, which will focus culturally-specific outreach and application support to priority groups that have the least access to high-quality preschool, including BIPOC families, migrant and refugee children, and children living in foster care. In the pilot, the group will guide 100 to 150 families through the application process. The **Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA)** is just one such example, offering program information on their website as well as contact information for a family navigator.
- In New York City, the outreach team often found local elected officials ready and willing to host joint events (**like ribbon-cuttings for new pre-K facilities**) or invite the team to community resource fairs. These proved especially important in areas where local organizations struggled to enroll their classes, both because the events brought families into those centers and because the elected official then became a partner in working through those enrollment issues.
- **Atlanta’s Early Education Ambassador program** was founded as a partnership between Atlanta Public Schools and Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARs) to create more administrative flexibility for the program. The team partners with an array of local organizations—from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to the local children’s hospital and the state’s child care regulatory agency—to make sure Ambassadors are trained on the wide array of topics and services that might benefit families. Child care providers also participate in Ambassador training to ensure a robust understanding of their program offerings.

In all these efforts, it is critical to partner with community organizations and providers. Many have long histories in their neighborhoods and excellent methods for recruiting and enrolling children in their programs. By bringing those organizations to the table and sharing leadership with them, teams can ensure that their efforts will be additive and welcome.

6. Bend the system for families.

In order to meet the program's equity goals, teams may need to work with other parts of government to change systems. Perhaps even more difficult, they may have to change their own ways of working. Team should spend time in the field, learning to understand real families' lives and the hurdles they may face. In this way, they can identify where the current system processes are not meeting family needs and take steps to "bend" or adapt the system in small and big ways.

For example, NYC made a concerted effort to boost the number of families living in shelters or transitional housing that enrolled their children in pre-K for All to bring the percentage of families enrolled as close to the average in the city as possible. Some of their strategies included:

- **Assign outreach team members to get out into the community.** In NYC, they visited shelters regularly to run onsite enrollment events and enlisted shelter staff in the effort to enroll families.
- **Redesign policies to meet gaps after identifying barriers in the enrollment process.** Initially, families had to apply, accept an offer, and then go to a program location to enroll. This was a burden for many families, and could be a particularly unreasonable burden for a family in crisis moving from shelter to shelter. Instead, the team shifted policy to allow families to accept their offer by phone or online.
- **Create an entirely new process to ensure families in shelters had a place to go.** This included:
 - Automatically enrolling families living in shelters in pre-K, whether or not they applied, using data from our Department of Homeless Services;
 - Sending outreach team members into shelters to meet with families directly;
 - Notifying families that they had a place "reserved" in a nearby program, while inviting them to call the team and change the enrollment to a different program, if preferred, in an effort to make the process as easy as possible; and
 - When schools and CBOs reserved spaces for children who wound up not attending, those seats were released several weeks before the first day of school. The team worked with them to fill seats with students who had applied late (which was frequent, especially among immigrant families who arrive in NYC year-round).

Leaders in Atlanta found that hiring community members to do recruitment helped break down barriers for families who might have been skeptical about pre-K. When neighbors or cousins encourage attendance, it feels different than hearing from a government worker. Atlanta's Ambassadors are trained on an array of topics so they can connect families to other needed resources, like Early Intervention and public benefits programs.



Social media outreach materials from Atlanta.

Source: Courtesy of Atlanta Early Education Ambassadors, used with permission.

7. Establish flexible funding when possible.

With rapid start-up timelines, teams may not have enough time to use typical government procurement methods to secure the support needed to accomplish the tasks listed above. Teams should consider flexible funding opportunities to support outreach efforts, including:

- **Bring in philanthropic dollars to support.** As seen above, many teams used private funding to kickstart innovative efforts.
- **Create third party organizations.** Several Working Group teams set up third party organizations, such as the Denver Preschool Program, Hope Starts Here in Detroit, and First 5 Alameda. These organizations take time to establish, but can hire and procure more quickly and flexibly in the long run.
- **Add scope to existing contracts.** Try reaching out to other government agencies to see if they have open contracts with flexibility for additional scope. For example, most of NYC's outdoor ads ran through contracts that the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene had procured for public health advertisements. Since pre-K has a significant impact on the health and wellness of children and families, the team was allowed to add scope in without rebidding—which meant signs were out on the streets within 90 days.
- **Add scope to retainer contracts.** Check to see if any partner agencies have retainer contracts for consultants. These are especially common for IT and other consulting services. NYC was able to make use of an existing set of retainers to hire the team that built our outreach database in the first months of the program.

8. Make data transparent and learn from it.

At the start of the outreach program, set key metrics that map to program goals. If equity is a program priority, teams will need to routinely collect and analyze data on important demographic elements: race, housing status, etc. This can be layered against the different outreach techniques to understand what methods are most effective with different population groups:

- Identify areas of focus with quantitative data.
- Share the data with all internal stakeholders—including the people doing direct outreach—to make it actionable.
- Use data to drive goal setting and to course correct when activities are not achieving desired impact.

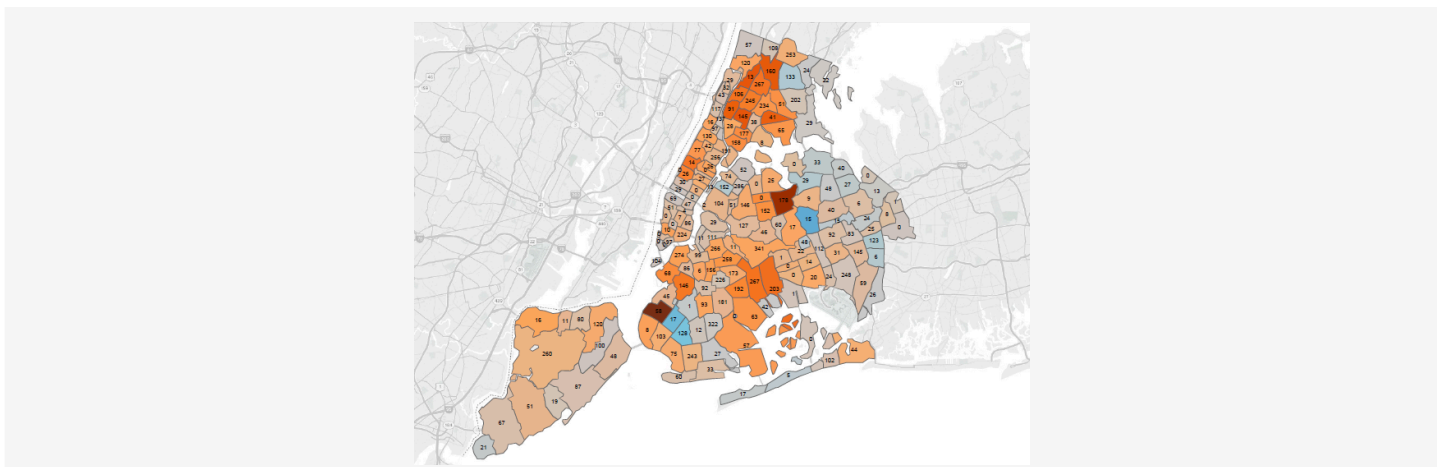
The data is just one step in the diagnosis process, though; **the next step is to spend time with families to understand why something is not working and how to improve it.**

The primary role of data tracking in NYC was for accountability. In a weekly meeting with the mayor and deputy mayor, the team tracked enrollment against goals and made decisions to invest additional resources or change tactics based on collected data.

In NYC, a particularly helpful analysis used the full kindergarten register to determine which students had been enrolled in the prior year for pre-K, and, if so, where. This gave the team visibility into which areas had large numbers of kindergarteners who had not attended pre-K.

For example, one year this analysis showed that a disproportionate number of Arabic-speaking children in two neighborhoods were attending kindergarten but had not attended pre-K. In response, the team asked for help from religious leaders in both neighborhoods, added bus shelter ads in Arabic in those areas, and hired an Arabic speaker

for the outreach team. The number of pre-K enrollees improved the following fall. Many communities can replicate this analysis and find areas where pre-K enrollment lags behind public kindergarten and examine the reason(s) why.



Deeper red color indicates a larger gap between the number of children attending public Pre-K and the number that attended Pre-K the year before. Numbers in each area indicate the number of open seats at the time during an enrollment period.

Source: Courtesy of New York City Pre-K for All, used with permission.

Looking Forward: Outreach to Build a Public Good

By investing in outreach and facilitated enrollment, programs can boost enrollment and ensure that families in the most historically marginalized and underserved communities are included in early care and education programs.

These efforts also serve the critical function of showing government as a responsive, proactive, inclusive force in communities—building confidence not only in the early childhood system, but in the ability of government to help families get what they need and care for one another.

While establishing these outreach efforts takes a lot of work, care, and energy, they can yield meaningful impacts to enrollment, which ultimately supports the development of children in a community. It is not necessary to launch a major effort all at once; by enlisting the support of families and starting small and slowly, you can iterate and grow bigger as you learn what works and assess results. It's most important to keep a curious, iterative mindset to design outreach that works best for your community.

Finally, the field has yet to explore what could happen if we work to build on this initial engagement with families to partner with those who are implementing child care for other families. Building linkages between the data we collect for enrollment and data for use in campaigns is complicated, but worth the time and effort to think through. It could be one of the keys to improving the experience of families accessing early care and education programs.

Acknowledgments

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