Implementing a State-Wide Universal Prekindergarten Program: A Small City Case Study

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The needs of young children have received increasing attention by policy makers, child development specialists, and education professionals over the past two decades. Since the 1980s, states throughout the country have developed a wide range of prekindergarten initiatives, all with a focus on educational services that will help prepare children to succeed in school. While the investment of millions of dollars by states has increased the supply and in some instances improved the quality of available services, more efforts are needed to ensure access to high quality programs for all young children and their families and to better integrate the plethora of programs springing up at the state and local levels.

In 1997, New York became the second state in the nation after Georgia to enact universal prekindergarten (UPK) legislation, aimed at the provision of voluntary educational services to all four-year-old children in the state. The UPK program is administered by the State Education Department and delivered through local school districts. The New York legislation contains specific policy elements that will have direct and indirect impacts on all early care and education efforts throughout the state. These include considerable local power over program design, community collaboration and teacher certification requirements, support services, parental involvement, inclusion of children with disabilities, and expectations for developmentally appropriate practice, in addition to the school readiness focus.

This research report is one of four case studies designed to examine the implementation of this very comprehensive UPK program. Funded by the Foundation for Child Development, the objectives of this research were threefold:

- to assess the viability of a decentralized, district-level approach to the planning and provision of a UPK program;
- to examine how the quality of UPK programming might be affected by an approach that relies heavily on the use of preschool programs outside the public schools; and

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to learn more about how community-based programs are affected by publicly-funded UPK programs.

Each of the four case studies has a systemic focus, with attention paid to a number of areas. Specific research questions address issues of universal access, financing, collaboration with community agencies, teacher preparation, and classroom quality.

Because New York was the first of the 10 largest states to introduce universal prekindergarten, this study of the implementation process represents an unprecedented opportunity to inform educational policy and practice nationwide. The findings provide insight into the challenges involved with delivering services in both the country’s largest and most concentrated city as well as in rural areas. In addition, the study makes much needed information available to policy-makers in New York and other states about blended funding strategies, local planning processes, the challenges of providing universal coverage and collaborating with community-based programs, and the differences between programs delivered in the schools and those located in other community settings. As states seek information about the most effective program designs and expand to universal provision in the years ahead, comprehensive information from existing universal programs will be essential for long-term planning and resource allocation.

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This work would not have been possible without the cooperation and support of the many individuals who participated in the interviews and so graciously shared information about UPK in their local communities. To the district superintendents, UPK coordinators, teachers, staff developers, advisory board members, and center directors — we thank you!

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In 1997, New York State passed legislation creating the ground-breaking Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program. The legislation called for UPK to be rolled out over five years, reaching full implementation by 2001-2002 and serving 150,000 to 200,000 children per year with an annual budget of $500 million by this time. The legislation gave school districts wide flexibility in how the program could be designed at the local level. Especially innovative was the requirement that at least 10% of the funds be contracted out to community-based organizations (CBOs) for the provision of services. A second pioneering requirement stipulated that all UPK teachers obtain teaching certification.

Inherent in the flexibility afforded to districts is variability in program design from district to district. Given these parameters, the Cornell Early Childhood Program has conducted a three-part investigation to examine how districts implement the UPK program across the state, using survey and case study methodologies. The first element of the investigation was a survey sent to UPK directors in all Wave I districts. These districts offered UPK during the first year of program implementation, 1998-1999. The second element was a survey sent to the resource and referral agencies in counties where UPK was being implemented. The third element involved case studies in four school districts: one New York City district, one upstate small city district, one upstate rural district, and one upstate large city district.

This report summarizes an in-depth look at the implementation of UPK in the upstate small city district, District B. It addresses the questions:

- How did UPK emerge in District B?
- What was the profile of the UPK program in District B?
- Who were the key players in District B, what were their roles in UPK, and what were their goals for UPK?
- How had UPK affected the early education system in District B, and what outcomes had emerged?
- What challenges remain for District B to reach universality while providing a high-quality program?
Information presented in this report emerged from in-depth interviews conducted during the spring and summer of 2000 with key members of the early education community in the district, including UPK teachers, site directors at UPK and non-UPK childcare centers, district UPK leaders, advisory board members, a staff developer, and the superintendent.

Now about to begin its fourth year of UPK, District B has concentrated its efforts on building a strong network of participating programs supported by staff development and administrative efforts, while expanding the number of children served in the district. The number of children served is largely determined at the state level. At the time of the case study, the district served 27 UPK children in six classrooms.

A number of key areas were addressed, these include: leadership and the advisory board roles, the site selection process, relationship building, staff development, leadership-staff communication, program quality, blended funding, and the future challenges of universality, teacher certification, and providing comprehensive services. Opposite is a summary of key findings:

**KEY FINDINGS**

**THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS**

**The Leadership’s Role**
- UPK leadership in District B viewed UPK as an opportunity to take an innovative leap into the future of early childhood education by integrating school-based and community-based programs and services for staff and for children.
- Teachers and site directors turned to UPK leadership because they believed their leaders to be well qualified, grounded in what’s best for children, knowledgeable, caring, and trustworthy.

**The Advisory Board’s Role**
The advisory board was instrumental in designing the program and selecting sites. They were not meeting at the time of the case study, but members were willing to reconvene if needed.

**The Site Selection Process**
Sites that were interested in participating in UPK completed applications, and a committee of advisory board members conducted site visits. Sites chosen offered high quality programs and met the needs of families in the community in terms of hours, location, and program structure
PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Relationship Building

- District B formed positive relationships with the State Education Department that administers UPK. Relationships built at that level provided the context for district participation in statewide initiatives.
- UPK provided the context for many teachers, site directors and staff to have close contact with each other and with district personnel. Relationships were built between sites and between sites and leadership. In addition, efforts toward Pre-K/kindergarten continuity have created an environment fostering relationships between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers and staff.

Staff Development

Staff development was a top priority in District B. The district received a grant to pursue a staff development program that included a mentor-protegee component. The staff development efforts in the district were highly regarded by teachers and site supervisors, and they were reported to be related to positive changes in classroom practices.

High Quality Programs

Classrooms were rated for quality using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R). Classrooms in District B received high overall scores on the scale (5.74), with all classrooms receiving a score of at least a 5 out of a possible 7.

Blended Funding

District B successfully blended streams of federal, state, and local funds to provide seamless care for children in UPK programs. The innovative approach that District B used to blend funding could be applied in other districts working to serve children and families who need more than the 2.5 hours of care per day that UPK funding provides.

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Achieving Universality

District B provided high quality services to staff and children; however the total number of children served remained low. In the future, District B will face the challenge of expanding its program to additional sites and additional children across the income range while maintaining the high quality it has already achieved.

Teacher Certification

Many respondents expressed serious concerns with the certification requirement of the UPK legislation. District B will need to meet the requirements of the program in a way that supports and includes the district’s early education teachers.

Providing Comprehensive Services

District B’s leadership had a strong philosophical approach to the comprehensive services requirement of the UPK legislation. In the future, District B must articulate that philosophy to individual programs while maintaining their efforts to support families.

Leadership Goals

District leadership has identified a set of goals for the future. These focus on program expansion, serving minority families, integration of Pre-K and the early elementary grades, and maintaining a balance between community and school providers.
In 1997, New York State passed legislation creating the groundbreaking Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program. The legislation called for UPK to be rolled out over five years, reaching full implementation by 2001-2002 and serving 150,000 to 200,000 children per year with an annual budget of $500 million by this time. The legislation gave school districts wide flexibility in how the program could be designed at the local level. Especially innovative was the requirement that at least 10% of the funds be contracted out to community-based organizations (CBOs) for the provision of services. A second pioneering requirement stipulated that all UPK teachers obtain teaching certification.\[1\]

This report takes an in-depth look at the implementation of UPK in a small upstate New York city, District B. One of the first districts to implement UPK, District B’s UPK participants offer valuable insights on the implementation process, possibilities for meeting the needs of children in high-quality settings, and concerns and hopes for the future.

This report addresses the questions:

- How did UPK emerge in District B?
- What was the profile of the UPK program in District B?
- Who were the key players in District B, what were their roles in UPK, and what were their goals for UPK?
- How had UPK affected the early education system in District B, and what outcomes had emerged?
- What challenges remain for District B to reach universality while providing a high-quality program?

Information presented in this report emerged from in-depth interviews conducted during the spring and summer of 2000 with the key members of the early education community in the district. Interviews were conducted with the following individuals:

- District B leadership: district superintendent, the director of Early Childhood Programs, the Pre-K program leader, and one staff developer
Two advisory board members
Six UPK site directors or principals
Six UPK lead teachers
Two non-UPK site directors

One additional non-UPK site director was contacted but declined to be interviewed.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NUD*IST software. In addition, three-hour structured observations of classroom quality were done in each UPK classroom.

[1] The certification requirement has been postponed until 2004. Until recently, the certification for teachers in New York State wishing to work with four-year-olds covered nursery school through Grade 6. A new Birth-Grade 2 certification took effect February 2004. Both require a master’s degree. Teachers with provisional or initial certification are eligible for teaching in UPK classrooms but must complete all requirements within a specified time period.
District B’s UPK implementation must be viewed with careful consideration of its context. Its location and population, educational ideology, and prekindergarten teacher backgrounds are discussed in this section.

The District and Its Population

District B is located in upstate New York. The urban center of the district is a small area of shops, restaurants, and businesses, surrounded by residential streets. Just outside of the downtown area, there are several neighborhoods, as well as two universities. The outer ring of the district is made up of farms and widely dispersed homes, a truly rural setting.

The district is 155 square miles with approximately 6000 K–12 students living in both rural and urban areas. The population is highly educated and diverse for its size and location, due in part to the presence of two higher education institutions in the area. The economic range of the community is wide, although on average fairly economically advantaged. In the 1999–2000 school year, 33% of families entering the school system were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Over the last several years, 27–38% of families were of minority race or culture. There were approximately 55 languages spoken in the district, leading to a fairly high demand for ESL services. Family compositions were also diverse, with a significant number of single parent families, families with adopted children, and families with same-sex parents.

The District’s Educational Orientation

The district has had a long and extensive history of providing early education services that have been supported by private, local, state, and federal funds. Due in part to this history, the district was one of the 97 districts across the state chosen to participate in the first year of UPK. It readily embraced the opportunity. The existing district Pre-K program was over 30 years old and had included an Experimental Pre-K (EPK) program. It also had collaborated with Head Start for approximately 15 years. In addition, the district had also been providing free services for children birth through five with special needs since 1989. In all district programs in 1999, 184 four-year-old children were
served. Approximately 89 additional children were served in community-based classrooms (CBO) with UPK teachers. However, at the time of the case study, only 27 children were actually funded through UPK.

The district philosophy toward early education was described as one with a strong family component, where developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) was a priority and addressed via appropriate space, ratios, and teacher experience.[3] The philosophy involved addressing the social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and motor domains of child development. The philosophy included learning through play, with Pre-K as the foundation for later curricular areas (math, science, reading). Ongoing assessment was also a priority in the district. The district believed strongly in the blending of services to meet all of a child’s needs. The prekindergarten program leader added:

*I think the strongest word about it is blending of services, so that we are providing services that allow access for children who have special education needs, children who have different levels of income, [and] children who are from a different language minority background.*

**District Implicit Theories**

District B operated with the implicit theory that DAP would lead to school readiness. In District B, both CBO and district classrooms were expected to range in quality, and neither was believed to be a superior venue for providing Pre-K services. District B worked with the assumption that young children have special developmental needs and that individuals who work with young children need knowledge and skills different from those required by teachers of older children. District B saw all programs providing services to young children as being part of the early childhood education system. These implicit theories were evidenced early in the UPK process when decisions were made about the composition of the advisory board and the issues to be discussed. The advisory board was made up of individuals from the early childhood community who held a common vision for a high-quality UPK program. The board focused on choosing and supporting sites that shared that vision.

**Training and Experience of District Participants**

The backgrounds of District B’s UPK leaders consisted of classroom work with young children and decades of service. Individual sites had either one or two years of experience with UPK at the time of the interviews. Of the site directors interviewed, 60% had a bachelor’s degree and 40% had a master’s degree. No site directors had degrees in early childhood education; however they had an average of seven years experience at their particular site (range 1 year to 19 years). Of the teachers interviewed, 60% had a bachelor’s degree, 20% had an associate’s degree, and 20% had a master’s degree. Eighty percent had some formal training specifically in early education, with an average of seven years of experience teaching at that particular site (range 1 year to 13 years).

[2] Experimental Prekindergarten is a state-funded prekindergarten program serving children from low-income families since 1966.

[3] DAP is a set of guiding principles for practice drafted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and includes age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. Teachers should be knowledgeable about typical development for the age range served, and aware of individual growth, strengths, interests, and experiences.
UPK Program Development

The development of a UPK program in District B necessitated the combined efforts of district leadership and the advisory board in order to select sites and implement program features required by legislation. These efforts are discussed in this section.

UPK Leadership

District B received UPK with great enthusiasm. Leaders looked at the program as an opportunity and viewed points of objection or ambiguity in the legislation as challenges that could be overcome by the participants in the program. The district director of Early Childhood Programs commented:

My initial reaction was, “This could be a great thing if it’s done right.” And the biggest caution was “...if it’s done right.”...I felt that this was an opportunity to really have inclusive preschool in the district and to have more heterogeneity...you know, we talk about diversity, but to really have diversity in all of our classrooms...

The prekindergarten program leader added:

I heard about it [UPK] before we were really even starting, and it was very clear that it was important. It was a very important kind of legislation no matter how it [came] through, and we needed to be among the first people if we had that opportunity so that we would be in a good position in terms of being able to shape what it was about.

The superintendent indicated that of the educational leadership, several were enthusiastically on board from the beginning, and many others expressed support following her announcement that the district would support the initiative. The district school board had been very supportive of Pre-K and had recently voted to fund additional Pre-K teachers in the following year using local funds. Many UPK participants and community members expressed similar positive reactions to the UPK initiative.

District B described a collaborative management style. Leaders played a significant role in all
decisions, soliciting and integrating input from program participants. There was evidence of participant-initiated staff development, as indicated by one site director:

*They’ll ask for input, “What are the issues? Do we need something on…?” But I think the other piece is looking at our individual self-assessments and plans…There’ve been a number of district professional development days that have included UPK sites…I think [recent topics] came from…not just from the UPK sites but from all the Pre-K sites.*

The district directors described leadership as a process of supporting the growth of individuals by first identifying strengths and vulnerabilities. They portrayed a team approach, matching people with each other and with tasks. Leaders expressed a belief in bottom-up staff and program development, ongoing recruitment, and supervision. Leaders also saw themselves as potential generators of ideas, enthusiasm, and solutions. The district director of Early Childhood Programs shared:

*I think 98% of my work ends up being modeling. And the other 2% is responding.*

Early on, the district director of Early Childhood Programs conducted a community needs assessment. This involved contacting kindergarten parents at both district and private schools and asking them what they would have wanted in a UPK program in terms of hours and location, whether they would have needed transportation, questions about curriculum, and their feelings about the initiative.

A major focus of the program implementation was collaboration. District leadership made 20 presentations to area stakeholders about the program and what they expected it to mean for the community. Letters were distributed asking for support. Advisory board members were largely chosen from individuals who responded to those letters.

**Advisory Board**

The district director of Early Childhood Programs made recommendations for board members that centered on representing the diversity in the community in terms of community stakeholders, gender, and race. The superintendent then formally invited individuals to be on the board. Two members of the advisory board were interviewed in that capacity, and three individuals indicated that someone from their site had been involved with the board. None of the teachers that were interviewed participated on the board. One board member indicated that she perceived an under-representation of the downtown sites on the board and felt this to be exclusionary.

*We were concerned about the exclusivity. It seemed to be that…certainly the large centers that were involved, involved predominantly university or university affiliate programs. But we also found that there was...heavy participation from Head Start groups and so forth. But there was not a whole lot of participation from the downtown area as far as center-based or school-based.*

The original advisory board consisted of approximately 30 members who met as a whole group to decide the first steps. Members recalled the tension of early meetings, as many people were concerned about what a state-funded universal program for four-year-olds would mean. At first, individuals at the table were skeptical of the program and each others’ intentions. The tension was effectively addressed and dispelled by the leadership. This was accomplished by drawing the focus to the similarities in individuals’ goals. Individuals realized their
common vision for Pre-K and the district leadership’s intent to support that vision. The group then formed sub-committees to handle the major tasks, such as drafting a district program proposal and observing potential sites. The board sub-committees met at least once a week in the first year, culminating with a presentation of the proposal to the school board.

The advisory board had not met in the last two years; however, the two members interviewed expressed that should a need arise, they would expect to be called and would happily resume meeting. They reported that board activities simply came to their natural conclusion, and decision-making was transferred over to the leadership and UPK participants. In the words of a previous advisory board member:

*If we need to get back together, we get back together; and I’m sure if there was a concern or if there was a need for us to get together, those people would call us together.*

**Site Selection**

The district felt that programs offering UPK should reflect a range of high-quality options for families, including full-day and part-day programming and school- and community-based services. It supported providing services in a way that required the fewest transitions for children and in settings where children were already placed, as long as high quality was maintained. The district believed that collaboration with the community was critical and that one token community site would not be sufficient. The superintendent elaborated on this philosophy by pointing out that school districts are always in collaboration with community organizations to provide services to children, and she felt that open collaboration would only benefit children.

Given this philosophy, CBOs were encouraged to apply for program funding and were supported in their efforts to do so. Child care sites submitted written applications, and advisory board members made observations at sites whose applications indicated a good potential fit with the program. Although the process was competitive, the district leaders viewed the process of becoming a UPK site as a collaborative one. During the application process, sites completed a self-assessment, the district offered several technical workshops to help with forms and procedures, members of the advisory subcommittee conducted site visits, and site staff convened to work on ways that program requirements could be met by existing procedures. The director of Early Childhood Programs described the process:

*First, we went to providers to see if they were interested in participating, and we wanted to get a pulse of: What are providers’ existing capacity? Are they interested in collaborating if that were an opportunity? Can they collaborate according to the guidelines? If they can’t, what are the barriers to their collaboration? And what supports would be needed to be a collaborating agency?…What’s a reasonable time frame? Many people said, “I want to wait and see what happens the first year, so call me the second year. Put me on for your second year.” And some people said, “I’m not going to have a certified teacher until the year 2002. I’m working towards it, so call me then.”…And what I do is I check back… with them on a yearly basis to see if they’re still interested, and if not, why? So, we looked at capacity. We looked at where the kids were already, so that we could look into existing programs, centers or family care that served…kids, and where they were. Where were they geographically, so that when we were looking at placements, would they fulfill that need?*
Four sites were chosen the first year, with two additional sites added the second year. There were five community-based programs and one school-based program participating at the time of the case study. Of these six programs, two were part-day and four were full-day. The programs were located across the district. One program was at a parent-cooperative, one was at a nursery school, three were at child care centers (one of which was at a university), and one was in a district classroom. This distribution of program types seemed to reflect the district’s stated philosophy on how UPK funds should be distributed.

During this process, there were a few challenges. First, resolving how to evaluate sites was difficult, with changes made from the first to the second year. Second, some sites were upset about not being selected while others wanted to wait before joining to see how the program would unfold. The teacher certification requirement also presented concerns. Most sites concluded that participation had changed their program positively, although not through direct intervention. Changes had rather grown out of contact with other programs and staff development efforts. Modifications included curricular changes, assessment changes, professional growth of teachers, and for some sites, changes in the population of children served. Two teachers shared their thoughts:

More, I’d say, newer ideas. Like looking at the guidelines, we’ve kind of grabbed ideas from places. And UPK meetings, I was getting so many ideas that I definitely brought in and said, ‘This other place, they tried this!’

And it’s changing the grouping in the classroom, definitely, to more heterogeneous grouping, not just based on low-income families…and…what they bring into the classroom is a little bit different, having a little bit higher income. (How do you feel about this population change?) Love it. I think it’s wonderful. I don’t think that it should be just based on income. I think we’ve never been able in the past been able to reach…the working poor, the people that are out there and they don’t have the options in daycare…there are a lot of times, I think that some of the children that are UPK, they bring in more knowledge of the world around them…they’ve had more experiences. They’re the children that have been places. So, what their interests (are), we try to go with, so I think some of that has changed what we do in the classroom.

One site director shared:

I would say the biggest day-to-day change has been in our assessment procedures. We had most of our Pre-K teachers attend the work sampling training that was offered in September of ’98. And we’re now using that in all of our Pre-K classrooms and are actually in the process of developing a similar type system for our infants and toddlers so that we’ll have a uniform assessment procedure throughout the entire center and have portfolios that children can take with them from the time that they’re eight weeks…through Pre-K and can be passed on to kindergarten teachers if the parent wants them to.

Although there were a few challenges to implementing District B’s UPK program, the district leadership and advisory board were able to work together effectively to produce a common vision for high-quality programs.
The district had a vision for its UPK program. However, details needed to be addressed, such as program funding, collaboration with community programs and Head Start, leadership, child selection procedures and universality, and the comprehensive services that would be offered.

UPK Funding

The district received $2,700 per child for UPK. At the time of the case study, the district was serving 27 children at 6 sites with UPK funds. The number of children served was largely determined by the state, with the intention to provide funding for additional slots as the program rolled out. The director of Early Childhood Programs felt that $2,700 per child was inadequate and indicated that the district supplemented that amount by blending funds. The superintendent expressed concern about this low level of available funding, considering the boom economy. She worried about the future of UPK. Of the four site directors who discussed funding, one indicated that the $2,700 was close to cost, one indicated that $2,700 was definitely inadequate, and two were unsure of the actual costs of 2.5 hours of programming. One site director put the funding amount in the context of District B’s school budget:

Full-time care means fifty-two weeks a year, generally 40 or more hours a week. This includes, of course, the summer. This includes, of course, after 3:00, because parents are generally working 50 or 52 weeks a year. So when we say our cost of care is $6,700, which really is the cost of care to most today, it explains why teachers’ salaries in the field of childcare are about $16,000 a year…to translate this to the school district, the [District B] school budget allows about $10,000 per child for a school year which, of course, is about nine months, when you figure in all of the vacation days and so forth, for a day that’s generally about six hours long, and for a classroom size that’s generally 20 to 25 with one teacher. In Pre-K, you need two teachers for every 15 to 16 children. You’re operating probably 30 to 40% longer, so you’ve got twice, more than twice as many staff members with almost 40% more time, and you’re trying to operate with under $7,000. This is the crush.
Although the funding may strictly cover the 2.5 hours intended, the legislative focus on decreasing parent fees makes it difficult to provide program enhancements. Many felt these enhancements were needed, particularly for salary improvements. All programs indicated that total resources available to them as a result of UPK had increased so that UPK was adding value to existing programs. Often this increase took the form of staff development opportunities, support to take advantage of professional opportunities, and materials. One site director indicated that they were unwilling to use UPK funds for their base operating budget because of concerns over the state’s commitment to continue the program into the future.

We won’t let it replace any string [funding stream] because of its tenuousness. We use it specifically for things that would be renewable year by year, because it’s renewable year by year...The bulk of it has gone back to parents in terms of tuition rebates, but we have used it for staff training. We’ve used it for substitutes when staff goes on training. We’ve used it for...[materials].

The prekindergarten program leader summarized:

I think that they have focused their money more on sub time and on staff development, which doesn’t give teachers more money, but supports the quality of the job experience of teachers.

Collaboration with Community Sites

Community sites were a primary component of UPK in District B. In fact, there were five community sites and one district site. Community sites were chosen for philosophical reasons and not because services were cheaper to provide through the community or because there was insufficient space in district classrooms. District leadership felt that collaboration with the community was essential and that it was going well.

The director of Early Childhood Programs commented:

I couldn’t imagine being a hundred percent school district. I couldn’t imagine being a hundred percent community-based. I think the better way to describe what makes sense is to look at where the kids are. What creates the least amount of transitions? And what percentages match that? And I think those percentages vary from community to community. I mean, in a district where they don’t have the child care options, it should be district...whereas in another district...if the community [placements are] more appropriate because the child care community has more experience and the district has never had a Pre-K program, I want those kids in the quality care.

The prekindergarten program leader added:

The kinds of services that the district can provide are somewhat different than what day care can provide. And families really need the kinds of services the day cares are providing. So, from that point of view also, by including day care in the process, then we’re really...able to meet the needs of families.

It was difficult to assess the possibility of differences between community sites and district sites in District B as there was only one district UPK classroom and the community sites themselves were far from homogenous. However, it was not the impression that district UPK classrooms were necessarily of higher or lower quality than community UPK classrooms.

Community sites were generally feeling very positive about the program and their collaboration...
with the district. One site director shared positive feelings expressed by many:

Well, first of all, we’re very excited to be involved with [UPK] because we really want to keep on the cutting edge of things that are happening in early childhood education. And I would think it was a step professionally for the teachers, also, to feel like…they’re involved with a program like this.

Collaboration with Head Start

There was little collaboration between Head Start and UPK at the time of the case study. No sites were serving children with both UPK and Head Start funds. However, there was longstanding collaboration between Head Start and the district that spanned over 15 years.

Leadership Strengths

All interviewees identified the same two individuals as UPK leaders and discussed their strengths. Many also mentioned the synergy that had been created by the program participants and saw it as a continuing force behind the program. The superintendent, director of Early Childhood Programs, and the prekindergarten program leader shared their thoughts about this synergy:

There’s a synergy now…it’s not a program that will be determined by a single individual. It really has taken on a life of its own.

I think the driving force now is really everybody who’s involved. But I feel that the directors in particular are a tremendous driving force behind it.

I think that the existing collaborators, community-based collaborators, directors, and teachers are a strong driving force because they have the experience now of collaborating with the district and we’re over 60% collaborative. So, the nature of the collaboration and the amount has increased the drive and support for [UPK] to not only continue, but to grow.

Site directors mentioned the strengths of the early childhood leadership. These included early childhood experience, contacts, a willingness to help, regular flow of information, an early childhood focus, interpersonal skills, organization, good relationship with superiors, skill at integrating diverse individuals into a cohesive group, respect for program diversity, respect for practitioners, and a comfortable visiting style. In the words of two site directors:

Their experience and their experience within the community is valuable. They know lots of people and, you know, if you come to them with an issue or a problem, they’re extremely willing just to come in if need be. I think the teachers have a good relationship with them as well, which I think is very important. [They] feel totally comfortable having them come in the classroom and observe…I think that the teachers here, and everyone here at [the center] felt that there’s a strong commitment to early childhood education on their part, and early childhood education, as we see it. And so, I think we all felt very comfortable that they knew and respected our philosophy and that no one was going to come in and say, “Well, you need to start doing worksheets or ditto,” or try to change the essence of what we do. They really have an understanding of early childhood education and a respect for the work that the teachers do.

You never feel like your time is being wasted, so that’s a message of really valuing us individually for the work that we do. Very…skillful at creating collaborations, again…taking many different directors
from many different programs who...in the past, we were competitors with. The other thing I would say is that I think they've both been in the trenches in programs, so there's a lot of credibility to what they say. And also, we believe that they know how hard this work is and what it takes to do it.

One teacher added:

I like that attitude that it's not, “Well, if you can't get into the school system, you could possibly go to day care.” You know, it's kind of a step down. I like the attitude that, “There are good things happening in this center and this center and this site and this classroom.” And that everybody...has a little bit different philosophy and is doing things in a little bit different way, but that we're all doing good things with children...I feel like I'm treated as an equal. I feel like I'm valued.

Advisory board members mentioned many qualities that made the district leaders effective. These included great intellect, ability to network, ability to work with rules and guidelines to do what was best for children, flexibility, pro-child philosophy, good listening skills, acting on input, prioritizing, goal setting, choosing the right team, knowledge base, and not being easily intimidated by challenges. A former advisory board member described one leader's approach this way:

I think that one of the best things is that she has a great intellect and also her ability to network. She works very well with all kinds of groups of people, and...if somebody comes up saying, “You can't do this,” she’ll work on finding a way; she's very flexible and is always very pro-child. And when input is invited, [they] take that input and...use it in the best way and then brainstorm and then prioritize what needs to happen.

So I think what she was able to do was to invite people or attract people who were willing to see a project through and to do whatever task that needed to be done...so you then go to work in a cooperative way to make sure it's happened.

**Universality**

At the time of the case study, there were very few children on wait lists for UPK. These were primarily families who needed full-day rather than half-day care and families who lived in one area of the district where fewer placements were available. The UPK program was serving a few children at each of six sites. The children were chosen, for the most part, from among children already attending the programs, generally starting with those who qualified for free and reduced lunch and moving to those just above that income criteria. At some sites, a refund of fees was given to all eligible families, although only a few children were officially UPK children. At that time, the leaders planned to include more children within the sites before expanding out to other sites. Transportation was generally not available; however, leadership felt that this was not a problem for most families enrolled, as children were not moved to be at UPK sites but rather were at sites families had chosen.

The interviewees cited many challenges to UPK becoming universal. These included inadequate funding per child, preventing competition (particularly with programs that serve infants and toddlers), maintaining quality, collaboration, transportation, certification, blending services to avoid tracking children by income, and having sufficient space at quality sites. One site director stated:
And it’s really important for us that...we keep our Pre-K programs full because that supports our infant and toddler program...which is a huge need in the community...

Barriers preventing individual families from participating in UPK included living outside the district and needing full-day care. Serving children with special needs was not seen as a barrier; all sites felt they could meet the needs of most children with district support.

Comprehensive Services

The district leadership defined comprehensive services as education, health and nutrition, supports in classrooms, and links with community resources. They viewed these services as part of the family component of Pre-K. They felt that this was a strong area in the district but that more family worker time and family health care services were needed. In addition, they indicated that their goals for comprehensive services were met in district classrooms. Community UPK programs were chosen in part for strengths in this area. In the words of one district leader:

Actually, I would say that all of the centers provide adequate services for families and that was part of what we evaluated them on. We also know that they’re providing adequate services around health and nutrition...and then we know that everyone has access to special services of any sort because we provide [them].

The superintendent indicated that she would like to see more comprehensive services for Pre-K families as well as for all families. This would ideally involve health care services in schools as a support for health and as a way to bring families into schools.
Prekindergarten teachers are often underpaid and undertrained. UPK legislation addressed this issue by trying to promote professional development in the early care and education field and requiring state certification. The topics of teacher salaries, staff shortages, professional development, certification and supervision are discussed in this section.

**Teacher Salaries and Retention**

Salaries and benefits varied considerably across sites. Leadership felt that district teachers were well compensated, with salaries in the median range for the state. They also believed that teachers in non-district sites were inadequately compensated, earning up to 50% less than district teachers. The superintendent felt that community site teachers were woefully underpaid and that this reflected a larger lack of commitment to children in our society:

*I have great concerns about our society and our adults and the real commitment that they have to our youth, to our children. So it goes beyond, “Does [a district] teacher get $32,000? Does the...day care center person get $6.00 an hour?” That is just a symptom that I don’t believe that we put our money where ...we say we are in terms of our children. I think that child care providers are woefully underpaid and that we have people in that field that don’t belong there, [and] we have phenomenal people there.*

This salary inequity was not mentioned as a point of contention among teachers during the interviews. Leadership suspected that there was dissatisfaction but that relationship building through UPK was helping individuals to work together despite these issues. Disparity of resources available to programs (e.g., money for field trips) was a topic at two monthly meetings; however, the group brainstormed ways to support particular interests with available resources.

There was a very low turnover rate reported by the participating sites, with teachers averaging seven years at their current program. Suggestions to support salaries included blended funding for short-term improvements as well as scholarship incentives
and educational opportunities to work toward certification. Blended funding was used extensively in the district, and UPK leadership was supportive of this.

### Teacher Shortages

Teacher shortages were not a major concern in District B. The district leaders felt that education was a high priority in the district as a whole, and as a result, there would be sufficient teachers to meet demand. They worried, however, that as teachers become certified they would continue to move out of the community sites and into the district sites. The prekindergarten program leader explained:

*One of the very sad things is that if people have enough education...by and large, they move to the school district because they can be better compensated. So what we often get in child care settings is people who don’t have the same level of education, even though they may have the same level, or better level, of skill working with children.*

Most site directors had not had any openings for teachers and were happy with their current teachers, both certified and uncertified. One site recently had been trying to fill a teaching position and had found that most applicants were either Child Development Associate (CDA) credentialed or elementary education certified without early education experience. She felt in that case a CDA with early education experience was more appropriate. There did not appear to be a pool of certified teachers with early education experience available in the district who were applying for teaching jobs at community sites.

### Staff Development

Staff development was a top priority in the district. The district applied for and received a staff development grant from the State Education Department around the same time that UPK started, and both the grant and UPK implementation contributed to the emphasis on professional development. Many UPK participants saw staff development activities as benefits of UPK, although these activities were not officially available or funded exclusively through the program. This grant had provided for a mentor-protegee program that several UPK teachers had participated in. In general, interviewees reported strong positive feelings about the mentor-protegee program and other staff development efforts. One site director explained:

*Well, priority has been toward professional growth, which is great. There have been some tremendous workshops that have [been] made available to us. There has been the program, as I mentioned before, the mentor-protegee, which enables the older teachers to rethink what they’re doing as they’re thinking in terms of mentoring someone who’s new. It also gives the new teachers tremendous exposure. So I think that if I was going to pick the area that has been most worked on, it has been in terms of staff development...I think, most definitely, certainly the individuals who have been involved have become more aware of what other programs are doing. In one particular case, it’s also opened the doors for the mentoring program, which has been a wonderful exposure of other ideas and also contributing of other ideas, so there’s been tremendous growth professionally...by the people who have been involved.*
One teacher shared what ongoing education means to her:

*It's just that, an ongoing education...It has shaken up my beliefs in a lot of things. I'm not really sure, on some things, what I really do believe now. Because I thought, at one time, that this is what I believed and then I took that mentoring workshop and [I've] gone to some workshops where I thought, “Okay, I can see how this should maybe change, but I'm not sure exactly.” Don’t ask me to put into 55 words or less what my philosophy is now because it’s constantly in a state of flux.*

Practitioners also generated staff development activities to some extent, and this had resulted in high satisfaction with these staff development efforts. Another area that interviewees felt strongly about was follow-up from workshops. Recently, the district had conducted a workshop focused on brainstorming ways to support Pre-K to kindergarten transitions, and participants were happily surprised to see that their suggestions were taken seriously. For example, efforts began to review kindergarten screening procedures for children who were already attending Pre-K programs. In addition, individuals felt that including kindergarten teachers in the mentor-protegee program would strengthen links, and this was discussed. In another instance, participants and leadership together had determined that current resources for specific classroom needs were limited and that a person dedicated to staff development would be very helpful. Participants were thrilled that the position was created, especially when one of the district’s most well-respected teachers was chosen for the job. Additionally, many mentioned monthly teacher and site director meetings as great opportunities for professional development. Most interviewees felt that there was some money available to support teachers attending conferences.

Program needs mentioned included: facilities and space, particularly for large motor activities; materials; funding for planning time during the day; qualified substitutes; accessibility for diverse families; and assistance with repairs and small construction projects. In addition, staff development opportunities specifically for teacher aides were a concern for some teachers. A site director described her need for planning time:

*I have seen an increase, an incredible increase in the volume of papers, but so have the staff members, particularly those who have been involved in UPK because with UPK have come other things. That includes training and classes...In one case, the mentoring project and all that. So there has just been a lot more asked [of us]. And it would be awfully nice to have the money available to give more time during the day for people to deal with that stuff.*

A teacher shared her feelings on staff development for teacher aides:

*I’m disappointed with the staff development for my assistants in the classroom. I think...it’s not consistent. It’s encouraged in word, but I don’t feel they’re supported. They’re asked to do and do and do, and they do far more than what their job description says. I don’t truly feel that they’re...backed 100%.*

**Certification**

Certification was an area of concern for most of the interviewees. While all felt that some type of certification was needed to ensure quality across programs, many believed that the existing requirement that teachers be state certified to teach elementary education was not appropriate. This sentiment was expressed both by certified and uncertified teachers. The main concerns with the current certification
requirement were that it did not require early education experience and that the ultimate requirements were unclear. One teacher expressed:

*What has been established as the credentials are somewhat inappropriate. New York has talked about doing a 0–8 certification, which has not happened, so right now an elementary school teacher could come and teach three- and four-year-olds, who has been teaching six-year-olds...I have been there. I’ve taught sixth grade. There is no comparison. And yet a person who...has been teaching three-and four-year-olds for ten or fifteen, or in our case, maybe twenty-five years...does not fall within that scope of being credentialed. So there’s something that has to give even in terms of the definition of the credentials for early childhood. It’s another world from elementary ed. and it needs to be re-looked at.*

*We have some wonderful, very experienced Pre-K teachers who are fabulous, and they have associate's degrees and are not certified...and also the pool of applicants that we get, we do get people with bachelor's degrees and master's degrees, but they might not always necessarily be the best person for this job...We certainly want a certain level of education, or require it. But we also look for the person who’s the best person for the job and who has...the closest match philosophically. And it’s not always that person who’s a certified teacher.*

Teachers with certification valued their education, and most felt strongly about it:

*I valued my education. It definitely helped me in the classroom. And it’s something I think you always fall back on.*

Teachers lacking certification and bachelor’s degrees felt overwhelmed by the idea of going back to school, and some commented that they simply could not afford further education. Some expressed confusion about the status of the certification requirement and which specific educational programs would meet that requirement, as well as frustration over the lack of support provided at the state level. One teacher expressed:

*I wish there was a principal’s office. I could go there and say, “Tell me what to do next.” Because...this is scary to me...But I guess my biggest beef with the state is that they pass more and more requirements all the time, it seems like. But they’re not giving you the help to be able to...achieve those requirements.*

The district had been highly involved in statewide efforts to include a grandmothering clause; however, this effort was stalled at the time of the case study. The grandmothering clause would have provided a set of guidelines and procedures for individuals with extensive experience in early education to document their qualifications and take additional supportive courses in lieu of obtaining the state teacher certification. Interviewees expressed support for the initiative, while appreciating the inherent difficulties. For example:

*I know that grandfathering in is kind of tricky. The reason why I feel so strongly about it is because I know these teachers. I know they’re fabulous teachers. And they have a wealth of experience and education in early childhood. Now, I don’t know, if somebody else just came in off the street...I would feel as strongly about it.*
Benefits of certification mentioned by teachers are that it is a potential measurement tool, provides teachers with training, helps to foster different ways of thinking about learning, is part of the necessary balance of experience and schooling, an education was something that one can fall back on, and that a degree-based certification requirement provides a non-subjective way to evaluate potential teachers.

Site directors added that with a certified teacher they can become a UPK site, lending a degree of professionalism to the field that may one day result in higher pay. The director of Early Childhood Programs felt strongly about certification and suggested that education empowered teachers, gave them more skills and knowledge, and helped them to be more open, confident, and aware of where to look for help. She stated:

*Well, I have obviously mixed thoughts about it. I think the credentialing in any profession is crucial because you have to have some way of establishing a criteria for the field, but it’s hard to do that in hindsight… We’re in that gray area of the transition. From an administrative standpoint, credentialing is a wonderful thing because what it brings with it is recognition of profession… With credentialing usually comes the monetary rewards that have been lacking in the field. So when I look at the future, I say, “This is great and bring it along.” It also sets standards, which are crucial. From the other part of the administrator, it leaves me with several staff members who have had a tremendous number of years in the field and probably could write a lot of the books, who do not have the formal certifications. The director of Early Childhood Programs added that the timeline for certification was unrealistic and that she planned to ask for extensions for particular individuals. The superintendent expressed concern that the certification requirement was an unfunded mandate, and as a result, she feared that individuals were going to fall through the system without a structure to help them to get certified. She worried that this might result in losing some of the district’s best teachers:

*I understand the requirement, but… they’re not really doing anything to assist people to meet the requirement. And that’s a problem to me. There are no grants or incentives, or “We’ll fund X percentage of people to get their associate’s and then their bachelor’s, and then they have to spend five years in a childcare-based program to pay that back... and the State lost their creativity [and that’s what I mean by their commitment] to make this really happen. It’s
kind of an unfunded mandate... I think they’re going to wait and see where the chips fall, and I think the chips are going break on top of kids...we might have some programs that go out of business. And/or we’re going to lose people that are not able to get the degree...the certification...that are really phenomenal people because there was no structure there to help them.

Support and Supervision

The superintendent indicated support for leadership coming from the school board, the state board of education, teachers, parents, and the county child care resource and referral agency. The superintendent described her approach to supervision as individualized, and in the case of the district director of Pre-K programs, she employed an open style with frequent communication and praise. The director of Pre-K programs indicated that she would like more training on how to collaborate, and how to include families in the request for proposal process, as well as more information to better alleviate tensions between the child care community and the district.

Program participants described feeling adequately supported by leadership while simultaneously feeling fully autonomous within their own programs. Areas of support described by teachers included feeling treated as equals, having someone to go to should they need assistance, monthly meetings for teachers, and access to resources. One teacher, however, indicated that she did not feel particularly supported as she was unable to attend meetings due to inadequate substitute coverage. Site directors described communication as open and cooperative.

Teachers and directors mentioned the monthly meetings with colleagues as a major benefit of the program. Most said that the opportunities to hear what others were doing was a great way to get ideas and inspiration. Many also mentioned that they now felt there was at least one other site they could call or be able to visit in the upcoming year. The meetings were relaxed gatherings with frequent and honest exchanges of thoughts and feelings. Although the atmosphere was casual, meetings were topic-based, and a wide range of topics and issues were addressed. Several teachers expressed:

There’s such a wide variety of programs...That has been the eye-opener for me...and it was really nice, you know, for me to see the variety of Pre-K programs out there and that they’re all fitting under this umbrella of UPK. I think it’s great.”

I’m feeling great! Very supported, very much more a part of the early childhood community...it’s been really wonderful.

Most sites felt that the amount of monitoring the district provided was sufficient and not troublesome. Many commented that resources were available to them, particularly staff development resources and materials. Some added that resources were also available through the county resource and referral agency and through area colleges.
With structural details worked out, specific classroom features could then be addressed. Curriculum type and content as well as overall classroom quality were critical issues for District B.

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

Interviewees identified several components of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). These included knowing appropriate activities and expectations for a specific age group, meeting the needs of individual children, promoting appropriate skills, and learning through play. DAP was described as a top priority in program planning by teachers, site directors, and district directors. Teachers and site directors shared their thoughts:

*To me, I guess it's taking children wherever they are and going with it...Developmentally appropriate, I could even think of my chairs going right down to the basic level...[chairs are too big]. So they're not developmentally appropriate. So I could be talking about the chairs and my curriculum...but it's really taking it to be where they're at and going with that and what are they excited with...We might change our plans in the middle of the week...So, I worry about districts...making you hand in lesson plans. Yeah, you can see my lesson plan for the week — after we've already done it.*

*It means, I think for me and for our program, that we know that four-year-olds are going to progress along a predictable developmental program and...that you can...think about four-year-olds in general as going along that path. But there's also individual differences around that. And that to be developmentally appropriate in terms of teaching four-year-olds in the context of a classroom, it means knowing in...general, you know, the basic skills and competencies that four-year-olds should be developing, but also knowing that because of the uneven course of development over that age range that it's going to look different on different kids. That's one piece. So for me, it means having teachers who have a picture of...what three- to five-year-olds are striving towards and then being able to meet them where they are. And knowing that in general that means that these*
kids are hands-on learners. They learn by doing. They learn by having experience. So that keeping all that developmental sort of backdrop in your head, looking at that child next to that backdrop and then figuring out the kinds of experiences that’ll move them along towards those competencies that we want them to have...a lot of flexibility, a lot of going with the flow, a lot of looking at kids, and providing them lots of active experiences.

Well, it’s something that I work on and that I struggle with and that I’m not done learning about. ...My own personal philosophy is that some activities, some of what happens in your classroom has to be teacher generated. Because the philosophy of “everything has to be child generated” is great in philosophy, but it’s actually harder to put into everyday practice...Once I get the kids into this classroom and I start knowing what they’re all about, I can work with them...I can go the direction they’re going. I can work with their interests. I can encourage learning in the ways that they seem to be headed. But I think sometimes, I have to have the enthusiasm. I have to have the ideas. I have to lay them out there and say, “Look at this.” Because they have never thought about looking at this topic or this subject ...and that’s part of what I consider my job, is to encourage enthusiasm.

Children need to learn in their own way. And they all develop at their own pace. So you can’t really plan for twenty children to do the exact same thing; you have to do it more individually.

It means...integrating the emerging skills and growth and development of your children into an interesting and captivating and enriching material and learning-based environment to support their growth and development.

I also think that at this age, developmentally appropriate practice has to do with learning through play. Main barriers to implementing DAP were time and flexible finances. Teachers expressed frustration with having insufficient time to develop materials to expand children’s interests, and that frequently, in order to have truly emergent curriculum, they had to use their own money for supplies. Time to notice each child’s strengths and needs was also a barrier that was mentioned.

There was little tension expressed between DAP and school readiness, with most teachers feeling that parents understood the curriculum goals, and that when they did not, an explanation of each activity and what skills that activity promoted was sufficient for families. One teacher felt that an academic push by families and the expectations of the kindergarten environment was a partial barrier to implementing DAP.

If I don’t head towards that goal in some way, I’m really failing those children because I’m not sending them into a whole elementary school environment that is child-directed and learn at your own pace. So I have this obligation to prepare them for what they’re going into, but also an obligation to encourage learning in the way that their intelligence might work best.

The district prekindergarten program leader shared her thoughts on the issue of tension between DAP and school readiness:

I think...that...there are always tensions at every grade level between what it is the teachers actually feel they can do with kids and what they think that the teachers at the next grade level expect. I think it gets talked about as the, you know, Pre-K, kindergarten, this DAP, school readiness. But you see the same thing happening between the...elementary school and the middle school. It sounds like the same conversation. And...it really goes on between the...the kindergarten teachers [and first grade], this...
have to do this because I have to get them ready for first grade.” And I think it’s a false issue. You know, I think it’s about there not being relationships between institutions and between the teachers that work next door to one another. And I guess...that we’re going with the assumption that the more conversations that people can have with one another...that there’ll be less that’s unknown. And the other thing is...I personally don’t see a distinction [between DAP and school readiness]...one of the workshops we did this year was about, “What are the standards? What does it mean to work toward standards? And what is developmentally appropriate practice?” And I don’t think those two things are in opposition to one another. I think good developmentally appropriate practice can very easily [meet] the standards.

We had a workshop that said...“Diversity should be celebrated the whole year through.” Now how to go about that? That’s something that I haven’t quite figured out yet. I have all these books...What I do on a continual basis is open up the discussion. We’ve had several really interesting discussions at circle time...Those activities are interspersed during the course of the year, so I’m not doing a unit on diversity. But at the same time, it doesn’t happen...I don’t have one of those activities, I don’t have those discussions every day. I’m not sure...if the experts would say...that I’m celebrating diversity then. I feel like loving the children in this classroom, no matter their background, no matter what their race, no matter what their religion, loving them and supporting them and teaching them and dealing with them with respect is celebrating their diversity and mine.

I have...sixteen children in a room, I have sixteen different little cultures. And that’s multicultural as it comes up in diversity. Yes, if you go into my room, I have one child of color this year. That’s all. But a very diverse class. It’s just how you look at the diversity.

Culturally Appropriate Practice

Culturally appropriate practice (CAP) was an area of interest and development for teachers. Many felt that there was more they could do to understand, include, and support families in ways that matched their needs and expectations. Some teachers felt that including culture was difficult, as the population of children they served was not very diverse. One teacher felt that it was difficult to really understand minority cultures and the impacts of being a cultural minority as she was not a minority herself. Another teacher expressed that it was difficult to know how often to discuss culture and race and chose to do so when the children spoke about similarities and differences, and also at other times when culture or race came up in classroom activities. The director of Early Childhood Programs noted that each family is a culture and that including CAP was a critical part of individualizing the curriculum. Two teachers shared their thoughts about culturally appropriate practice:

We had a workshop that said... “Diversity should be celebrated the whole year through.” Now how to go about that? That’s something that I haven’t quite figured out yet. I have all these books...What I do on a continual basis is open up the discussion. We’ve had several really interesting discussions at circle time...Those activities are interspersed during the course of the year, so I’m not doing a unit on diversity. But at the same time, it doesn’t happen...I don’t have one of those activities, I don’t have those discussions every day. I’m not sure...if the experts would say...that I’m celebrating diversity then. I feel like loving the children in this classroom, no matter their background, no matter what their race, no matter what their religion, loving them and supporting them and teaching them and dealing with them with respect is celebrating their diversity and mine.

I have...sixteen children in a room, I have sixteen different little cultures. And that’s multicultural as it comes up in diversity. Yes, if you go into my room, I have one child of color this year. That’s all. But a very diverse class. It’s just how you look at the diversity.

Classroom Quality

District B UPK classrooms were evaluated using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale — Revised Edition.[4] The ECERS-R focuses on the nature and quality of the environment, including health and safety practices, materials and activities, and interactions in the classroom. There are seven subscales, resulting in item, subscale, and total scores for each classroom. The subscales are: Parents and Staff, Program Structure, Interactions, Activities, Language and Reasoning, Personal Care Routines, and Space and Furnishings. Each subscale consists of multiple items.
Researchers observed each classroom on one occasion, between 9:00 a.m. and 12:00 noon. The ECERS-R was scored based on this three-hour observation period and on answers provided by teachers during a short follow-up interview. Item, subscale, and total scores were computed for each classroom on a seven-point rating system, where 1 = inadequate, 3 = minimal, 5 = good, and 7 = excellent. The UPK classrooms in District B received very high scores on the ECERS-R, with an average UPK classroom score in the district of 5.74 and with all programs receiving at least a 5 for overall score. Subscale average scores ranged from 5 to 7. These scores compared favorably with the estimated national average total score which falls between 4.0 and 4.3, as reported in several large national studies.[5]

Items indicating particular strength with average scores of 6.5 or higher were: furniture for care, play and learning, greeting/departing, nap/rest, encouraging communication, children's interactions, group time, meals/snacks, sand/water, gross motor supervision, discipline, staff/child interactions, provisions for parents, and staff cooperation. Areas needing improvement with average scores of 3.3 and 5.0 were: room arrangement, space for privacy, music/movement, staff personal needs, furniture for relaxation, gross motor space, health practices, blocks, dramatic play, and math/number.

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Families

Although site directors and teachers reported positive feedback from families concerning UPK, many parents were unclear of the program’s parameters and how to become involved in their local program. These issues are discussed in this section.

**Reported Reaction of Families**

During the initial needs assessment, 80% of families polled indicated that they would use and support a program like UPK. Teachers and site directors indicated that many families were unaware of the program, or, if aware of the existence of UPK, were uninformed about the specifics of the program (e.g., hours, eligibility). Most programs had at least one or two inquiries for the following year. Many site directors expressed that their parent boards felt honored to have had their center chosen as a UPK site and that families were pleased with the reduction in fees.

Few teachers or site directors had received negative feedback from families about the program. One director indicated that there was some concern over whether the site would continue to be eligible for UPK because of the certification requirement. One teacher stated that some families had expected more change from the program, rather than what they perceived to be the same services with reduced fees. Overall, however, most participants indicated that the average parent in the district was unclear about what the program offered and whether their child would be eligible. The prekindergarten program leader explained:

*I think that this program is incredibly confusing to the public. And that I don’t know what we can do to not have it be so confusing...I think it’s very hard on families because they hear vaguely about this program. They don’t understand what it is... Many of them also don’t really understand what Experimental Pre-K or Head Start are... There’s a lot of discrimination that also happens. And...they call and they don’t understand what will allow them to be in the program or not in the program. And it’s very frustrating to hear that only three or four...*
kids can be in the program or seven can be in the program, and you have to go to a day care center and find out about it. I mean it's incredibly un-parent friendly. Not because we're not trying hard. And our receptionists are incredible, and I'll talk with people and have long conversations about it...People are not happy that we’re going, you know, and working our way up the income guidelines. It requires... individual education of every single parent...I think it’s probably not a long-term problem. I think it’s just the short-term, start-up problem...

Family Involvement

Most programs felt that they would like more family involvement and that there was more they could do to encourage participation. One teacher noted that her first priority was to help parents feel comfortable in the classroom. Another teacher felt that family involvement was at the level she would like for about half of her families. A third teacher felt that the level of family involvement was incredible considering that most of her families had two working parents. The director of Early Childhood Programs noted that they have had a large family component for years and that they were able to expand that to more heterogeneous family groups because of UPK. Family involvement efforts included wrap-around care, supports, and efforts to get families more involved with their children. Family workers were a part of the district's overall support for families. The district UPK leaders discussed family involvement as integral:

I don't want family involvement, number one, to ever be an add-on. I don't want family involvement to be, you know, field trips and volunteering only. And how do we support families in being involved in their child’s learning through just natural avenues, if it's doing dishes together at night or if they don't do dishes, then they throw away the microwave package together...how do you make it so simple?

One teacher addressed both family involvement and family diversity by commenting:

Families are welcomed in. And sometimes it's as basic as, can you communicate with them? And how do you [know] when you can’t? And the same with children...I don't think that everyone needs to be expected to know what every culture’s practices are, but to be open to [them] and to be willing to, you know, have them share with you, even to encourage them to share with you...

Another teacher shared how she explains to families what she means by family involvement:

It's responding to them. We sent home lending library books...and it's sitting down with your child and reading those. It's getting your child to bed...on time, so that when they come to school, they can function. So we really put out that parent involvement is not just coming into the classroom.

Informing the public of the opportunities of UPK and involving families in classroom activities remain challenges for UPK directors and teachers.
Perceptions of UPK

Both UPK and non-UPK preschool sites expressed positive feelings about the program's effects on the surrounding community. However, the individuals interviewed for this study raised concern for the consequences of state regulations.

### Participants' Support

Of teachers and site directors currently participating in the UPK program, many felt very positively about the program. Areas of UPK that respondents were enthusiastic about included greater connection to the early childhood community, increased opportunities for staff development, the diversity of programs, and feeling their individual programs were valued and respected. Two individuals mentioned excitement over being a part of a cutting edge development in the area of early childhood education. As one stated:

*Now there is a big, very big push for inclusivity, which has been very reassuring. And the staff has felt that way too. The teachers have gotten to see other programs, and I think they really do feel part of a joint effort. I think it’s really made the childcare community more…linked.*

### Participants’ Concerns

Some respondents expressed concerns about UPK. The first was a concern over the possibility that the State Education Department or the oversight agency would set standards that might conflict with the standards of particular programs and that there would be pressure to conform to these state-level standards. Largely, this concern had been alleviated by the flexibility in the legislation and the district’s effort to preserve and strengthen the existing diversity of programs by administering UPK collaboratively through existing sites. Two individuals expressed the following:

*I think originally...my concern was that...by becoming state-funded, we’d lose control of what our philosophy and practices were about. As I’ve learned more about the program...I feel confident that the people who are making policy understand...*
early childhood and want to incorporate developmentally appropriate practices.

First of all, I think it’s really great that the [District B] School District has made it a collaborative approach with the...early childhood community because I think it is a little bit scary to think that..., with this universality that...there could be...school districts who would be providing the entire program.

The second concern expressed by one teacher was the increased profile that resulted from being a UPK site. She experienced an increase in unexpected visitors and traffic.

The third concern was expressed by the majority of teachers, as well as by several site directors. Many felt that the current certification requirement, an N-6 teaching certificate with no required early education experience, was inappropriate. They might be forced to choose between someone who was certified but did not have the appropriate experience and someone who had the appropriate experience but was not certified. Many also felt that obtaining this level of certification was beyond their reach, due to financial and time constraints. Those who were certified valued their education, and many teachers and directors, both certified and not, mentioned educational credentials as critical but not something that replaces experience. The consensus was that some standard was necessary in order to evaluate potential teachers and that certification brings a degree of professional recognition to the field. However, they would like to see revisions to the current requirement.

In general, both directors felt that the additional quality spots for preschoolers and the additional resources available to the community through UPK were positive changes. Both sites indicated regular contact with other sites via the county child care resource and referral agency and felt that they had access to staff development opportunities. One director felt that she was missing out on the staff development provided by UPK, particularly for directors. Potential sources for new ideas that these non-UPK site directors used included the county child care resource and referral agency, the internet, other directors, their personal collections, and the library. Concerns they raised included the following:

I've been impressed with local work on standards but, I'm concerned about the elementary education degree requirement. I don't think it's appropriate for a caregiver working with this age group.

I think that, for the community, it will be helpful because there will be more spaces for kids. But I'm always concerned about the quality of a program...I don't think Pre-K should be a school for little kids. Our center is play-centered, child-centered. The
philosophy that has been developed by the local group is really similar. I think it’s hard on kids under five to have to take the school bus to and from the other centers they go to and to have a short UPK day. In terms of impact on this center, I’m worried about losing enrollment.

Both UPK and non-UPK programs were optimistic about UPK’s influences on the community. However, they had reservations concerning state requirements and enrollment in non-UPK sites.
Program Successes

UPK leadership, staff, and site directors in District B reported multiple areas of success regarding the program’s implementation. These included success in fostering relationships with other programs, schools, and the government; staff development; high quality classrooms; creative funding arrangements; and attention to continuity from Pre-K to kindergarten.

Building Relationships

District leadership felt a strong and positive relationship to the Early Childhood Coordination Team at the State Department of Education and found the leadership and staff to be very responsive, connected to colleagues, and able to provide ample technical assistance. The district UPK director noted that the current state staff had been the most supportive group she had worked with and that the limitations to what they were able to provide stemmed from a lack of resources rather than unsupportive staff. The superintendent felt that there was insufficient support from the governor and the legislature for UPK.

Staff Development

UPK had provided the context for many sites to have close contact with each other and with district personnel. Monthly teacher and site director meetings were a common ground where individuals could get to know each other while sharing ideas and experiences, exploring topics, and brainstorming solutions to specific site challenges. Relationships were built among sites as well as between sites and leadership. In addition, efforts toward Pre-K/kindergarten continuity had created an environment that fostered relationships between Pre-K and kindergarten teachers and staff.

Staff development had been a top priority in District B. The district had applied for and received a state grant to pursue a staff development initiative. The staff development efforts were regarded highly by teachers and site supervisors and were reported to be related to positive changes in classroom practices. Staff development in District B took place during one-on-one meetings between mentors and
partners or in small groups at monthly meetings and topic-based workshops. Practitioners generated areas to be discussed and pursued, and these topics were followed-up by UPK leadership. This ensured a higher level of involvement in staff development activities and fostered a supportive team environment focused on providing the best services to young children.

**High Quality Programs**

Classrooms were rated for quality using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R). As discussed previously, classrooms in District B scored very well on average (5.74), with all classrooms receiving at least a score of 5 out of a possible 7. Areas of particular strength, scoring near ceiling on this scale, were: furniture for care, play and learning, greeting/departing, nap/rest, encouraging communication, children’s interactions, group time, meals/snacks, sand/water, gross motor supervision, discipline, staff/child interactions, provisions for parents, and staff cooperation.

**Blended Funding**

District B had successfully blended federal, state, and local funds to provide seamless care for children in UPK programs. The innovative approach that District B had used to blend funding could be applied in other districts working to serve children and families who need more than 2.5 hours of care per day, within the context of UPK. Blended funding had been used to meet classroom needs such as materials, additional hours of care, and transportation. Often children were eligible for more than one source of funding at the local, state, and federal level. Understanding the “ins and outs” of these various funding streams and working to make ends meet provided access to high quality childcare for families who otherwise would have been unable to afford it.

**Continuity**

During this case study, District B launched an effort to increase continuity between Pre-K and kindergarten so that children’s and families’ needs were served as seamlessly as possible. Teachers from Pre-K and kindergarten settings were brought together to brainstorm ways to help children transition successfully to school. Building on Pre-K curriculum, sharing strategies for what works for individual children, and helping families with the intimidation many feel about enrolling their children into the formal school setting were all topics addressed. Strategies suggested by teachers and paraprofessionals were recorded and summarized, and district leadership was following up on particular suggestions and initiatives at the end of this case study.
Despite its successes, the UPK programs in District B were faced with a number of ongoing challenges. Areas of concern that emerged were achieving universality, teacher certification, the scope of services offered, and leadership goals.

**Achieving Universality**

District B has provided high quality services to staff and children; however, the total number of children benefiting from these services remains low. In the future, District B will face the challenge of expanding its program to additional sites and children across the income range while maintaining high quality services. As UPK becomes fully implemented and districts receive additional funding to serve more children, District B will need to expand to additional sites. The current sites were each serving only a few UPK children at the time of the case study and would be able to enroll a higher percentage of their children as UPK children. However, to truly meet the demand of the district, additional sites will have to be included. In addition, some sites were wary of serving only UPK children because of concerns over maintaining financial viability should UPK funding become unavailable. Additional sites in the community were interested in participating in UPK, but the certification requirement was a major barrier to their participation.

Another challenge is enrolling children across the income range. Many programs in District B provided UPK enrollment to families according to family income, serving families most in need first. To become truly universal, families across the socioeconomic spectrum will need to be served.

**Teacher Certification**

Many respondents expressed serious concerns with the certification requirement of the UPK legislation. District B will face the challenge of meeting the requirements of the program in a way that supports and includes the district’s early education teachers. Several teachers did not meet the certification requirement of the legislation and were not comfortable striving toward the goal of certi-
fication. These teachers faced many barriers to pursuing an advanced education and worried about additional requirements that might exist in the future. Many other respondents expressed concern about choosing between certified teachers with no training or experience specific to early childhood education and teachers with early childhood training and experience but no certification. The district will need to support teachers financially and logistically in their efforts to meet the requirements, while recognizing the legitimate concerns about a certification requirement appropriate for elementary education.

Enhancing Comprehensive Services

District B’s leadership had a strong philosophical approach to the comprehensive services requirement of the UPK legislation. In the future, District B will need to articulate that philosophy to individual programs and support their efforts to engage families. The district superintendent and UPK district directors were comfortable with the term “comprehensive services” and readily specified their goals and achievements in this area. However, many interviewees were not comfortable with the term and were unable to state their goals and efforts in this area. This was not to say that programs did not have goals or were not meeting the needs of families; rather, it emphasized the need for a more clearly defined district approach to comprehensive services. In addition, sites expressed the need for support in linking families with resources, ideally with the help of a family worker but alternatively with a frequently updated resource list:

“...frequent updates, so I don’t have to make six phone calls to find out what’s going on here. ‘You know, what’s going on with Medicaid these days or with the Child Health program? And what are the income parameters? And how does somebody get on it?’ I have sources for information...But it certainly would be very useful to...have a list that comes and...is frequently updated.

Leadership Goals

UPK directors shared their goals for the future. These included expanding to serve more children and include more sites, conducting a second needs assessment to determine the adequacy and accessibility of services, and strengthening the existing system. Additional goals were integrating with other care systems and kindergarten, serving language minority families, serving children from three years of age, integrating Pre-K programs to be truly universal with a birth through eight focus, and maintaining a balance between community and school providers.

The director of Early Childhood Programs articulated her vision:

To have education and care not seem like two different systems. To feel that we’re developing contacts that really are supportive to kids, families, staff, and community. To have that be systemic support and change that can be sustained and to let relationship development, ethics, and values guide our practice, our content, and our actions.

The pre-kindergarten program leader described a long-term goal for the ECE system:

I think a goal would also be that people no longer think of elementary schools as K to fifth [grade]. That it would just be accepted, though we’re not there yet...that we educate children from three on...And, another thing is, it’s a little scary to keep thinking
of serving young children in the public school system
in the sense of the scariness of children being in
institutional settings...How can we make those insti-
tutional settings not feel like institutions?

UPK leadership has acknowledged the challenges
of program and service expansion as well as staff
certification. They have produced a list of goals to
address in the near future.
This investigation into the implementation of UPK in District B offers insight for districts in the early stages of UPK program development, for legislators in New York State and in other states considering similar legislation, and for members of the early education community across the country grappling with issues of funding, staff development, and providing quality programming. Key findings are summarized below.

Conclusion

How Did it Operate? The Program’s Successful Development

The Leadership Team’s Contribution
- District leaders brought decades of hands-on experience, contacts throughout the state, a strong knowledge base, and limitless enthusiasm to the planning and implementation of UPK.
- Advisory board members were carefully chosen to represent district diversity and to work as a team to create a comprehensive plan for UPK implementation.

- A collaborative approach was used to design the program, evaluate potential sites, and plan and carry out staff development efforts, creating an atmosphere of team effort and support.

What Worked: The Program’s Impact

Benefits for Children
- High-quality programs were available to all children served by UPK in the district.
- Blended funding allowed more seamless services for children, providing wrap-around care, materials, and supports.
- Continuity between Pre-K and kindergarten was enhanced, allowing for more seamless transitions for children and families.

Benefits for Programs and Staff
- Relationships were formed and strengthened among programs, between programs and the district, and between Pre-K and kindergarten.
Staff development efforts in the district were comprehensive, intense, well-administered, and met with enthusiasm.

**What Work Remains: Ongoing Challenges**

**Achieving Universality**

- Serving all four-year-olds in the district remains a challenge. Funding for additional children, increasing accessibility to families by expanding hours of service, and finding more space will be needed to serve all the district’s four-year-olds.

- Expanding to additional sites, while maintaining high quality programming and staff development currently available, will be a focus in the future.

**Teacher Certification**

- Reaching the point where all UPK teachers in District B will be certified remains a challenge for the years ahead.

- Supporting teachers in their efforts to become certified, while addressing the concerns of many that education and experience, specifically with four-year-olds, be included and valued in the certification process, will be an ongoing issue in the district.

**Enhancing Comprehensive Services**

- More clearly articulating the district’s philosophy on comprehensive services and helping CBOs to link parents with services will be an important enhancement for the future.

**Leadership Goals**

- District leadership has identified a set of goals for the future. These focus on program expansion, serving minority families, integration of Pre-K and the early elementary grades, and maintaining a balance between community and school providers.
Bibliography


