

# Improving Access to Prekindergarten for Children of Immigrants

## Outreach

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The first step in enrolling more children of immigrants into prekindergarten is getting the word out about available programs. The experts we interviewed shared their strategies for identifying immigrant families and community needs, promoting programs through ads or in person, and sustaining and encouraging outreach efforts.

### Identifying Who to Reach

Before reaching out to immigrant families, it is essential to know who they are, where they are, whether they are underserved by early education programs, and what barriers may stand in the way of pre-K enrollment. The experts we interviewed used the following strategies for learning this information.

- **Analyzing census data** to compare the characteristics of children enrolled in pre-K with the characteristics of children living in the area overall.
- **Looking at the characteristics of kindergarteners** to see whether the children enrolling in pre-K are similar or if children of immigrants are under-enrolled.
- **Building on Head Start’s “Community Needs Assessment” process** to learn the demographic makeup of eligible families, as well as other community characteristics.

### Reaching Out

Providers and program directors use a variety of strategies to connect with immigrant parents and tell them about pre-K programs.

- **Participating in community events** —or creating their own, like one district’s “back to school” festival—that draw families with young children to share information about available programs.
- **Going door to door** in targeted neighborhoods.
- **Reaching parents where they already go** by posting flyers or setting up an information table at places like grocery stores, doctors’ offices, churches, immigrant-serving nonprofits, social service agencies (particularly enrollment offices for WIC), and English-as-a-Second-Language classes. Talk to staff at social service agencies so they can pass information along to their clients. Some immigrant families may avoid government agencies and may be best contacted through trusted individuals or organizations in the community.
- **Encouraging parents of enrolled children to recruit other parents.** Some programs designate official outreach roles (paid or volunteer) to parents of current students or offer a small rewards program for successfully recruiting new families.

### Project Motivation and Overview

Pre-K has been shown to strongly boost children’s learning trajectories. This is as true, or even truer, for children of immigrants and English language learners (ELLs) as for children overall.

But children of immigrants, who make up about a quarter of children in the United States, have significantly lower rates of pre-K enrollment, on average, than children with US-born parents. Issues such as a lack of awareness about programs, language barriers, logistical barriers to enrollment, and lack of comfort with programs can keep immigrant parents from signing their children up for pre-K.

We interviewed local and state pre-K directors and staff, directors of other early childhood education programs, and early childhood education specialists to compile their strategies for stepping up enrollment among immigrant families.

This is the first of three fact sheets based on *Supporting Immigrant Families’ Access to Prekindergarten* by Julia Gelatt, Gina Adams, and Sandra Huerta.

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- **Using mass media**—TV, radio, newspapers, billboards, websites, and social media—to spread the word. Many programs advertise in foreign-language newspapers or run free public-service announcements. Some have partnered with local nonprofits already engaged in media campaigns

### Sustaining Outreach

Outreach is strongly affected by overall program size and funding. Smaller programs with long waiting lists and limited funding may forgo conducting outreach. Programs with more generous funding may have more flexibility to pay for recruitment efforts and will be better positioned to serve more children.

But in large, well-funded programs, as well as in smaller, targeted programs, cost and staffing for outreach efforts can be difficult to sustain. The experts we interviewed shared the following strategies for managing cost and staffing demands and for making the best use of limited resources.

- **Target resources to children of immigrants and English language learners (ELLs)**, making them a priority for limited pre-K seats. Programs that can serve more immigrant children or ELLs have more incentive to reach out to such children. Targeting funds to low-income children or underserved areas may also, indirectly, focus resources on immigrant families.

- **Draw from flexible funding.** Some providers draw outreach funds from Title I grants for serving low-income families, Title III funds for serving students with limited English proficiency, competitive federal grants for refugee services, Safe Start funding, or Head Start funding for family service workers. Some used private funding from United Way, local foundations, or state initiatives for young children. Only a couple of the states we spoke with allocated funding specifically for outreach.

- **Tap existing staff or hire a designated cultural liaison.** Some programs relied on administrative staff to do outreach, particularly those

about the importance of early childhood education. Other programs have sent information home with school-aged children, in case they have younger siblings, or have contacted families on school mailing and phone lists.

who spoke the languages of immigrant parents in the community. One program had a designated cultural broker, hired from within the immigrant community. District-run programs can often rely on district- or school-wide family services workers, bilingual parent liaisons, or family engagement specialists.

- **Evaluate outreach efforts** to identify whether strategies are working and to ensure that resources are being used on the most effective methods. One program used a parent survey, while others asked, on the enrollment form, how parents heard about the program.

- **Weave outreach into program reporting requirements** or funding application criteria. These requirements emphasize the importance of promoting programs within underserved communities.

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