

Pre-K Preferences: How and Why HISD Parents Choose Pre-K Programs

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November 2020

Distance and program characteristics drive parental pre-kindergarten (pre-k) choice. This study reflects the third in a series of briefs examining pre-k enrollment and access for students in the Houston Independent School District (HISD). The aims of this study are to identify characteristics that drive enrollment, understand where parents receive their information about HISD pre-k options, and understand parental beliefs about which program characteristics are most important. Findings suggest distance from home is one of the primary drivers of pre-k parental choice for their children. Additionally, program characteristics are important, specifically whether programs have highly trained teachers and teacher aides. However, variation in parental beliefs exist by language of survey participation and campus-level proportions of English-language learners (EL) or economically disadvantaged students. Parents report learning about HISD pre-k programs through family and friends.

Key Findings

- **Distance is a major driver of pre-k choice and enrollment.** The reason families prioritized particular pre-k programs and ultimately chose the program in which they enrolled their child was the distance the program was located from their home.
- **A majority of families enroll their children in their first-choice pre-k.** Over 70% of families enroll their children in their first-choice school.
- **Parents learn about pre-k options from friends and family.** Although parents report other sources of information, the vast majority receive information about HISD pre-k offerings from family and friends.
- **Parents believe highly trained teachers and aides are important in pre-k.**
- **Parent beliefs about importance of pre-k characteristics varies by language and school characteristics.** The language of the survey taken by parents (English vs. Spanish), the proportion of EL students on the campus, and the proportion of economically disadvantaged students on a campus were all associated with ratings of the importance of various pre-k characteristics.



Pre-K and Parent Preferences

Study background

To date, the youngest students in public education – pre-k students – have been largely ignored in past research on public school choice. School choice refers to the opportunities that exist for students, within a public school district, to enroll in any program with space available. HISD offers students and families the ability to exercise school choice.

In a number of ways, pre-k may be one of the most important points at which school choice decisions are made. First, prior research has established the importance of high-quality early education in improving student readiness at school entry and beyond. Second, for a majority of students, the school they enter at pre-k goes on to serve as the school for their elementary years along with its subsequent feeder pattern into middle and high school. Therefore, choice at this early stage has both short- and long-term implications.

However, research on school choice assumes parents and guardians (hereafter, parents) are making informed decisions about the campus in which they enroll their child. This suggests all parents have some opportunity to access information about the educational opportunities available to their child and that parents know how to process this information when making a decision. Yet, not all families are equipped with these resources, which may translate into negative educational opportunities and outcomes for students starting as early as pre-k. Additionally, there may be other factors beyond program characteristics that influence how and why parents choose programs for their children, such as distance from home or whether other children in the family attend the school.

This brief aims to answer the following questions:

1. Which factors do parents consider when choosing where to enroll their children in pre-k?
2. Where do parents obtain information about HISD pre-k options?
3. Which characteristics of pre-k programs do parents believe are most important?

Data and sample

A majority of the data presented here come from an anonymous survey about home literacy practices sent to parents of HISD pre-k through fifth grade students in fall 2018. If a parent indicated they had a child in pre-k, they received a supplemental questionnaire. The supplemental questionnaire asked parents to report how they learned about pre-k program options in this district, how they ultimately chose a program, and which characteristics of pre-k programs they believed were important.

Nearly 300 parents of pre-k students participated in the survey, representing about 334 students, as some parents had multiple pre-k children. Since there were over 14,000 HISD pre-k students enrolled at the time of the survey, these parent responses represent about 2% of all pre-k students.¹ Some results presented below reflect smaller numbers of responses because of missing data. About 76% of parents responded to the survey in English and 24% responded in Spanish.

¹ This reflects parent responses on over 107 campuses in HISD. In the 2018-2019 school year, 165 campuses had pre-k programs.

Key Findings

1

Distance from home and program characteristics were the two primary reasons parents chose the pre-k their child attends.

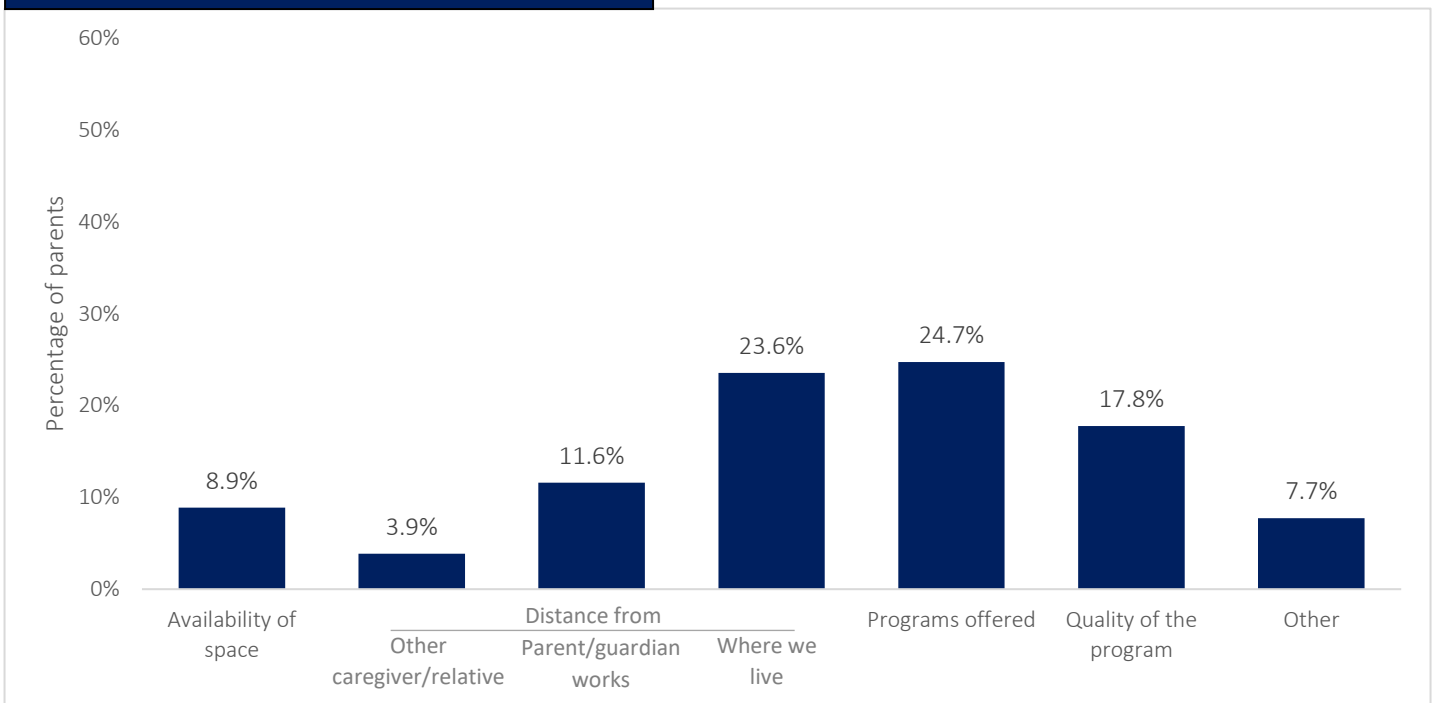
Distance is a significant driver of pre-k enrollment

Parents were asked, “What is the primary reason you ultimately chose the pre-k your child attends?” As shown in Figure 1, distance of pre-k from parents’ home, work, or other caregiver is a significant factor for parents when choosing a pre-k for their children. Nearly 40% of parental decisions about pre-k enrollment were driven by distance, with families particularly sensitive to distance of these programs from their homes. When asked about their first choice for pre-k, whether or not it was the program in which they ultimately enrolled, over 70% of parents who responded identified a school’s distance from their home as the reason a particular program was their first choice (Appendix, Table 2).

Parents also care about program characteristics

Another way parents made decisions about where they enrolled their child in pre-k was based on the specific programs offered at a campus or their perceived quality of the program. As shown in Figure 1, 24.7% of parents indicated the programs offered at their current campus is what drove their decision to enroll their child at that campus, while nearly 18% of parents indicated they chose the campus because of its quality.

Figure 1: Primary reason for choosing a program



Note: Based on 259 non-missing responses

Source: Supplemental questionnaire about pre-k options in the district, included in a survey of parents about literacy, 2018-19

Key Findings

2

A majority of families enroll in their first-choice pre-k campus.

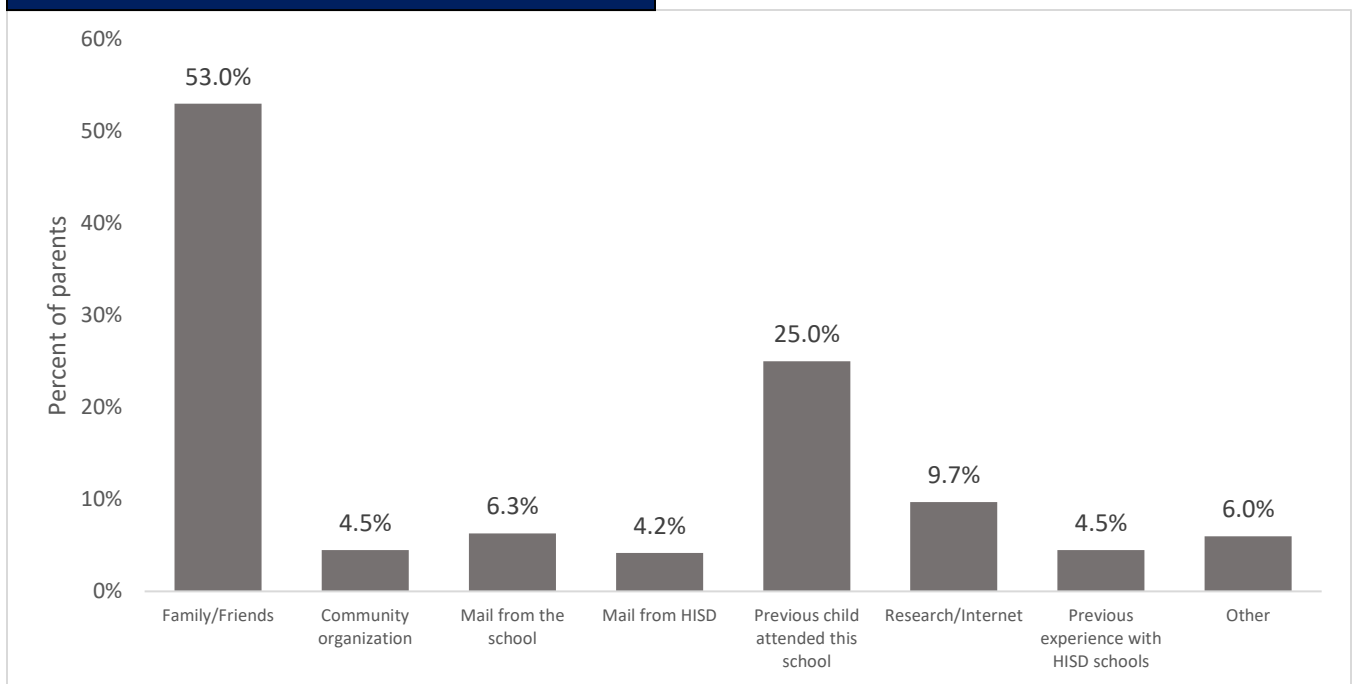
As HISD pre-k is not zoned, families who qualify for pre-k can enroll on any campus where there is space available. In instances where more families enroll than seats are available, a campus may conduct a lottery. Over 70% of families enrolled their child in a pre-k that was their first choice.

3

Parents learn about HISD pre-k through family and friends.

When asked the ways in which they learned about the pre-k options available in HISD, over half of parents who responded noted that they received information from family and friends.

Figure 2: How parents learned about pre-k options



Note: Does not sum to 100% because parents were asked to select all ways in which they learned about pre-k options available in HISD. (Appendix Table 3); based on 268 non-missing responses, 25 parents did not select any of the options provided

Source: Supplemental questionnaire about pre-k options in the district, included in a survey of parents about literacy, 2018-19

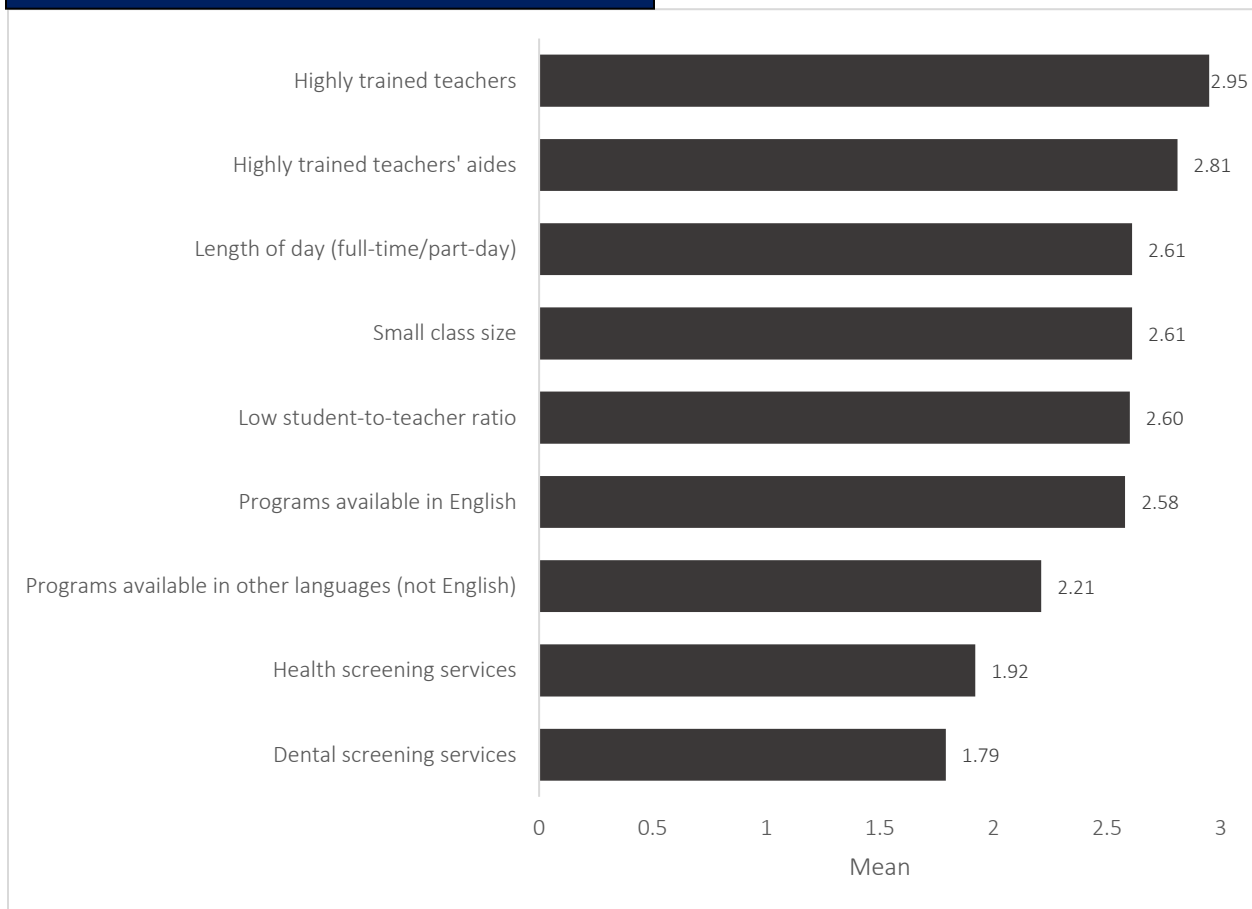
4

Parents believe highly trained pre-k staff are important.

When presented a list of characteristics typically associated with high-quality public pre-k and asked to rate how important they felt each characteristic was on a scale from “not important at all” (zero) to “very important” (three), parents varied with respect to their feelings about the importance of each characteristic.

On average, parents rated having highly trained teachers and aides at 2.95 and 2.81, respectively, on a scale of zero to three (Figure 3). These characteristics were also most commonly selected as “very important,” while dental and health service offerings were least commonly rated as “very important.”

Figure 3: Pre-k staff are important to parents



Note: Based on over 250 responses (missingness varied across characteristics, see Appendix Table 3), response scale 0 (“Not important at all”)- 3 (“Very important”).

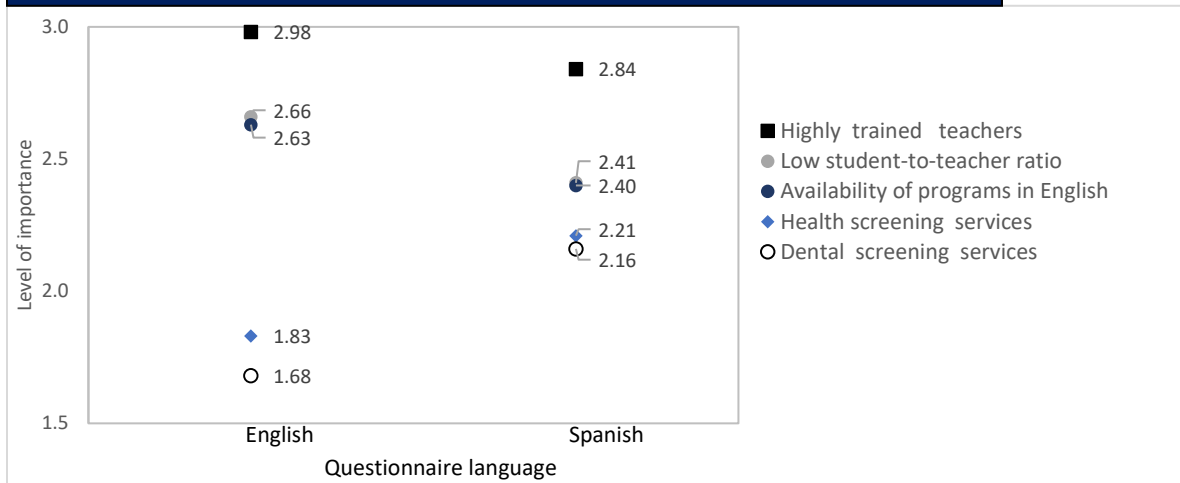
Source: Supplemental questionnaire about pre-k options in the district, included in a survey of parents about literacy, 2018-19

Parent beliefs about importance of pre-k characteristics vary by language and school characteristics.

Parent beliefs about pre-k characteristics vary based on survey language

In particular, parents who took the survey in Spanish rated the importance of health screening services and dental screening services higher as part of a pre-k program than parents who took it in English. Conversely, parents who took the survey in English placed greater emphasis on the importance of programs available in English and highly trained teachers.

Figure 4: Importance of pre-k program characteristics to parents, by language



School characteristics are also associated with perceived importance

Parents of children on campuses with a higher proportion (than district average) of EL students or higher proportion (than district average) of economically disadvantaged students were more likely to report health screening services and dental screening services were “very important.” Parents of students on campuses with a lower proportion (than district average) of EL students found the availability of programs in English very important.

Parents of students on campuses with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged students were more likely to rate program availability in English and highly trained teacher aides as very important.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Study Limitations

One limitation in this study to note is sample size. This analysis includes about 300 parents, which represents a small proportion of parents of pre-k students. However, these parents do represent a wide spectrum of campuses with pre-k programs in HISD (parents responses were from 107 of the 165 campuses with pre-k programs). In addition, one of the main study findings – family sensitivity to distance – is reflected in previous research in this series that includes the full population of pre-k and kindergarten students in HISD.

Conclusion

Study findings align with previous HERC research that found the distance families live from a HISD pre-k program appears to be associated with their likelihood of enrolling their child in pre-k.

In considering which program characteristics are important to parents, it may not be surprising that families who speak Spanish or with children who attend pre-k on campuses with a high proportion of EL students are less concerned with having English programs available than English-speaking parents. The findings further show health and dental offerings appear to be more important for families who took the survey in Spanish. Together, these findings may reflect the wraparound service needs of children of non-English proficient parents in HISD.

Overall, the information provided in this report may provide a starting point for HISD to consider additional strategies for communicating with families of potential pre-k students, the type of information to share (including information about the characteristics of various pre-k campuses), and the importance of being intentional in the physical placement of pre-k programs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings discussed above, HISD may consider the following recommendations:

Consider ways to do additional community outreach related to pre-k. As many parents are learning about HISD pre-k programs through informal networks of family and friends, the district should consider additional ways to share information about the availability of programs. As only a small proportion of parents learned about pre-k from a communication received directly from the school or district, or through a community organization, this may provide an opportunity to increase parental understanding about pre-k options available for their children. Given that a number of families qualify for pre-k because their children are ELs, it is especially important that this information be made available in languages other than English.

Ensure communication between Early Childhood and Wraparound departments. As Spanish-speaking parents expressed the importance of access to health and dental services, the district should consider whether they can offer these services and share information with families about their availability. If the district does not offer these services, the should ensure Wraparound Specialists are communicating with pre-k teachers, programs, and the ECE department to understand the needs of young students and help families access needed supports.

Offer pre-k in places where families with young children reside. As distance from home is a particularly important for families in deciding where to enroll their children in pre-k, HISD may consider whether there are spaces in the district where programs may need to be added to provide additional opportunities for student enrollment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Ensure high quality pre-k across campuses. While distance is important to parents in ultimately selecting where to enroll their children in pre-k, a number of parents also expressed that the type of program offerings and quality of programs are important drivers of their decision. To ensure all families have access to high-quality pre-k, HISD should consider ways to evaluate the quality of current pre-k and work to improve quality when challenges are identified. As the district is currently evaluating programs using guidelines from state policies (such as Rider 78), they should consider making the program evaluations available to the community. It is important that families do not have to choose between distance, quality, and program offerings when selecting pre-k for their children.

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Appendix

Table 1. What is the primary reason you ultimately chose the pre-k your child attends?

	N	%
Availability of space	23	8.9%
Distance from other caregiver/relative	10	3.9%
Distance from where I/other guardian works	30	11.6%
Distance from where we live	61	23.6%
Near public transportation	5	1.9%
Programs offered	64	24.7%
Quality of the program	46	17.8%
Other	20	7.7%
Missing (out of 293)	34	

Source: Supplemental questionnaire about pre-k options in the district, included in a survey of parents about literacy practices, 2018-19

Appendix

Table 2. How did you learn about pre-k options available in HISD?

	N	%	Significantly differs from:
(A) Family/Friends	142	53.0%	B, C, D, E, F, G
(B) An organization in my community	12	4.5%	A, E, F
(C) Mail I received from the school	17	6.3%	A, E
(D) Mail I received from HISD	11	4.1%	A, E, D
(E) Had a previous child who attended this school	67	25.0%	A, B, C, D, F, G
(F) Research/Internet	26	9.7%	A, B, D, E, G
(G) Previous experience with HISD schools	12	4.5%	A, E, F
(H) Other	16	6.0%	
Missing for all options (out of 293)	25		

Note: Percentages in Column 3 are based on the number of valid responses to the question (268 parents responded out of 293 possible)

Source: Supplemental questionnaire about pre-k options in the district, included in a survey of parents about literacy practices, 2018-19

Table 3. Parents' perceptions of importance of characteristics of a pre-k program

	Mean	Significantly differs from:	Missing (out of 293)
(A) Small class size	2.61	D, E, F, G, H	34
(B) Low student-to-teacher ratio	2.60	D, E, F, G, H	35
(C) Programs available in English	2.58	D, E, F, G, H	34
(D) Programs available in other languages (not English)	2.21	A, B, C, E, F, G, H, I	35
(E) Health screening services	1.92	A, B, C, D, F, G, H, I	34
(F) Dental screening services	1.79	A, B, C, D, E, G, H, I	35
(G) Highly trained teachers	2.95	A, B, C, D, E, F, H, I	32
(H) Highly trained teachers' aides	2.81	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, I	35
(I) Length of day (full-time/part-day)	2.61	D, E, F, G, H	34

Notes: Response options were: not important at all (=0); slightly important (=1); fairly important (=2); and very important (=3)

Source: Supplemental questionnaire about pre-k options in the district, included in a survey of parents about literacy practices, 2018-19

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