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How Parents Make Decisions about PreK Enrollment¹

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Abstract: Public PreK programs are an increasingly popular policy tool to equalize early learning opportunities. Programs can be universally available or targeted to support children's readiness. At the intersection of early childhood and K-12 education, their hybrid status can be difficult for families to negotiate. Based on interviews completed in 2018, we describe how parents in a universal PreK program decided whether and where their child would attend PreK, comparing parents who chose school sites with those who did not. The part-time nature

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of the program was a barrier to many families, prompting us to ask whether a program is authentically universal if it is not accessible to all.

Keywords: public preschool; universal PreK; half-day preschool; parent decision making; case study; Wisconsin

Cómo los padres toman decisiones sobre la inscripción en PreK

Resumen: Los programas públicos de preescolar son una herramienta política cada vez más popular para igualar las oportunidades de aprendizaje temprano. Los programas pueden estar disponibles universalmente o estar dirigidos a apoyar la preparación de los niños. En la intersección de la educación de la primera infancia y la educación K-12, su estatus híbrido puede ser difícil de negociar para las familias. Con base en entrevistas realizadas en 2018, describimos cómo los padres en un programa universal de PreK decidieron si sus hijos asistirían a PreK y dónde, comparando a los padres que eligieron sitios escolares con los que no lo hicieron. La naturaleza a tiempo parcial del programa fue una barrera para muchas familias, lo que nos llevó a preguntarnos si un programa es auténticamente universal si no es accesible para todos.

Palabras-clave: preescolar público; preescolar universal; preescolar de medio día; toma de decisiones de los padres; estudio de caso; Wisconsin

Como os pais tomam decisões sobre a matrícula no PreK

Resumo: Os programas públicos PreK são uma ferramenta política cada vez mais popular para equalizar as oportunidades de aprendizagem precoce. Os programas podem estar universalmente disponíveis ou direcionados para apoiar a preparação das crianças. Na intersecção entre a educação infantil e a educação básica, o seu estatuto híbrido pode ser difícil para as famílias negociarem. Com base em entrevistas realizadas em 2018, descrevemos como os pais de um programa pré-escolar universal decidiram se e onde seus filhos frequentariam o pré-escolar, comparando os pais que escolheram locais escolares com aqueles que não o fizeram. A natureza de tempo parcial do programa foi uma barreira para muitas famílias, levando-nos a perguntar se um programa é autenticamente universal se não for acessível a todos.

Palavras-chave: pré-escola pública; pré-K universal; pré-escola de meio período; tomada de decisão dos pais; estudo de caso; Wisconsin

How Parents Make Decisions About PreK Enrollment

With a growing research base that shows that public PreKindergarten (PreK) can provide foundational skills for kindergarten (Atteberry et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2017), PreK has been touted as a critical policy tool for closing the opportunity gap that limits many children's success. The rationale behind public PreK is relatively simple: waiting until kindergarten is too late to address inequitable education opportunities. Access to high-quality programming makes PreK an equity-leveraging tool, as quality care is economically out of reach for many families.

Seeking to bolster the social safety net for families and children, public PreK addresses two concerns: enhancing child development through high-quality early childhood programming and advancing economic benefit by enabling maternal employment (Miller, 2021). First, advocates argue that public PreK can close what some call the kindergarten readiness gap by extending high-quality early education to families with limited access to programs that promote learning and development (Phillips et al., 2017). In addition, full-day programs provide child care that allows more families to

work (Friedman-Krause et al., 2020). For these reasons, public PreK's unique education and care elements make it a popular policy option.

One challenge in creating a public PreK system is that it lives at the intersection of the K-12 education system and a fragmented child care sector – designed to promote learning while filling some care needs of working families. Though children learn in child care and our schools care for children, child care and K-12 education differ in structure, finances, mission, scope, and history (Bloch, 1987). The distinction was felt most keenly during the COVID pandemic when the boundaries between care and education blurred. That challenge was reflected in a *New York Times* opinion piece titled “School Is (Whisper It) a Form of Childcare”:

Separating child care from the larger K-12 educational system forces many of us to live with an expensive, patchwork private system for children up to age 5. And ignoring the fact that school is a place where children both learn and are kept safe while their parents work means we haven't reconciled short school days and academic calendars with a typical working parent's schedule. (Covert, 2020)

Hybrid public PreK models that bring together schools, child care, and Head Start are one effort to bridge public PreK's care and education missions. Often framed as partnerships, they vary in terms of the degree of regulation, salary parity, eligibility criteria, length of the school day, etc. (Graue, 2018; Friedman-Krause et al., 2020; Wilinski, 2017b), and as a result, they can replicate or disrupt the disparities between child care and K-12 sectors.

A critical decision in building a public PreK system is the site of implementation. Unlike the broader K-12 system, state-funded PreK purportedly allows all families to select programs that meet their needs (Bassok et al., 2018). This paper explores how parents navigated a public PreK program that sat between the traditional education role of K-12 and the very real care needs of working families. We examine how parents in a midsize Midwestern school district decided whether and where their children would attend a state-funded mixed-model PreK program.

Literature Review

Much of our knowledge about public PreK enrollment decision-making comes from the literature on daycare decision-making. Though different in critical ways, the child care literature provides a starting point for understanding the factors that families consider in their decisions about public PreK enrollment.

Meyers and Jordan (2006) explained the parental child care decision-making process through two models. Viewed from an economic perspective, the *individual consumption choice* model frames child care choices as driven by maternal satisfaction with time allocation between work and caregiving and the quality of care. From this perspective, parents make rational choices based on price or preference for formal care. Though providing some insight into the process, this model leaves essential variation unexplained.

Meyers and Jordan suggested that attention to decision-making is a *contextualized pattern of action* that reflects a dynamic decision process, part social and part economic, using imperfect information. Parents juggle familial and social norms, personal opportunities, and constraints reflecting cultural models of identity.

Parents make child care choices that accommodate their dual roles as providers and caregivers. Balancing these competing demands may force tradeoffs among features of care that parents value, such as optimal program quality for children and convenience of location and hours. (Meyers & Jordan, 2006, p. 64)

The *accommodations model* has been widely used to understand the multiply-determined process not captured by the individual consumption choice framework (Ansari, 2017; Ansari et al., 2018; Bassok et al., 2018; Coley et al., 2014; Crosnoe et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2018). Meyers and Jordan identified three dimensions within the accommodations model. *Parent preferences and beliefs about quality* include normative ideas about high-quality care and the tradeoffs needed for their job. *Information* plays a critical role, though it is less logic-based than the individual consumption model suggests. Because getting appropriate information is difficult, parents rely on social networks, which filter information through cultural norms. Finally, selections are limited by the *supply of care* and parents' resources *for alternatives*. The shock of cost and the limited supply can force mothers into less appealing care arrangements, or they move out of the labor market in frustration. Including individual choice and contextual factors, the accommodations model reflects the push and pull of economics, cultural/social, individual, and community.

Child care researchers have focused on parents' characteristics in this process. First, parents use personal social networks to gain helpful information about child care programs (Ackert et al., 2018; Shuey & Leventhal, 2018). For example, Latinx families were more likely to enroll their children in preschool programs in communities with more co-ethnic social networks (Ackert et al., 2018). Second, parents consider their perceptions of supply and economic resources like the cost of care, availability, location relative to work or home, and hours of operation (Ackert et al., 2018; Vesely, 2013). This is partially because not all parents can access the type of child care program they prefer for their child. Low-income families are hardest hit as they are likelier to work non-standard hours (Coley et al., 2014; Crosnoe et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2016; Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Miller et al., 2013). Lastly, parents consider the quality of care like warm and nurturing caregivers, education, and type of environment (Grogan, 2012), structural elements such as safety, program goals, ratios, and group size (Ansari et al., 2018), and personal preferences like their child's perceived needs or their personal beliefs (Kim & Fram, 2009). Parents' child care preferences are highly variable based on their values and beliefs (Ansari, 2017; Dahlberg et al., 1999).

PreK Decision Making

Because public PreK serves a portion of the child care population and the programs sometimes employ collaborative models for delivery, research on this topic frequently approaches PreK decision-making from the same logic as child care research. Parents prioritized teachers' experience and relationships with children, comprehensive services, program location, and the quality of home-school relations (Barbarin et al., 2006). Low-income Latinx parents looked for program responsiveness to their cultural backgrounds, whether the program provided appropriate and safe learning contexts, and emotional and academic learning support (Ansari et al., 2018). Further, information use differed by the type of public PreK programs chosen.

For example, many parents in Head Start use personal ties while parents in child care use advertisements or the Internet. Many low-income parents in public schools used local public schools to gain information about public PreK enrollment (Bassok et al., 2018). Sherfinski (2013) found that historic members of the lower-middle class used social networks developed over time while those who had recently slipped from middle- to lower-middle class worked to access resources traditionally allocated to people experiencing poverty and working-class families.

Low-income immigrant parents who valued school preparation were more likely to enroll in Head Start rather than unsubsidized programs (Johnson et al., 2016). Lastly, in a project parallel to ours, Grogan (2012) asked parents who would be eligible for state-funded PreK the *following* year about issues they considered as they decided if and where their child would attend the program. In this prospective study of parent public PreK decisions, Grogan found that quality factors like child-staff ratios, warm staff, and instructional considerations were positively correlated with costs, hours,

food, school/district preference, sick policy, and transportation. Parent and child characteristics like socioeconomic status, beliefs about child-rearing, and parent involvement factored into the quality and practical considerations. Many families traded off more highly rated public PreK programs for ones that conform to work schedules or proximity to home (Bassok et al., 2018; Grogan, 2012). Under-resourced families made decisions within real budget constraints, using Head Start or subsidized child care (Johnson et al., 2016). In addition, they faced structural and cultural barriers like transportation and a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate public PreK options, eligibility cutoffs, or insufficient slots (Ansari et al., 2018; Bassok et al., 2018).

While the accommodations model has often been used to describe child care decision-making, we wondered about the fit with public PreK decisions in Madison, Wisconsin (WI). The elements seemed relevant but would be considered for a slightly different choice set. Like child care, work, and family are elements in public PreK enrollment decision-making, including a formal education institution and the cost of variously free experiences, as well as part-time and full-time programming. Finally, we wanted to learn how parents decide whether and where their child would go to public PreK, including decision drivers, what information informed their thinking, and how resources narrowed or expanded the choice. The accommodations model informed the study, but we also looked beyond its framework given the context. This semi-structured approach prompted us to ask: *How do families decide whether and where their children will attend a state-funded, half-day, mixed-implementation PreK program?*

Methods

We studied a public PreK program in Wisconsin, which funds a universal program in almost 98% of the state's elementary school districts. Called 4K, programs are run by school districts and have considerable flexibility in implementation. The Department of Public Instruction (<https://dpi.wi.gov/early-childhood/4k>) requires state-funded 4K programs to provide at least 437 hours of instruction per school year, translating to a half-day program. However, some districts offer full-day or alternate-day programs or supplement the state funding to operate full-day. In addition, some districts use a community approach to 4K and partner with child care centers or Head Start programs, with funding flowing through the district to these providers. 4K teachers must be kindergarten certified, and districts must choose developmentally appropriate curricula.

Located in Madison, Wisconsin, the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) served an increasingly diverse community with over 25,000 students and 5000 staff. Like much of the Midwest, the city has a shrinking manufacturing base and shifting demographics. MMSD opened its 4K program in 2011 with 1,772 children in 26 schools, 25 child care centers, and six Head Start sites. Child care partners were limited to centers rated 5 out of 5 stars on the state QRIS system². 4K classes in schools were four half days per week, shy of 3 hours per day; they provided no wraparound care to accommodate parents who worked or commuted, though transportation was provided to child care centers within the school catchment area. Head Start and child care sites nested 4K programming in their typical schedules. School and Head Start classes used the Creative Curriculum (Dodge, 2016) and Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment (Heroman & Tabors, 2010), while child care centers chose their curriculum. All sites used the district progress report; at the time of this study, the state required the Phonemic Awareness Literacy Screener (Invernizzi et al., 2004).

² Wisconsin's, QRIS, called Young Star, assesses the childcare provider's education and training, learning environment and curriculum, program's professional and business practices, and children's health and well-being. Participating providers receive a corresponding incentive to increase quality while eligible families receive higher subsidy reimbursement for their selection. (<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar>)

The year before this study, the Madison Education Partnership, a partnership between the district and researchers at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, reported that approximately 30% of age-eligible children did not attend 4K in any district-supported classroom. Where were those children, and why didn't their families take advantage of this free program? This piqued our interest, and we wondered how families decided about 4K enrollment. This project is a result of that interest.

As shown in Table 1, parents had several choices when their child was 4K eligible. Three subgroups enrolled their children in the district 4K program, reflecting the state policy for 4K sites: 4K in a district-affiliated child care center, school-based 4K, and 4K in a Head Start program. Those who opted out of the district 4K program kept their child at home or placed them in a care setting (center-based child care, home-based care, nanny/au pair).

Table 1

Definitions of 4K Enrollment Choices

4K site	Definition	
4K enrolled	4K child care	Enrolled in district-affiliated child care 4K program (4K CC)
	4K Head Start	Enrolled in a district-affiliated Head Start 4K program (4K H.S.)
	4K school	Enrolled in a district-affiliated school-based 4K program (4K S.B.)
Not enrolled 4K	Non 4K child care	Enrolled in non-district affiliated 4K child care (CC)
	No 4K home	Not enrolled in district 4K, at home (home)

Our proposal for this work was reviewed and funded by the Madison Education Partnership; the university IRB approved the study. To access families of 4K attendees and non-attendees, we waited to collect data until the children attended kindergarten. Before that, the school district only had records for enrolled students and their families. Our broader project began with a survey of all kindergarten families in the spring of the 2017-18 academic year, followed by interviews with a smaller sample of individual parents recalling their 4K decision-making. This paper focuses on our interviews to explore the processes of parents' decision-making in depth.

The interview protocol included biographical and family information, a description of 4K decision-making, their child's 4K and 5-year-old kindergarten experience, and whether they would make the same decisions now that their child was completing kindergarten. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Appendix 1.

Sample

We drew the final interview sample of 51 from successive stratified random samples of 200, oversampling racially and economically minoritized families to enhance the likelihood of including them in the project—stratified random sampling started by dividing the district population into racial-ethnic groups. Random samples were then selected from each subgroup in successive stages. This method increased the likelihood that we would obtain a sample that reflected the diversity of the district population.

We conducted 51 interviews from the population of all families of children enrolled in kindergarten during the 2017-18 school year. We conducted 33 semi-structured interviews in person. To accommodate family schedules, we interviewed the remaining 15 by phone. While phone interviews could lead to data loss due to the lack of visual cues, our phone interviews lasted about as long as face-to-face interviews and followed the same protocol as in-person interviews. In addition, offering a phone interview helped us recruit a more diverse sample; nine of the 15 families who

completed the phone interviews were from minoritized groups and sent their children to 4K in child care centers or Head Start sites. We also had a Spanish language interpreter available to the Spanish-dominant speakers. The interpreter accompanied researchers on interviews with two Spanish-speaking families and transcribed the interviews. All participants received \$20 in cash for completing the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company. Table 2 presents a descriptive overview of the district population and interview participants and an overview of children's distribution across 4K sites.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of 2017-18 Kindergartners by 4K Program Type and Interview Participants

4K Program Type	District Pop.	Interview Participants				
	Overall	School	Child care center	Head Start site	No 4K	Interview Sample
Female	0.49	0.50	0.48	0.53	0.48	0.35
Mean Age in Years (<i>SD</i>)	5.50 (0.32)	5.50 (0.29)	5.52 (0.29)	5.49 (0.31)	5.49 (0.35)	5.50 (0.30)
Race/ Ethnicity						
White	0.41	0.37	0.66	0.05	0.48	0.43
Black	0.16	0.18	0.09	0.38	0.14	0.16
Latinx	0.21	0.24	0.09	0.45	0.17	0.10
Asian	0.09	0.11	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.12
Multi-racial/Other	0.12	0.11	0.08	0.04	0.08	0.19
Missing data	0.01	-	-	-	0.04	-
Parent Education						
Did not complete high school	0.06	0.06	0.01	0.17	0.05	-
High school degree or equivalent	0.20	0.26	0.11	0.22	0.17	0.04
Some college or technical school	0.18	0.19	0.07	0.41	0.15	0.08
BA or more	0.48	0.43	0.78	0.11	0.50	0.86
Missing data	0.08	0.06	0.03	0.09	0.13	0.02
Income Status						
Qualifies for FRL	0.47	0.52	0.25	0.95	0.38	0.27
Does not qualify for FRL	0.53	0.48	0.75	0.05	0.62	0.73
4K Program Type						
School	0.42					0.47
Child care	0.16					0.24
Head Start	0.09					0.06
No 4K	0.33					0.23
<i>N</i>	2,227	943	344	192	748	51

The interview sample was distributionally representative of the general district 4K families on eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, compared to the district kindergarten population, the interview sample had proportionately fewer parents identified as Latinx (21% district vs. 10% interviewees) and included a higher percentage of more highly educated and affluent (73%). Further, interview participants were likelier to send their child to 4K and select 4K at a child care site. The district population and interview samples were proportionally similar across elementary school-based 4K sites.

Data Analysis

A professional service transcribed all interviews. All members of the research team participated in data analysis. We imported interview transcripts into the mixed-method software MaxQDA 2020. We assigned each transcript attributes related to demographic characteristics and type of PreK, allowing us to do comparative analyses of subgroups. Analysis was iterative, moving between inductive and deductive coding and memo-writing (Saldaña, 2015). Coding started deductively, applying codes derived from this project's literature and the interest in why many children did not attend 4K. These deductive codes included care experiences from birth to three, 4K experience, 4K decision-making, 4K schedule, and kindergarten. In inductive coding, we read the corpus of transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity with the data and its meanings. This reading identified additional codes: transportation, 4K hours, cost/affordability, and stability. The process alternated between these two types of coding to construct our understanding of the data. The team met regularly to share analysis processes, discuss shared meanings of codes, and bridge to memos designed to move across codes and to larger meanings. We refined the codes until our readings generated no new theme or idea (Emerson et al., 1995). This iterative process allowed us to triangulate our assertions across data sources and subgroups, pointing to convergence, inconsistency, or contradiction for a more robust analysis (Mathison, 1988).

Parallel to the coding process, we wrote memos that moved analysis derived directly from the data to more abstract ideas related to the literature and the accommodations framework (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These memos were synthesized into themes that illustrated how different groups of parents thought about their 4K decision process. This analysis was the foundation for first draft drafts linking the survey data with interviews. This mixed methods approach led to a long paper that under-represented the interview analysis. We chose to disentangle the two data sources; this paper represents the interview analysis only.

For this paper, Graue reviewed the coding and wrote complementary memos, exploring the data for depth of evidence within the analysis. She took the 4K site type as a case and did within-case and cross-case analyses (Stake, 2006). This produced more examples of quotes from which we looked for the most illustrative quotes of the category and chose them for the paper, working to balance site type and participant characteristics. For this paper, we present excerpts of identified themes. Demographic information about these parents can be found in Table 3. All names for individuals and places are pseudonyms. The proportion of parental quotes compared to district proportions was similar for school-based 4K (41 vs. 42%) and No 4K (29% vs. 33%) and less so for Child care 4K (25 vs. 16%) and Head Start 4K (4 vs. 9%).

Table 3
Demographic Characteristics of Quoted Participants

Parent Name	Race/ ethnicity	Education	Eligibility for FRL	Language	Special Education	4K Site
Jonathon Anderson	W	BA+	-	E	-	Child care 4K
Amy Anderson	W	BA+	-	E	-	Child care 4K
Lima Borman	W	BA+	-	E	-	Child care 4K
Ella Chung	A	BA+	-	E	-	Child care 4K
Mark Morrison	W	BA+	Y	E	-	Child care 4K
Kara Pulaski	W	BA+	-	E	-	Child care 4K
Deneisha Jordan	B	Some college	Y	E	-	Head Start 4K
Carleen Boston	M	BA+	-	E	-	No 4K, child care
Marilyn Fine	W	BA+	-	E	-	No 4K, child care
Kaitlyn Sellers	W	BA+	-	E	-	No 4K, child care
Mary Morton	M	BA+	-	E	-	No 4K, child care
Belinda Bailey	W	BA+	-	E	-	No 4K, child care, au pair
Jamal Thompson	B	Some College	-	E	-	No 4K, home
Jack Ranier	W	BA+	-	E	-	No 4K, home
Colleen Durst	M	Some college	Y	E	Y	School-based 4K
Zendaya Gotel	B	Some college	Y	E	-	School-based 4K
Tarin Jefferson	W	BA+		E	-	School-based 4K
Damian Katupo	B	BA+		E	-	School-based 4K
Ben Kowloon	A	BA+		E	-	School-based 4K
Elsa Loflund	W	BA+		E	-	School-based 4K
James Lorton	W	BA+		E	-	School-based 4K
Katerina Roman	H	BA+		Sp	Y	School-based 4K

Positionality Statement

We are university researchers who identify as cis-gender women from middle-class backgrounds with experience in early childhood education and policy research on families' perspectives on their children's schooling. Our familiarity with the local PreK system provided valuable context for understanding the intricacies of family decision-making processes.

We recognize that researcher identities influence our interactions with participants and our conceptualizations of the problems of interest. We are committed to inclusivity, designing our work to connect with diverse families and their experiences. We did this work hoping it would contribute to the district PreK program by elevating the perspectives of families often not considered in program planning.

Graue is U.S.-born, a former Kindergarten teacher, and the mother of adult sons who attended MMSD, with more than 30 years of working with the local school district. She has extensive experience studying home-school relations, including the community construction of the meaning of readiness and policy research on families' perspectives on their children's schooling.

Woo's positionality is shaped by her experiences as both an educator and mother of an infant. She brings firsthand knowledge of the complexities and challenges embedded in educational settings and the perspectives and concerns of families navigating the early years of their children's development. She is a native of South Korea, where she currently lives with her family.

Lee's positionality as a researcher has been shaped by her working experience with families as an early childhood teacher and her views on families as advocates in the lives of their children. She brings her insights into families' complex childcare/PreK decision-making experiences and the elevation of families' stories. A native of South Korea, she now lives in the US.

Findings

For many parents, decisions about 4K were not just contingent on whether their child was 4 by September 1. Age determines eligibility for 4K, but parents consider other elements when deciding about this new educational experience. These retrospective interviews allowed parents to consider their choices in their current context.

The organization of this section reflects one aspect of within and cross-case analysis. Though we expected that the defining point of families' decision-making would be whether families opted out of the 4K program, we found that those who sent their children to *school-based 4K* were more alike in their perspectives than those who did not. That decision most frequently rested on whether the families needed full-day care.

Not Choosing School-based 4K

This section describes how parents who did not send their children to school-based 4K articulated their enrollment choices. This group included families who chose district-affiliated 4K in child care and Head Start and those who did not attend the district program but may have kept their child in child care or at home. We begin with the words of a father whose child attended 4K at a child care center:

I think we would make the same choice. I sort of feel a little guilty saying that because I consider myself an advocate for public schools, and we sent him to the private 4K. It's sort of where he was, and it just sort of seemed easier. But I could do the same thing over again. It's more convenient for our schedule. It was fewer

transitions. It was less time on the road and all those things. (Mark Morrison, Child Care 4K)

This quote refers to several ideas discussed below: stability, 4K schedule, and transportation.

Choosing Stability

The parents who did not send their children to school-based 4K valued the stability of what they knew for their child at the time of the 4K decision. Their comfort with their current arrangement, knowledge of their child's needs, respect for the curriculum, and fit with their work schedule all played a role for these parents.

Comfort and familiarity with their current child care site were often cited by those opting out of school-based 4K. For example, a mom and dad whose child went to a district-affiliated 4K child care center, 4K, did not think twice about staying there for 4K. They knew the staff, the community, and the facility, so why move?

Dad: Well, it was easy for us to pick a 4K because they had one at the YMCA, and we really liked the staff there. . . several of his friends from preschool were going to be doing 4K there, too, so that helped, and the YMCA is a fantastic community. We just really like the facility, and we like the people there, so that was easy.

Mom: It wasn't too much of a transition for him because it was in the same building. He already knew the teacher; several of his friends were there, and he was used to having that routine and structure. So, for him, the transition to 4K was almost nonexistent. He just seemed to roll right in.

Dad: And the wraparound care that was right there at the same facility, so you know, that was easy. Yeah. (Jonathon & Amy Anderson, Child Care 4K)

Stability was also a factor for parents who valued what their child was learning and wanted to extend it for another year. For example, consider this contrast between two parents who felt their homes provided rich learning opportunities. A dad who was a kindergarten teacher told us that his son could learn just as much at home as what they could offer in the short 4K program:

If it's only four days a week for a half-day--what is he going to get out of it or benefit out of it? And I guess when we think about it that way, it was also connected to knowing what we know or what we were doing with him or like me being a teacher. You know, it's like he was basically getting the same things he'd be getting at 4K he was getting at home. Again, the only thing that we did consider was some of the social experiences (Jack Rainier, No 4K, home)

The same logic can be heard from a working mother whose daughter was cared for by an au pair and attended a part-time nursery school.

We felt like her educational environment at home was rich enough that some of the things that 4K was doing weren't necessarily essential to ask for her, so we didn't see that as a strong draw. We felt like we have enough access to things in our home life such that she would still be well-equipped to start kindergarten without being specifically in that program. (Belinda Bailey, No 4K, Child Care)

Both parents valued what they offered at home, so an official 4K placement seemed unnecessary. In one case, the child was learning at home; in another, she was in a non-district part-time preschool program and cared for by an au pair.

Families who did not enroll in the district program often told us that the district 4K program needed to add value to their child's learning experience. As noted above, they were confident in their child's existing educational context and could not see what 4K added beyond that. For some, enrollment decisions were in the works for years, based on parental research and input from their social networks:

Well, it was really a decision we made when he was about two because we had done a lot of research on the daycare center and the 4K program there. We just knew it was going to be great all the way through until he started kindergarten, so we really made that decision when we put him there at the age of 2 and, knowing he would be there through 4K. And again, it was really word of mouth. We heard enough from teachers and from other parents saying that the kids that came out of that program were super well prepared for kindergarten, and they think they do a really nice job with the kids there. And they had a lot of fun, too. We were really interested in a play-based type of curriculum. Some 4K programs are getting too academic-focused, which I don't think is good for 4-year-olds – they should be playing. (Mary Morton, No 4K, child care)

In the same way that academic redshirting³ is often chosen before a child is born, based on the family and community advice (Graue, 1993), Ms. Morton took the long view, making an enrollment decision very early to stay with a known entity until kindergarten. These families preferred the educational partners they knew served their family well during their child's first four years. The move to school-based 4K felt like jumping into something foreign that might not do as good a job. These decisions were reinforced in communities of like-minded peers. In contrast to families who chose their neighborhood schools for 4K, parents who made other decisions usually did not share physical proximity – instead, their networks were broader but no less firmly held.

Family perceptions of a child's needs sometimes called for stability. One mom looked for fit, "For Ethan, specifically, fit means *not new*. . . So familiarity for him is a big thing. And knowing, being very familiar with the place he already is" (Ellen Chung, Child Care 4K). A mom who did not send her child to district 4K thought, "He just wasn't ready to be in a giant school environment. He had relationships with friends at preschool. Having the kids that he knew was really key for him. Starting over and being brand new with new adults and new kids – I think he would've freaked him out" (Mary Morton, No 4K, child care). Keeping their child in the same program bought some time to smooth the transition to kindergarten.

Child care staff sometimes cultivated stability by contacting families to suggest that their child maintain enrollment for their 4-year-old year. Sometimes, this occurred informally; in others, it was embedded in formal communication with families.

We talked to the preschool director. They also provided a parent information setting where they reviewed the curriculum and the materials they were going to cover in the classroom during their 4K. [They] also provided us with statistics of prior students

³ Academic redshirting describes the delay of kindergarten entry for one year, thought to enhance kindergarten readiness.

that had [gone] through, about their ability to be ready for the kindergarten setting.
(Kaitlyn Sellers, no 4K, child care)

In all these cases, stability was wrapped in familiarity – a transition was minimized, and families could maintain the structures and relations that had served them well. At the same time, some parents told us that maintaining the status quo meant their child’s experience did not seem officially marked as 4K. Several parents made remarks like Mateo’s mom:

Mom: En “Head Start” -- Quizás fue esto, que yo no entendía qué era 4K si no hacían nada diferente.

Translator: Yes, maybe it was that I didn’t understand what 4K was because they weren’t doing anything different.

Mom: Quizás fue lo único que no me gustó de que 4K pero --

Translator: Maybe that’s the only thing I didn’t like about 4K.

Interviewer: There’s no difference between 3K and 4K?

Translator: Yes, she didn’t see any difference. (Eva Santiago, school-based 4K)

The Schedule Did Not Work

Entering the project, we wondered why families would pay for 4K if they had a free program available. Child care is expensive, so this was a non-trivial cost. The district school-based 4K schedule⁴ – either morning or afternoon, Tuesday-Friday – was often the driver for opting out of the school program. For families with 9-5 jobs, this schedule did not work:

Well, the problem with 4K for us was that it would not be feasible unless we had some sort of wraparound care. We both -- if we work those days, we work all day long. So, the half-day program just doesn’t work for people who work all day. So, the public program just wasn’t feasible. (Marilyn Fine, No 4K, child care)

Almost all families whose children were in child care – whether district-affiliated or not -- mentioned the clash between the half-day model and the needs of employed parents. Several parents talked about how the antiquated schedule narrowed their choices for the 4K experience:

In this day and age, there are fewer and fewer people that don’t work full-time or could stay home. I think that some kind of wraparound care is really important. I could have had them at Ellington [Elementary] for 4K, and I could’ve been fine with that, but we couldn’t do it! We couldn’t do it logistically, so it was not an option for us. I think that that was the biggest barrier for them being in their home school for 4K. (Kara Pulaski, Child care 4K)

Some parents considered knitting together a hybrid in which their children attended their neighborhood school-based 4K with some form of child care. But many found it a juggling act that was too much for a young child. “I just think a 3- or a 4-year-old shouldn’t have to go from one place before school, then go to school, and then have to go to another place after school before

⁴Locally, Head Start provided part day, full day, extended day, and home programs with charges beyond part day.

coming home because of their parents' work schedule – that's just not fair to a kid" (Carleen Boston, No 4K child care).

This arrangement probably would not have worked due to a wrinkle in the child care economy – parents told us that many child care programs required children to enroll full-time. This meant that the price of a split enrollment was more than a full-time slot, making that approach unattractive.

As an unexpected group, families who chose district-affiliated child care or Head Start or opted out of 4K focused on two main themes. First, they overwhelmingly valued maintaining the stability of their child's 4K context because of their comfort and familiarity. In addition, they did not see that a school program would add value to their child's experience. Finally, the school program's half-day, four-day-a-week schedule presented an insurmountable barrier for working families, requiring them to choose a context that provided full daycare. Together, these reasons routed families away from school-based programming. Next, we explore what drew families to the school sites.

Choosing School-based 4K

Families choosing to send their children to school-based 4K were more diverse than those who did not, and their reasons for their decisions varied.

Stability for the Transition to Kindergarten

Stability continued as a theme for families who chose school-based 4K but had both forward and backward-looking elements. Parents often based their decision on their older children's 4K experience, enrolling them in the same school. They described how their family was familiar with the school: "She had been exposed; she had been going to the Lewis Elementary School to pick up her brothers since she was 2 weeks old. At 4 years old, she practically ran the place before she was even going there, you know" (Tarin Jefferson, School-based 4K). Others had children who received district early childhood special education services, such as speech therapy or enrollment in the early childhood program. This school-based experience eased the transition into 4K. "She was there-- started when she was 3, so she went to the early childhood program. She went to early childhood first, and then it switched over to 4K" (Colleen Durst, School-based 4K).

While some parents based their decisions on familiarity and past experiences, a much larger group thought stability from 4K to 5K would support the transition into kindergarten. If their child was going to start formal schooling, most school-based 4K families wanted it to begin in their neighborhood elementary school.

So, I always felt strongly that I wanted to take advantage of the 4K program through our public education system. First of all, because it was convenient in location. Our school is right down the street. We could walk there. That felt very natural. I felt like it would be a great transition since that's where she's going to be going to school full-time, kindergarten through fifth grade. That was really important to me.
(Katerina Romàn, school-based 4K)

This quote bundled several themes that were prominent in our conversations. Most fundamentally, they wanted 4K in their local elementary school, where their child would attend K-5. Second was the notion that by choosing school-based 4K, they supported the public education system. This came up several times, with parents viewing placement in child care as akin to sending their child to private school. There was a moral implication to this decision. Third, parents talked about the school's location, in their neighborhood, within walking or biking distance, where the family could play on

the grounds. This connection to the physical location of “their” school, part of “their” neighborhood, differed from those who chose child care or Head Start.

Not all children were assigned to 4K in their home elementary school. Some schools did not have 4K, and others were oversubscribed. In those cases, children were either assigned a new 4K school or offered a choice of several schools. Unfortunately, none of the parents we talked to found this very satisfying, even when their child had a positive 4K experience.

I think for us, being in a school as opposed to a daycare was really ideal because I think it best prepared him for being in kindergarten in his actual school. I think we would have preferred for him to have been able to go to Langston Elementary to be at the same school that he would then progress into, but it just wasn’t an option for us. If I’m describing a perfect setting, that would be it. Because then he would have gone into kindergarten with some built-in friendships and knowing the building and knowing some of the familiar faces. So, for him, I know he felt like he kind of had to keep restarting. And the first day of school, anxiety was higher. (Elsa Loflund, School-based 4K)

For many parents, choosing a school-based 4K was selecting a *particular* school rather than going into the system. This signaled the beginning of an ongoing relationship that was educational but also social.

Free but Not Free

For some parents, having their child attend 4K at their neighborhood school came with costs. We heard from parents who worked at night and lived with fragmented sleep, hired nannies or paid neighbors to pick up and watch their children, or blew up their work-at-home schedule to accommodate their child’s 4K schedule. But many saw the value of beginning their child’s school journey at their neighborhood school was worth it.

Knowing that kindergarten was a full-day program, I felt it was important to get her into 4K to ease her into the school system a little bit since she did not go to a big center or anything. . . So I ended up paying for a friend to go to the school to pick her up and drive her back over to daycare, and I still had to pay the full daycare rate to keep her spot. For me, it ended up being more expensive, but I felt it was important. I really wanted to do that. (James Lorton, School-based 4K)

A father who relied on a nanny to manage his son’s care told us:

I wanted him to be at the school he was going to be at for kindergarten, so that outweighed the fact that it would inconvenience me. I felt like his benefit was greater than my inconvenience, so it was kind of like, yes, it sucks, we’ll have to figure it out, but it’ll be a greater transition for him when he goes into kindergarten. (Damian Katupo, school-based 4K)

It is worth noting that this father had the resources to make the choice that outweighed his inconvenience. He could afford a nanny who managed drop off and pick up, so his choice set was quite different from those who did not have that kind of “inconvenience.”

School-based 4K saved money for other parents because they no longer paid for daycare. Unlike the cases where the daycare director successfully made a case for families to *stay*, other

families declined the invitation and placed their children in school-based 4K. In addition to wanting their son in their local school, the cost was considered:

Mom: That's the reason why we really wanted it, because even though the centers would say, "Hey, we can do the same thing." We were like, "Nope."

Dad: That's the same setting as the preschool. So, we didn't feel like it would be beneficial, and we would also be paying \$200 and something a week for them to play, where he could go to actual school. It was free, and he could actually be in that setting where he was going to be next year and start to get a feel for the building and the teachers and that sort of thing. (Delight & Damian Katupo, School-based 4K)

This quote includes several themes. The first is the cost of child care; to put it another way, the school program was free. Curiously, the state requires 4K to be free to all, but it did not seem free with care bundled into 4K in child care. Second, several parents equated non-school-based 4K with play and preferred their child to attend "real school." This contrasts with the parents who felt strongly that 4K should be play-based. And finally, building familiarity with the school was important. It was almost as if they were visualizing their child in this new place, gaining familiarity to ease a big transition.

In addition to the question of cost, transportation was a consideration for several families. Unlike child care, children who lived in a school catchment area but outside the walking boundaries received transportation for their children. If their child took the bus, this saved the parents considerable time each day. If siblings were already taking the bus, they would consolidate the number of spots they had to negotiate. A dad who worked from home told us that transportation was why they chose school-based 4K.

The main reason for me was that he could bus to school with his brother. . . The driving was a pain. Without having the bus thing. . . he's a 15-minute drive for me, but by the time I drop him off – and he's only there for three hours. . . So we are talking about two and a half hours, maybe two hours. . . If I can put him on the bus with his brother at 8:00 in the morning, he comes home on the bus at 12:30; it saves two and a half hours a day just because he's on the bus pretty much. (Ben Kowloon, school-based 4K)

In this case, transportation offered time this dad would have lost taking his child to school-based 4K. Figuring this into the cost of 4K was a real benefit as he could extend available work time.

School-based 4K parents expressed a strong desire to start their child's formal education in their home elementary school, and some found strategies to make it work. They also tended to have more flexibility than those who did not. This flexibility was related to funds for transportation and care during non-4K hours, a job, social networks, or time in sync with the part-time schedule. Though the School-based 4K group was more likely to be eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than the No 4K or Child Care 4K groups, most adapted their lives to the program. Sometimes that was not feasible, however. One mother told us about pulling her daughter out of 4K when their family could no longer cover the non-4K part of the school day:

We ended up having to pull her out [of 4K] at the end, but that's only because my husband got a different job and his schedule wasn't going to work with the half-day that 4K does, and there was no way to transport her from 4K to her daycare because the daycare also didn't provide transportation for that school that she went to. I

would have had to switch her to a different school, and I didn't want to do that, so we just had to pull her out altogether of 4K. And then she came back this year for kindergarten. (Zendaya Gotel, school-based 4K)

The Gotel family juggled employment, 4K site and schedule, day care, and their desire for continuity between 4K and kindergarten. With these balls in the air, the only solution was to take her child out of 4K for the remainder of the year. The universal 4K program was offered but not accessible in this case.

Discussion

In an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, David Kirp (2022) argued that 70% of voters favored a federal investment in public PreK. Though more Democrats are in favor than Republicans, getting anything with 70% support is impressive in the current political climate.

Advocates of public PreK make a variety of claims about its potential benefits: a) it will equalize the opportunities for high-quality early education (Friedman-Krause et al., 2020b); it will relieve working parents of child care expenses (Malek, 2021); c) the labor market will increase with more mothers working (Marte, 2021); d) it will save the child care community by infusing desperately needed public funds; e) it will enhance child readiness for kindergarten (Phillips et al., 2017); and f) this advantage continues throughout schooling (Gray-Lobe et al., 2021). While the drive for public PreK has focused on children's developmental gains, later school success, and economic savings (Phillips et al., 2017, the other reasons on this list reflect its unique position at the intersection of early care and education. Family was a central factor in public PreK enrollment decisions. And that is an opportunity and a challenge to any public PreK system.

In this paper, we analyzed conversations with families about their decisions regarding their child's enrollment in the local public PreK program. Parents brought various ideas and concerns to the decision-making task in a universal program with only a "four by September 1" enrollment requirement. The district used a community approach where 4K classrooms were found in homes in elementary schools, child care centers, and Head Start. So, the decision was not just "go to 4K or stay home," or even "are they ready?" Instead, it was "stay home," "stay in a child care center," "go to 4K in a school, child care, or Head Start." It was complicated and full of personal and professional concerns.

In Table 4, we summarize the key decision factors and the challenges for each group of families with representative quotes. The difficulties faced by families can be interpreted as constraints of the site. Then, we highlight critical issues we identified in our analysis, the fit with the accommodations framework, policy implications, and limitations of the work.

Table 4*Overview of 4K Enrollment Choices*

4K decision site	Key decision-making factors	Challenges	Representative Quote
4K enrolled	4K child care	Stability into 4K, extended care services before and after-4K programs	The continuity and the fact that my child would be around people who had known her for a very long time. (Lima Borman, White, Not eligible for FRL)
4K enrolled	4K child care	Stability into 4K, extended care services before and after-4K programs	It's more convenient for our schedule. It was fewer transitions. It was less time on the road and all those things. (Mark Morrison, White, Eligible for FRL)
	4K Head Start	Stability into 4K, Developmentally appropriate settings, Federally funded programs	I decided that he went to Head Start instead because it's more appropriate for children, much smaller (building) (Deneisha Jordan, Black, Eligible for FRL)
	4K school	Stability into kindergarten, sibling effect, proximity, ongoing friendship, free of cost	School settings encompassing various grade levels, not all elementary schools offer 4K She had been exposed; she had been going to the Lewis Elementary School to pick up her brothers since she was 2 weeks old. At 4 years old, she practically ran the place before she was even going there. (Tarin Jefferson, White, Not eligible for FRL) It was free, and he could actually be in that setting where he was going to be next year and start to get a feel for the building and the teachers. (Damian Katupo, Black, Not eligible for FRL)

4K decision site		Key decision-making factors	Challenges	Representative Quote
Not enrolled 4K	Non 4K child care	Satisfaction with current child care, avoiding transitions, full-day program	High cost	Our decision was largely based on sending my son to the center that he was already going to, as the 4k schedule in the school district is not helpful for families where both parents work full time. (Marilyn Fine, White, Not eligible for FRL) The three-hour schedule did not work for our schedule nor did we want her to have a broken- up school day. (Carleen Boston, White, Not eligible for FRL)
	No 4K home	Adequate educational resources at home	Social experiences	If it's only four days a week for a half day, I guess, what is he going to get out of it or benefit out of it? (Jack Ranier, White, Not eligible for FRL) We felt like her educational environment at home was rich enough that some of the things that 4K was doing weren't necessarily essential to ask for her, so we didn't see that as a strong draw. (Jamal Thompson, Black, Not eligible for FRL)

Note: FRL stands for free or reduced-price lunch.

Length of the School Day

In a nation where only 17 states and the District of Columbia require districts to offer full-day kindergarten (Kelley et al., 2020), it is little surprise that only 13 states require state PreK to be offered for a minimum of five hours each day, roughly the equivalent of a full-day kindergarten (Friedman-Krause, 2020). These longer school days are more likely in targeted than in universal programs. Though we do not have data on half or full-day administrative choices, we hypothesize that cost is a primary driver in half-day programming.

Parental employment loomed large in this study. The half-day, four-days a week, school-based 4K schedule was challenging for many working families because schools provided no wraparound care. We heard many stories of families juggling responsibilities, costs, preferences, and resources so their child could attend 4K. The cost structure of splitting time between school and center-based sites was prohibitive; it often cost more than having a child in care full time. A not-so-subtle sorting process resulted in more affluent families with employed parents choosing child care

rather than school-based 4K. Head Start followed the same pattern. Many parents in school-based programs saw them as affordable – they saw them as free.

The sorting is illustrated in the case of the mystery group who motivated this study — one-third of students eligible for 4K who did not attend the district-affiliated program. Were their parents different from other 4K parents, did they look for different things, and where did their children spend their 4-year-old year? Based on general district data, children who did not attend PreK were likely to be White, have parents who had B.A.s or more education, and were more affluent. In addition, the majority of our study had children in child care.

The juggling families did to make these decisions reflects how the elements of the accommodations model come alive in lived experience — they are stuck together in families' lives. These families were working within systems of constraints and opportunities, trying to find some way to reconcile competing demands and hopes — that seems like a good definition of accommodation.

It also shows the challenge of knitting together programs with vastly different structures and resources. The resources available in publicly funded PreK in schools, Head Start, and child care centers are very different, as are their finances, rules, regulations, and administrative structures (Graue, 2018; Wilinski, 2017a, 2017b). Although school-based, child care and Head Start sites were all part of the same program, auspice-related resources and facilities were prominent in 4K practice. You might think of it as different cultures — they value different things, have different resources, and approach their goals differently.

For example, the focus on care was central to the child care centers, which had broader parameters for programming and built on previous relationships. Parents saw the teachers daily, so relationship-building and communication were more easily facilitated. In contrast, school-based 4K services worked within the district structure, limited to the half-day preschool session in which parents were not allowed access to the classroom without a pass, and represented a much larger institution, expecting families to adapt to the school. We know that individual teachers build relationships, but the institution of the school requires them to do a bit more work. Families must sort out those differences and their needs and preferences when we purportedly bring them together under a single state-funded PreK program (Weixler et al., 2020).

Hybrid Approaches To 4K Provision

In an earlier 4K study, Graue and colleagues (Graue et al., 2016; Graue et al., 2018) found that many district and school administrators preferred having all their 4K programs in schools to ensure quality control. This is an example of how family perspectives are not central to K-12 planning or policy but are central to early childhood programming.

In the case of this 4K program, funding and administration of the program flowed through a K-12 district. In these systems, concerns about family needs outside the school day are not typically relevant to program provision. But life continues after the buses leave and the children walk home. Our interviews illustrated why hybrid programs, including school, child care, and Head Start, are so important- because they are designed to accommodate many families' needs (Wilinski, 2017b). With multiple sites to choose from, families were more likely to find the one that best fit their work and family preferences for educating their young child if they had the resources for a half-day program and the information to discern among choices. For families who maintained their child's attendance in an early childhood program, the transition into 4K was seamless – for their child and themselves. For families who enrolled their children in school-based programs, a seamless transition into kindergarten was the goal.

Public PreK sits at the intersection of two traditions in early childhood education: care and education. We can see shadows of those traditions in our interviews. We explored parent decision-making for a program housed in the state government's education wing but implemented across education *and* care traditions and governance. This paper's most significant contribution to the literature is highlighting this intersection.

Previous work has explored parent decision-making about combinations of child care, Head Start, and school PreK through the eyes of primarily under-represented and minoritized families (Ansari et al., 2018; Barbarin et al., 2006; Bassok et al., 2018; Grogan, 2012; Johnson et al., 2016; Sherfinski, 2013). By listening to parents' perspectives of a single state-funded, universal, community-approach program, we hear about enrollment-in-practice at this intersection and from families who opted out of PreK who were primarily middle class. This is the first study we know that has centered their experiences. The difficulties that the child care and opt-out group experienced with the program's part-time scheduling and similar goals for their children were a reminder that public PreK does not always meet families' care needs.

And the Accommodations Framework?

Meyers and Jordan (2006) argued that child care decisions are part rational and individual and part a complex social process of accommodation. This model has been used to understand better decisions about child care and enrollment in public PreK programs. Could it also help us understand the additional element of choosing NOT to enroll in public PreK? And how does it help us understand whether public PreK programs make families' access to high-quality early education more equitable?

This model sets out *preferences, beliefs, information, supply, and resources* as forces shaping these judgments. Regarding preferences and beliefs, parents discussed the importance of familiarity in easing their child's transition. Some parents focused on the importance of familiarity going *into 4K*, spending one more year in a well-known context; this preference was often paired with a need for full-day childcare. These families were more likely to have the resources to pay for child care (but still felt the sting of child care costs). Others centered familiarity going *into kindergarten* and beyond, establishing relationships, knowledge of school culture, and the school building so that the transition would be seamless; this reflected a belief that this would be an investment in K-5.

Drawing on community information about kindergarten, families who chose school-based 4K cited concerns about the full-day kindergarten program and the escalating expectations that had changed its activities. Further, in a context that required 4K programming to be free, families who chose school-based 4K consistently noted that it was free. In contrast, others pointed to the cost of child care and the curious case that made care even more expensive if child care supplemented school-based 4K. This is a significant issue in a district where the 2016 median weekly full-time cost for child care was \$250 (Community Coordinated Child Care, 2016).

The influence of supply and resources could be seen in discussions of the effect of the state's half-day schedule, which ranged from a complication to an outright barrier. Most working parents in our sample chose a 4K site based on their need for child care that extended beyond three hours per day, Tuesday through Friday. It was a key driver for many parents who chose not to enroll their children in district-affiliated 4K. This was not just a problem for affluent families. Though a few parents found the 4K schedule a good fit with their family and child's needs, they were few and far between.

The accommodations framework provided categories that helped us fit the puzzle of ideas that families shared. We made its applicability in this problem space an empirical question, exploring its fit in a local context. We found that decision-making was rational, an accommodation, and individual and social. The families who chose not to participate in the 4K program, whose children

attended non-4K child care or who stayed home, resembled those who went to 4K in non-school sites in their decision process. Their choices were intentional and aligned around concerns about 4K's schedule, employment, and/or satisfaction with their current caregiving context.

Did the 4K program promote equity? Though all 4-year-olds were eligible for the program, their families did not have the same access. 4K's part-time design was a critical sorting factor, with only more affluent families receiving the full range of opportunities. This meant that rather than integrating and broadening the 4K population, it reinscribed the segregation by income that plagues early education and care. We want to be clear that we are not advocating for one form of PreK programming over others.

In the 2021-22 school year, MMSD began a phased implementation of full-day 4K programming in schools serving greater numbers of minoritized and lower-income families. This move extends access to 4K to a broader range of families. In each subsequent year, the district has included more schools in the full-day plan, which is very much a move in the right direction.

Policy Implications

Public PreK is a critical addition to early childhood and K-12 education policies. It is premised on the idea that education inequality starts early, so waiting until kindergarten is too late for large-scale public investment in young children. Our work illustrates how offering a public PreK program is a first step in opening access to quality early education for families who lack resources, especially time and money. To date, most public PreK policies have created targeted programs that limit funding to children thought to be at risk for school failure (Education Commission of the States, 2021). In addition, 56% of state Pre-K programs are part-day. (Education Commission of the States, 2020).

Though some might argue that child care is not part of public PreK's mission, we argue that it *should* be a consideration in design and implementation. For example, in this study, access *was* limited for those who needed care beyond 12 hours per week provided by 4K. It is also an equity issue for many women who take up the slack when a child care issue arises (Schochet, 2019). Echoing Heimer and Ramming (2020) we argue that if we are serious about equalizing educational opportunities before kindergarten, we need to build programs that are truly accessible to all children and their families.

Casto, Sipple, & McCabe (2016) advance a compelling argument that public PreK policy is usually promoted with individual-level arguments of economic investment. They assert a different policy outcome: universal PreK programs yield *community* economic and social benefits that are more immediate and local. These benefits accrue by stabilizing the child care sector, presenting choices to families, and providing resources for parents to re/join the workforce. In authentic partnerships between program and community, these benefits promote a community's vitality. Conversely, damage to the community is more likely when the partnership is performative. For these reasons, Casto et al. (2016) argue that we expand our vision for PreK beyond its cost savings later but also as a lever for community development. This project provides a micro-window on that thinking.

PreK has entered a fragile early childhood ecology in a hybrid space that reflects privately supported programs for children birth to age 5 and the publicly financed K-12 system, the razor-thin staffing and profit margins of child care, and the more well-staffed but also stressed economy of school (Friedman-Krause, 2020; Wilinski, 2017). In this context, it is crucial to recognize that equitable program design includes decisions about funding, curriculum, or teacher credentials. In addition, success or failure is connected to program responsiveness to various needs that are not always visible to policymakers (Casto et al. 2016).

Limitations

Despite our best design intentions, this study has limitations. Our sample size was relatively large by qualitative research standards, but it was not a full reflection of the district we studied. Our sample was more likely to be affluent and white and have parents with a B.A. or more than the district in general. Parents who placed their children in a 4K child care center were over-represented, and those with less than a B.A. were under-represented. Therefore, their experiences are prevalent in our analysis, and we missed hearing from others.

In addition, we interviewed parents about their 4K decision process when their children were in kindergarten, and there may have been some decay in their recollection. Though these factors shape our ability to generalize from our sample, generalization is not the logic of case study (Stake, 2006). Instead, we hope readers can connect the individual and collective perspectives shared here to the notion of trustworthiness, recognizing that we can learn from interpretive inquiry and inferential work.

Conclusion

Decision-making about public PreK is a complex act that is not just about program quality or curriculum. In different ways for different families, it involves program characteristics, parental perceptions about children's needs, and functional attributes like schedule and availability of wraparound care that are an inevitable part of a working parent's life. The location of public PreK between the education and care missions in early childhood education sets up a conundrum. How do programs meet young children and their families' care and education needs in ways that promote equity and add value to children's experiences? As PreK policy and programs continue to evolve and expand, we hope their designs will consider family needs for care so that parents have real choices for their children.

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Appendix 1

Parent Interview Protocol

- Tell me about yourself and your family (family members, employment, neighborhood).
I'd like you to think back across [child's name] care and education *before* PreK. Where were they during this period?
How did you choose them?
Was there anything you particularly liked or didn't like?
And what about PreK – what was it like?
Was there anything you particularly liked or didn't like?
Then, specifically, can you talk me through the PreK decision?
Who did you talk to, and where did you get information?
What kinds of things did you have to keep in mind as you made your decision?
How did scheduling fit into your decision? Both managing your schedule and the program's?
What would it be if you could describe a perfect PreK setting for your child?
How did the program your child attended compare to your ideal one?
Tell me about your child's kindergarten experience.
Seeing your child's kindergarten experience, what do you think about PreK?
If you could have a do-over, would you make the same decision about PreK?
If the district were to call for family ideas about PreK to improve the program, what would you want them to know?

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