



Centering Equity in Planning & Implementation of Multnomah County Preschool for All: Community Interviews Findings

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Overview

The Preschool for All (PFA) initiative in Multnomah County, Oregon welcomed its first children into preschool for all pilot site programsⁱ in September 2022. PFA’s goal is to provide free, culturally responsive, inclusive preschool experiences to 3- and 4-year-old children living in the County. Funded by a ballot measure that passed in 2020, PFA will provide universal access by 2030.ⁱⁱ During program roll-out, priority is given to children who currently have the least access to high-quality early learning experiences and face barriers to accessing preschool.ⁱⁱⁱ Planning for PFA began during advocacy efforts to pass the ballot initiative and continues during early implementation. In the spring of 2022, the Center on the Ecology of Early Development (CEED) research team conducted interviews with 23 community members to learn more about the planning and early implementation process for PFA. This brief shares three themes from the interviews.

Research Question

What were the strengths and challenges of the planning and initial implementation process for an equity-focused preschool program?

Methods

The twenty-three participants included government leadership engaged in planning and implementing the program, leaders and staff from community organizations, and representatives from state and local level organizations with roles in early education and/or data systems, and preschool providers. Virtual interviews were conducted by CEED research staff and were one hour long. We analyzed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis.^{iv}

Key Findings

Overall, interview participants provided positive perspectives on the planning and implementation process for PFA. Three themes provide insights into the strengths and challenges as well as considerations for the future:

1. **“Nothing About us, Without Us”**: Centering Voices Most Affected in the Process
2. **The Costs and Benefits of Being Flexible**
3. **Ripple Effects of New Policies Can Be Positive and Negative for the Workforce**

“Nothing About Us, Without Us”: Centering Voices Most Affected in the Process

Interview participants discussed the importance of having the people most affected by the new policies and programs at the table, including **parents, preschool providers, and culturally specific organizations in the community.**

- Participants generally expressed that their experiences and hard questions were listened to and addressed.
- Some participants had a motto during the design and planning process, **“Nothing about us, without us”** to express that the people who would be the most affected by the decisions had to be part of the process conversations.
- Participants engaged in the implementation process said that there was more work to be done to ensure that the voices of those most affected (i.e., parents, providers, and culturally specific organizations) stay involved as the program continues to grow. Feedback from families should be included in the future program changes to meet the needs of the community.

“The main thing is, it was parent led. So it wasn't like we were just asked to be in a room, because oftentimes people ask for parents to come into a room, and then you hear that parent, but you don't use what that parent is saying...This time the box wasn't just checked. It was checked, but it was also implemented and...we had our voice continually being heard in every space.”

– *Community Member*

The Benefits & Costs of Being Flexible

Participants who had roles in the planning and implementation process spoke about the importance of being flexible during the early years of the program. **This flexibility was both a benefit and a cost.**

- Throughout the first year of implementation, the County worked closely with community organizations and preschool providers to make changes as they received feedback. This responsive communication from the County was a strength and a positive part of the program. However, the quick and constant changes were also seen a challenge for the County to implement as the year went along.

One community member participant shared a quote that captured this complexity:

“Like, you know, it's that flying the plane while you're building it, right? ...We have constantly been able to kind of like check ourselves. There's a lot more complexity as we're just trying to navigate all of that very quickly.” – *Community Member*

Ripple Effects of New Policies Can Be Positive and Negative

Ripple effects, or unintended consequences, are extremely common when implementing new programs and policies such as Preschool for All. These ripple effects can be both positive and negative. Participants discussed various examples of the positive and negative implications of the program that have emerged during its early stages.

“I'm ready for like a ripple map of the things that have opened up because of passing this... So that's a success for me. It's hard to quantify it in the sense of number of kids and seats yet, but it's a piece of the infrastructure that we've needed.” – Community Member

Positive Ripple Effects	Negative Ripple Effects
<p>Many participants discussed the positive implications that PFA had on the early care and education (ECE) workforce in the community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although mainly serving 3- and 4-year-olds, PFA also provided some funding to invest in their infant and toddler teachers across programs. This intentional action served as a positive ripple effect for the funding and policies for other members of the ECE workforce. • For example, one public school program discussed how required PFA policies drove positive salary increases for other non-PFA funded staff in the ECE programs funded by the school district. • Family childcare providers and small center-based programs described how programs are increasing their enrollment and expanding to new sites as a result of their participation in PFA. 	<p>There were also some examples of signs of potential challenges, or negative ripple effects, associated with the new program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, some interview participants expressed that they believe that other preschool programs such as Preschool Promise and Head Start programs may lose enrollment as Preschool for All is being implemented. Further research is needed to better understand whether or not this is happening.
	Future Planning
	<p>Participants expressed the importance of understanding these ripple effects as the program scales up in the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The County can consider these ripple effects when improving the PFA implementation model (i.e., changes to the work force, facilities, and other structural changes) to ensure families will continue to have access to the types of providers that meet their family needs.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Considerations for the Future

This research provides a unique look at the planning and initial implementation phases of Preschool for All. A primary lesson from the Preschool for All community leader interviews is the integral role of equity.

- Interview participants stressed the **equity must be a foundational element**, embedded from the very beginning, and not merely an afterthought. One participant expressed this necessity succinctly: *"Racial equity is difficult to add back into a policy; but if you design it with racial equity at the core, at the heart at the beginning then you create something that really resonates with all of us as human beings..."*
- Furthermore, the program's success hinges on its ability to **maintain a delicate balance between structured standards and the flexibility to meet diverse family needs**. Participants voiced that while consistent and robust measures are necessary to ensure quality, these should be complemented by adaptable practices that cater to the uniqueness of each family. As one participant puts it: *"I think we want to have this nice balance of this idea of a standard and robust kind of measures for that, but also flexibility in parent choice..."* This dual approach allows the program to stay true to its goals while being responsive to the voices and needs of the community, thereby enhancing the program's effectiveness and relevance to those it serves.
- **Adaptability** is the third critical lesson gleaned from the program's evolution. The Preschool for All program has shown that being adaptable to unforeseen circumstances and feedback is essential for its continued relevance and success. *"And I think the one thing I really want people to know, too, is you have to... really make changes and adjust, based on what they're hearing..."* The philosophy of taking measured steps for greater impact is encapsulated in the phrase *"going slow to go fast"*, suggesting that a thoughtful, considered approach to incorporating community feedback is essential for long-term success. This commitment to adaptability is further highlighted by a community member's desire for continuous learning, especially in areas such as racial equity: *"a conference and an ongoing...training system."*

These principles, distilled from the experiences and perspectives of the program's leaders and participants, provide a roadmap for delivering a comprehensive, responsive, and high-quality educational experience to every child. Through these lessons, the Preschool for All program continues to evolve, reinforcing its position as a model of innovative and inclusive early childhood education.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1. *Equity must be a central part of the design, planning and implementation process. It cannot be separate or added later in the process.*
2. *A balance of flexibility and structure is needed.*
3. *Adaptability is necessary as unintended consequences are identified.*

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About the CEED: The Center on the Ecology of Early Development (CEED) at Boston University is led by Dr. Stephanie M. Curenton. CEED conducts and disseminates applied research using a strengths-based equity impact framework that examines young children’s positive growth and development within health, education, and community settings. The CEED-Multnomah County Preschool for All Research and Evaluation Partnership is a partnership between CEED researchers and Multnomah County’s Preschool and Early Learning Division to examine implementation and impact of the Preschool for All program. For more information visit: www.bu-ceed.org

Endnotes

ⁱ Preschool for All pilot sites are existing and new preschool programs that applied and were accepted to receive Preschool for All funding for children. Pilot sites include the mixed delivery system of family child care homes, center-based programs, and public school preschool programs.

ⁱⁱ Preschool for All website: <https://www.multco.us/preschool>

ⁱⁱⁱ 2023-2024 Preschool for All Application. Priority populations included: Black, Brown, Native American Indigenous, and all Children of Color; children who speak languages other than English; children with developmental delays and disabilities; children living in or at risk of placement into foster care; children from families experiencing low incomes, and children experiencing homelessness. <https://www.multco.us/preschool/families>

^{iv} Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

