

# **PRESCHOOL FOR ALL**

**Findings from the Family  
Survey and Community  
Champion Interviews**

**MAY 2024**

## **I. INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS**

Since the launch of the Lowell Early Childhood Council (LECC) in 1990, Lowell has been on a mission to develop and expand preschool access for all three-, four-, and five-year-olds within the city. In 2023, Lowell Public Schools (LPS) contracted with Pear Associates to conduct a needs assessment to develop a supply and demand assessment that will inform a strategic plan. This comprehensive research, including a family survey and community champion interviews, is a crucial step in this process.

LPS and Pear Associates, in a collaborative effort, co-facilitated monthly Preschool Strategic Planning Committee (PSPC) meetings. These meetings ensured that the community's voice and direction were included throughout the project implementation. From January 2024 to March 2024, a family survey was developed and distributed to gather information from Lowell families about their experiences, needs, and recommendations regarding preschool access. Simultaneously, six (6) interviews were conducted with key community champions to gather feedback and insight into strategies, funding, opportunities, and challenges.

This comprehensive report not only summarizes the key findings from the family survey and interviews but also provides clear recommendations based on these findings. It is important to note that a Supply and Demand Assessment, informed by these engagement strategies, will be released in June 2024, furthering our collective understanding and progress in expanding preschool access in Lowell.

### **Key Findings**

#### **1. Current Enrollment in Preschool**

- Approximately half (56.26%) of the survey respondents with preschool-age children had their children enrolled in preschool.
- Of those enrolled in preschool, 53.21% were enrolled in LPS preschool and 27.81% in center-based programs.
- Among survey respondents whose preschool-age children were not currently enrolled, 32.16% indicated they would like them to be enrolled.
- Families prefer school day and full-day programming (62.07%) and prefer the program to be offered following the school year calendar. If full-day preschool was available in Lowell 71.68% of respondents would access it.

## 2. Barriers to Enrollment

- Lack of knowledge about preschool options was the main reason children were not enrolled, with 31.82% of unenrolled families stating they did not know what programs were available and 26.6% reporting they were unsure where to get information about programs.
- Cost was a primary barrier for 21.72% of unenrolled preschool families. Among those citing cost as a barrier, 69.77% were English-speaking, and 23.26% were Portuguese-speaking.
- The limited availability of preschool slots was another common barrier, with unenrolled families indicating spaces were unavailable in their desired location or for the age of their children.
- Challenges related to transportation can prevent families from enrolling their children, with 57.44% of respondents stating they could only travel up to five miles for an early learning program.
- All families, whether they are enrolled or not, cite the lack of seats that meet their needs, cost, and transportation as their top three barriers. Khmer-speaking respondents experience these barriers at higher rates, followed by other non-English-speaking respondents.

## 2. Support for Preschool

- A significant majority of families (71.68%) expressed strong support for the implementation of full-day preschool programs, whereas only 51.44% claimed they would access a part-day program.
- Factors that contribute the most to a family's decision about early learning programs include location (51.07%), whether the program meets their basic needs (38.5%), program quality (32.89%), and knowing another child who was enrolled in that program (32.09%).
- The top reasons families enrolled their children in preschool were the children's social development, children's interest in learning, language development, emotional development, cognitive development, and kindergarten readiness.

## 4. Interview Subjects Validated Family Survey Results

- Community champions echoed family survey respondents, claiming cost, limited knowledge of programs, and transportation were the greatest barriers to preschool enrollment.
- While there is a desire to expand preschool access in Lowell, community champions claim the lack of preschool slots is due to limited space and funding.

Families and champions are eager and supportive of a preschool-for-all program that serves all three-, four-, and five-year-olds in Lowell. The potential academic outcomes and social return on investing in space, workforce, and transportation are shared across the Lowell community.

## II. FAMILY SURVEY METHODOLOGY

LPS and the PSPC, in collaboration with Pear Associates, administered a comprehensive family survey (Appendix A). To ensure equitable access to families, the survey was developed in English, Khmer, Portuguese, and Spanish -- the four predominant languages spoken by the majority of residents in Lowell. The survey included questions related to the demographics of participants, enrollment and engagement in early learning programs, early learning program preferences, and challenges and barriers to accessing early learning programs. The survey also captured respondents' definitions of quality and their level of access to information.

Based on experience administering surveys among families with young children, LPS and the PSPC established a target goal of 300 completed survey responses between January and March 2024. Table 1 outlines the multilingual outreach strategies used and the timeline in which each activity took place. The successful multi-pronged translated outreach strategy resulted in 926 completed responses to the survey. Of those respondents, 130 did not meet the survey qualifiers, which included being a resident of Lowell and having at least one child between the ages of three and six. The total number of included respondents was, therefore, 796.

*Table 1: Family Survey Outreach Strategy Timeline*

Outreach Activity	January	February	March
Targeted Facebook Ads	X	X	
LPS All Call System	X	X	X
LPS Newsletter	X	X	X
LPS Website Banner	X	X	X
LPS Social Media Posts	X	X	X
Flyers and postcards distributed at community events, including Preschool Registration Information Sessions, the Preschool Showcase, and playgroups	X	X	X
Flyers and postcards distributed at community locations, including the library, supermarket, UTec, and Lowell Community Health Center	X	X	X
Flyers and postcards distributed throughout LPS using home visitors and flyers in backpacks	X	X	X
Email distribution of flyers and postcards to community partners	X		X

### III. KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FAMILY SURVEY

The following sections provide data related to respondent demographics, children with special needs, early learning, family engagement, needs and preferences, what matters most for families, barriers, and information access. Where applicable, data is compared against prior surveys to show trends and shifts. Moreover, the findings highlight comparisons across linguistic groups and other demographics, as appropriate. Finally, given that some respondents skipped questions, the document includes the percentage of survey respondents who answered each question.

#### Demographics

While Lowell is comprised of ten distinct neighborhoods, this family survey utilized the postal code-defined neighborhoods of Centralville (01850), Belvidere and South Lowell (01852), Downtown (01853), Highlands (01851), and Pawtucketville (01854). The data shows that 17.17% of survey respondents reside in Centralville, a community comprised of mostly Hispanic, White, and Black individuals with low to average incomes.<sup>1</sup> Children in this community have access to McPherson Park's green space. The only local preschool in Centralville is Greenhalge Elementary School.

The Merrimack and Concord Rivers separate Belvidere and South Lowell from the rest of Lowell. Lowell's Pollard Memorial Library, Shedd Park, Rogers Fort Park, and South Common are all located in the 01852 community. The train station connecting to Boston is also located in Belvidere and South Lowell. Members of this community, including 34.90% of survey respondents, live near James Houlares Center, Children's Village, Learning Latta, UTEC, and Cardinal O'Connell Early Learning Center preschool programs.

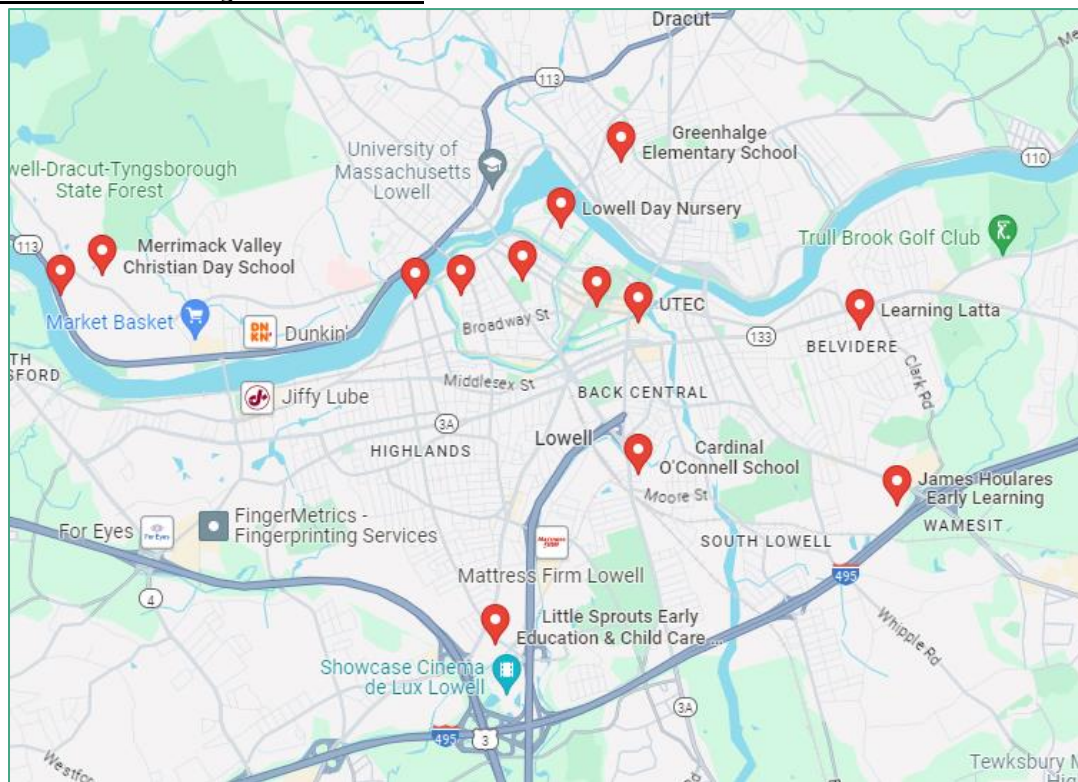
Individuals who call Downtown their home are likely to have smaller families and be younger, apart from the area between Dutton Street, Market Street, and the Pawtucket Canal.<sup>1</sup> While there are no preschool programs within the Downtown zip code (01853), Children's Village and UTEC are considered "downtown" to the community. Downtown had the lowest response rate of 0.69%. Pawtucketville is home to the University of Lowell and 20.64% of survey respondents. This neighborhood is mostly White and has an average to high income.<sup>1</sup> These families live near several preschool programs, including Lowell Day Nursery, Small Steps, Merrimack Valley Christian Day School, Community Teamwork Lowell Collaborative Preschool Academy, Bartlett Community Partnership School, and Murkland Elementary School.

The Highlands neighborhood is southwest of Lowell. This neighborhood is diverse in terms of its income level, race, and age. Highlands families closer to Downtown are more likely to be Asian. Farther southwest, the demographics change to predominately Hispanic and White.<sup>1</sup> The survey results indicate that 26.59% of respondents live in the Highlands. Little Sprouts is the only preschool program in this neighborhood.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bestneighborhood.org/demographics-in-lowell-ma/>

Figure 1: Preschool Programs in Lowell



One of the primary goals of the family survey was to gather a representative sample of residents with young children to ensure that diverse voices within Lowell would contribute to the Preschool for All strategic plan.

Among the survey respondents who indicated their race, 0.55% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native non-Hispanic, 22.16% as Asian or Asian American non-Hispanic, 6.51% as Black or African American non-Hispanic, 0.14% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander non-Hispanic, 22.44% as White non-Hispanic; 1.80% identified as multi-racial non-Hispanic. As shown in Table 2, the survey sample aligned with the Census and Lowell 2023-24 Lowell Public Schools enrollment data.

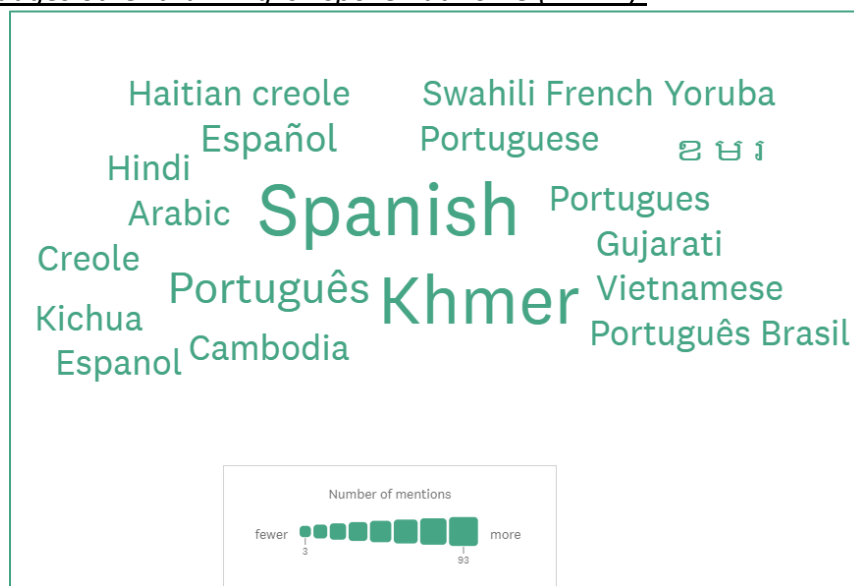
**Table 2: Lowell Demographics**

Race	Lowell Family Survey	Lowell 2023-24 Enrollment <sup>2</sup>	Lowell Census <sup>3</sup>
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.55%	0.2%	0.3%
Asian or Asian American	22.16%	26.3%	22.6%
Black or African American	6.51%	7.5%	9.5%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders	0.14%	0.1%	0.1%
White	22.44%	21.1%	46.5%
Multi-Racial	1.80%	4.1%	7.5%
Hispanic	34.63%	40.6%	17.8%
Prefer Not to Answer	11.78%		

\* Per LPS reporting standards, individuals who indicated Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin are only calculated as Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin and are not categorized within any race or within "Prefer Not to Answer."

While a majority of participants (60.11%) indicated that they spoke English "very well," 59.97% stated that they speak a language other than English at home. Figure 2 provides a word cloud visual, illustrating the frequency of specific languages spoken at home.

**Figure 2: Languages other than English spoken at home (n=722).**

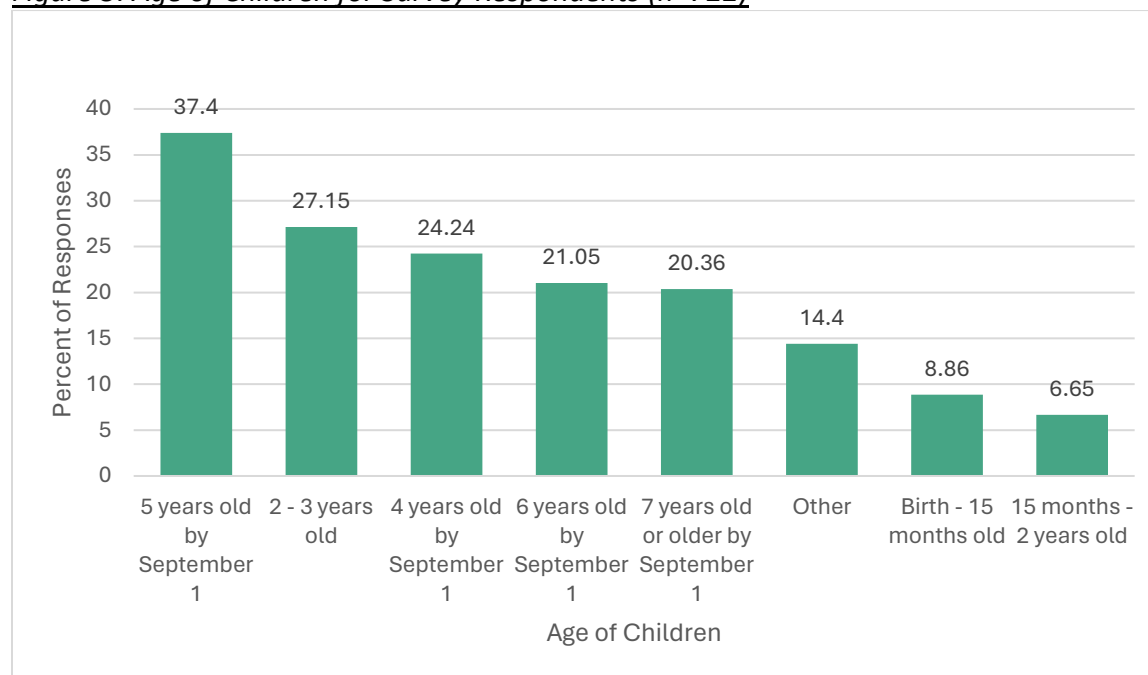


As shown in Figure 3, 37.40% of respondents had at least one child who would be five years old by September 1, 2024. Based on the ages of the children among respondents, 88.78% of respondents have children of Lowell's target preschool age of three-, four-, and five-year-olds.

<sup>2</sup> <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/general/general.aspx?topNavId=1&leftNavId=100&orgcode=01600000&orgtypecode=5>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/lowellcitymassachusetts/PST045223>

**Figure 3: Age of Children for Survey Respondents (n=722)**



### Children with Special Needs

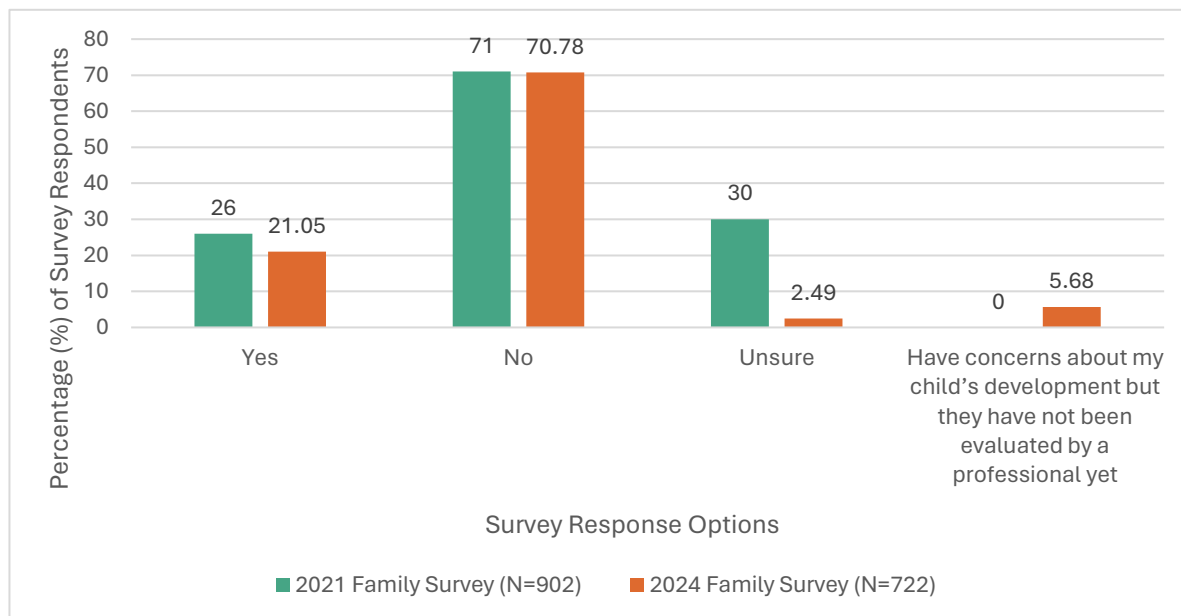
According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)<sup>4</sup>, 6.4% of students in LPS aged three to five have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which designates the specialized instruction, services, and supports a child with a disability is required to receive. As shown in Figure 4, 15.75% of survey respondents had at least one child with an IEP. Among respondents, 9.57% of English-speaking participants reported having at least one child with an IEP, compared to 17.39% of Khmer-speaking respondents and 9.68% of Spanish-speaking respondents. None of the Portuguese-speaking respondents indicated they had a child with an IEP.

An additional 2.49% of respondents indicated that they had at least one child with an Individualized Family Survey Plan (IFSP), which focuses on the child and family and the services that a family needs to help them enhance the development of their children. Also, 2.77% of respondents shared that they had at least one child with a diagnosed disability, but they did not have an IEP or IFSP. An additional 8.17% of caregivers stated that they were unsure if their children had an IEP or IFSP or that they were awaiting a professional evaluation. Of those waiting for a professional evaluation, the majority (80.49%) were English speakers.

<sup>4</sup> [https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/gis/sped\\_map.aspx?orgcode=01600000](https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/gis/sped_map.aspx?orgcode=01600000)



**Figure 4: “Do any of your children under age six years old have a diagnosed disability?”  
Comparing 2021 and 2024 Results**



NOTE: The 2021 Family Survey did not provide an option for respondents to answer, “Have concerns but have not been evaluated by a professional yet.” The 2024 Family Survey respondents “Yes” data includes the responses “Yes, I have at least one child with an IEP,” “Yes, I have at least one child with an IFSP,” and “I have at least one child with a diagnosed disability, but they do not have an IEP or IFSP.”

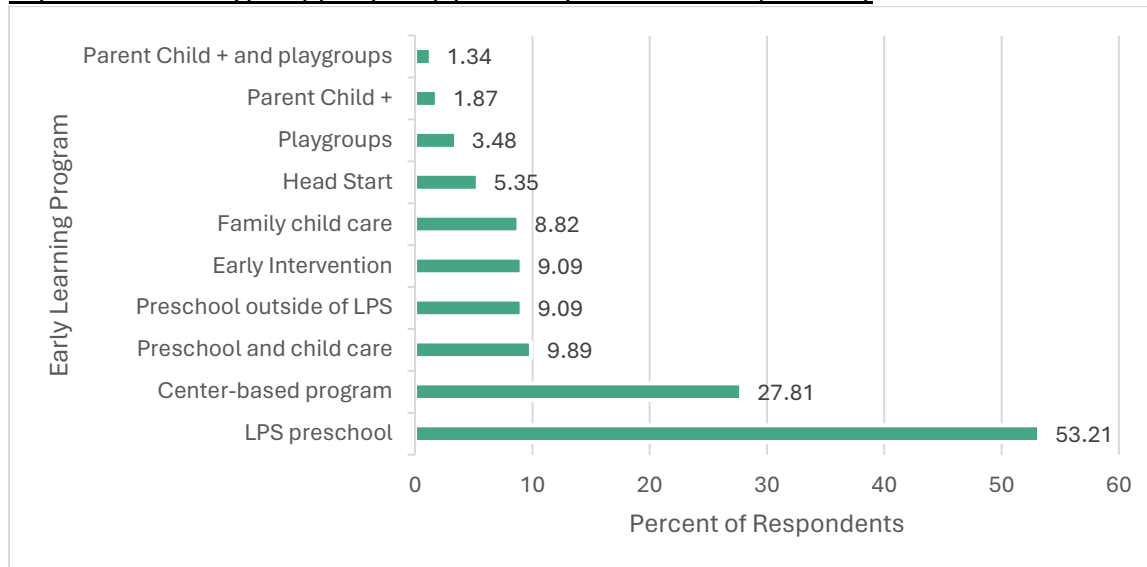
## Enrollment

Survey respondents were asked about their child’s enrollment and engagement in early learning programs to help LPS and the PSPC understand where children are currently served, the potential demand for services, and factors that contribute to enrollment in a formal early learning program. Of those respondents who answered questions about current enrollment in an early learning program, more than half (56.28%) indicated that their children were enrolled. A majority (62.50%) of respondents with enrolled children utilize the LPS preschool program, continuing the trend from the 2018 and 2021 family surveys in which LPS preschool was the most frequently utilized early learning program. As shown in Figure 5, center-based programs were the second most frequently utilized program type among respondents.

While all respondents rated LPS and center-based among their most frequently utilized programs, among Khmer-speaking respondents, close to half (46.67%) utilized Early Intervention, and 20% utilized Head Start. Despite the high enrollment in Early Intervention, only 17.39% of Khmer-speaking respondents indicated that at least one child had an IEP. The remaining 82.61% reported that none of their children between the ages of three and six have a diagnosed disability. It can be deduced that many Khmer-speaking respondents are also likely to be low income as the eligibility requirements for Head Start include low income, as defined by the Poverty Guidelines, and families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Supplemental Security Income.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.benefits.gov/benefit/1917>

**Figure 5: “What type of program(s) are they enrolled in?” (n = 374)**



Among respondents with a child enrolled in an early learning program, the majority (65.78%) indicated that the program fully met their needs. However, 28.87% of respondents reported that the program only partially met their needs or was not their preferred choice.

### **Barriers to Enrollment**

When asked, “Is your child currently enrolled in an early learning program?” 56.67% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, 43.01% of Spanish-speaking respondents, and 30.43% of Khmer-speaking respondents reported, “No, but I’d like them to be enrolled,” compared to just 25.74% of English-speaking respondents. Based on this data, it is clear that more non-English-speaking families want their children enrolled but are experiencing more barriers to enrollment than English-speaking families.

To understand these barriers, the survey asked, “Why is your child not enrolled?” As shown in Figure 6, the top three barriers for respondents were “I don’t know what programs are available,” “I don’t know where to get the information about available programs,” and “The cost is too much.”

**Figure 6: Respondent answers to “Why is your child not enrolled?” (n = 198)**



### Information Access

More than a third of respondents (32.16%) stated their child was *not* enrolled, but they would like them to be. Of these, 31.82% reported not knowing what programs were available, and 26.26% were unsure where to get information about programs. Among those who were unsure which programs were available, 57.14% were English speakers, and 26.98% were Portuguese speakers.

Of those who were unsure where to get the information about programs, 44.23% were English-speaking, 28.85% were Portuguese-speaking, and 23.08% were Spanish-speaking. Lack of information in native languages can compound an engagement gap for Portuguese-speaking and Spanish-speaking participants. While Khmer-speaking individuals only reflected 3.85% of participants who reported “I do not know where to get information about available programs,” due to the smaller amount of respondents to this question, it is important to note that within the Khmer-speaking sample, 40% selected this as a barrier to enrollment.

### Cost

Program costs ranked third among barriers for families who expressed a desire to enroll their child but ultimately did not do so. Program cost impacted 40% of Khmer-speaking respondents compared to 25.42% of English and 22.73% of Portuguese-speaking respondents. In comparison, cost ranked 12<sup>th</sup> for Spanish-speaking respondents, with only 3.23% indicating it was a barrier. Cost was the primary barrier to access in both 2018 and 2021 but was no longer the case in 2024.

### Linguistic Variations

Preschool programming can serve children three, four, and five years old. However, according to Lowell families, despite wanting their three-year-old enrolled in an early learning program, there are no seats available for their child. Of the English-speaking respondents, 21.91% reported experiencing this barrier to enrollment. The inability to find a program that serves their three-year-old child was also selected by 40% of Khmer-speaking respondents, 13.64% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, and 3.23% of Spanish-speaking respondents. When evaluating the related barrier to enrollment of “We are not eligible because of the age of my child,” the families who selected this barrier previously identified that their children were “4 years old by September 1” or “2-3 years old,” the two age groups that include three-year-olds. This data corroborates the need for additional preschool programming, particularly for three-year-old children.

Among Khmer-speaking respondents, 40.2% reported language barriers as an issue. While not understanding the language spoken at the program was a barrier for all non-English speaking respondents, the impact varied based on the respondent’s native language. Khmer-speaking respondents reported this as a barrier at the highest rate at 40.2%, followed by Spanish-speaking respondents at 6.45% and Portuguese-speaking respondents at only 2.27%.

Spanish-speaking respondents rated “I don’t have reliable transportation to, from, or between programs” as a top barrier, which is not surprising given the significant number of Spanish-speaking respondents who live in the Belvidere and South Lowell communities, which are separated from the rest of Lowell by the Merrimack River and Concord River.

### Other Barriers

Responses varied for the families that selected “Other” to categorize their barrier(s). Age was the reason in five of the 17 responses, including the fact that their child is three or four years old, “I have been told it’s for kids older than five years,” and “She is in kindergarten.” Two respondents are currently in the process of enrolling their children. Two provided details regarding hours barriers, including “I am a full-time student in college” and “I would like an option of the part-time part day.” Two individuals reported not knowing how to apply. Cost was listed as the barrier for one respondent. Other responses included “I am disabled” (translated from Spanish), “I haven’t applied,” and “husband doesn’t trust ‘daycare.’” Despite selecting “Other (please specify),” two individuals neglected to provide additional details.

### **Additional Early Learning Programs**

Outside of formal programming, survey respondents reported utilizing various experiences to support their children's early learning development. Among respondents, 31.81% indicated they participated in day trips to museums, libraries, and cultural events. Also, 37.36% of respondents indicated that their children participated in playdates with peers. This rate is a significant decrease from the 2021 and 2018 surveys, in which an average of 64% of respondents indicated their child participated in playdates. Among respondents, 13.38% indicated their child participated in playgroups, which also represents a significant decrease from 2018, when 44% of respondents indicated their child participated in playgroups, but a slight increase from 7.64% in the 2021 survey; COVID-19 may have contributed to a low playgroup participation rate in 2021. Respondents were given the opportunity to share other experiences in which they engaged their child. Some examples of those experiences include speech therapy, dance, swimming, and applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy.

Of the 11.57% of respondents who reported *not* wanting their child enrolled in an early learning program and indicated a reason why, 30.99% of respondents claimed their child was too old for preschool, and another 30.99% felt that early learning was not needed, and/or they preferred to have their child learn at home. Among respondents, 14.08% reported that schedule and cost became such barriers that they have since decided that early learning was not a good fit for their child. Of the remaining respondents, 11.27% felt that their child seemed too young for formal programming, and 4.23% noted they used other programs, such as daycare (4.23%).

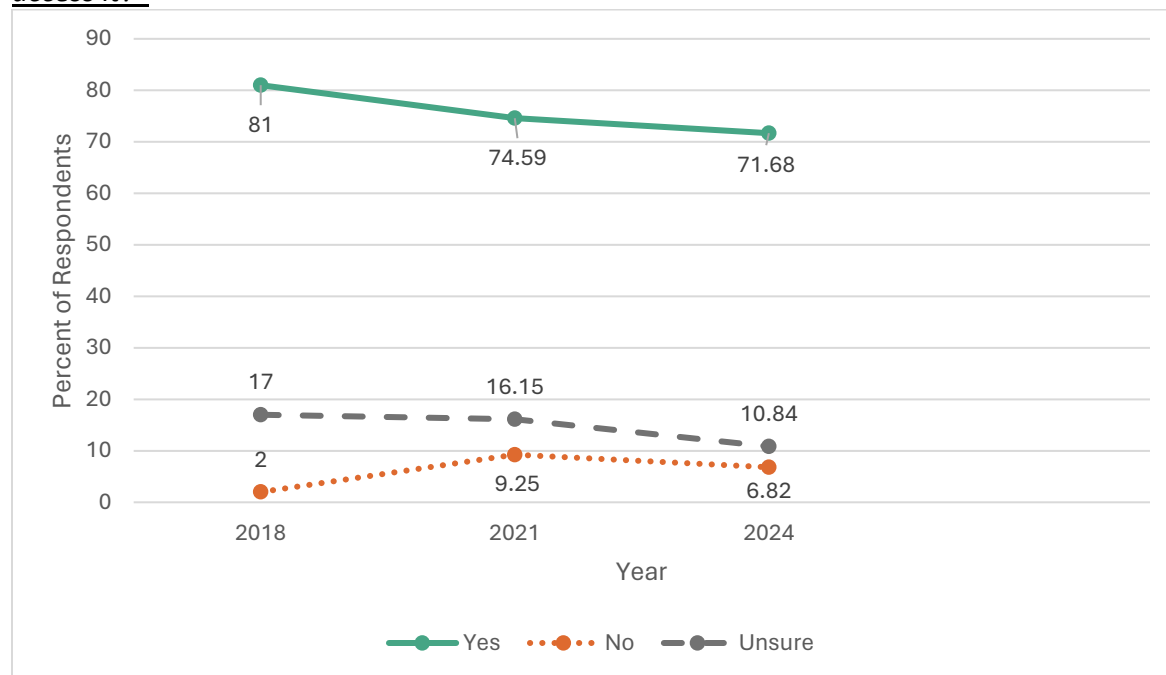
### **Program Hours and Length**

In terms of program hours, 32.17% of respondents are seeking full-day (6-10 hours) early learning programs, while 29.9% are seeking school-day programs. Close to half of families (49.13%) prefer the school year (September to June) programs. Also, 16.16% of respondents claim that the hours available for early learning programs do not meet their needs. Of those who reported "The hours available don't meet my needs," 27.27% require a minimum of a full-day program, 18.87% require a minimum of a school day, 9.52% require a minimum of a half-day program, and 7.14% require at least a part-day program. Over the past seven years, program hours have consistently been a barrier; however, the survey results have fluctuated. In 2017, 18.52% reported this challenge, which increased to 27% in 2021 but decreased in 2024 to 16.16%.

If full-day preschool for all was available in Lowell, 71.68% of respondents indicated they would access it, whereas only 51.44% claimed they would access a part-day (2.5 – 3 hours) program. If these programs were available, families would need them to be free, have transportation support, and have meals provided to their children during program hours.

Transportation is a significant barrier for survey respondents in terms of early learning program access. A majority of respondents (57.44%) stated they could only travel up to five miles to an early learning program; only 15.08% of respondents could travel more than five miles to bring their children to an early learning program.

**Figure 7: Trends in “If full-day preschool for your 3-5 year old was available in Lowell, would you access it?”**



### Program Cost Preferences

A majority (73.68%) of respondents would be very likely to participate in an early learning program if it was available at no cost to their family. A total of 60.59% of respondents would be “Somewhat likely” or “Very likely” to participate in an early learning program that costs up to \$40 per week per child. Only 32.83% of respondents were likely to participate in a program that cost \$40 - \$100 per week per child. These responses are similar to those collected in 2021. Respondents were asked how the cost of early learning programs should be calculated. A majority (56.61%) stated that it should be consistent across all families and follow a similar model to the k-12 education system. Among the remaining responses, 15.07% believed the cost should be income-based, and 13.02% believed it should be expense-based. When utilizing an income-based model, one respondent shared the importance of utilizing gross income to conduct calculations.

## **Family Choice**

Family choice is a critical component of a successful preschool system. Families consider multiple factors when deciding if they want to enroll their children in an early learning program and which program to enroll them in. When asked which factor contributed the most to a family's decision about early learning programs, 51.07% of respondents indicated that location was the primary factor. When evaluating programs, 38.5% of respondents claimed they would assess if the program met their basic needs, 33.96% would assess whether LPS offers the program, 32.89% would consider program quality and 32.09% would prioritize knowing another child who is currently or was previously enrolled in the program.

Among respondents who shared multiple reasons why they want their children engaged in an early learning program, 60.10% claimed the reason was their children's social development, and 56.57% of respondents said their children's interest in learning was also a key factor in their decision-making. Other reasons respondents wanted their children engaged were for language development (52.02% of respondents), emotional development (42.42% of respondents), and cognitive development (39.39% of respondents). Another reason shared by respondents in the open-ended question about their children's enrollment was kindergarten readiness.

## **Quality**

Over the past seven years, families have been asked which factors are most important to them when choosing an early childhood program. In 2024, the survey further distinguished factors into a "quality" category and a "needs" category. According to survey respondents, the top three quality factors were that the program engaged them in their children's development, educators have knowledge of child development, and the program provides access to other supports and services for their children and family, such as health and wellness programs and referrals to community resources. Access to other resources and supports was a top-three priority for every language group except English-speaking respondents.

As a follow-up, survey respondents were asked, "What level of education do you want your child's educators to have." Of the respondents, 39.67% preferred educators to have a bachelor's degree, and 26.03% prefer a master's degree. Of the 6.25% of families that selected "other," the common sentiment is that passion, nurturing, and the ability to connect, keep children safe, and experience with children (including those with special needs and/or behavioral challenges) are more important than a degree.

In addition to identifying these quality factors, families were asked to define quality in early learning programs for children ages three to five. The word cloud shown in Figure 8 is a visual representation of the most frequently occurring words or phrases within responses.

**Figure 8: Family Responses to “What does quality in early learning program for your children ages 3 – 5 mean to you?”**



### **Needs**

When asked, “What are the most important needs,” respondents reported the following as their top three priorities: the cleanliness of the program, the safety of the program, and the program location being near their home, work, or somewhere else that is convenient. Khmer-speaking respondents also included “the program provides transportation” among their top three priorities. Of the respondents who provided additional details about needs factors, the majority called attention to the cost of programs, the need for transportation, and tailored support for children with disabilities, special needs, and/or who have experienced trauma. These additional items are not surprising considering the change in access to early learning programs and increased exposure to trauma during COVID-19.<sup>6,7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://childtrends.org/publications/considerations-for-building-post-covid-early-care-and-education-systems-that-serve-children-with-disabilities>

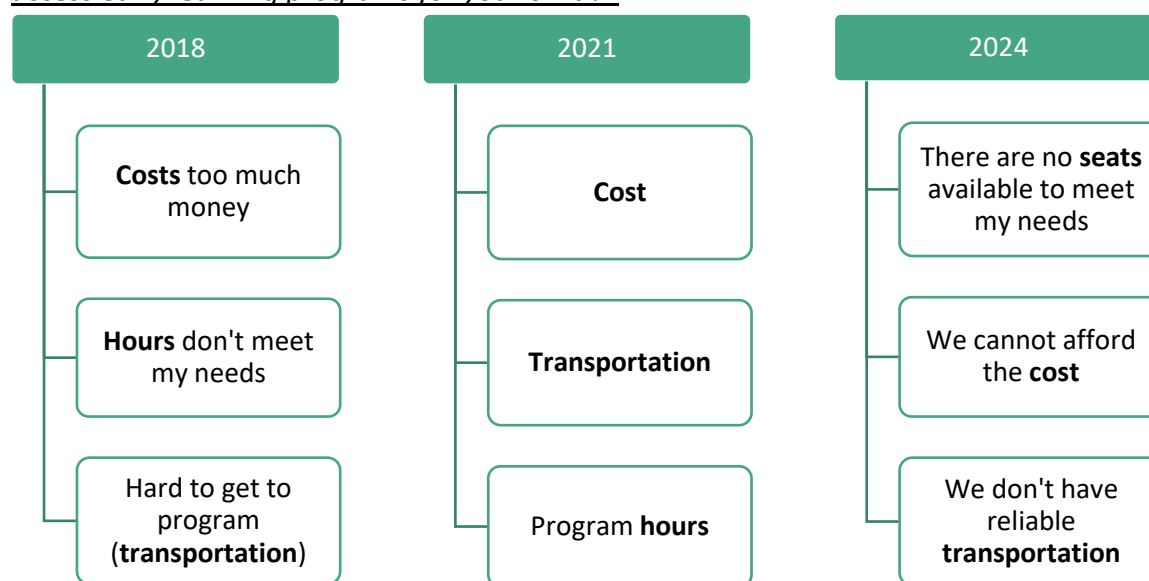
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/special-resource/traumatic-impact-covid-childrenfamilies.pdf>



## Barriers

Survey participants were asked to rank the barriers they experience when trying to access early learning programs for their children. “There are no seats available to meet my needs” was the top barrier experienced by 37.82% of respondents. The second top barrier was “We cannot afford the cost,” which aligns with the data gathered on the amount families can pay and their top decision-making factors. The third top barrier was “we don’t have reliable transportation.” Families also noted that eligibility, in terms of income, their child’s age, or disability status, was a barrier they experienced when trying to enroll in an early learning program. As shown in Figure 9, the primary barriers families experience have been consistent over the last seven years.

Figure 9: Top three responses to “What are the top barriers you’ve experienced when trying to access early learning programs for your child?”



Of the families that selected “There are no seats available to meet my needs” as their top barrier, 31.07% needed a minimum of a full-day program, followed by 27.12% that needed at least a school day program. Nearly 50% (50.28%) of these individuals also reported they needed a minimum of a school-year program, followed by 38.98% looking for a program that was offered during the school year and summer. While preferring the full day and school year options, 42.37% state they would need a free program, 28.98% they would need transportation support, and 34.46% stated they would need meals for their children during program hours in order to be able to access and use this program option.

### Linguistic Variations

While the top three barriers were the same across all languages, there are variations in terms of the impact the barrier has on the sample population. For example, 100% of Khmer-speaking respondents selected “There are no seats available to meet my needs” as one of their top three barriers, as opposed to 83.24% of English-speaking, 81.82% of Portuguese-speaking, and 80.39% of Spanish-speaking respondents. This data indicates that Khmer-speaking families are experiencing a higher rate of this barrier. This trend continues when evaluating the impact program cost has on each linguistic community as 93.75% of Khmer-speaking respondents rate this as one of their top three barriers compared to 89.09% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, 84.31% of Spanish-speaking respondents, and 81.50% of English-speaking respondents. There is a larger difference when comparing how lack of transportation hinders a family from accessing early learning programming. Of all Khmer-speaking respondents, 87.50% reported lack of transportation as one of their top three barriers, followed by 72.55% of Spanish-speaking respondents, 65.45% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, and 50.58% of English-speaking respondents. These linguistic variations show that non-English speaking families in Lowell experience higher rates of barriers related to lack of seats, high costs of care, and transportation challenges when trying to enroll their children in early learning programming.

### Other Barriers Experienced

In 2024, families had the opportunity to share, via open response, any additional barriers they experienced. The responses fell into the themes of transportation, cost, the impact of special needs or disability, and juggling the different options available based on policies and costs. The two following quotes provide personal examples of the two main themes about access to information and special needs.

*“Lack of resources or information offered to me as a parent of a COVID-19-aged child. I have no support or help and have to figure it out on my own. It’s A LOT!”*

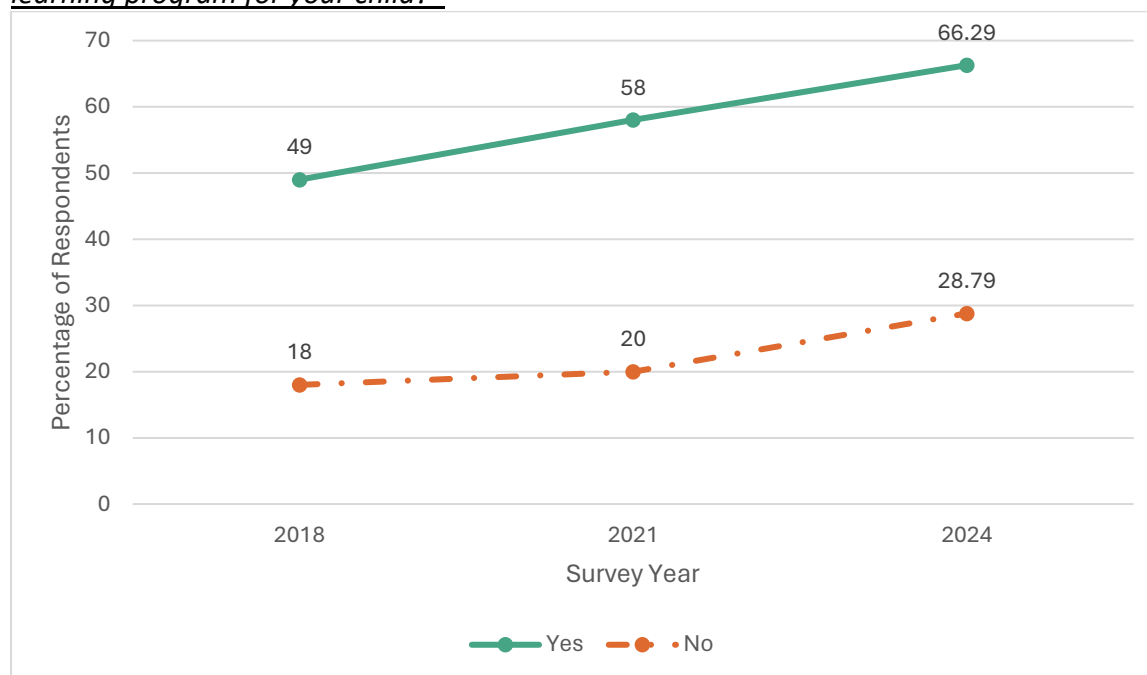
*“My experience has been frustrating because I identified my child’s need on the first day of school, and the services that she needs are available on-site, but getting her assessed and started in the program has been sluggish. It is mid-year, and she still hasn’t been formally assessed...”*

### Information Access and Needs

Families need to know what programs are available to them and how to enroll in preschool for all to be successful. Knowing “What programs are available” was the top information request for 67.52% of respondents, followed by information about the “Locations” of programs, which was a topic indicated by 56.54% of respondents. Finally, 46.73% of families seek information regarding “Eligibility criteria,” which may explain why eligibility was a top barrier listed above. Other information needs included “Transportation support to programs” (44.63% of respondents), “Enrollment timeline” (44.39% of respondents), and “How to enroll” (44.16% of respondents).

Among respondents, many wanted to understand why early learning is important; this was a top three information request among 61.22% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, 80% of Khmer-speaking respondents, and 48.98% of Spanish-speaking respondents. While 66.29% of respondents report having enough information to select an early learning program, close to a third (28.79%) are looking for basic program information along with the types of additional support, especially transportation, that may be provided by programs. Figure 10 indicates this trend over the last seven years.

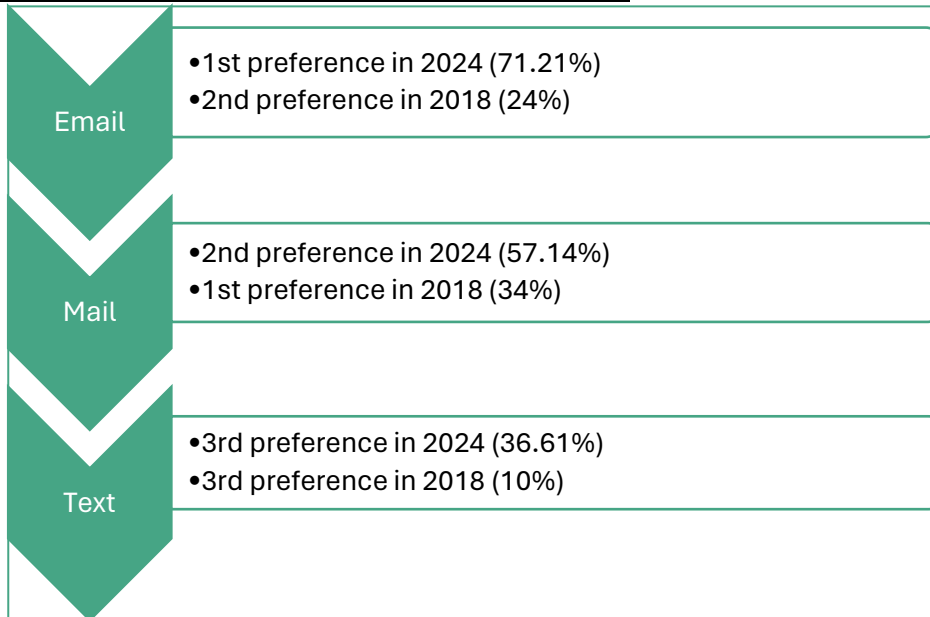
***Figure 10: Multi-year trends to “Do you feel like you have enough information to select an early learning program for your child?”***



*Note: The “not sure” option from 2018 and the “not applicable, I don’t want my child enrolled” option from 2024 were not included in the graph as they did not collect the same information, and the data was excluded from the 2021 report.*

As LPS prepares for the next phase of the work, Figure 11 identifies trends in how families would like to receive information on early learning programs. Most respondents want to receive communication via email, mail, and text messages. Khmer-speaking respondents listed mail as their preferred communication method, followed by email and the LPS website.

*Figure 11: Top communication preference for families.*



## IV. KEY FINDINGS FROM COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

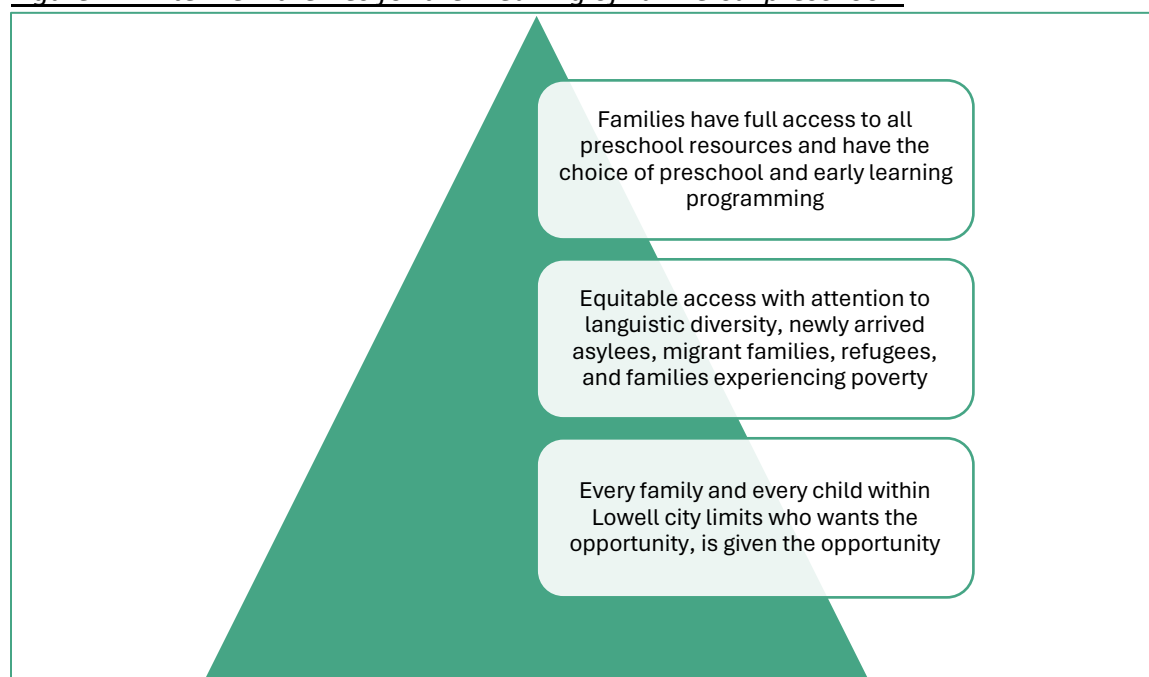
To understand the perspectives on early learning programs from champions within the Lowell community, LPS and the PSPC conducted six 30-45-minute virtual interviews with key leaders. Interviews followed a standard protocol (Attachment B) that focused on kindergarten readiness and the current preschool system.

### Definitions

All interviewees were asked, “What does the term *universal preschool* mean to you in ensuring access to preschool for all children 3-5 years old regardless of where they are served.” All interviewees shared the sentiment that every family and every child within the Lowell city limits who wants the opportunity to engage in preschool is given that opportunity. Four interviewees specifically mentioned equitable access and defined it similarly as ensuring no difference in access across all families.

Interview subjects indicated that the implementation of preschool for all children must consider language diversity, support for newly arrived families (including immigrants, refugees, and asylees), and acknowledge the impact of poverty on families within Lowell. While historically, the term “universal preschool” has been associated with free programming for families, only one interviewee stated that the program should be free of charge.

Figure 12: Interview themes for the meaning of “universal preschool”



## Preschool in Lowell

In order to gather additional information about the community and perspectives of these champions, six (6) interviewees were asked, “What have you heard or know about preschool for 3-5-year-olds in Lowell?” and five (5) interviewees were asked, “What have you heard from families and early educators about preschool programming in Lowell.” There were limited themes to be garnered from these two questions as respondents utilized this time to share general feedback and ideas about programming.

Among interview subjects, four believed that there is not enough supply of early learning slots to meet the needs of Lowell families and that this lack of supply needs to be addressed for this initiative to be successful. Two interview subjects felt the currently available options are expensive and flagged cost as a concern. To resolve these challenges, interview subjects suggested that a public/private partnership is needed to ensure access and family choice. While all interview subjects were champions for preschool for all, none had direct communication with families or early childhood educators about preschool. Interview responses were based on their past experiences or on what they heard from colleagues, family, and friends, as illustrated in Table 3.

*Table 3: Summary responses to “What have you heard from families and early educators about preschool programming in Lowell.”*

Theme	Examples
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Only people who can afford to pay get access.</li><li>• There are misnomers about who can afford programs.</li><li>• One parent stays home with the kids while the other works. Or, if they both work, one income goes specifically to childcare.</li><li>• More access if we offered free programming.</li></ul>
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Funding is needed to diversify staff to match student demographics.</li><li>• No funding requests were received that focus on early childhood.</li></ul>
Family Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some families are leaning towards homeschooling because they do not know what LPS offers.</li></ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Transportation is an issue.</li><li>• More access would be provided if we offered busing to programs or if programs were closer to home.</li></ul>

## Kindergarten Readiness

Interview subjects were asked, “What have you heard from parents and caregivers about how well they believe their child is being prepared for kindergarten?” Subjects were also asked whether they were aware of the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (DESE) preschool curriculum frameworks and the MA Department of Early Education and Care’s (EEC) early learning guidelines and how they inform kindergarten readiness.

In response to this inquiry, interview subjects reflected on whether there was consistent quality across programs that would equally prepare children for kindergarten. For example, one interview subjects shared concerns about the high student-to-teacher ratio in some early learning classrooms. Another interview subject was unsure whether all programs have the same skilled educators as those leading Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms.

One interview subject raised concerns about the level of stress and anxiety a family may experience when determining where their child should go for an early learning experience. In contrast, another interview subject shared an opinion that parents are not “fussy consumers.” Finally, one interviewee suggested that LPS create a shared definition of kindergarten readiness for any initiative to be successful.

In relation to the DESE and EEC frameworks, none of the interviewees had experience using the frameworks, but all were aware that they existed. Interview subjects believed the frameworks helped differentiate “preschool” from “daycare” by ensuring children are educated on consistent content and based on their learning style, no matter the setting. Additionally, interview subjects asserted that the frameworks support equitable and safe learning that engages parents, early educators, and community partners. Two interview subjects suggested utilizing these frameworks to support the implementation of a public/private partnership. One interview subject suggested that family childcare providers as “small businesses” within the community could serve as key partners in implementing preschool for all.

### **Barriers to Implementation**

Interview subjects were asked to consider barriers to implementing a preschool-for-all model. Space was identified as a key barrier, with three interview subjects stating the importance of keeping preschool students together in age-appropriate locations that include play space. From a fiscal standpoint, interview subjects claimed purchasing space will be a challenge as LPS is currently at capacity. Beyond space, interview subjects identified the diverse linguistic and cultural makeup of Lowell families, posing potential barriers to implementation. In addition to ensuring families are engaged and have access to resources, interview subjects mentioned the importance of building trust and connection with all families.

During the interviews, subjects emphasized the consequences of poverty on students, families, and the community. Financial challenges impact the affordability of early learning for families, as well as the transportation costs. In addition to affecting families, financial challenges also impact programs, given the cost of recruiting, retaining, and training qualified educators. In creating a preschool-for-all model, interview subjects urged LPS to consider costs associated with the time and effort needed to build and maintain partnerships that lead to more successful funding and program implementation. Interview subjects also mentioned the importance of policy change at the city, state, and federal levels to ensure a diverse funding pool. Finally, interview subjects mentioned the implications of a potential tax increase to fund the model.

### **Facilitators to Implementation**

Despite the barriers listed above, there is significant political will to engage in this work and few political hurdles to implementation. Of the three interviewees who were asked if they would advocate for expanding preschool for all three- to five-year-olds in Lowell, all of them said yes and were eager to learn actionable steps they could take.

Interview subjects were asked to share any innovative strategies within and beyond Lowell that could support the implementation of this initiative. Interview subjects identified Chapter 70 and the City Maintenance of Effort budget as two funding streams for potential fiscal support for this work. When seeking fiscal support, one interview subject shared how the communication should speak to this initiative as an *opportunity* as opposed to an expense or cost for the city. Finally, interview subjects identified the collaboration between Community Teamwork Inc. (CTI) and LPS, as well as the early childhood business pilot funded by the Community Foundation of North Central MA, as potential models to replicate. When speaking about the costs of a preschool for all, interview subjects emphasized the importance of the social return on investment for early learning programs for children in Lowell.



## **V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The survey and community interviews discussed here were conducted as a part of a needs assessment sought by LPS to determine support for and needs related to preschool access for all three-, four-, and five-year-olds within the city. The findings from this research indicate strong support for the expansion of a Preschool for All program and highlight important cultural, linguistic, and logistical challenges that such an expansion must consider to be successful and meet the needs of the community.

At its heart, Lowell is a community that thrives on diversity. The 2024 family survey garnered feedback from families that spoke different languages and came from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Of our sample, more than half reported speaking a language other than English at home. As noted by interviewees, the rollout of a preschool-for-all initiative must communicate and connect with this linguistically diverse community. Families are eager to engage in an early learning program, with approximately 88% of participants stating that their child is enrolled in a program or that they want them to be.

Since 2018, families have shared that if full-day school-year programming were available, they would utilize it. Lack of knowledge about what programs are available and the supply challenges are the key barriers to engaging those families that are not currently enrolled but want to be. Families continue to utilize LPS' preschool programming more than other opportunities. However, families leverage play dates, day trips to museums, the library, cultural locations, and playgroups to supplement formal early learning.

### **Next Steps and Recommendations**

Given that families and community champions recognize the value of preschool for all in Lowell, LPS must address the barriers to access -- lack of knowledge about programs, limited available seats for all children, cost for enrollment, and limited transportation. Furthermore, LPS must ensure all preschools provide equitable, high-quality programming delivered by early childhood educators. LPS will convene a diverse group of diverse (racial, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic status, programmatic focus) community partners to develop and oversee a strategic plan that includes initiatives to address these barriers.

Preliminary strategies may include the following:

1. Development of a multilingual informational campaign that educates families about the value of early education, available school- and community-based programs, and eligibility and enrollment requirements;
2. Completion of a facilities assessment to identify current preschool space and potential locations for child-friendly programming, including satellite classrooms and mobile preschools;
3. Engagement of policymakers and philanthropic organizations to allocate sustainable multi-year financial resources in support of the preschool-for-all model;
4. Exploration of safe, convenient, and affordable transportation options (i.e., private and public transportation, carpooling, employer reimbursement) to ensure children can get to and from preschool regardless of their home location;

5. Implementation of an early childhood educator recruitment and retention strategy that prioritizes teacher preparation, professional development, and utilization of innovative curricula and instructional tools; and
6. Creation of collaborative partnerships with family-serving providers to ensure access to wraparound supports to address the social, emotional, and financial needs of children that may impact learning.

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Jean Delius, Parent  
Pharah Delius, Parent  
Jerubi Romero, Parent

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Lina Gruca, Director, Lowell Day Nursery  
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Liam Skinner, Superintendent, Lowell Public Schools  
Translation Team, Found in Translation

## GLOSSARY<sup>8</sup>

Child Care Center: Any facility operated on a regular basis, whether known as a day nursery, nursery school, kindergarten, child play school, progressive school, child development center, daycare center, preschool, or known under any other name that receives children, not of common parentage, younger than seven years old, or younger than 16 years old if such children have special needs, for non-residential custody and care during part or all of the day separate from their parent(s). Child Care centers shall not include any part of a public school system; any part of a privately organized educational system, unless the services of such a system are primarily limited to kindergarten, nursery or related preschool services; a Sunday school conducted by a religious institution; a facility operated by a religious organization where children are cared for during short periods while persons responsible for such children are attending religious services; a family child care home; an informal cooperative arrangement among neighbors or relatives; or the occasional care of children with or without compensation therefore.

Children with Special Needs: Children younger than 16 years old who, because of temporary or permanent disabilities arising from intellectual, sensory, emotional, physical or environmental factors or other specific learning disabilities, are or would be unable to progress effectively in a regular school program. Such children may include, but not be limited to, a school-age child with disabilities as determined by an evaluation conducted pursuant to M.G.L. c. 71B, § 3, and as defined by the Department of Education in 603 CMR 28.00, or an infant or toddler with an individual family service plan (IFSP) receiving early intervention services.

Family Child Care: Temporary custody and care provided in a private residence during part or all of the day for no more than ten children younger than 14 years old or children younger than 16 years old if such children have special needs. Family child care shall not mean an informal cooperative arrangement among neighbors or relatives, or the occasional care of children with or without compensation therefore.

Family Child Care System: Any entity or person who, through contractual arrangement, provides to family child care homes that it has approved as members of said system, central administrative functions including, but not limited to, training of operators of family child care homes; technical assistance and consultation to operators of family child care homes; inspection, supervision, monitoring, and evaluation of family child care homes; referral of children to available family child care homes; and referral of children to available health and social services, provided, however, that family child care system shall not mean a placement agency or a child care center.

Preschooler/Preschool Child: Any child at least two years and nine months old but not yet attending first grade. (Note: LPS is focused particularly on children ages three, four, and five years old)

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/doc/family-group-school-age-child-care-programs-606-cmr-7/download>

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A – Family Survey

#### Preschool In Lowell – Family SURVEY

##### Welcome

Lowell Public Schools is interested in helping more children enter kindergarten with skills they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Lowell Public Schools has hired Pear Associates to gather information from families about their experience, needs, and preferences regarding preschool and early education for their young children. We understand that each family has unique needs and interests when it comes to your child's first five years. Your input will help ensure that Lowell Public Schools considers what is most important to families with young children.

The results of this survey will be integrated into reports and presentations related to the supply and demand for preschool in Lowell. Your responses and contact information will not be linked. At the end of the survey, a link will take you to a separate, independent webpage to share your contact information so that we can determine and contact our prize winners. Your contact information or any individual information will not be shared with the district.

We appreciate your time and energy to provide your feedback. The survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. We will ask various multiple-choice questions and offer opportunities to share your open-ended feedback. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Please answer questions to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers. Eligible participants who complete the entire survey will be entered to win a \$25 gift card.

If you have any challenges completing the survey, please contact Pear Associates at [blittle@pearassociates.com](mailto:blittle@pearassociates.com).

Thank you.

##### Criteria

This questions requires an answer

Thank you for your interest in this project. Unfortunately, you do not meet the criteria to complete this survey. If you feel this is inaccurate, please contact Pear Associates at [blittle@pearassociates.com](mailto:blittle@pearassociates.com).

1. Are you a resident of the City of Lowell, MA? You will be asked to provide your Lowell mailing address if you want to be entered into the raffle. Gifts will only be mailed to Lowell addresses. Addresses outside of Lowell, MA will be deemed ineligible.
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
2. Do you have at least one child between the ages of three and six?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No

##### Demographic Data

3. Are you Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin?
  - A. No, not of Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin
  - B. Yes, of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
  - C. Prefer not to answer

4. What is your race?
  - A. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - B. Asian
  - C. Black or African American
  - D. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - E. Multi-racial
  - F. White
  - G. Prefer not to answer
5. How well do you speak English?
  - A. Very well
  - B. Well
  - C. Not well
  - D. Not at all
  - E. Prefer not to answer
6. Do you speak a language other than English at home?
  - A. No
  - B. Prefer not to answer
  - C. Yes (please specify)
    - i. Please enter the other language you speak at home
7. What is your zip code?
  - A. 01850 (Centralville)
  - B. 01851 (Highlands)
  - C. 01852 (Belvidere, Downtown, Back Central, South Lowell)
  - D. 01853
  - E. 01854 (Pawtucketville)
8. What are the ages of your children? Check all that apply
  - A. Birth – 15 months old
  - B. 15 months – 2 years old
  - C. 2 – 3 years old
  - D. 4 years old by September 1
  - E. 5 years old by September 1
  - F. 6 years old by September 1
  - G. 7 years old or older by September 1
  - H. Other
9. Do any of your children **under age six** years old have a diagnosed disability?
  - A. Yes, I have at least one child with an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)
  - B. Yes, I have at least one child with an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
  - C. Yes, I have at least one child with a diagnosed disability but they do not have an IEP or IFSP
  - D. No
  - E. Unsure
  - F. I have concerns about my child's development but they have not been evaluated by a professional yet

### Current Enrollment And Engagement Status

The following questions will use terms to help us better understand your needs and experience. When we use the term “early learning”, we are referring to any experience in which young children learn, for example, center-based child care, family child care, Head Start, home visiting, playgroups, pre-kindergarten, and preschool for children ages 3, 4, and 5 year olds.

10. Is your child currently enrolled in an early learning program?

A. Yes

- i. What type of program(s) are they enrolled in? Check all that apply
  - a. Center-based (child care or preschool program not in someone’s home)
  - b. Early intervention (services such as speech or physical therapy for children under 3 years old)
  - c. Family child care (child care in a home setting)
  - d. Head Start
  - e. Lowell Public Schools preschool
  - f. Parent Child +
  - g. Parent Child + and playgroups
  - h. Playgroups
  - i. Preschool outside of Lowell Public Schools
  - j. Preschool and child care
- ii. Do the programs your child is enrolled in meet your needs?
  - a. Yes, it fully meets my needs
  - b. Yes, but it was not my preferred choice
  - c. Yes, but it only partially meets my needs
  - d. No, it does not meet my needs
- iii. What factors influenced your decision to select the specific program? Check all that apply
  - a. Knowing other children who are or were previously enrolled (your other children, children of friends and family)
  - b. The program is located near my home, near my work, or somewhere else that is convenient
  - c. The program was offered by the school district
  - d. The quality of the program
  - e. The program met my basic needs

B. No, but I’d like them to be enrolled

- i. If no, why do you want your child enrolled? Check all that apply
  - a. For myself or my partner to be able to work
  - b. My child is interested in learning
  - c. My child’s social development
  - d. My child’s cognitive development
  - e. My child’s emotional development
  - f. My child’s language development
  - g. My child’s motor development
  - h. Other (please specify)
    - a. Please enter a comment

- ii. If no, why is your child not enrolled? Check all that apply
      - a. No seats available at the school I prefer
      - b. The hours available don't meet my needs
      - c. The cost is too much
      - d. I am on the waitlist for a voucher
      - e. The program does not serve 3 year olds
      - f. The program is only open during the school year, not in the summer
      - g. I do not understand the language spoken at the program
      - h. I don't have reliable transportation to, from, or between programs
      - i. We are not eligible for a seat because of income
      - j. I cannot find a seat because of my child's disability or special needs
      - k. We are not eligible because of the age of my child
      - l. I don't like the quality of the available programs
      - m. We missed the enrollment period
      - n. I don't know what programs are available
      - o. I do not know where to get the information about available programs
      - p. My child was asked to leave a program
      - q. I can't access programs to fit my work schedule
      - r. I work 2<sup>nd</sup> shift
      - s. I work 3<sup>rd</sup> shift
      - t. Other (please specify)
        - a. Please enter a comment
  - C. No, and I don't want them to be enrolled
    - i. Please explain why you do not want your child enrolled in an early learning program.
- 11. What other early learning experiences does your child or family take part in besides formal preschool on a regular basis? Check all that apply
  - A. Community playgroups
  - B. Cultural programs
  - C. Early Intervention Playgroups
  - D. Faith-based or church programs
  - E. Home visiting
  - F. I or another adult in my household stay at home with my child
  - G. Library story hours
  - H. Lowell Public School playgroups
  - I. My child stays with a family member or friend
  - J. Online learning experiences
  - K. Parent leadership (school council, Head Start Policy Council, PTO)
  - L. Parenting support groups
  - M. Playdates with friends or family
  - N. Trips with family or friends to museums, libraries, or cultural events
  - O. Workshops on parenting or child development
  - P. None of the above
  - Q. Other (please specify)



## Needs And Preferences

The following questions will use terms to help us better understand your needs and experience. When we use the term “early learning”, we are referring to any experience in which young children learn, for example, center-based child care, family child care, Head Start, home visiting, playgroups, pre-kindergarten, and preschool for children ages 3, 4, and 5 year olds.

12. What is the absolute minimum program length of day you **need**?
  - A. Part day: 2.5 hours
  - B. Half day: 3.0 – 4.0 hours
  - C. School day: 5.5 – 6.0 hours
  - D. Full day: 6.0 – 10.0 hours
  - E. I don’t need my child to be enrolled
  - F. I’d prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren’t formal preschool
13. What program day length would you **prefer**?
  - A. Part day: 2.5 hours
  - B. Half day: 3.0 – 4.0 hours
  - C. School day: 5.5 – 6.0 hours
  - D. Full day: 6.0 – 10.0 hours
  - E. I don’t need my child to be enrolled
  - F. I’d prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren’t formal preschool
14. What is the absolute minimum program yearly length you **need**?
  - A. School year: September – June
  - B. School year (September – June) with a summer program (July – August)
  - C. Full year: January – December
  - D. I don’t need my child to be enrolled
  - E. I’d prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren’t formal preschool
15. What program yearly length would you **prefer**?
  - A. School year: September – June
  - B. School year (September – June) with a summer program (July – August)
  - C. Full year: January – December
  - D. I don’t need my child to be enrolled
  - E. I’d prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren’t formal preschool
16. If full day (6.0 – 10.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5 year old was available in Lowell, would you access it?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Unsure
  - D. Not applicable – my children will be older than 5 years by September 1, 2024

17. What support would you need to access full day (6.0 – 10.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5 year old? Check all that apply
- A. Transportation
  - B. Help with cost
  - C. Free program
  - D. Second shift options
  - E. Third shift option
  - F. Meals for my child during these hours
  - G. Translation of enrollment and other materials
  - H. Other (please specify)
18. If part day (2.5 – 3.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5 year old was available in Lowell, would you access it?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Unsure
  - D. Not applicable – my children will be older than 5 years by September 1, 2024
19. What support would you need to access part day (2.5 – 3.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5 year old? Check all that apply
- A. Transportation
  - B. Help with cost
  - C. Free program
  - D. Second shift options
  - E. Third shift option
  - F. Meals for my child during these hours
  - G. Translation of enrollment and other materials
  - H. Other (please specify)
20. How likely are you to use early education programming at the following cost per child per week?  
[Very unlikely, Somewhat unlikely, Not sure, Somewhat likely, Very likely]
- A. No cost to my family
  - B. Up to \$40
  - C. \$40 - \$100
  - D. \$100 - \$200
  - E. Over \$200
21. How do you think the amount you are required to pay for early learning programs should be calculated?
- A. Monthly income-based eligibility
  - B. Monthly expense-based eligibility
  - C. Both monthly income and expense-based eligibility
  - D. Everyone pays the same amount
  - E. Universal preschool should be provided to all, similar to K-12
  - F. Other, please specify
22. How far would you be able to travel to bring your child to an early learning program?
- A. Less than a mile
  - B. 1 – 5 miles
  - C. More than 5 miles

23. What are the **most important needs factors** when choosing an early learning program? Either drag and drop your selections or utilize the up and down arrows to indicate your selections. Number 1 is most important.
- A. The cleanliness of the program
  - B. The program is located near my home, near my work, or somewhere else that is convenient
  - C. The program provides transportation
  - D. The program serves lunch or other meals and snacks
  - E. The safety of the program
  - F. We can afford the program
  - G. Not applicable. I don't want my child enrolled
24. If your important needs factors were not listed above, please describe those here.
25. What are the **most important quality factors** when choosing an early learning program? Either drag and drop your selections or utilize the up and down arrows to indicate your selections. Number 1 is most important.
- A. The program provides access to other supports and services for my child and family (ex. health and wellness, referrals to community resources)
  - B. The program engages me in my child's development
  - C. Educational background of the teacher
  - D. Educators have knowledge of child development
  - E. Educators have knowledge of development disabilities
  - F. Educators are passionate about the work they do
  - G. The curriculum, or what is taught in the program, is developmentally appropriate
  - H. The program engages my child in activities that support their development
  - I. The program helps my child be ready for kindergarten
  - J. My child's social interaction with peers their age
  - K. My child's interest in learning
  - L. The program offers special needs support
  - M. Other, please describe
  - N. Not applicable. I don't want my child enrolled
26. If your top important quality factors were not listed above, please describe those here.
27. What level of education do you want your child's educators to have?
- A. Associates (2 years)
  - B. Bachelors (4 years)
  - C. Masters (6 years)
  - D. Other, please describe

### Challenges and Barriers

28. What are the top barriers you've experienced when trying to access early learning programs for your child? Either drag and drop your selections or utilize the up and down arrows to indicate your selections.

Number 1 is the biggest barrier.

- a. There are no seats available to meet my needs
  - b. We cannot afford the cost
  - c. We don't have reliable transportation to, from, or between programs
  - d. We are not eligible for a seat because of income
  - e. We are not eligible for a seat because of disability
  - f. We are not eligible because of the age of my child
  - g. I don't like the quality of the available programs
  - h. I don't feel like the programs are safe
  - i. The hours available don't meet my needs
  - j. We missed the enrollment period
  - k. I don't know what programs are available
  - l. The teachers don't speak our native language
  - m. I don't feel welcome in the program
  - n. Finding a program that offers special needs support for my child
  - o. My child was asked to leave
  - p. I missed the enrollment date
  - q. Not applicable, I don't want my child enrolled
  - r. Other (please describe)
29. If the top barriers you experience when trying to access early learning programs for your child were not listed above, please describe those here.

### Definitions

30. What does quality in early learning programs for children ages 3 – 5 mean to you?

### Access To Information

31. Do you feel like you have enough information to select an early learning program for your child?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Not applicable. I don't want my child enrolled

32. What information would help you select an early learning program for your child? (select all that apply)

- A. Why is early learning important
- B. What programs are available
- C. Locations
- D. Transportation support to programs
- E. Enrollment timeline
- F. Eligibility criteria
- G. How to enroll
- H. Not applicable. I don't want my child enrolled
- I. Other, please describe

33. If your family wanted information on early learning programs, how would you prefer to receive it? Select all that apply

- A. Mail
- B. Email
- C. Text
- D. LPS website
- E. Facebook
- F. Flyers in the community
- G. Through places I already go like the library or playgroups
- H. Other – please specify
- I. Not applicable. I don't want information on early learning programs

**Other**

34. Is there anything you'd like to share or suggest regarding universal preschool in Lowell?

## Appendix B – Interview Protocol

### Lowell Universal Preschool Interviews

#### Interview Information:

- Audience: up to 5 key leaders
- Format: 30-minute virtual interviews, recorded with permission for notetaking purposes
- Location: Zoom
- Proposed Timeframe: Jan. – Feb. 2024

Proposed Questions (What do we want to know? How will responses inform Supply and Demand and more if possible?):

#### INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us about access to preschool in Lowell. My name is Lara Quiroga, and I am a Senior Consultant with Pear Associates and my colleague, Brittany, is joining us as well. We are working with Lowell Public Schools Early Childhood Department to conduct a Supply and Demand Assessment. As part of this process, we are conducting interviews with key leaders and the early childhood sector. Your responses will help us gain insights that will be considered along with results from a survey of families about their experience, needs, and preferences regarding preschool and early education for their young children and a survey of preschool providers in Lowell about their programs, capacity, funding, and workforce.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we are about to ask you. If at any time we ask you a question that you do not have an answer for or you prefer not to provide an answer, we can skip the question and move along in the interview. Your input will be grouped with responses from other interviewees and not directly attributed to you so your identity can remain confidential. With your permission, I would like to record our conversation to support note-taking and accuracy in collecting your important insights. Would that be ok with you? (RECORDING BEGINS)

To get us started, please share your name, title, and organization.

As I ask you these questions, it is important to keep a few definitions in mind. If at any time you need a reminder or clarification, please let me know.

- Preschool: Formal educational experience for children ages 3-5 years old.
- Early learning: Any experience in which preschool young children learn e.g., Head Start, center-based education and care, public schools, home visiting, playgroups, Pre-kindergarten, for children ages 3, 4, and 5-year-olds.

#### LOWELL PRESCHOOL

1. *\*For Policy Leaders*: What does the term “universal preschool” mean to you in ensuring access to preschool for all children 3-5 years old regardless of where they are served?
2. What have you heard or know about preschool for 3 to 5-year-olds in Lowell?
3. What have you heard from families and early educators about preschool programming in Lowell?

## KINDERGARTEN READINESS

4. What have you heard from parents/caregivers about how well they believe their child is being prepared for kindergarten?
  - Prompt: What does kindergarten readiness mean to you?
5. Are you aware of the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) preschool curriculum frameworks and MA Department of Early Education and Care's (EEC) early learning guidelines and how they inform kindergarten readiness?
  - Prompt: What have you heard about how LPS aligns with DESE and EEC early childhood frameworks and guidelines?

## SYSTEM

6. \*What **barriers** exist to offering access to preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
7. What **fiscal hurdles** do you see to implementing preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
8. What public and/or private funding is used to implement preschool? What public and/or private funding opportunities are you aware of to implement preschool access for all?
9. What **political hurdles** to implementing preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell do you see?
10. \*To what degree does **public** will for universal preschool exist in Lowell?
11. What **innovative strategies** in Lowell are you aware of currently to implement preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
12. What **innovative strategies** do you see/know of *elsewhere* that would help the community of Lowell?
13. Are you an **advocate** for expanding preschool for all in Lowell? If so, can you provide examples of how you would advocate (not limited to lobbying)?

## CONCLUSION:

That concludes the questions that we had for you today.

14. Is there anything that you were hoping to share that we have not already discussed?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. As we mentioned in the beginning, your thoughts and feedback will be essential to understanding preschool supply and demand in Lowell. Our Supply and Demand

Assessment will be presented to Lowell Public Schools in April. If you have any questions or additional thoughts, please feel free to reach out directly by email.

\*indicates questions (or comparable questions) asked in program surveys