



Report on the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Grant

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I. Overview of the Commonwealth Preschool Expansion Grant

In 2015, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) was awarded a federal Preschool Expansion Grant (PEG) from the U. S. Department of Education to expand high-quality early childhood education to four-year-old children whose families earn under 200 percent (200%) of the federal poverty line. Five high-need communities in Massachusetts -- Boston, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, and Springfield -- are currently being funded through this federal grant to implement full-day, full-year preschool for four-year-olds through public-private partnerships between the local public school district as the lead education agency and two or three local licensed early learning providers.

In FY16, the state established the **Commonwealth Preschool Partnerships Grant (Planning Grant)** in the amount of \$500,000 for local communities to develop strategic plans for preschool expansion. The purpose of the Planning Grant is to support communities in identifying the local infrastructure, funding and supports that would be needed to increase access to high quality preschool programs, in a manner similar to the parameters of the PEG, to children ages 2.9 through kindergarten entry. The Planning Grant aligns with the state's commitment to ensure children have high quality early education experiences that lead them to greater success in school and life.

The thirteen communities that were awarded the Planning Grant include Athol, Brockton, Cape Cod, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, North Adams, Pittsfield, Somerville, Springfield and Worcester. The following report provides a summary of the strategic plans each of the communities developed to expand access to high quality preschool education for young children.

Strategic plans submitted to EEC documented strong need for both expanded access and quality improvements to early education opportunities for 3 and 4 year old children in the thirteen communities.

- Many communities noted the need to provide greater access to children not currently attending any formal early education program
- All communities noted a strong need for affordable early education among families just over 200 percent of the poverty line and ineligible for any childcare subsidies, yet unable to bear the full cost.
- Transportation was noted as a need for families in all communities but only some included the provision of transportation in their plans; others looked at how programs might be distributed geographically to address this need.

All plans also noted the need for on-going professional development supports for educators, in addition to efforts to ensure a competent and well-educated workforce through degree requirements and other measures of competency for educators.

- On-going professional supports such as trainings, coaching and professional learning communities were considered in all plans.
- Efforts to develop pathways to degree attainment were included in many plans through collaboration with local institutions of higher education.
- Ways to increase educator compensation were considered as important to recruitment and retention, although not all plans committed to salaries commensurate with those in public schools.

The importance of collaboration between public schools, early education providers and other local stakeholders was acknowledged in all plans, both through the appreciation expressed for the value of the collaborative planning process and the integration of such collaborations in the leadership and decision making structures.

- The public school was identified as the lead agent in all but one plan.
- All plans outlined collaborative management structures that included local early education providers.
- Many plans included an advisory group or steering committee to provide guidance to the community management, which included a broader group of stakeholders in the community, such as institutions of higher education and business leaders.
- The planning process provided the opportunity to develop a local system-wide vision for early education and effectively identify and deploy resources.

II. Local Community Strategic Plans for Preschool Expansion

Each of the thirteen communities received an award of up to \$40,000 to collaborate with public school districts, community based early education programs and other stakeholders to design a comprehensive plan for preschool expansion for children ages 2.9 to 5 years old. The communities were required to address the following elements of high quality preschool in their planning process:

- Partnership between the local school district and private early learning providers in all areas of planning and implementation of expanded preschool programming;
- Full-day, full-year programming (at least 8 hours/day, 12 months/year);
- Level 4 rating in the Massachusetts Quality Rating and Information System (QRIS) or National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation and Level 3 QRIS rating of participating early learning providers within 4 years;
- A maximum class size of 20 and maximum child-teacher ratio of 10:1;

- A curriculum selected using the Massachusetts Common Core Standards and EEC Standards and Guidelines;
- Teaching Strategies Gold™ used as a formative assessment tool;
- At least one educator in each classroom with a bachelor's degree in a relevant field;
- Educators paid salaries that are commensurate with those of comparable positions in the public schools;
- Professional development for all staff, including coaching, group trainings, and other supports for planning and implementation of curriculum, provided in collaboration with the local public school district;
- Family engagement activities, including support for the Kindergarten transition and information and resources about child development;
- Comprehensive services (including services addressing health, mental health, and behavioral needs) provided to all families;
- Inclusion of students receiving special education services (6.9% of students served) as well as children requiring other supports (e.g., children without permanent homes, dual language learners (DLLs), refugee or immigrant families, etc.); and
- Effective efforts to build links with services for children from birth to age 3 (e.g., early intervention or home visiting services), as well as support for the transition to Kindergarten and connections with public elementary schools (e.g., through communication between Prekindergarten and Kindergarten teachers and sharing of Kindergarten expectations).

Table 1. Summary of the Planning Grant Communities

Community	Grant Award Amount
Athol	\$22,000
Brockton	\$40,000
Cape Cod	\$39,000
Fall River	\$40,000
Holyoke*	\$40,000
Lawrence*	\$39,000
Lowell*	\$40,000
New Bedford	\$40,000
North Adams	\$40,000
Pittsfield	\$40,000
Somerville	\$40,000
Springfield*	\$40,000
Worcester	\$40,000
* PEG grantees	Total \$500,000

Partnerships and Planning

All local partnerships included community-based programs and public schools. Some partnerships included representatives from local municipalities and the city Mayor's office, philanthropic organizations, community colleges, non-profits and other existing early childhood consortiums. To support planning, most communities hired strategic planning consultants to facilitate meetings or to conduct needs assessments. Although the duration of the planning grant was short, most communities worked intensely to establish a partnership group that would create a plan for preschool implementation, often coordinating multiple initiatives and key stakeholders throughout the process.

Many plans include a discussion of how preschool expansion fits into larger Birth to Grade Three visions, and see expansion of preschool as a priority for ensuring that all children enter Kindergarten with the skills and readiness to succeed. The planning process built on existing local collaborations, many with longstanding visions for ways to enhance opportunities for the success of children and families in the community. Several of the planning grant communities used this opportunity to expand on strategic alignment efforts established through Birth to Grade Three Alignment grants previously awarded by EEC, CFCE Councils, PEG planning and locally developed Kindergarten Readiness Initiatives, toward goals such as kindergarten readiness, the establishment of public-private partnerships, access to high quality early learning experiences, and coordination of resources for families, and integration of various local, state and federal initiatives.

Strategic plans point to the significance of creating public-private partnerships as the foundation for successful planning for preschool expansion. Partnerships allow for input from various perspectives and identification of existing resources and initiatives to create economies of scale, both key components of a feasible expansion model. Over the course of the grant period, multiple grant recipients reported the invaluable opportunity the planning grant provided, and how the planning process itself increased community level readiness through establishing local visions, identifying priorities, identifying barriers and potential solutions. In some instances, public school officials, such as a Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer, endorsed strategic plans developed through these partnerships.

Needs in the Community

Through surveys, focus groups, partnership meetings, and evaluation of local and state data, each community collected feedback from families, programs and other stakeholders on the critical needs of their community to inform plans for preschool expansion. Grantees reported a lack of single-source, comprehensive data on the children and families in their communities and as such it was time-consuming to compile the data needed to assess the current use of early education programs and unmet needs of the community. The major findings from the needs assessment were as follows:

Children and Families

Economically disadvantaged

- The children with the highest need for access to high quality preschool come consistently from low income families. These families face challenges such as unemployment or under-employment, substance abuse, homelessness and housing insecurity. Many families have been on waitlists for early education and care for extended periods of time. Several communities identified immigrant and/or refugee families reporting a high need for high quality early education programming.
- Families with an income of just over the current 200% of the Federal Poverty Line, and working families in poverty who do not qualify for other financial assistance, are noted as demonstrating a particular need for free prekindergarten. Currently, PEG mandates that eligible children must be at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty line. Yet families just over this threshold report struggling to afford quality early education.
- Parents shared a desire for transportation services, either because access to personal transportation was limited or public transportation inadequate.

Full-day, full-year education and care

- There is a high demand for full-day, full-year preschool programs across all communities, although some communities also include opportunities for part-day, part-year programming to provide flexibility to families, noting that not every family needed the full time programming.

No previous formal early education and care experience

- Needs assessments highlight that many children enter kindergarten without prior early education experiences. For example, in Lowell and Fall River, approximately 50% of children enter kindergarten without any formal preschool experience, and up to 30%-40% of children in Cape Cod and Worcester.

Programs

Capacity and Expansion

- Most communities stated the need for new seats in their plans for expansion, and the number largely depends on the size of the communities. Most plans include a combination of new seats and the enhancement of existing programs serving high-need children in a variety of ways, such as extending to full-day or full-year, or offering additional services like comprehensive services, mental health, family engagement, and increased professional development and compensation for educators.
- Some communities reported they would need to identify, renovate/repurpose, or purchase additional space in order to implement preschool expansion plans. Some plans noted that

the community does not have enough space to provide sufficient number of preschool seats to children that need it, when considering both public school buildings and community based programs. Worcester and Pittsfield, for example, are at capacity which leads to long waiting lists, often leaving some children without access to any program. In response to this challenge, communities creatively planned to use a combination of existing space, new space and renovated space for both new preschool slots and the enhancement of existing slots.

Program Quality

- Proposed expansion classrooms are engaged with the QRIS system, many with existing ratings of Level 2 or Level 3, and all with plans for upward movement in the system. Some programs are accredited or have plans to attain NAEYC accreditation.
- A few communities used classroom quality measures, such as the ERS or the CLASS, to measure existing program quality. Of those who did, most proposed expansion classrooms are in the mid to high range of quality on each subscale or dimension measured, although instructional quality scores tended to be lower.
- All communities have plans to engage in continuous quality improvement through a variety of educator and program supports

Educator Qualifications and Supports

- The number of educators in the existing workforce that have at least a Bachelor's degree varies across communities. All communities identify a need to create or expand upon existing pipelines toward degree attainment and increased competency of educators.
- Teacher supports needed to offer high quality preschool include enhanced professional development on a variety of topics such as curriculum, formative assessment, and serving children with identified special needs, and those who are English Language Learners.
- Plans address the need to offer coaching and increased compensation for educators in order to attract, retain and support highly qualified staff
- In all communities, educator professional development, including training, coaching, career pathway support, and professional learning communities, would be offered to preschool educators across the community, and would rely on the existing expertise of the partners.

Design of Preschool Programs

With the exception of one community, all plans identified the local public school district as the potential lead agent, and a plan for a mixed-delivery model to provide high quality preschool services through an early learning provider, consistent with the current Preschool Expansion Grant in Massachusetts. The early learning providers include mostly center-based, private non-profit and for-profit organizations, Head Start partners, in addition to a small number of family

child care providers in a few communities. Approximately one third of communities include public preschool classrooms in plans for expansion, some of which would be operated by the public schools and others that would be located in a public school but administered by an early learning provider.

Although the public school district is considered the lead agent, plans include a variety of governance structures to support expansion efforts. For example, early childhood advisories, boards and cabinets would be utilized to oversee and inform overall program activities and determine strategic directions. In addition, the development of local steering committees and working groups would be responsible for oversight of operations and program development priorities, as identified by the governing body. A number of plans include the need to hire a coordinator to oversee general operations and expansion activities. Given the many challenges children and their families face, family engagement staff and some additional support staff, including mental health consultants, would be hired to support quality if plans for expansion were implemented.

Communities designed their preschool expansion programs to include the following criteria and design components:

Eligibility

Each of the communities recommend the new preschool slots be available for working and low income families. Plans mention the need to consider families with an income just above the 200% of the Federal Poverty Line requirement, unlike the eligibility requirements of PEG. Flexibility with the income requirement would allow for communities to serve a broad range of families, and in some cases, offer a mixed-income model for preschool expansion.

Many communities would prioritize children who have no previous early education experience, as they see a large number of children entering Kindergarten without such experience.

Other eligibility priorities varied depending on the unique needs of community, including plans to develop local priority categories based on results from needs assessments.

New and Expansion Classrooms

Communities developed plans to open preschool classrooms in phases over a span of one to two years using various physical spaces, including existing space within public schools and private early learning programs, opening new facilities, or renovating existing facilities to better accommodate programs. The location of preschool expansion classrooms varies by community, with some planning to centralize all classrooms in one location, and others offering expansion classrooms across multiple programs and locations in the community.

Most include plans to offer full-day, full-year programs, and some include a mix of full-year and part-year options to offer flexibility for families. Depending on the size of the community and the model design (new versus enhanced slots), the number of preschool children to be served

through expansion efforts range from 60 to 400, often through a combination of new and enhanced preschool slots.

Although the majority of plans indicated that direct services will be primarily provided by private community based organizations, or family child care programs, some considered the role of public schools in providing preschool programming, through opening new classrooms operated by public schools or enhancing existing public school slots through extended day or extended year options for families.

Classrooms and Educators

Each of the communities included a robust plan for placing highly-qualified teachers in classrooms. Requirements for staff qualifications are mixed, although many plans mandate at least one B.A. degree teacher in each classroom. When family child care providers are included in plans, a combination of education level, length of experience, and competency are considered as measures of staff qualifications, as they may not have hold a Bachelor's degree. Most plans propose a three educator per classroom model.

Although difficult to ascertain the precise salary and benefit package for educators, all plans included increases to current educator compensation to promote retention of highly qualified staff. Communities were at various points in the process of determining the appropriate levels of compensation for educators, and approaches to addressing this challenge vary. For example, some communities explicitly cited salaries commensurate with the public school in plans for expansion, while others continued to explore this issue through collaborations with unions, local Head Start partners, and other relevant fields as a point of comparison. Recognizing the costs associated with increasing compensation of educators, one plan proposed increasing salaries of educators gradually over the course of a few years, and another is considering a tiered model of compensation to incentivize educators toward career advancement.

Plans relied on current systems for measuring and benchmarking quality, including QRIS and/or NAEYC accreditation, and the CLASS observation tool as a method for measuring classroom quality. Some communities used this opportunity to understand the current level of quality being offered. In these cases, existing quality of classrooms of expansion partners are moderate to high, as measured through QRIS, national accreditation systems and locally assessed levels of quality using the CLASS.

Implementation of an evidence-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum aligned with K-12 programs and/or kindergarten readiness indicators are components of each plan. Some communities intend to implement a consistent curriculum across all settings, while others are in the process of selecting or developing a curriculum that can be adopted in the future.

Career Pathways and Professional Development

Professional development (PD) trainings and supports are included in the preschool expansion plans to ensure that teachers are equipped to deliver high quality education and served as a

mechanism to support continuous quality improvement. Approaches to PD varied from community to community. Plans included coaching, experienced teachers providing direct support in the classroom to help educators improve their classroom practices, and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Communities planned to deliver PD and coursework through Educator and Provider Support (EPS) grantees, as well as in partnership with community colleges and local institutions of higher education. Joint, or shared PD between public schools and community-based early education and care programs in all plans, either through joint whole-group training or coaching, highlighted the intention to leverage local expertise, align programming and increase overall quality across communities.

Approximately half of the communities have established collaborations with vocational high schools and/or local colleges and universities toward the goal of offering career pathways for educators. Through these collaborations, administrators would connect educators to coursework, practicum experiences, and in some cases, a cohort model approach to support degree attainment. In order to support the needs of a diverse workforce, some communities highlighted the need to establish and expand upon pathways for English Language Learners. One community is working to develop a pilot program for family child care providers by offering a competency-based strategy that takes both formal education and previous experience into account when determining qualifications

Transportation

Through needs assessments, most communities noted that transportation enabled families' access to preschool programming. Although an identified need, offering transportation services to families requires substantial funding and administrative oversight. Some communities indicated that transportation costs are prohibitive, and in an effort to accommodate the needs of families throughout a particular city, planning communities considered the following: classrooms in different geographic locations throughout the city, offering limited transportation, reducing costs through a central pick up and drop off location, and subsidizing public transportation for families when available. At least five plans include transportation costs in proposed budgets.

Comprehensive Services, Family Engagement and Special Education

Using Head Start as a model for considering the role of comprehensive services and family engagement strategies, many plans built on existing services already being offered throughout the community, but will likely require hiring additional staff to support these efforts.

Most plans outlined intensive comprehensive service supports, like mental and behavioral health, speech and language pathologists, to work with each expansion program. Most plans considered leveraging and/or enhancing existing services offered through the public school, while others consider separate consultants in plans for expansion.

In addition, family engagement specialists and family resource liaisons were included in most plans, recognizing the need to support the whole family as a priority for school readiness and

overall success. Home visiting, playgroups, community events, parent education programs, family resource and welcome centers, and centralized recruitment and enrollment services are consistently mentioned as strategies for family engagement.

When addressed, plans included the intention to provide services for children with identified special needs, with an IEP, in the child's primary education setting if possible. However, most also acknowledged the possibility that limited resources may require the child to receive these services in a public school setting. Increasing the prevalence of inclusion classrooms in non-public school settings may require additional professional development for educators and administrators.

III. Costs

Although all plans requested implementation funding from the state, some plans mentioned the potential for investment from local, philanthropic and private sources. Pittsfield, Springfield and Holyoke proposed partial funding with public school funds, Holyoke proposing the use of Chapter 70 funding. In the event the state would fund initial expansion efforts, a few included plans to gradually shift some costs to the local municipalities over time.

Consistent with PEG, many planning grant strategic plans included one-time start-up costs in the calculations of costs for implementation, particularly for those communities who would require new or renovated space. Other upfront costs included the purchase of classroom materials for new classrooms, and costs for offering professional development to educators.

After initial start-up costs, plans included various levels of detail for estimated operating costs, often using a cost per child approach, although there were no explicit requirements about how to identify costs. Plans identified a significant range of estimated costs per child, from approximately \$10,000 to \$31,000, although most plans indicated costs between \$13,000 to \$19,000 per child. These operating costs were associated largely with personnel, including educators, administrators from the public school districts and early learning providers, as well as other direct service providers like family engagement specialists, mental health clinicians, and coaches. Some plans reflected cost savings due to shared staff across the programs. Other expenses include utility costs, food and facility rent.

A considerable amount of in-kind costs were included in plans, including public school district and early learning provider administration staff time for overall grant management, materials, facility space and utilities, classroom materials, professional development resources, data analysts and technology support.

IV. Discussion

Strategic plans for preschool expansion indicate the need to expand access to high quality preschool and to improve the quality of existing programs. Although there was some variation in

the details of the plans, the general components included throughout explicitly outline how expansion of high quality preschool supports local goals and would fulfill unmet needs of children and families in the community. Program components outlined above provide a fundamental structure for approaching expansion, yet require a substantial investment to be successfully implemented.

The lack of single-source, comprehensive data on the children and families in each community made planning challenging; all communities needed to engage in direct data collection to fully understand how many children are and are not currently being served, program capacity, and needs/capacity of the workforce. Understanding the needs of children and families was essential for communities engaged in intentional programmatic and financial planning and could support efforts to obtain buy-in from various stakeholders, yet holistic information about local ECE systems was not readily available without direct data collection to supplement existing sources.

Communities all highlighted the need to provide intensive professional development, even for those with a Bachelor's degree, as well as explicit and clear pathways toward degree attainment for the educators in the existing workforce that do not have a Bachelor's. Many communities would continue to expand upon local partnerships to increase competency and support degree attainment through collaborations with colleges and universities, in response to the urgent need for qualified educators.

Although communities organized the planning efforts in different ways, many unequivocally stated the necessary role of the state and a broad range of local early childhood stakeholders to support these efforts, through convening planning communities to share best practices, providing guidance on the integration of policies and initiatives, and contributing to the buy in and awareness at the local level.

The activities that communities engaged in to plan for preschool expansion facilitated a necessary logistical and strategic planning process that arguably enhanced the foundation for effective implementation. The readiness of communities to engage in this process was largely related to the existing infrastructure and partnerships already in place at the local level. The development and enhancement of these local partnerships was critical, and the robust planning at the local level solidified goals and targeted actionable steps to implementation if funds were to become available.