

New York City's *Pre-K for All*

Family Perceptions



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New York City Center for Economic
Opportunity

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes families' engagement in the first year of the *Pre-K for All* program, and the effect this program had on participating families and children.

Findings described in this report are from two data sources: a family survey and focus groups with parents/guardians. The survey was conducted by telephone with 1,090 parents or guardians¹ from March to May 2015 to learn about families' experiences with the pre-K program their children attend. Focus groups were held at six pre-K centers in April and May 2015. A total of 67 relatives (mostly parents, with a few grandparents) attended these groups.

Findings are structured around the five research questions.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has a few limitations that should be kept in mind when reviewing findings. The survey and qualitative data are based on respondents' self-reports. Self-reported data can be influenced by respondents' ability to recall certain information, their understanding or interpretation of the questions, and their desire to appear a certain way to interviewers. Focus group participants were not representative of all parents. Many of those who participated volunteered with the school or their child's class making them more engaged with the program, and since all but one of the groups were held during typical workday hours, focus group participants may have been less likely to be employed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. **Selection.** How did families learn about *Pre-K for All*? How did they select their site?
2. **Transition to Pre-K.** What are families' perceptions of the orientation programs for children and parents? How else did programs prepare children and their families for pre-K?
3. **Communication and Engagement.** How do families communicate with *Pre-K for All* teachers and staff? How are families engaged and what resources do *Pre-K for All* programs provide?
4. **Satisfaction.** How satisfied are families with *Pre-K for All* and their participation in the program? What changes would they recommend?
5. **Perceived Impact.** What changes do families see in children? How has *Pre-K for All* influenced families' decisions around work and care for their children?

1. SELECTION

Survey findings indicate that **about a third of parents (34 percent) heard about the program their child attends from a friend or relative.** A quarter reported their child already attended the school where the pre-K program was, or they had another child or relative that attended or had previously attended that school. The most important factors in selecting their child's pre-K program among the surveyed parents were: impressions of teachers or other staff, information about class activities and curriculum, and location. Focus group participants also mentioned familiarity with the program and its' reputation, as well as location, space, and security. **Ninety-three percent of families responding to the survey reported that it was easy or very easy to apply for the pre-K program.**

¹ For the remainder of the report, we will use the terms "parents" or "families" instead of "parents and/or guardians."

2. TRANSITION TO PRE-K

Orientations at the beginning of the school year helped many families learn about the pre-K program. About 88 percent of survey respondents reported that their child's pre-K program had an orientation, and of these, 86 percent attended the orientation. **Among those that attended, about 93 percent found the orientation moderately or very helpful for learning about the pre-K program.** Far fewer parents (49 percent) reported that their child's pre-K program had other events or activities specifically designed to help children get ready for pre-K. However, three-quarters of parents reported that teachers worked with them to set goals for their children at the beginning of the school year.

3. COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The most frequent way that teachers and programs communicate with parents was face-to-face meetings such as parent-teacher conferences. In focus groups, parents reported that they frequently had and appreciated informal conversations with pre-K teachers as they dropped off and picked up their children. Surveys and focus groups indicated that communication through phone calls were also common, while less than half of surveyed parents received an email communication.

Most parents reported regularly receiving resources from the pre-K programs to support learning at home (77 percent at least monthly). Some parents (43 percent) also utilized resources from the NYC Department of Education (DOE) website. Overall, a large percentage of families (91 percent) reported that the events, activities, or communication from their child's pre-K program have been helpful to them in supporting their child's educational progress.

Focus group participants reported that parents were invited to attend holiday celebrations, to volunteer in the classroom, supervise children at lunch time, and chaperone field trips. Half of the pre-K programs attended by focus group participants also offered workshops to help parents at home. Two centers have "parent coordinators" who facilitate communication around group events.

4. SATISFACTION

Overall, **63 percent of surveyed parents rated the quality of their child's pre-K program as "excellent"** and 29 percent rated it as "good." The dimension most used by parents in forming their opinion of the quality of their child's pre-K program was quality of teaching (70 percent), followed by safe environment (48 percent). In the focus groups, when asked what they liked most about the pre-K program, many parents spoke about it giving their child a "head start" in school readiness. Parents valued preparation for kindergarten, both academically and in socialization with peers. And, across the board, parents greatly appreciated that the program was free.

5. PERCEIVED IMPACT

According to surveyed families, attending pre-K has improved their child's learning "a lot" (83 percent) and their child's behavior "a lot" (54 percent). Parents reported that the availability of universal pre-K affected decisions about child care and labor force participation. A little over half of surveyed parents (56 percent) reported a decrease in spending on childcare from last year to this year. About one in five

(20 percent) reported that participation in pre-K affected the number of hours they worked. Families reported various childcare alternatives if pre-K was not available, with focus group participants noting that other options (e.g., daycare, care by family members) would not prepare their child for kindergarten, which they highly valued.

INTRODUCTION

Westat, Metis Associates, and Branch Associates are conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the *Pre-K for All* initiative in New York City to assess the implementation and outcomes of this effort. The study consists of an ongoing assessment of New York City's *Pre-K for All* expansion efforts, both in terms of processes, structures, and policies that are in place to support and monitor the rapid expansion, as well as on-the-ground program implementation and delivery. Results from this study will help identify successful practices, challenges, and areas for growth.

This report describes families' engagement in the first year of the *Pre-K for All* program, and the effect this program had on participating families and children. Findings described in this report are from two data sources: a family survey and focus groups with parents/guardians, and are structured around the research questions presented in Figure 1. The survey was conducted by telephone from March to May 2015 to learn about families' experiences with the pre-K program their children attend. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Russian via Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI)

Figure 1. Research Questions

1. **Selection.** How did families learn about *Pre-K for All*? How did they select their site?
2. **Transition to Pre-K.** What are families' perceptions of the orientation programs for children and parents? How else did programs prepare children and their families for pre-K?
3. **Communication and Engagement.** How do families communicate with *Pre-K for All* teachers and staff? How are families engaged and what resources do *Pre-K for All* programs provide?
4. **Satisfaction.** How satisfied are families with *Pre-K for All* and their participation in the program? What changes would they recommend?
5. **Perceived Impact.** What changes do families see in children? How has *Pre-K for All* influenced families' decisions around work and care for their children?

by Westat's Telephone Research Center. Westat initially selected a simple random sample of 1,500 families from a list of 8,459. During data collection, 1,500 additional families were sampled.² In total, 1,090 parents or guardians completed the survey for a response rate of 41 percent.^{3,4} Families received a \$20 Target gift card for completing the survey. The survey asked about the application and enrollment process, the quality of the program their child attends, their child's experiences in the program, the frequency and satisfaction with communications from program staff, and their participation in any family engagement activities.

The children of the families who completed the survey were representative of all children in the *Pre-K for All* program. Forty-eight percent of children whose families responded to the survey were female compared to 49 percent of all children in the program. The children of families that responded were also very similar to all children in the program with regard to the type of center the children attended and the borough

² Additional families were sampled to replace families that refused to participate, were found to be ineligible, could not be located, or had non-working phone numbers.

³ Sixty-one ineligible families and 255 families with non-working numbers were removed for a total of 2,284 in the denominator of the response rate.

⁴ To explore any threat from non-response bias, researchers mailed a shortened, paper version of the survey to 100 families that were sampled for the interview but had not responded by the end of data collection. Thirty-seven families completed and

where the center was located. Forty-nine percent of respondent children and 51 percent of all children attended programs in district schools while 39 percent of respondent children and 37 percent of all children attended programs operated by independent organizations under contract to the Department of Education. Twenty-eight percent of respondent children and 32 percent of all children attended centers in Brooklyn, while 32 percent of respondent children and 27 percent of all children attended centers in Queens.

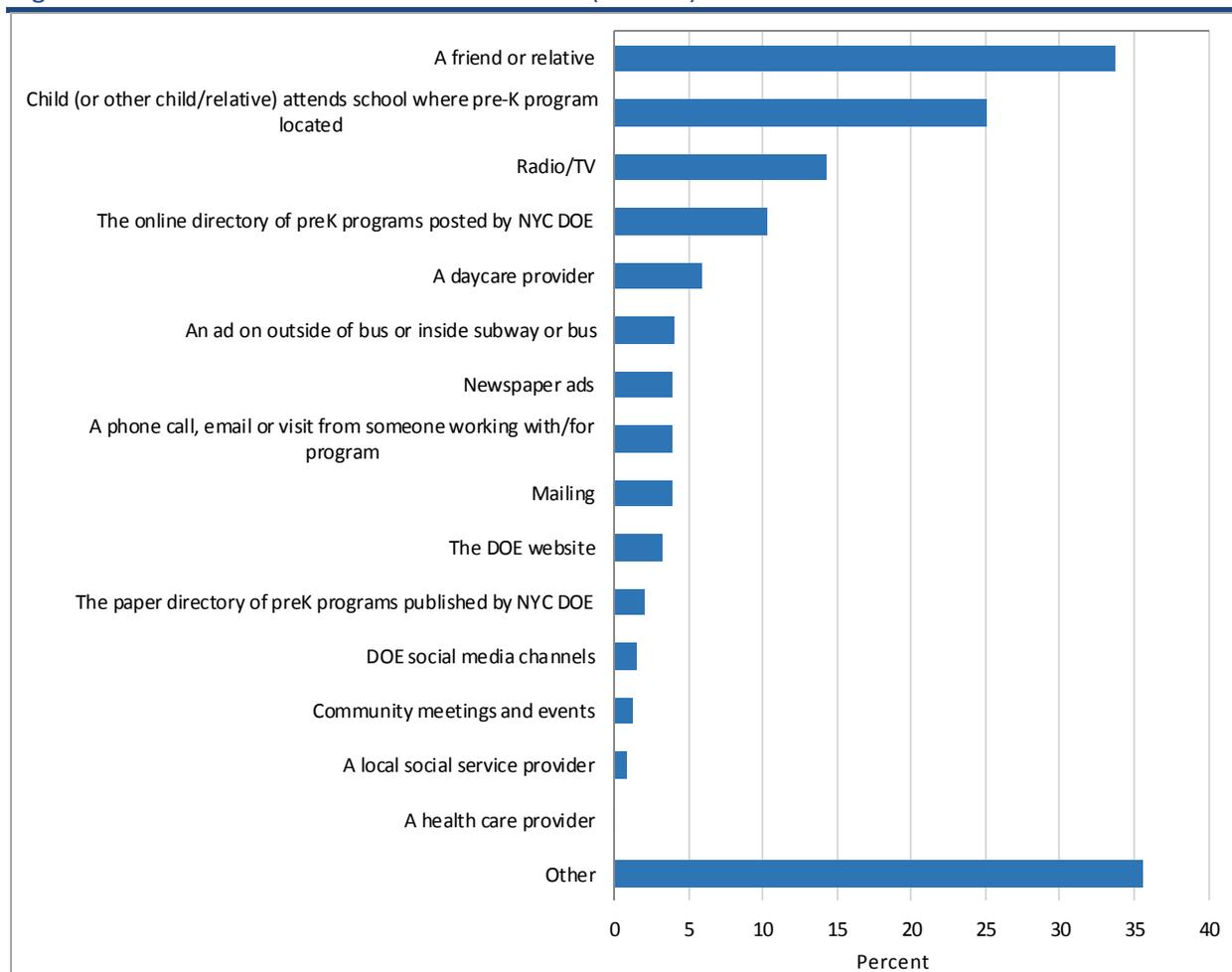
Focus groups were held at six centers in April and May 2015. A total of 67 relatives (mostly parents, with a few grandparents) attended these groups. The centers included a mix of public schools and community-based centers under contract to the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) that are providing pre-K under the Department of Education (DOE) *Pre-K for All* program. Centers with 40 or more slots were contacted by email and phone and invited to host a focus group at their site. Sites that agreed were responsible for recruiting family members to participate in the focus group. Refreshments were provided, but individuals did not receive incentives for participating in the focus groups.

returned the paper survey, which contained 17 items. No systematic patterns of non-response bias were evident when comparing data from the initial respondents and non-respondents.

1. PRE-K FOR ALL SITE SELECTION

The survey asked respondents how they heard about the pre-K program, ease of the application process, and how they chose a program for their child. **About a third of parents (34 percent) reported that they heard about the program their child attended from a friend or relative** (Figure 2). Parents with children at ACS centers were **more** likely than parents with children at DOE centers or public schools to have heard about the program from a friend or relative (44 percent versus 37 percent and 28 percent, respectively).⁵ A quarter reported their child already attended the school where the pre-K program was, or they had another child or relative that attended or had previously attended that school.⁶ Other ways parents heard about the program include: signage and flyers, from the neighborhood or live nearby, or through the school zone.

Figure 2. How Families Heard About *Pre-K For All* (N=1082)



⁵ Chi-square, $p < .05$

⁶ This response was added to Figure 2 based on responses to “other” ways parents heard about the pre-K program.

Parents in the focus groups reported a similar list of how they heard about their child's pre-K program, with many having sent one or more children there before, and others who learned about the program from relatives or friends. Focus group parents also heard about pre-K programs through:

- List from NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS)
- Calls to the 311 hotline number
- Referral from another pre-K facility that was already full
- Passing by the school and saw that it was close to home

Seventy-six percent of parents reported that their child was assigned to their first choice program (in 2014–15).

Ninety-three percent of parents responding to the survey reported that it was easy or very easy to apply for the pre-K program. Ninety-five percent and 92 percent of parents of children at public school programs and DOE centers, respectively, reported it was easy or very easy to apply, versus 87 percent of parents of children at ACS centers.⁷ Among those who found the application process difficult, the most common reasons were issues related to a lack of space in the program or being put on a waiting list.

About a third of the survey respondents (34 percent) reported that they received help or information from DOE or ACS in selecting or enrolling in a pre-K program. Parents of children at centers in the Bronx and Queens (40 percent and 37 percent, respectively) were **more** likely to receive help than parents from other boroughs.⁸ Non-English speakers were also more likely to have received help.⁹ Among Spanish-speaking parents/guardians,¹⁰ 84 percent reported that enough information about the pre-K program was available in Spanish. Over 90 percent of Spanish speakers reported that application materials were available in Spanish.

On the survey, over 80 percent of parents identified the following factors as "very important" in choosing a pre-K program (Figure 3):

- impressions of teachers or other staff (91 percent);
- information about class activities and curriculum (88 percent);
- location (86 percent); and
- impressions from a visit to the pre-K program (82 percent).

Parents of children in centers in the Bronx were **more** likely than other parents to report that impressions of teachers and other staff (95 percent) and the agency running the pre-K program (76 percent) were very important factors in choosing a program.¹¹

When asked to pick **one** factor that was the most important, 29 percent selected impressions of teachers or other staff, 23 percent selected location, and 20 percent selected information about class activities and curriculum. Parents of children at public school programs were **more** likely to select

⁷ Chi-square, $p < .05$

⁸ Chi-square, $p < .05$

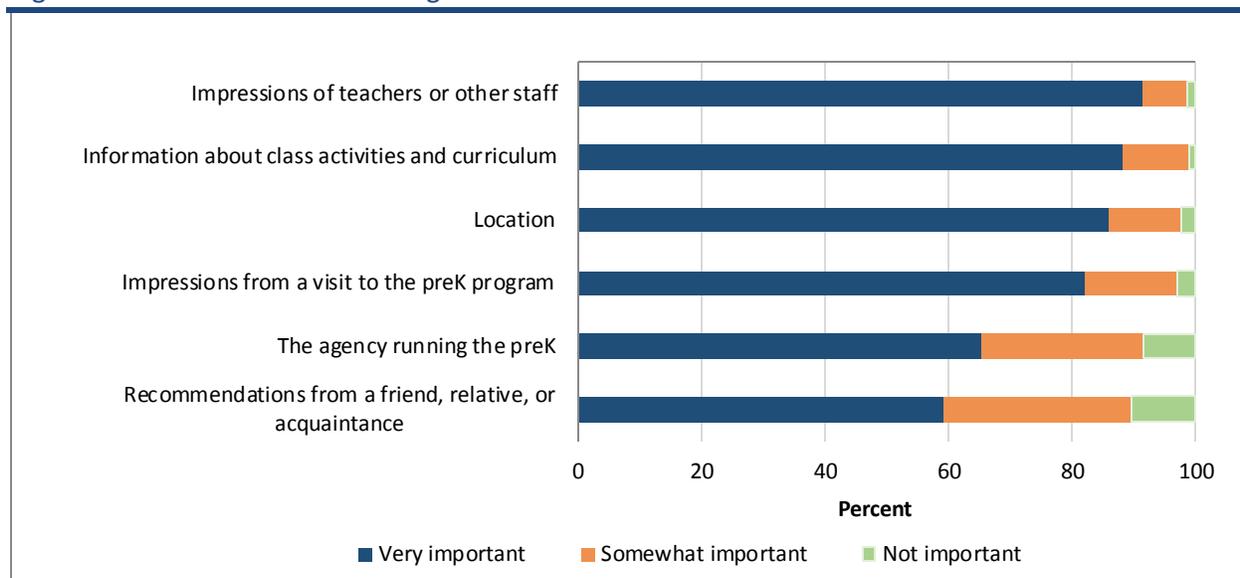
⁹ Forty-five percent of non-English speakers reported receiving help or information from DOE or ACS in selecting or enrolling child in pre-K compared to 29 percent of English-speakers (chi-square, $p < .05$).

¹⁰ Thirteen percent ($n=142$) of family survey respondents spoke Spanish.

¹¹ Chi-square, $p < .05$

location than parents of children at DOE or ACS centers (26 percent versus 20 percent and 18 percent, respectively).¹²

Figure 3. How Families Chose a Program



NOTE: Other factors mentioned as very important were: factors related to hours of operation and schedule (full-day or not; afterschool hours) (22 percent); class size (9 percent); cost (5 percent); and cleanliness (3 percent).

For parents in the focus groups, familiarity with the program predisposed families to choose centers where their child or child’s sibling had previously attended. The program’s reputation was another important factor. For example, one parent who learned about pre-K after receiving a mailing from the Department of Education, said she then looked at the list to find the best schools in the area and selected the school based on recommendations from several other parents.

Location was also important to many. However, even when families moved away, if they had been happy at the school or center, they sometimes kept their children in place despite the long travel requirements. Convenience to transportation and locations near work were also mentioned. One parent applied to other schools, but was waitlisted so she opted for her neighborhood school.

Parents took into account the space, classroom size, and access to outdoor play areas. Parents also based their decision on the school structure and educational curriculum. Parents were also concerned with security; one mother said that seeing a security guard and cameras alleviated her concerns about leaving her child to go to work.

My daughter transferred here, or attended school here after attending another site that we weren't happy about. For me in looking at some of the schools including this one, the size and location and availability, the spac[e], ...I like the environment versus another site. [The other site] was too much babysitting, and I didn't see any educational aspect in it. And another site, their school was very good, but they didn't have any space, so the child would just be in one room all day, and there was no playground.

Parent

¹² Chi-square, p<.05

2. TRANSITION TO PRE-K

The survey asked a number of questions about pre-K orientation or other events at the beginning of the school year. About 88 percent of families reported that their child's pre-K program had an orientation for families to learn about the pre-K program at the beginning of the school year; of these, 86 percent attended the orientation.¹³ Among those that attended, about 93 percent found the orientation moderately or very helpful for learning about the pre-K program.

About half of families (49 percent) reported that their child's pre-K program had events or activities other than a general orientation at the beginning of the school year to help children get ready for pre-K. Of these, about 86 percent reported that their child attended the event/activity, and 94 percent who attended reported the event/activity was moderately or very helpful with the transition to pre-K.

The survey also asked about goal setting and other communication at the start of the school year to support the transition to pre-K. Three-quarters of parents reported that teachers worked with them to set goals for their children. Furthermore, more than three quarters of parents reported that the pre-K teachers asked about their child's health (89 percent), behavioral (77 percent), and learning needs (77 percent) at the beginning of the school year.

Parents of children at DOE centers were **less** likely to report activities to prepare for the transition to pre-K, compared parents of children at ACS centers and public schools. For example, 83 percent of parents at DOE centers reported that their center held an orientation, compared to 93 percent at ACS centers and 91 percent at public schools. Parents at DOE centers were less likely to report that their centers held events or activities other than orientations to prepare for pre-K, and were less likely to report that teachers worked with them to set goals for their child at the beginning of the year or that teachers asked about their child's behavioral needs.¹⁴

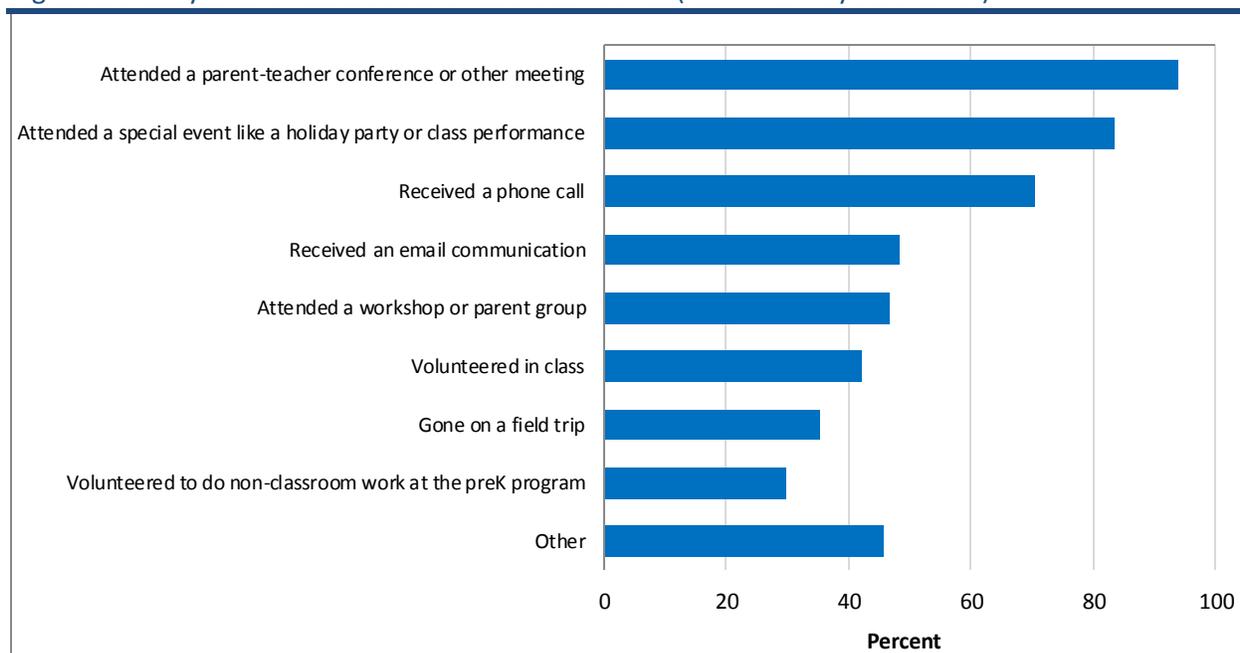
¹³ English-speakers were more likely to attend orientation than non-English speakers: 88 percent versus 81 percent (chi-square, $p < .05$).

¹⁴ Events/activities other than orientation: 44 percent (DOE), 50 percent (PS), 65 percent (ACS). Teachers work with parents to set goals for year: 67 percent (DOE), 78 percent (PS), 85 percent (ACS). Teacher asks about child's behavioral needs at beginning of year: 73 percent (DOE), 78 percent (PS), 86 percent (ACS). Chi-square, $p < .05$.

3. COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

A number of questions on the survey asked about communication and support throughout the school year. The most frequent way that teachers and programs communicate with families was face-to-face meetings such as parent-teacher conferences (Figure 4). Phone calls were also common, while less than half of parents received an email communication.^{15 16}

Figure 4. Family Contact with Teachers and Center Staff (since school year started)



More than twice as many parents make time to attend a special event like a holiday party or class performance (83 percent) than volunteer (42 percent) or go on a field trip (35 percent). English-speaking parents were more likely to have volunteered in the classroom than non-English-speaking parents.¹⁷

Parents of children in DOE centers were **less** likely to report being involved in pre-K programs in various ways, compared to parents of children in ACS centers or public schools. For example, parents of children in DOE centers were less likely to attend a special event, attend a workshop or parent group, go on a field trip, or volunteer in class.¹⁸ It is not clear whether these centers had fewer opportunities to get involved or whether parents were less likely to be involved. Parents of children in Manhattan programs

¹⁵ Parents of children at ACS centers were **less** likely than parents of children at DOE centers or public schools to receive email communication (38 percent versus 51 percent and 49 percent, respectively). In addition, parents of children in Manhattan programs were **more** likely to receive emails from teachers and staff than other parents. Chi-square, $p < .05$.

¹⁶ "Other" forms of contact between families and pre-K teachers and staff were: written communications (letters, mailings, notes, folders sent home with child, etc.) (23 percent); face-to-face contact (17 percent); and texts or social media/websites (5 percent).

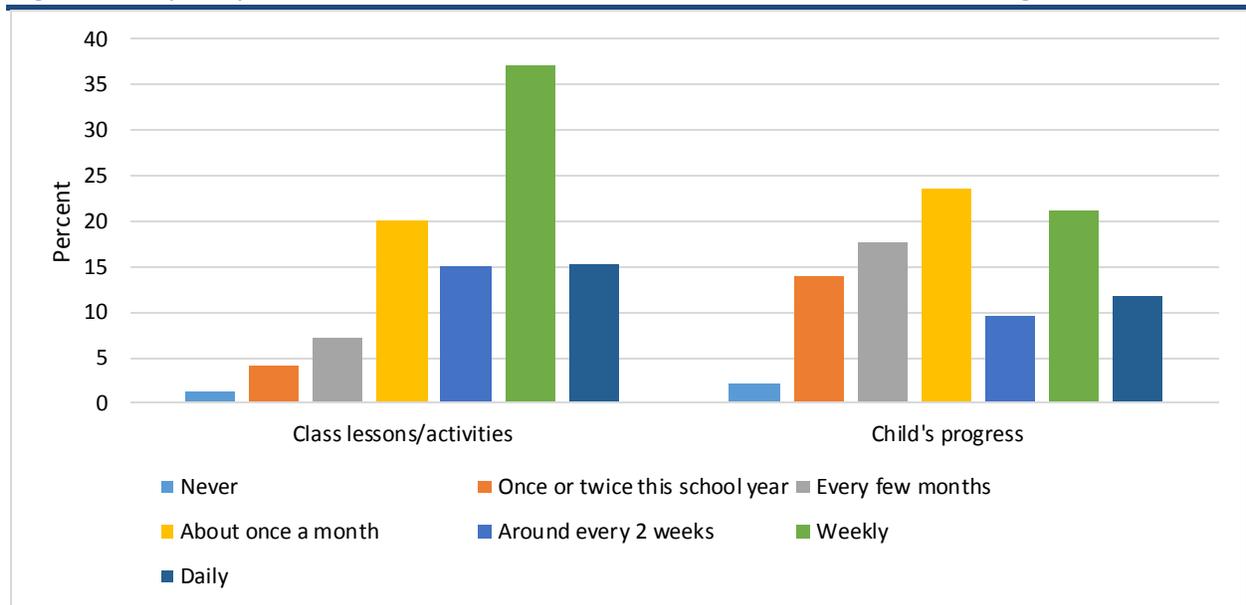
¹⁷ Volunteer in class: 47 percent English-speakers versus 30 percent non-English speakers; volunteer to do non-classroom work: 32 percent of English-speakers versus 23 percent non-English speakers. Chi-square, $p < .05$.

¹⁸ Attend special event: 81 percent (DOE), 91 percent (ACS), 84 percent (PS). Attend workshop/parent group: 36 percent (DOE), 58 percent (ACS), 52 percent (PS). Go on a field trip: 29 percent (DOE), 37 percent (ACS), 40 percent (PS). Volunteer: 35 percent (DOE), 54 percent (ACS), 45 percent (PS). Chi-square, $p < .05$.

were **more** likely to participate in various activities, such as workshops, field trips, and volunteer work compared to other parents.¹⁹

Families reported on the survey how often during the school year pre-K staff communicated with them about class activities and about their child’s progress, in writing or by email, phone, or in person (Figure 5). About two-thirds of parents (68 percent) reported that staff communicated about class lessons or activities at least every two weeks. About 43 percent reported that staff communicated about their child’s progress at least every two weeks; 41 percent reported this occurred about every month or few months.

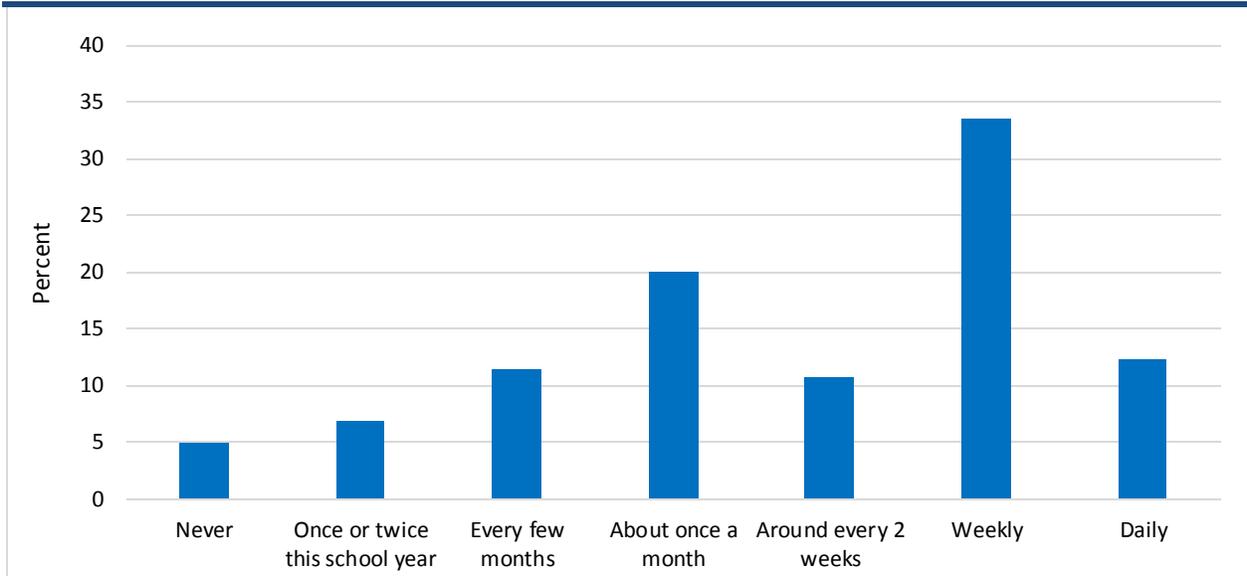
Figure 5. Frequency of Communication about Class Lessons/Activities and Child’s Progress



¹⁹ Chi-square, $p < .05$.

On the survey, families also reported how often they received materials or communications about activities to do with their child at home to support learning in the pre-K program (Figure 6). Over half of parents (57 percent) reported receiving such materials or communications at least every two weeks. An additional 32 percent reported receiving them about every month or few months. Five percent reported they never received materials or communications from their child’s pre-K program about home activities to do with their child.²⁰

Figure 6. Frequency of Receipt of Materials to Support At-Home Activities



²⁰ More parents of children at DOE centers reported never receiving these materials compared to parents at ACS centers and public schools: 7 percent (DOE), 3 percent (ACS), 4 percent (PS). Chi-square, $p < .05$.

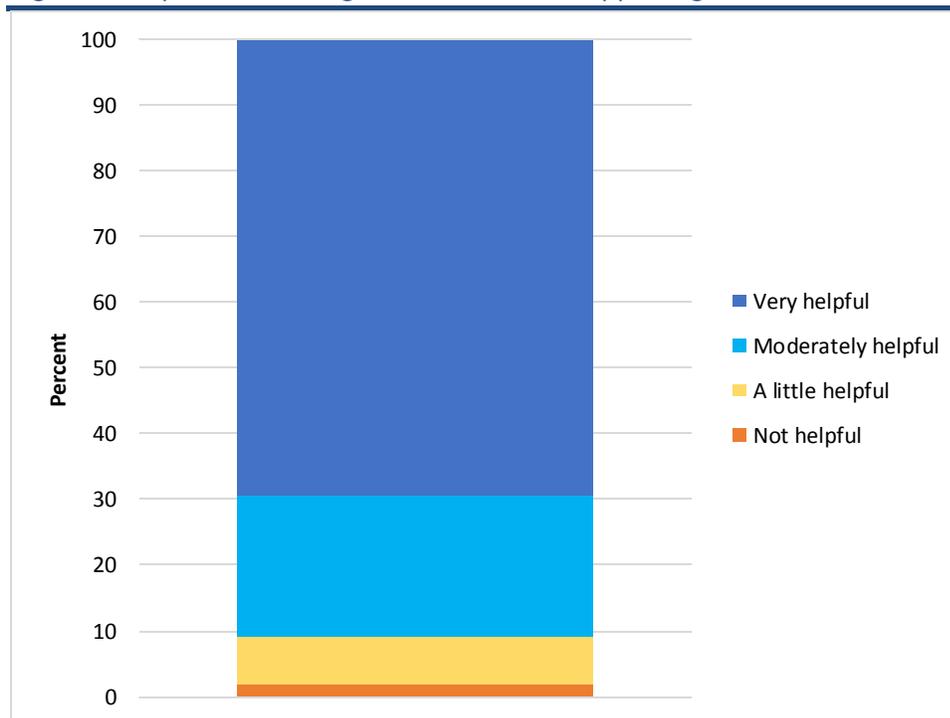
Of those who received materials, about 80 percent of parents said that they have tried some of the learning activities or other suggestions recommended by the pre-K program at least once (55 percent have tried them several times). English-speakers were more likely to have tried the at-home activities than non-English speakers (82 percent versus 73 percent).²¹ Among those who have tried the activities, 91 percent reported they were moderately or very effective in helping with their child’s learning or behavior. Those who had tried the recommended activities several times were more likely to rate the activities as “very effective” in helping their child compared to those who only tried them once or twice (61 percent versus 39 percent).

NYC DOE also provides resources for families on their website. About 43 percent of survey respondents reported that they looked at any of the online resources on the DOE website related to educating families about how they can support their children’s growth during pre-K (such as the “Welcome to Pre-K Guide”).²² Among those, 87 percent reported they found the resources moderately or very helpful in supporting their child’s growth and development.

Forty-three percent of families reported using the resources posted on the DOE website.

Overall, about 91 percent of families reported that the events, activities, or communications from their child’s pre-K program have been moderately or very helpful to them in supporting their child’s specific educational progress (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Helpfulness of Program to Families in Supporting Their Child’s Educational Progress



²¹ Chi-square, p<.05

²² Parents of children at ACS centers were less likely to look at DOE’s website for resources: 28 percent (ACS) versus 43 percent (DOE) and 46 percent (PS). Chi-square, p<.05.

The parent focus groups also addressed communication between families and teachers, participation in school activities, and assistance with learning in the home. Parents reported engaging in informal conversations with pre-K teachers as they dropped off and picked up their children. Parents described feeling welcomed when staff greeted their children by name in the morning. In addition, parents said they communicate with teachers via phone calls and email. Some said they communicate as frequently as daily, others said twice a week, and for others it occurred only if there was a specific incident that they needed to discuss.

Parents appreciated access to teachers if they had an immediate concern and not having to wait for the formal parent/teacher conference. They also liked being kept up-to-date on a variety of issues by the teachers. Parent-teacher communication concerned children’s behavior, health issues or concerns, academic and social progress, and upcoming events.

Parents were invited to attend holiday celebrations, to volunteer in the classroom, supervise children at lunch time, and chaperone field trips. Some were also invited to help during school routines such as breakfast, staying with children in the auditorium until school starts, and helping children line up during the day. Some teachers welcomed parents to come in as volunteers in the classroom to read to the children. At two centers, parents were invited to participate in parent

associations (called the Parent Council at one center and the Parent Teacher Association at the other). Communication about events occurs through word-of-mouth during parents’ daily interactions with teachers at drop off and pick up times, as well as through monthly calendars and flyers that come home and are posted around the building. Two centers have “parent coordinators” who facilitate communication around group events.

You don't really have to set an appointment. If you come in the morning and there's a problem that your child might have had the day before, you can get a pass and go see the teacher for about 5 minutes. They will take time and talk to you And I like that because I don't have to wait until parent-teacher conference. They're always available for you.

Parent

Not surprisingly, work schedules make it challenging for employed parents to get engaged with their child’s school. One program held some activities in the evening and provided child care to facilitate participation. Whereas calendars showing events allowed parents to plan ahead, at one center, parents cited lack of a calendar and no advance notice about events, which seriously hindered their participation.

In addition to inviting parents to participate in activities with their children in school, three of the six pre-K programs attended by focus group participants offered workshops to help families at home, addressing topics such as child behavior and discipline, parent/child communication, bullying, and nutrition.²³ At one center that tied its workshop on nutrition to what was being taught in the classroom, several parents commented on their children’s new-found interest in choosing healthy snacks and meals. One center ran a 14-week workshop series on parenting skills. One parent spoke about the usefulness of learning about “time outs” and how and when to use this parenting strategy.

²³ Two were ACS programs and one was a DOE public school.

Out-of-school enrichment activities was another way pre-K programs engage parents in children's learning at home. Homework most often consisted of worksheet packets and reading with the child or instructions to practice with children what they are learning at school. Parents in the focus groups voiced strong opinions about homework, with some favoring it and others feeling it was not age-appropriate for preschoolers to have homework; some felt their children had too little and others too much. On the positive side, parents enjoyed engaging with their children and saw homework as a window into what they were learning at school. On the other hand, some parents felt their children had too much homework and preferred their children to spend more time at play.

Most felt the daily requirement of reading a book to the child was important and key to their child's reading and vocabulary progress. One parent pointed out that some of the content of the homework is beyond the child's knowledge so parents are almost "required" to teach it at home. To encourage children to enjoy reading, one center loans each child a book every week that parents are expected to read with their child.

There was one time where the teacher assigned homework, which was to make a train, any kind of train. So, me as a New Yorker, I chose the M Train..... So—and he was there all happy, drawing—mommy the train—showing it off everywhere. And, you know, we were relating what we did to the actual trains and I was teaching him and he was responding back to me.

Parent

I like to buy them books but.... It's really hard. So it's nice to have a new book every week that I have to return back and then get a new one. We can do that in a library, but we get it right here.

Parent

4. SATISFACTION

Overall, **63 percent of surveyed families rated the quality of their child’s pre-K program as “excellent”** and 29 percent rated it as “good” (Figure 8). The dimension most used by respondents in forming their opinion of the quality of their child’s pre-K program was quality of teaching (70 percent), followed by safe environment (48 percent) (Figure 9) (respondents could select their top two).

Figure 8. Rating of Program Quality

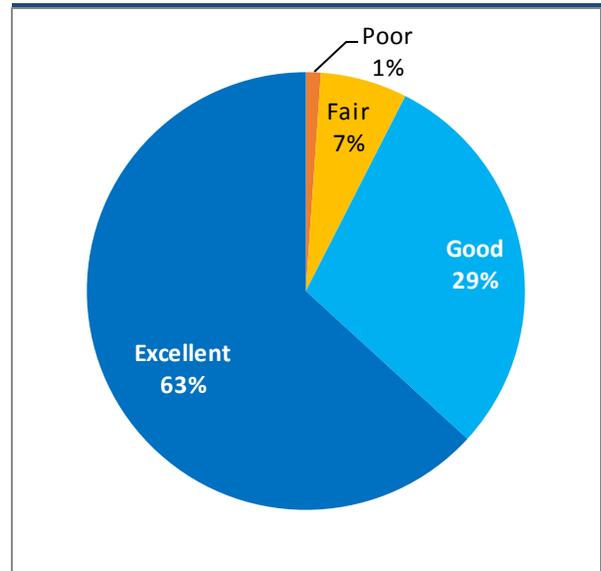
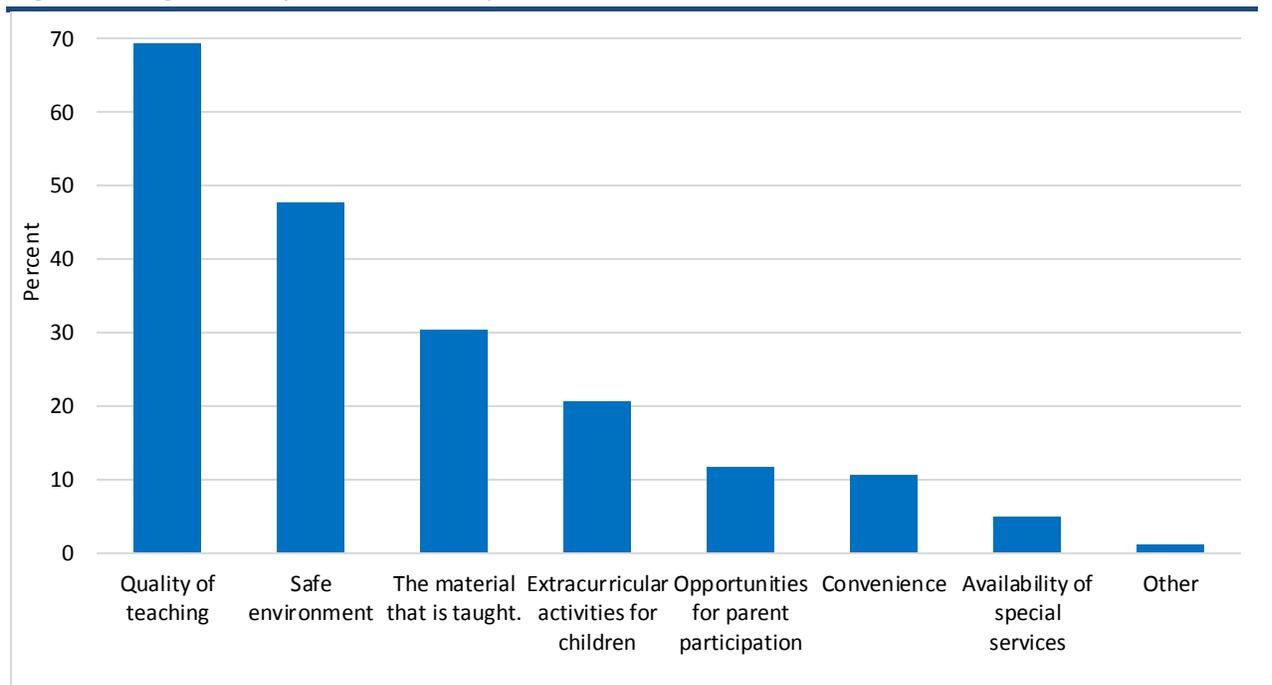
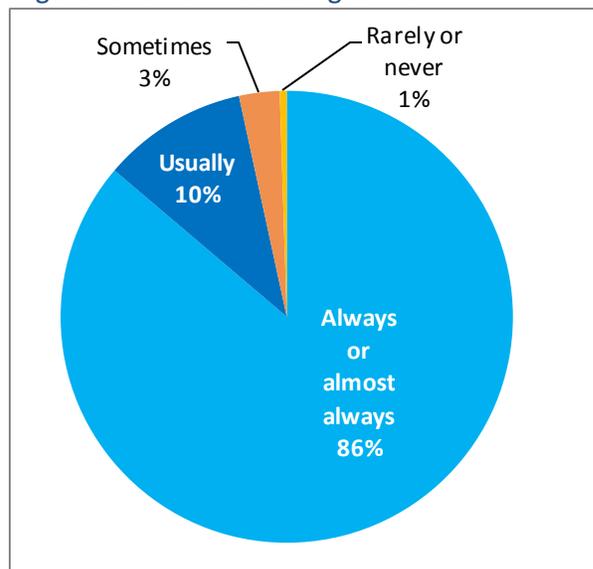


Figure 9. Program Components Most Important to Families



Many families also reported that their children like going to their pre-K program. About 86 percent of the survey respondents reported that their child always or almost always likes going to pre-K (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Child Likes Going to Pre-K



Survey respondents were read a number of statements and asked to consider how much each statement sounded like their experience with pre-K this year (Figure 11). Over 90 percent of families agreed “a lot” with the following:

- My child is safe at the pre-K program (96 percent);
- My child’s pre-K program communicates with me in a language that I can understand (95 percent²⁴);
- The space where my child attends pre-K is clean (94 percent); and
- I feel welcome at my child’s pre-K program (91 percent).

Beyond these basic program qualities (safety, cleanliness, etc.), at least 80 percent of parents also agreed “a lot” with the following statements about communication and partnership with the pre-K programs (Figure 11):

- I am satisfied with the response I get when I contact my child’s pre-K program staff with questions or concerns (88 percent);
- The pre-K program keeps me informed about my child’s progress (84 percent);
- I am treated as a partner in my child’s learning at my child’s pre-K (81 percent); and
- The pre-K program shares information with me to tell me about my child’s achievements and successes (80 percent).

Parents of children at Bronx centers were **more** likely to report the pre-K programs kept them informed of their child’s progress, shared child’s achievements and success, and treated them as a partner in their child’s learning compared to other parents.²⁵

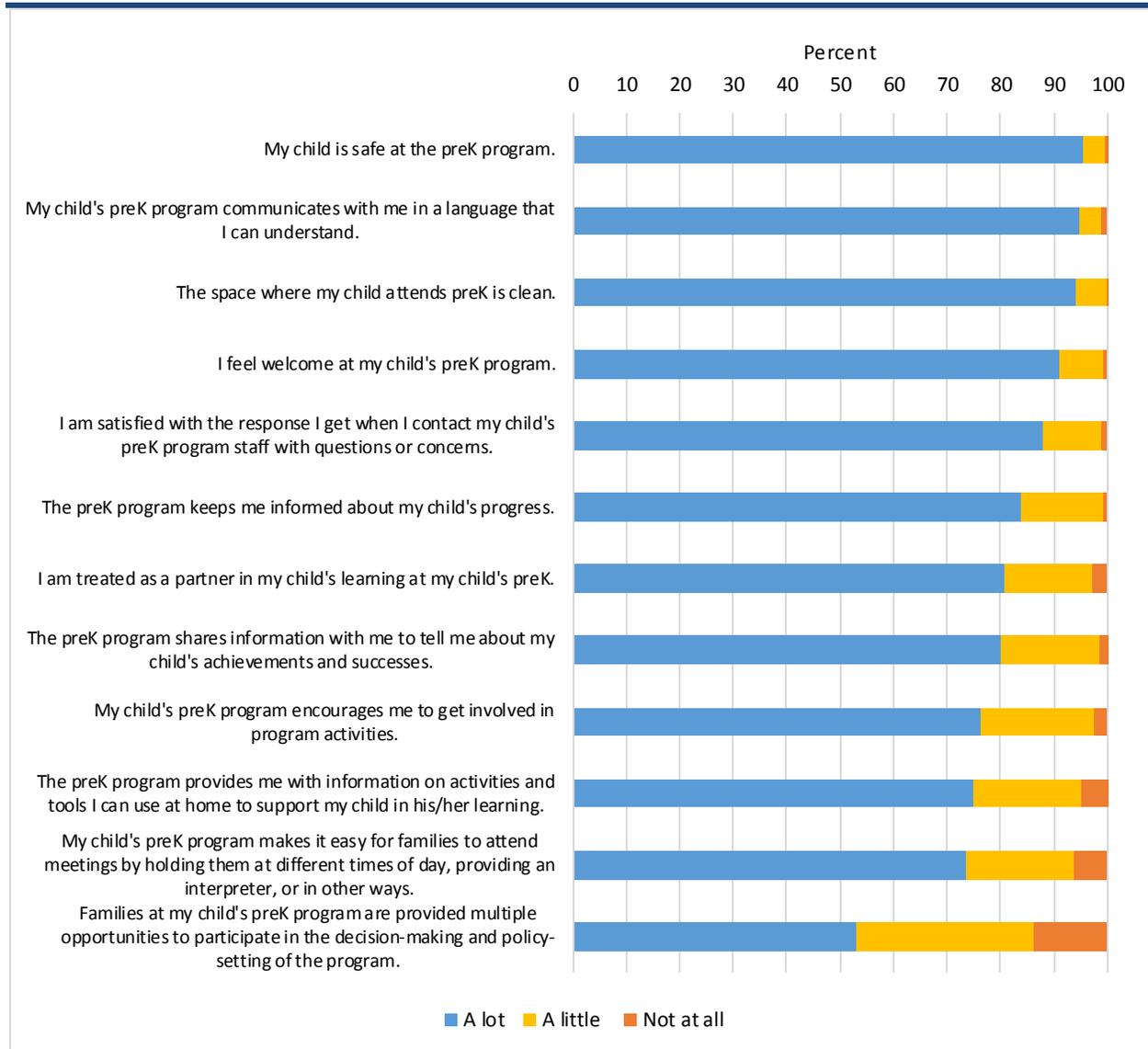
Fewer parents (53 percent) reported that families at the pre-K program are provided opportunities to participate in decision-making and policy-setting.²⁶

²⁴ Eighty-eight percent of Spanish-speaking parents reported this statement sounded like their experience “a lot.”

²⁵ Keeps informed on child’s progress a lot: 92 percent (Bronx), 81 percent (Brooklyn), 83 percent (Manhattan), 82 percent (Queens), 87 percent (Staten Island). Shares child’s achievements and successes a lot: 90 percent (Bronx), 80 percent (Brooklyn), 70 percent (Manhattan), 79 percent (Queens), 82 percent (Staten Island). Treated as partner in child’s learning a lot: 93 percent (Bronx), 81 percent (Brooklyn), 74 percent (Manhattan), 78 percent (Queens), 80 percent (Staten Island). Chi-square, $p < .05$.

²⁶ Parents of children in centers located in the Bronx were most likely to report opportunities to participate in decision-making and policy-setting: 69 percent (Bronx), 51 percent (Brooklyn), 49 percent (Manhattan), 52 percent (Queens), 32 percent (Staten Island). Chi-square, $p < .05$.

Figure 11. Family Agreement with the Following Statements



Focus group parents' overall satisfaction with their child's pre-K program was evident in the fact that all the parents from five of the six centers said they would recommend the pre-K program to others (or already had). Views were mixed at the sixth center, with a couple of parents expressing reservations about the program's curriculum (i.e., felt the children were not learning enough and would not be fully prepared for kindergarten) and they felt children spent too long napping in the afternoon.

In the focus groups, when asked what they liked most about the pre-K program, many parents spoke about it giving their child a "head start" in school readiness.

Families valued preparation for kindergarten, both academically and in socialization with peers. And, across the board, parents were grateful that the program was free.

Families also valued the field trips for expanding their children's cultural experiences. One center's partnership with the YMCA allowed children to get swim lessons. Another pre-K program operated out of a larger organization that was uniformly praised for serving the whole family.

In the focus groups, family members discussed their satisfaction for various facets of their pre-K program including: staff and teachers, curriculum, location, hours, and classroom space.

And the great thing about your child being in this program is that your family is open to the other resources, so if you need any family resources, or if your child needs anything outside of the classroom, they're more than happy to find you the resources, point you to where you need to go, so it's a very holistic program

Parent

- **Staff and teachers**

Parents praised teachers for being accessible, compassionate, patient, and making an effort on behalf of students. Some parents spoke about the help they received from staff in finding the right services for children with physical, cognitive, and behavioral issues. One parent liked that there were a lot of male teachers and staff. Turnover was a problem for one parent, who said she was still getting to know the current teacher.

- **Curriculum**

When asked to rate the center's curriculum (on a scale from unsatisfied to extremely satisfied) parents were divided; nearly all parents at two centers rated the curriculum at the high end, parents at one center were uniformly dissatisfied, and parents at the other three centers varied in their views. On the positive side, parents saw progress in children's academic readiness and applauded their centers' curriculum. These parents noticed improvements in writing, vocabulary and/or math skills. On the other side, parents believed there was too little exposure to academics or that the curriculum weighted too heavily on "teaching to the test." Parents concerned about their child's academic progress worried that their child would not be prepared for the structured and demanding environment they will face in kindergarten.

I think this is the best thing that ever happened for a lot of mothers who can't afford it. It's affordable.

Parent

I wish that they had ...more exposure to writing, because when they enter kindergarten, they're going to be in a bigger school setting with older children, and it's going to be more structured. So I don't want my child to be kind of surprised that there's so many expectations of them, and they will just kind of shut down, or have a difficult time transitioning.

A few parents felt the lack of individualized instruction thwarted the progress of children who had started the year more academically advanced than their peers. One parent, whose child was the oldest in his class, felt his behavioral issues were a result of boredom:

my son—he was the oldest one in his class at a point. ...So with him, it's like he knew everything that was going on in the class, so he felt as if—like from my experience, it caused his behavior to be more aggressive than what it was. Because he knew everything, and he felt like he had to just sit down and focus on stuff he already knew.

- **Location**

A convenient location was frequently a key factor in families' selection of the program with many choosing sites close to their homes, so it is not surprising they rated the location of their centers quite highly. Location was an issue for a few families who had moved but were happy with the center and chose to keep children there, or for those who did not get their first choice of center. Convenience to the train lines was a factor in parents' satisfaction with one center's location.

It's convenient, in the vicinity of our family members to just walk and go pick him up and not worry about it being too far to walk.

- **Hours**

At five of the six centers, families were extremely satisfied with the hours of care. Parents at one center objected that the official start time was 8:30 am, but teachers often did not arrive until 9:00 am. Despite the general sense of satisfaction, even "full day" pre-K creates issues for working parents when the hours conflict with work obligations. According to some parents, when care lasted until mid-afternoon, parents who were still at work (or who had to get to work) had to scramble to find someone to pick up their child. One mother said she had to stop working, in part because of the hours. Previously, when parents paid for day care, they could drop off at 7 am and pick up at 6 pm, so for some, the pre-K hours were shorter than what they were used to. Even though the dismissal time was an issue for some working parents, parents made it clear that a half-day program would have been worse.

They could do something about the hours, because parents have to work, and you don't necessarily have someone to pick up your child for you.

The hours are—not good for a lot of people. If you work, say you go to 7:00 to 3:00, you can't drop them off before 8:00 o'clock. Right. So and you have to find somebody to drop them off at 8:00, which when you were paying, you could drop them off at 7:00 o'clock and you could pick them up at 6:00 o'clock. So the hours is like people have to be trying to work themselves into the hours. The hours are difficult.

- **Classroom space**

Views of classroom space differed across the centers. At one end, families were extremely satisfied, with several saying the space was one of reasons they initially chose the center. At the one center where space and facilities was the biggest concern, the lack of a playground and space large enough to hold group activities were the main points of dissatisfaction. One parent voiced concerns about the safety and cleanliness of a center's use of a public playground.

Family Recommendations to Improve Pre-K for All

Finally, the survey asked what parents would change about their pre-K experience. Almost half (49 percent) responded that there was nothing they would change.²⁷ The recommendations most often mentioned to the open-ended question were extending the hours of pre-K and providing afterschool care; and assigning more homework or having a more academic focus.

Parents in the focus groups voiced similar recommendations such as extended hours and additional aftercare slots, access to a playground (in a site where it was lacking), and a more structured/academic curriculum. Some parents wanted changes in homework amounts (but whether they wanted less or more varied based on their current experience). A few parents mentioned they would like more individualized attention for children at different levels of learning. Parents who experienced issues with teachers would like to see more teachers with expertise in early child development so they accurately identify normal versus problem behaviors.

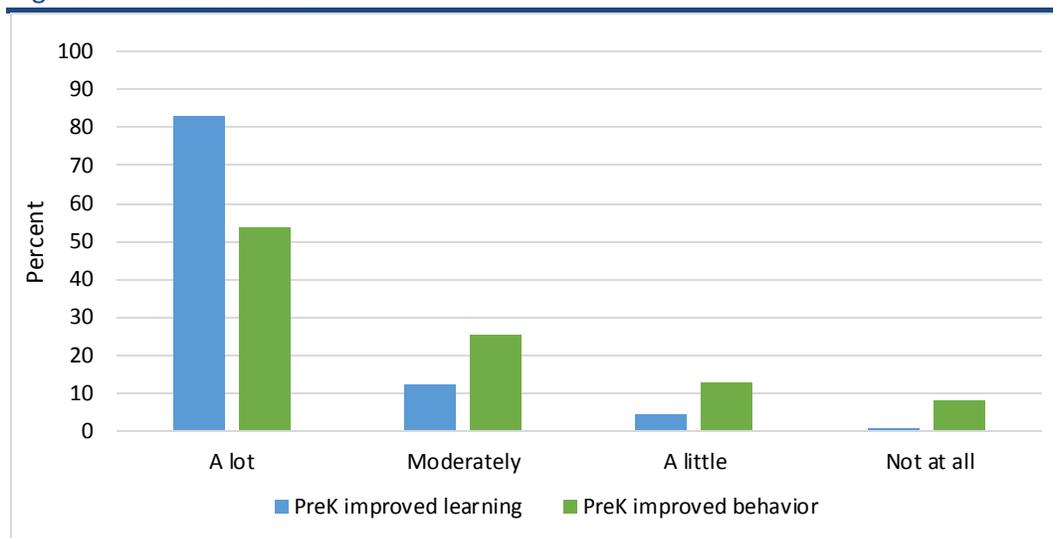
²⁷ Eighty-one respondents also skipped this question.

5. PERCEIVED IMPACTS

Family Reported Impacts on Children

In the survey and focus groups, families were asked about the effects of the pre-K program on their child (as of the time data collection, spring 2015). About 83 percent of surveyed parents reported that attending pre-K has improved their child’s learning “a lot” (Figure 12).²⁸ A little over half (54 percent) reported that attending pre-K has improved their child’s behavior “a lot”; another 26 percent reported it improved “moderately.”

Figure 12. Effects on Child



Parents in the focus groups said they had noticed academic, social, and behavioral changes in their children that they attribute to the pre-K program. Parents cited children’s progress in reading and vocabulary, writing, and number recognition. One parent’s description of reading with her son illustrates the influence that attending pre-K has had for this family at home:

With my son.... he gets so excit[ed] when we read a book. He explains to me everything. [For] example, if I'm going to start to read a book he says, mommy, no, this is not the way you read the book. Ask me first. Tell me which part of the books—I said, oh my goodness. So for me it was a little hard. I have to learn all the parts of the book: front, back, front cover, back cover, spine, pages, order—everything. So one day I finish the book and he says, mommy, you forgot something. Ask me what was my favorite part of the book. Okay. Tell me, what was your favorite part of the book? He says this one, and so—and then I start realizing, like, yeah, I have to ask first. So now I—before I read the book, I'll show him—I just show the cover and I say tell me what's going to happen. What you think is going to happen in this story, and he's trying—and he tries to think and he says a lot of words.

²⁸ Parents of children in DOE centers were less likely to report improvements in learning, compared to parents with children in ACS centers and public schools: pre-K has improved child’s learning a lot: 79 percent (DOE) versus 82 percent (ACS) and 86 percent (PS). Chi-square, $p < .05$.

Parents described children who learned to share and were more relaxed around other adults. Children also learned how to follow rules—at home and at school—and adhere to routines such as picking up toys at the conclusion of playing with them.

Several parents said that without the program their children with disabilities or special needs would not have been receiving the services their children need. One parent attributed her son’s progress in socializing with other kids to the speech therapy he received through the center. One mother whose son receives special services at school said her son is learning “how to listen a little more and express himself a little more.” Parents at one center appreciated help with the paperwork in getting services, and also with the way concerns about a child were brought to parents’ attention:

[At school] they teach them you have to pick up after yourself because nobody's going to do it for you. Now I tell him pick up your toys. He goes, okay, mommy. He picks it up.

Parent

If they notice something going on with your child, like maybe you haven't noticed, they'll come to you and let you know. And ifyou want to observe, they'll schedule an observation for you where maybe I can observe my child at play, and he won't know that I'm there, and I'll see what he's doing that's crazy.they don't come to you and be like, well, your child has this problem, and you need to get him help. It's more of your choice. And if you decide against it, they're fine with it. If you decide to go ahead and do something about it, they're fine. So it's a support system in both whether you say yes or no.

Participants at one site highlighted how the program exposed children to the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of families through events (such as Chinese New Year celebration), food, and activities. The school provided someone to translate for non-English speakers, allowing for wider participation in these events. One parent said exposure to these events has made her son less intimidated by new experiences. The program also pushes cultural exposure outside of the classroom and provides a ‘Culture Pass’ for all families in the program (free access to city museums and botanical gardens).

Reported Impacts on Parents

As described in section 3, the resources that the programs provided to families helped them in supporting their child’s progress at home. Among parents who tried any of the learning activities or other suggestions recommended by their child’s pre-K program, over 90 percent reported on the survey that they were moderately or very effective in helping with their child’s learning or behavior (Figure 7). Families who tried the suggested activities more often were even more likely to report that the activities were very effective. Overall, families reported that the events, activities, or communication from their child’s pre-K program has been effective in helping them support their child’s educational progress (91 percent reported very or moderately helpful on survey).

Family Reported Impacts on Work and Child Care Decisions

The availability of universal free pre-K affects family decisions about child care and labor force participation. If full day pre-K was **not** available to parents, they reported they would have most likely done the following²⁹ (Figure 13):³⁰

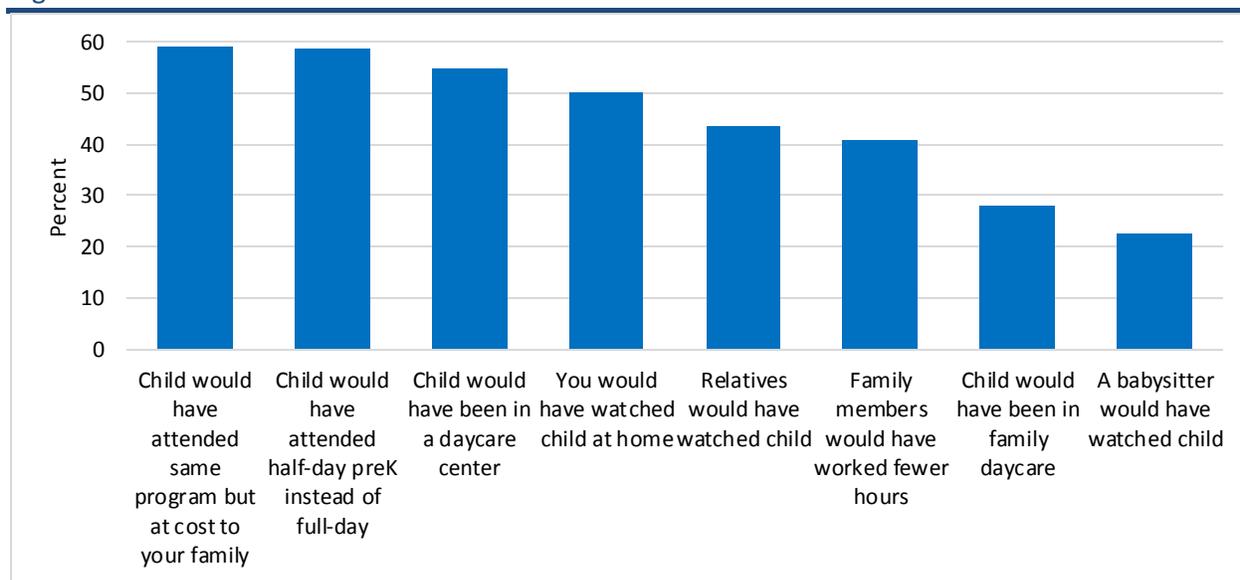
- Child would have attended same program but at cost to family (59 percent);
- Child would have attended half-day pre-K instead of full day (59 percent);
- Child would have been in daycare center (55 percent);
- Parent would have watched child at home (50 percent).

In addition, 41 percent of survey respondents reported that family members would have worked fewer hours had full-day pre-K not been available (Figure 13).

In the focus groups, parents were also asked what type of child care they would have used if full-day pre-K was not available to them. Some working parents said they would have paid for day care; a few said they would have family member care for their child. Some working parents noted that they would work fewer hours (i.e., only work part-time or half a day) presumably so they would be available to drop off and pick up from care. Other parents, mostly non-employed parents, would have kept children home, waiting until kindergarten to send their child to school.

Parents acknowledged that other options (care by family member, home day care centers) would not prepare their children for kindergarten, which is something they value highly.

Figure 13. Effects on Child Care Decisions



²⁹ Respondents could select more than one response.

³⁰ Parents of children at ACS centers were **more** likely than parents of children at DOE centers or public schools to report that, in the absence of full-day pre-K, they would have had a relative or a babysitter watch their child, or their child would have attended a daycare center. Chi-square, $p < .05$.

Child care is a large expense for many families. In inflation-adjusted dollars, average weekly child care expenses for families with working mothers who paid for child care rose more than 70 percent from 1985 (\$87) to 2011 (\$148), according to research by the Census Bureau.³¹ Child care costs, however, vary by age of child, type of facility, and where the family lives. According to the Pew Research Center, the state of New York had the highest average annual costs for full-time child care for four-year olds.³²

The family survey asked respondents how much they spent last year and this year on child care for their child currently in the pre-K program. Among survey respondents, the percent who reported not spending anything on childcare increased from the previous year: in the prior year, 32 percent of families reported spending \$0 on child care compared to 59 percent in the current year when their child was in the pre-K program (Figure 14). Furthermore, over half of families (56 percent) reported a **decrease** in spending on childcare from last year to this year (Figure 15).

Figure 14. Change in Childcare Spending From Previous Year

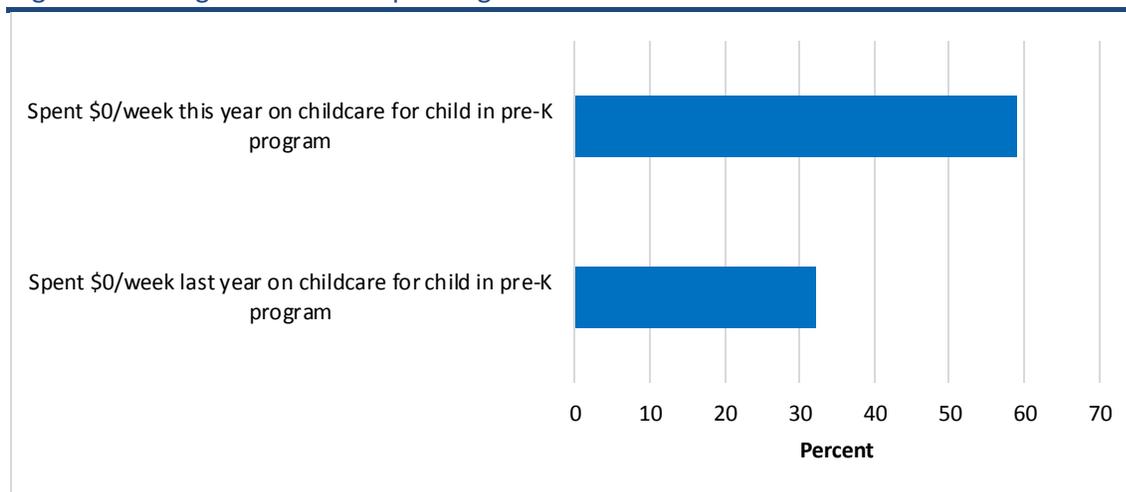
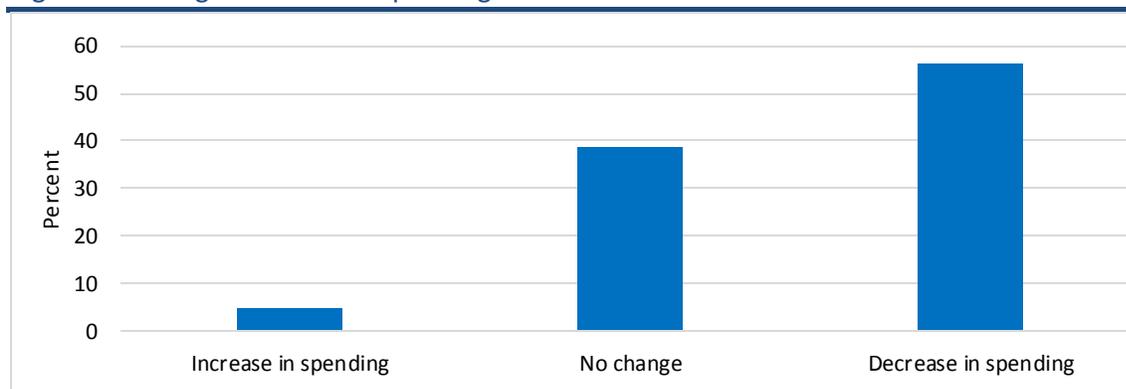


Figure 15. Change in Childcare Spending from Previous Year



³¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/08/rising-cost-of-child-care-may-help-explain-increase-in-stay-at-home-moms/>

³² Ibid.

The availability of affordable, high-quality childcare can also increase parents' ability to work outside the home. For example, the Pew Research Center reports that increases in the costs of childcare may be one reason for the increase in the number of stay-at-home mothers over the past decade.³³ The survey asked families if their child's participation in full-day pre-K affected the number of hours they (the survey respondent) worked. About one in five (20 percent) reported that participation in pre-K affected the number of hours they worked. Overall, about 12 percent increased work hours from last year to this year, five percent decreased work hours, and the remaining reported no change.³⁴

7. CONCLUSION

New York City's *Pre-K for All* program expanded free, full-day, public preschool for four-year old children in New York City. As new families participate in pre-K programs, the programs are not just working with the children in isolation, but forming "partnerships" with parents and other family members. This report describes families' perceptions of the program in its' first year.

Overall, families reported being quite pleased with their child's pre-K program. The application process was smooth and two-thirds of children were admitted to their first choice program. Most parents reported their child's pre-K programs were welcoming, clean, and safe.

Programs were active in building relationships with families. Centers created a welcoming environment, allowing parents to visit and enabling parents to assess teachers and curriculum— aspects they deem important in their decisions (along with location, safety, and adequate space and playground facilities). Orientations to pre-K programs and goal setting opportunities were also important in building relationships. Invitations to volunteer in the classroom and go on field trips offered (mainly non-working) parents opportunities to become engaged with the school.

In a private home... you know, the mom—they wouldn't teach as much. I'm aware that the teachers here are prepared for teaching the kids and their learning abilities. So, yeah, that—it rules out every other option.
Parent

Families reported positive impacts of the program for their child, as well as themselves. Families reported gains in their child's learning, and to a lesser extent improvements in behavior. Parents reported positive effects of enrichment activities and resources provided by the pre-K programs on their ability to support their child's learning at home. There was an economic impact as well, with the percentage of families not having to pay for their child's pre-K program almost doubling in one year. Families felt the pre-K programs were giving their children a "head start" to prepare them for kindergarten, something that alternative forms of childcare could not provide.

Families mentioned several issues that warrant further attention. For working parents in particular, the hours the pre-K program operated were limiting, with some suggesting longer hours or afterschool programs. Out-of-school enrichment activities, or "homework," was a divisive issue with some parents wanting more homework and others wanting less or none. This may be an area for additional education

³³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/08/rising-cost-of-child-care-may-help-explain-increase-in-stay-at-home-moms/>

³⁴ It is possible that family members other than the survey respondent changed their working hours; however, the question was only asked of survey respondents.

for parents and teachers regarding developmentally appropriate at-home enrichment activities. Finally, while Spanish speakers reported receiving program information (such as application materials) in Spanish, we do not have information on how well the program addressed language issues for other populations. There is some evidence that non-English speakers were less engaged with their child's pre-K program, such as a lower likelihood of attending orientation or volunteering in the classroom. Additional research should address how programs can improve access and engagement for all families.