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Executive Summary

In 2018, Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) contracted with the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government (Institute of Government) to study lottery-funded Georgia's Pre-K waitlist. The study comprised two parts: (1) a series of focus groups with Georgia public and private Pre-K directors to better understand their perspectives on Georgia's Pre-K enrollment in local communities and (2) a survey of parents and caregivers of children currently on Georgia's Pre-K Program waiting list.

Focus Groups

The Institute of Government held five focus groups with a total of 39 public and private Georgia's Pre-K directors. The majority of these participants (35) were from private centers, but three of the five focus groups included at least one public-school Pre-K program director. There were four categories of findings from the focus group interviews:

1. Georgia's Pre-K in the local community: provider perceptions
2. Access and demand: influences on Georgia's Pre-K enrollment
3. Data collection and reporting
4. Suggestions for improvement: strategies and perceived needs for Georgia's Pre-K

Key themes include:

- According to participants, public school settings (e.g. local public school systems) for Georgia's Pre-K are favored over private center-based settings unless the private center-based setting has a long-term history and a positive reputation in the community.
- Public school system participants, who all stated they were full with large waitlists, attempt to notify parents and caregivers of private centers with openings. This collaboration requires private Georgia's Pre-K centers to reach out to the public schools to notify them of openings in their classrooms.
- Participants agreed that when parents and caregivers place their children on waitlists, the majority place them on multiple waitlists, for two primary reasons. Some prefer a specific center or school, so they are "holding" a place in the hope that a slot will open up. Others are less concerned with the specific location and want to ensure that their child is enrolled in a program; they place their child on multiple waitlists to ensure enrollment.

- Participants believe that parents and caregivers think that public-school systems provide higher quality education than private child development centers. Participants agreed this is due to a lack of knowledge of Georgia's Pre-K standards; parents and caregivers are not aware that the standards, requirements, and quality are intended to be comparable in all Georgia's Pre-K classrooms
- Participants also said that some parents and caregivers are misinformed about the cost of Georgia's Pre-K, noting a lack of understanding that Georgia's Pre-K is free in both public and private settings.
- According to participants, parents and caregivers tend to select a Georgia's Pre-K provider based on its proximity to their home or workplace. If parents and caregivers already have children enrolled with a particular program that offers Georgia's Pre-K, participants believe they are more likely to enroll their children or place their children on a waitlist at that same facility.
- Participants stated that for some parents and caregivers, transportation affects the choice of Georgia's Pre-K setting. For families with multiple children, parents and caregivers may choose a Georgia's Pre-K site at the same site attended by their other children so that they only have one drop-off.
- Participants were not aware of how the Workplace Sampling System is being used and are concerned that data collected are not being used as intended in kindergarten.
- Participants expressed three areas of waitlist concern: inaccurate or out-of-date rosters, lack of access to the waitlist itself by Georgia's Pre-K directors, and use of waitlist information to determine Georgia's Pre-K locations.
- Across all groups, public and private Georgia's Pre-K participants stated that the number of screenings required to attend Georgia's Pre-K, such as immunization records and vision screenings, can be difficult for some parents and caregivers to provide.
- Across all groups, participants stated a desire for joint professional development among private and public Georgia's Pre-K centers, waitlist sharing and access, and greater community collaboration.

SURVEY

The Institute of Government collaborated with DECAL to develop a 17-item survey asking parents and caregivers with children on waitlists for Georgia's Pre-K classrooms about their perceptions of the waitlist experience. Survey items covered four general categories: Georgia's Pre-K waitlist status, Pre-K program preferences, Pre-K program selection, and respondent demographics.

In addition to examining perceptions of the waitlist experience, the secondary purpose of the survey was to examine the effectiveness of two modes of contacting Pre-K waitlist parents and

caregivers. As such, the survey utilized a dual-mode approach to test the response rates between a web-based option with a mailed invitation and a phone-based option. Participants were randomly assigned to either receive the survey via phone or receive a survey invitation and reminders via standard mail with instructions to access the survey via a provided URL and unique access code. Random assignment was used to ensure that the two groups would be statistically comparable. From December 3, 2018 to December 21, 2018, 5,095 parents and caregivers on Georgia's Pre-K waitlists were invited to complete the survey either online or via phone. Overall, 625 respondents completed the survey, with significantly more respondents via phone ($N = 548$) than online ($N = 77$).

Key findings include:

- Half of survey respondents indicated they currently had a child on a Georgia's Pre-K waitlist; most of these (84%) indicated that their child was only on one waiting list. Three-quarters (74%) stated they "never" received updates about their child's waitlist status.
- The majority of respondents whose child was no longer on a waiting list indicated that this was because he or she was currently enrolled in a lottery-funded Georgia's Pre-K classroom (48%) or another preschool/Pre-K (38%).
- Parents and caregivers with a child on a waiting list most commonly wanted to enroll their child in a Georgia's Pre-K program so that he or she could attend a high-quality program (66%) or to save on child care costs (51%).
- When selecting Pre-K programs, parents and caregivers indicated they generally prefer programs that are close to their home (75%), public elementary school-based (48%), or close to or at their other children's school (39%); these preferences were consistent with perceptions held by Georgia's Pre-K directors who attended focus groups.
- When asked their single most important reason for selecting a particular Pre-K program, the most frequent response was that it was close to their home (29%).
- Waitlist parents and caregivers found out about the programs through a variety of sources, most commonly through their local elementary school (47%) and prior experience with the program (30%).
- Nearly one-quarter (22%) of respondents with a child on a waitlist used Georgia's Pre-K Provider Search on www.qualityrated.org.
- Less than one in ten waitlist respondents (8%) used 1-877-ALL GA KIDS.
- Respondents were primarily between ages 25 to 44 (87%), had two children (43%), and were employed full time (49%).

