



**Carl Vinson  
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UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**



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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 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 wait 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](http://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%).

## Introduction

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. This report describes the findings from the exploratory focus groups and the survey.

## 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

### **GEORGIA'S PRE-K IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY: PROVIDER PERCEPTIONS**

The perception that public-school settings are preferred over private center-based settings permeated the discussion of Georgia's Pre-K enrollment. Many of the groups discussed situations in which a local public school will have a long waitlist, while nearby private center-based settings will have open slots. In focus group discussions that included both public and private Pre-K directors, it was clear that collaboration between the two is key to addressing such situations. 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. Public-school systems then share this information with parents and caregivers, maintaining both confidentiality and parental choice in placement.

### **ACCESS AND DEMAND: INFLUENCES ON GEORGIA'S PRE-K ENROLLMENT**

Participants unanimously agreed on the issues affecting access and demand for Georgia's Pre-K. Issues of access and demand were intertwined in participant responses. Discussion generally

focused on the following areas that affect Georgia's Pre-K enrollment: waitlists, parent and caregiver perceptions, location and saturation, transportation, siblings, and the level of collaboration between public and private Georgia's Pre-K programs.

### **Waitlists**

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.

### **Parent and Caregiver Perceptions of Georgia's Pre-K**

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. Similarly, participants stated that this perception of quality leads to a stigma against private Georgia's Pre-K versus the public-school system, as parents and caregivers perceive private centers to be "daycare" rather than having staff trained specifically in best practices for early care and learning.

Participants also said that some parents and caregivers are misinformed about the cost of Georgia's Pre-K. They may think that Georgia's Pre-K in the public-school systems are the only free programs, not understanding that Georgia's Pre-K is free in both public and private settings.

### **Location: Proximity, Convenience, and Saturation**

According to participants, parents and caregivers tend to select a Georgia's Pre-K provider based on its proximity to their home or workplace. Additionally, 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 also said that oversaturation in the market influences Georgia's Pre-K enrollment. Private providers stated that enrollment in their Georgia's Pre-K classrooms is influenced by how many other providers are located nearby. Similarly, the location of public elementary schools with Georgia's Pre-K programs influences enrollment, causing private centers to lose enrollment.

### **Transportation and Siblings**

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. Additionally, for working families, transportation to before and after care strongly influences their choice of Georgia's Pre-K programs. Due to cost and liability issues, private Georgia's Pre-K centers are not always able to provide transportation, making public Georgia's Pre-K locations a better option for some parents and caregivers.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND REPORTING**

Participants described three data concerns in the focus groups: 1) a lack of awareness of how the Work Sampling Online (WSO) system is used; (2) confusion about how waitlist data are used by DECAL and questioned waitlist accuracy, such as out-of-date waitlists, lack of access to waitlist data by Georgia's Pre-K directors, and use of waitlist information to determine Georgia's Pre-K locations; and (3) the number of screenings required to attend Georgia's Pre-K (e.g., immunizations, vision), which can be onerous for some parents and caregivers.

### **Work Sampling System**

Participants were not aware of how WSO is being used, and they reported that the data are not being transferred with the child into kindergarten. Participants are concerned that data collected are not being used as intended in kindergarten.

### **Access to Waitlist**

Participants expressed confusion over how waitlist data are used by DECAL and questioned waitlist accuracy. There were 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.

### **Screening**

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.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT: STRATEGIES AND PERCEIVED NEEDS FOR GEORGIA'S PRE-K**

Participants across all groups stated a desire for joint professional development, waitlist sharing and access, and greater community collaboration. Participants regularly stated that they miss the resource coordinator position, which had formerly helped with many of the above concerns about Georgia's Pre-K access and enrollment.

## 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.

### COMPARISON OF SURVEY MODES

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 ( $N = 2,547$ ) or via phone ( $N = 2,548$ ). After eliminating undeliverable addresses ( $N = 383$ ), the adjusted online sample was 2,164 potential respondents. For the phone-based sample, numbers that were disconnected/non-working or not associated with an eligible respondent were removed ( $N = 447$ ), providing an adjusted phone sample of 2,101 potential respondents. Overall, 625 parents and caregivers completed the survey, either online ( $N = 77$ ) or via phone ( $N = 548$ ); therefore, the adjusted response rate to the survey was 14.7% (3.6% for online respondents and 26.1% for phone respondents).

The phone-based mode produced a significantly higher response rate (26.1%) than the push-to-web methodology (3.6%) ( $\chi^2(2, N = 4,265) = 432.45, p < .000$ ). Half of the respondents still had a child on a waitlist for a Georgia's Pre-K classroom at the time of the survey. Parents and caregivers who responded online were significantly more likely to indicate that their child was still on a waitlist (84%) compared to those from the phone survey (45%). This difference between groups likely demonstrates the effects of an active versus passive recruitment effort. The phone-based mode required relatively passive participation: Parents and caregivers simply needed to answer the incoming call and agree to participate. Conversely, the web-based mode required a higher level of active intent: Parents and caregivers needed to read the recruitment materials and then use the provided URL and access code to take the survey. As such, it appears that caregivers with a child on a waitlist were more highly motivated to actively participate in the web-based mode; in comparison, the phone-based mode was equally successful in garnering participation from both waitlist and non-waitlist parents and caregivers.

Despite the phone-based method providing a significantly higher response rate, caution should be used when applying these results to other projects. For example, the web-based method provided proportionally more waitlist respondents, while the phone-based methodology resulted in greater contact with non-waitlist respondents. Thus, when attempting to focus on a narrow subset of the population, a phone-based methodology might elicit responses from a sizable number of contacts outside of the target population. Similarly, when attempting to contact a highly motivated population, methods that require respondents to actively access the survey may be appropriate. Thus, the results of this mode test should not be interpreted as evidence that all attempts at surveying Georgia's Pre-K parents and caregivers need to be phone-based.

## **SURVEY FINDINGS**

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. 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%). Thus, it would appear that parents and caregivers generally place their child on one waiting list and stay on it until that child is enrolled. Parents and caregivers with children currently on waiting lists appeared relatively unsatisfied with the frequency of updates they received about their child's waitlist status.

Parents and caregivers with a child on a wait 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 importation 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 of parents and caregivers with a child currently on a waitlist (22%) used the provider search on [www.qualityrated.org](http://www.qualityrated.org) and 8% used 1-877-ALL GA KIDS. Thus, it appears parents and caregivers use informal sources more frequency than formal sources provided by DECAL.

Most respondents who provided comments indicated they had a negative waitlist experience (73%). The most recurrent criticism was a lack of communication, information, and updates, which correlates with nearly three-quarters of waitlist parents and caregivers indicating they never received updates. Thus, it appears that lack of communication was a persistent concern

among waitlist respondents. The next most common complaint among waitlist respondents was the lack of space in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms for all interested children. Respondents frequently requested additional Pre-K spots to accommodate all Pre-K-aged children. Thus, parents and caregivers have a strong interest in Georgia's Pre-K programs and would like to see the program expanded.

## Recommendations

To recap, this report disseminates the findings from a study on Georgia's Pre-K enrollment. The study was comprised of 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.

Parents and caregivers with a child on a waiting list most commonly wanted to enroll their child in a Georgia's Pre-K program for their child to attend a high-quality program (66%) or to want to save on child care costs (51%). When selecting Pre-K programs, parents and caregivers generally preferred 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 a focus group. The single most importation reason when selecting a Pre-K program 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%), which is consistent with the perceptions held by Georgia's Pre-K directors who attended a focus group. Directors believe parents and caregivers prefer local elementary school programs and often select a program location based on prior experience. Nearly one-quarter of waitlist parents and caregivers (22%) used the provider search on [www.qualityrated.org](http://www.qualityrated.org) and 8% used 1-877-ALL GA KIDS. Thus, it appears parents and caregivers use informal sources with more frequency than formal sources provided by DECAL.

There were inconsistencies between the perceptions of Georgia's Pre-K directors attending the focus groups and parents and caregivers responding to the survey, primarily around program preference. Focus group participants believe the primary preference for parents and caregivers is to attend a public Georgia's Pre-K program; survey results indicate waitlist parents' and caregivers' single most important reason in selecting a Georgia Pre-K program is that it is located close to the home (29%).

Private Georgia's Pre-K directors attending the focus groups believe that the difficulty in offering transportation before and after school for parents and caregivers leads them to select

public Georgia's Pre-K programs over private Georgia's Pre-K programs. However, when waitlist parents and caregivers were asked to pick the single most important reason in selecting a Georgia's Pre-K program, transportation (5%) followed behind close to the home (29%), close to or at other children's school (20%), public elementary school (17%), Georgia Quality Rated provider (16%), and provides after-school program (6%). Focus group participants also believe that parents and caregivers prefer public Georgia's Pre-K programs over private; again, survey results indicate the most important reason for waitlist parents and caregivers to select a Georgia's Pre-K program is proximity to their home (29%).

Private and public Georgia's Pre-K director both believe that parents and caregivers are under-educated on the standards and quality of Georgia's Pre-K program. However, when asked why they would like to enroll their child in a Georgia's Pre-K program, 66 percent stated they wanted their child to attend a high quality program.

The section below highlights several recommendations based on the study's overall findings:

- Increased support for collaboration between public and private Georgia's Pre-K providers is recommended to address long waitlists at local public schools and open classroom seats at private center-based programs. DECAL can encourage private school directors to reach out to the Georgia's Pre-K directors at the local public schools to inform them of openings and to encourage parents and caregivers on their waitlist to seek out private center-based programs for Georgia's Pre-K enrollment.
- Encourage joint professional development on the local level, while also providing opportunities for joint professional development on the state level. Joint professional development may allow public and private Georgia's Pre-K programs to collaborate and work out many of the issues around waitlists, enrollment, and access merely by providing the space and time to connect outside of the workplace.
- To strengthen communication among public and private Georgia's Pre-K programs and parents and caregivers, the development of a communications template is encouraged. Both public and private Georgia's Pre-K providers are in need of communication tips to work not only with one another, but also parents and caregivers. A communications template could benefit providers by including tips for waitlist collaboration communication and by including tips for education and outreach with parents and caregivers on Georgia's Pre-K. DECAL may also want to consider developing "coaching" emails for Georgia's Pre-K program directors to keep parents and caregivers better informed of their waitlist status.

In summary, participants stated that DECAL is providing a tremendously valuable program for children in Georgia. Numerous participants stated that they believe in Georgia's Pre-K and its

benefits to the intended population of children. All of the findings provided in this report are intended to be constructive and beneficial to the larger system of Georgia's Pre-K.