

LOWELL FAMILY SURVEY
- LOWELL
SUSTAINABILITY
PLANNING GRANT MAY
2018

LOWELL SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING GRANT

MAY 2018

Submitted by:
Early Childhood
Associates, Inc.

Introduction

The City of Lowell Early Childhood Department distributed needs assessment surveys to families throughout the City of Lowell in the Spring 2018 as part of the development of a strategic plan for funding and sustaining Lowell's Preschool Expansion grant funded by the Massachusetts Department of Early Care and Education. The survey were translated into Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, and Khmer and distributed through the Lowell's Early Childhood Advisory Council, Family Resource Center; was sent home with all preschool and kindergarten children; and distributed at playgroups. In addition, a Connect-ED call was placed announcing the link to the online survey on the Department website. One-hundred and thirty-five surveys were completed and returned to the Lowell Early Childhood Department.

The City of Lowell contracted with Early Childhood Associates (ECA) to analyze the survey responses, conduct two focus groups with parents/caregivers of young children, create a report, and present the findings as a Community Stakeholder meeting in June, 2018.

The report is divided into two Sections. Section One presents an analysis of the city-wide parent survey; Section Two provides information shared by parents/caregivers during the two focus groups.

Section One: Family Survey Analysis

The survey's objective was to assess demand for early education and care and other services for families with young children. To inform demand, survey questions asked families about the kinds of early education and care settings in which their children were enrolled (e.g. a center or a family childcare) and why they enrolled their child in a program. If their children were not enrolled in an early learning program parents were asked to identify from a prescribed list why they did not enroll their children; barriers to accessing early education and care; and affordability of care. The survey asked about activities families do at home to support language and social development; family engagement in school and community; and need for social supports.

I. Demographics

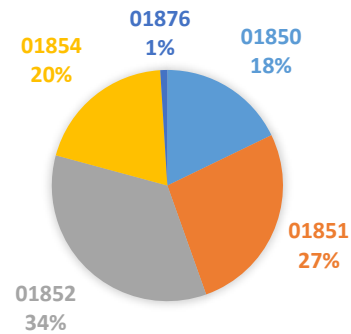
Lowell's total population is 109,870. Approximately, 7 percent or 7,828 residents are under the age of 5 years old. The median household income is \$46,972. The poverty rate is nearly 22 percent of the total population. While the respondents were not asked to provide information on race and ethnicity, Lowell's overall population is 61 percent White; 22 percent Asian; and 9 percent Black (American Factfinder 2016).



Respondents' zip codes in Lowell

Over one-third of all survey respondents (34%) reside in neighborhoods in zip code 01852; 27 percent reside in the 01851 zip code area of the City; another 20 percent are in 01854 followed by 18 percent in 01850.

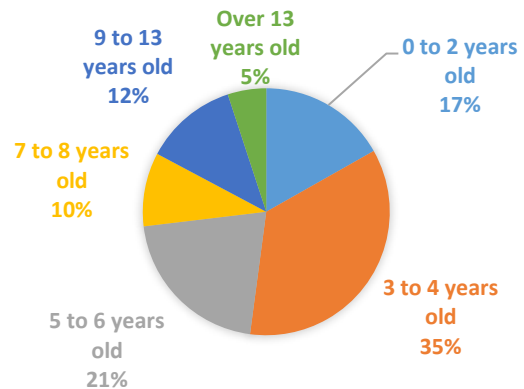
FIGURE 1: ZIP CODES OF RESPONDENTS (N=107)



Children's Ages

On average, the 123 respondents reported 1.9 children per family. Across these respondents, most of the children (35%) were between 3 and 4 years old; followed by five to six years old (21%), and birth to age two (17%). The remaining 27 percent of the children were age seven years or older.

FIGURE 2: CHILDREN'S AGES N=238 CHILDREN ACROSS 123 RESPONDENTS



II. Preferences and barriers to early education and care

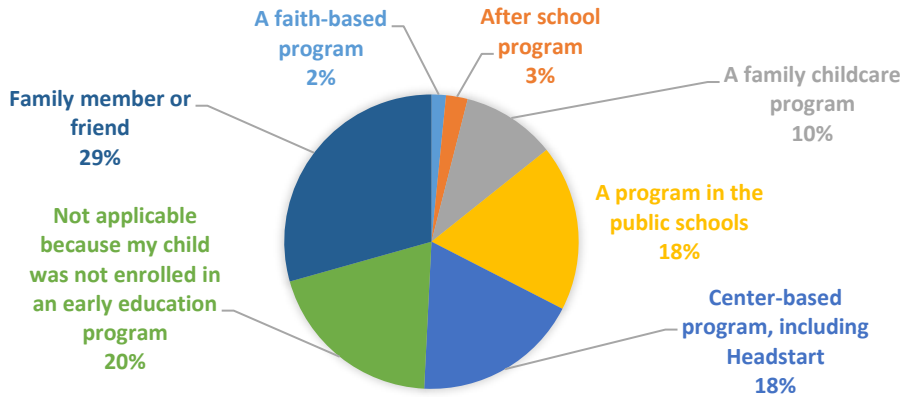
Survey findings describe types of settings in which parent respondents' children are enrolled, waitlist information, preferences for level of early education and care, and barriers to it.

Types of settings in which children are enrolled

Of the 126 respondents to this question, just over half (51%) had children enrolled in some type of early education and care setting. Most of the enrolled children were in either a Head Start or public school early education program. The remaining 15% were enrolled in family childcare, after school, or a faith-based program.

Of the 49% respondents whose children were not enrolled in an early education program, most of these had children in the care of family member or a friend (29% of all respondents).

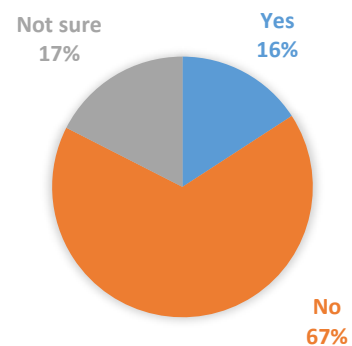
FIGURE 3: EARLY CHILDHOOD ENROLLMENT BY PROVIDER TYPE N=126



How many respondents’ children are waitlisted?

When asked if their children were on a waitlist, 16 percent (19 parents) reported that their child was on a waitlist for a program or child care; two-thirds (67%) were not a waitlist; and 18 percent were not sure.

FIGURE 4: PERCENT OF FAMILIES ON A WAITLIST N=120



Preferences for Length of Care

Respondents were asked about how much early education and care they would like to access for their children. The data in Table 1 shows that families generally would like to have their children in early education and care for more hours – specifically, for a full day, year round program.

- Two-thirds of all respondents (67%) wanted full day care. Of these, most (42%) preferred full day care over the course of a full 12 month year. Another 15 percent wanted half-day care either for the school year or the entire year. Finally, a few respondents preferred after school care (6%) or before school care (2%).
- A total of 11% percent in Table 1 prefer not to have their children in any particular setting. Of these parents, about half expressed interest in participating in regular community programming and playgroups; while the other half were “not interested in enrolling their child in a program.”
- Of these unenrolled families, some portion may not be enrolled due to barriers to accessing programs, while others may be unenrolled by choice. A chi square analysis was conducted to examine preferences for care between parents whose children were enrolled in a program and parents whose children were not enrolled. A significant difference between the two groups was found $\chi^2 (2, N = 132) = 17.33, p = .027$, suggesting that on the whole, parents who have not enrolled their children (for whatever reason) may have done so out of choice.



TABLE 1: PREFERENCES FOR AMOUNT OF EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE (N=113)

	Amount of early education and care parents would like	Percent
<i>Want a program</i>	Full day for the whole year (12 months)	42%
	Full day for the school year (September-June)	25%
	Half day for the whole year (12 months)	4%
	Half day for the school year (September-June)	11%
	After school care	6%
	Before school care	2%
<i>Do not want a program</i>	Regular participation in playgroup and other community programming with my child	6%
	I do not/would not wish to enroll my child in an early education program	5%
		100%

Most important characteristics of an early childhood program

Respondents were asked to rate 14 different program characteristics, on a three-point scale, from 1 = not important; 2 = somewhat important; and 3 = very important, about what mattered most to them when considering a childcare program. Note that since all scores exceeded 2.5, parents generally value all of the characteristics presented to them (Table 2). However, two clear tiers of importance emerge:

- The first tier of factors rated as most important are associated with the quality of the program and the extent to which the environment fosters development and readiness for kindergarten. The top three characteristics (mean scores of 2.9) include *educator quality and knowledge of child development; clean space; and whether the program prepares their child for kindergarten*. Five characteristics close behind in importance (mean scores in the 2.8 range) include the extent to which *the program engages children in activities that foster child development; good hours; affordability; and if educators speak English to their child*.
- The second tier of factors, with mean scores in the 2.7 and 2.6 range, are largely logistical, including items such as *transportation, affordability, and whether the language of the home was spoken at the program*. Factors identified as least important are *knowing other people whose children had been in the program and availability of meals*.

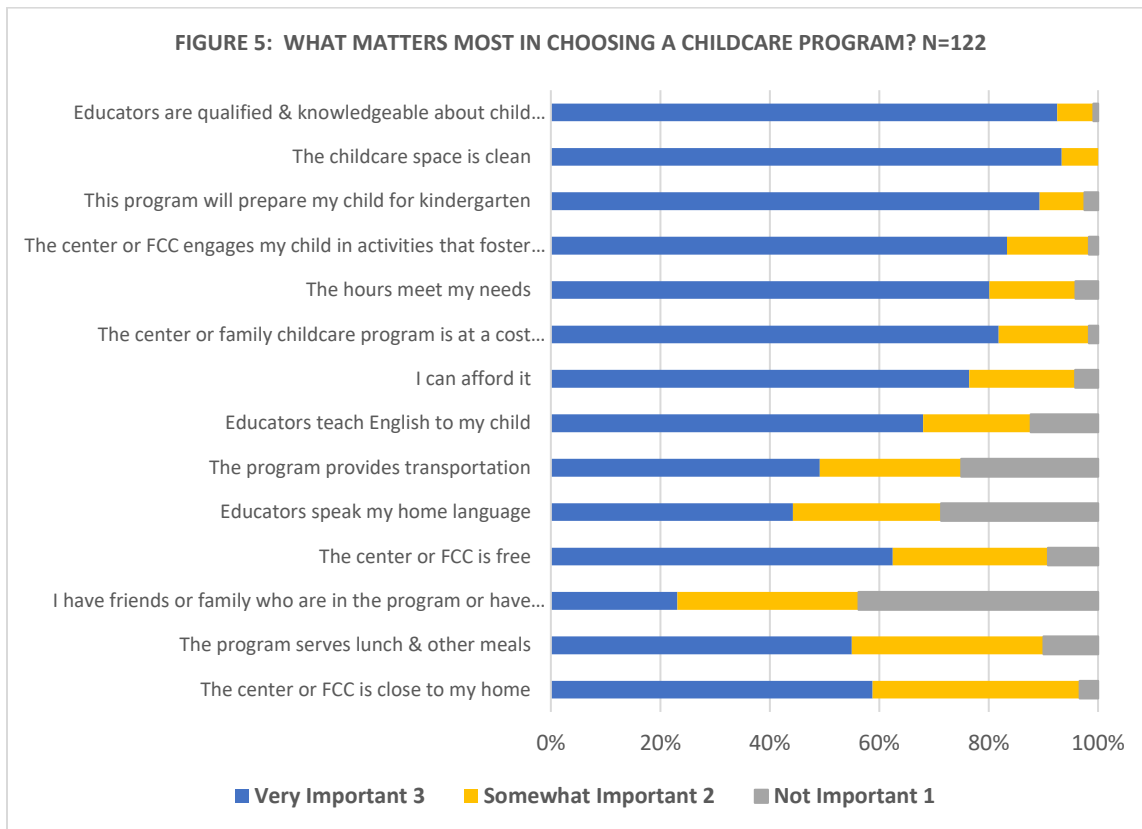




TABLE 2: WHAT MATTERS MOST IN CHOOSING A CHILDCARE PROGRAM? N=122

	Item	Mean Score
Tier 1	Educators are qualified and knowledgeable about child development	2.93
	The childcare space is clean	2.93
Very important	This program will prepare my child for kindergarten	2.92
	The center or FCC engages my child in activities that foster my child's development	2.85
	The hours meet my needs	2.84
	The center or FCC is at a cost affordable to my family	2.83
	I can afford it	2.81
	Educators teach English to my child	2.80
	Tier 2	The program provides transportation
Educators speak my home language		2.73
The center or FCC is free		2.72
I have friends or family who are in the program or have been in it		2.67
The program serves lunch and other meals		2.65
The center or family childcare program is close to my home		2.62
Important		

Figure 5 below shows the same data, but presents a better visualization of the distribution of scores. For example, *while the program serves lunch and other meals and the center or FCC is close to my home* received the lowest average mean scores, these factors still were rated as *very important* frequently.



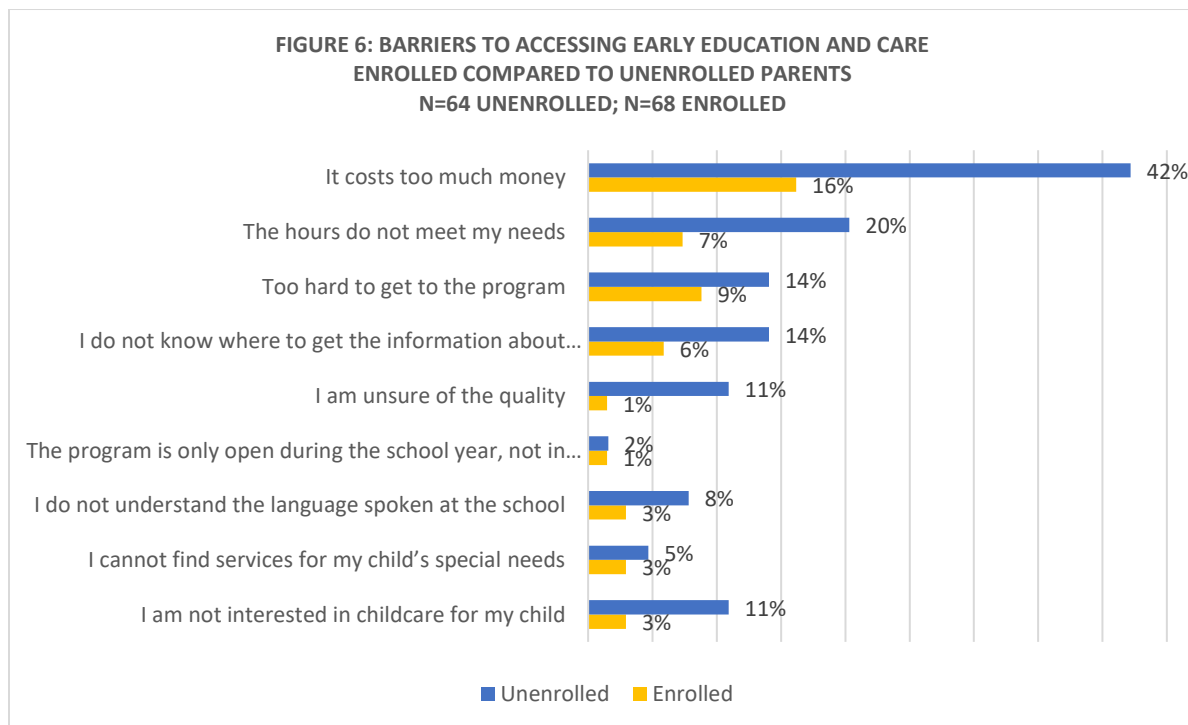


Barriers to accessing early childhood education and care

Respondents were asked about what makes it difficult to get the early education or childcare they need. The parents provided on average two barriers each.

- The barriers to accessing early education and care follow a similar pattern for both groups of parents, with costs and hours not meeting needs, and difficulty in getting to the program being the key barriers for both enrolled and unenrolled families.
- Note that a larger percentage of unenrolled families face barriers in every category. In particular, the unenrolled families are much more *sensitive to costs, hours not meeting needs, not knowing where to find information about the program, and being unsure of quality*. Being unclear about quality as well as where to get information – correspond with a need for more information. If taken together, these items indicate that awareness and information are key barriers to accessing early education and care.
- *Also note that being interested in childcare* were identified five percent of the time for unenrolled families, which is similar to that reported above in Table 1. A few other respondents commented on the lack of options or availability of slots for families that did not fall into the low income tier and children without special needs; another respondent identified a waitlist as a barrier.

The analysis was conducted using a chi-square test, which examines differences between two groups and their responses to a particular question. A p-value, or significance value of less than 0.05 suggests that the differences between these two groups are unlikely due to chance.





Parents of children unenrolled in programs identified more barriers than parents of children enrolled in program. The barriers for which differences were most significant (see highlighted boxes in Table 3) are *cost*, *hours*, and *uncertainty regarding quality*. A lack of interest in childcare trends towards a significant difference between the two groups of parents. Chi-square values are presented in the table below.

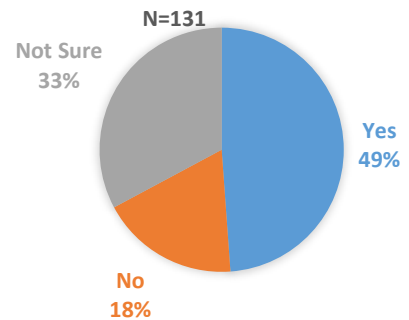
TABLE 3: CHI-SQUARE VALUES FOR BARRIERS FOR ENROLLED VS. UNENROLLED

Item	Enrolled	Unenrolled	Chi Square	Sig
I am not interested in childcare for my child	2%	5%	3.32	0.069
I cannot find services for my child’s special needs	2%	2%	0.28	0.599
I do not understand the language spoken at the school	2%	4%	1.55	0.212
The program is only open during the school year, not in summer	1%	1%	0.00	0.966
I am unsure of the quality	1%	5%	5.19	0.023
I do not know where to get the information about programs	3%	7%	2.48	0.115
Too hard to get to the program	5%	7%	0.90	0.343
The hours do not meet my needs	4%	10%	4.70	0.03
It costs too much money	8%	20%	10.88	0.001

Adequacy of information on appropriate early education and care

All parents were asked whether they have enough information for accessing early education and care programs to meet their family’s preference and needs. Just under one-half of all respondents (40%) said *yes*, they had enough information. Just over half (51%) said *no* or *not sure*. This data, along with some of the information on barriers to childcare above, further indicate a need to inform more of the population about early education and care options.

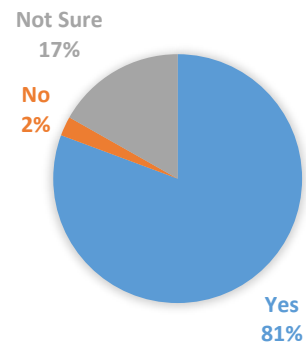
FIGURE 7: PERCENT WHO HAVE ENOUGH INFORMATION TO SUPPORT ACCESSING APPROPRIATE EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE



Would families access care if it were free, full day and high quality?

Respondents were asked if they would use early education and care in Lowell if it happened to be free, full day, and high-quality. Four out of five (81%) said they would use early education and care if they had access to free, full day, high quality early education in Lowell. Only two percent said they would not access care under these circumstances while 17 percent were unsure.

FIGURE 8: IF YOU COULD HAVE ACCESS TO FREE, FULL DAY, HIGH-QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE IN LOWELL, WOULD YOU USE IT? (N=119)





III. Eligibility for financial assistance

When asked if they were eligible for financial assistance, nearly one-quarter (23%) reported they were eligible and one-quarter reported they were not. However, over half (52%) said they were *not sure*. The data indicates lack of awareness about a key feature – cost and affordability, which is an important aspect of participating in early childhood education for these families. The lack of clarity on eligibility of financial assistance indicates a need to better dissemination of information on programs, including access and financial assistance.

If not eligible for financial assistance, did the cost of early education and care limit your ability to access a program for your child?

Of the 114 respondents who checked *not being eligible for financial assistance*, 21% reported that the cost of early education and care did not limit their ability to access a program.

However, about one third (34%) reported that the cost of early education and care did limit their ability to access it even as they were not eligible for financial assistance. In other words, one third of the families earned too much to be eligible for financial assistance but were still unable to afford care. Nearly half (45%) were *not sure* if cost limited their ability to access care.

If not eligible for financial assistance, were you able to afford and find access to a program for your child?

The same respondents who were not eligible for financial assistance were asked if they were able to afford and find a program for their child. While 34 percent said that the cost of early education and care limited their ability to access a program (Figure 10 above); a similar percentage (33%) said that they were *not able to afford and find a program for their child*. This data further confirms that about one third of the parents who are not eligible for financial assistance nevertheless face financial barriers to accessing early education and care.

FIGURE 9: ELIGIBILITY FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE (N=121)

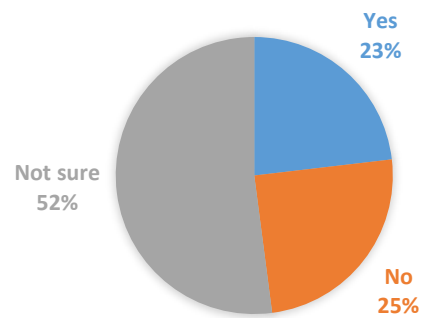


FIGURE 10: IF NOT ELIGIBLE FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, DID THE COST OF EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE LIMIT YOUR ABILITY TO ACCESS A PROGRAM FOR YOUR CHILD? (N=114)

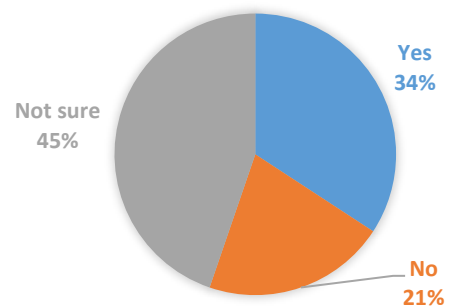
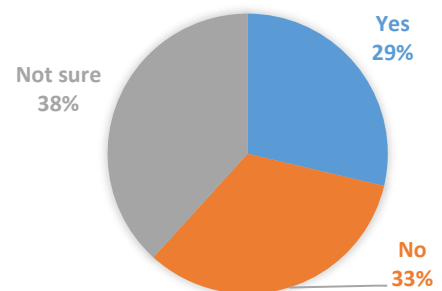


FIGURE 11: IF NOT ELIGIBLE FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE, WERE YOU ABLE TO AFFORD AND FIND A PROGRAM FOR YOUR CHILD? (N=115)



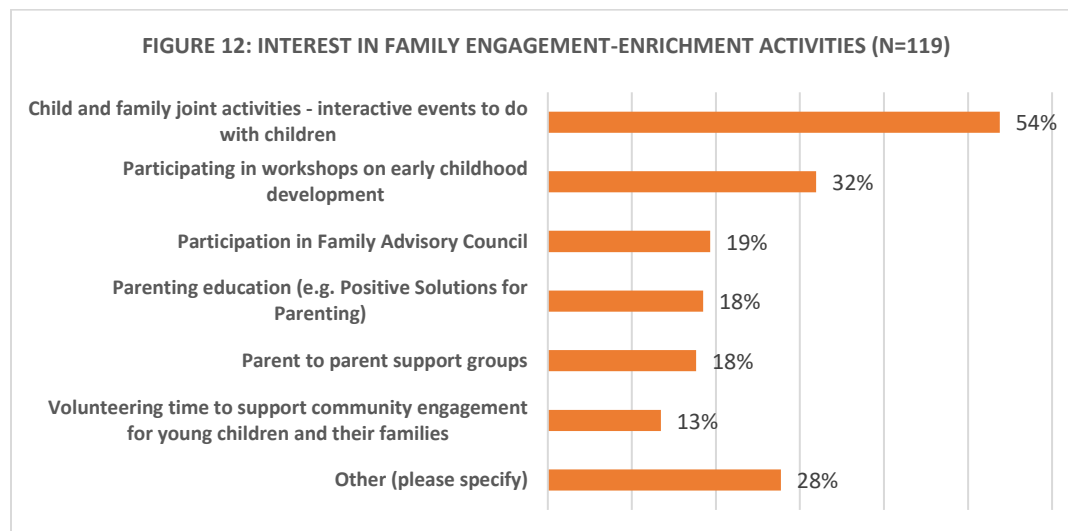
IV. Interest in family engagement, community programs, and services

Presented below are survey findings on interest in parent engagement and family enrichment; aspects of programs that facilitate engagement; information shared by teachers with parents; families’ preferred methods of communication; unenrolled parents’ participation in community-based events that foster their child’s development and socialization; and finally, need for services.

Interest in parent engagement and family enrichment activities

Respondents were asked to identify parent engagement and family enrichment activities in which they were interested in participating. They selected one or more activities from a prescribed list including volunteering their time; parent support groups; parenting education; participating in family advisory councils; parenting workshops; and family activities (Figure 12).

- Participating in child and family joint activities and interactive events was the most popular choice, comprising over half (54%) of all responses.
- Respondents next most frequently said they were interested in workshops on early childhood development (32% of all responses); followed by family advisory council (19%); parenting education (18%); and support groups with other parents (18%).
- Twenty-eight percent of the respondents designated “other” or “not applicable”, with some respondents adding they had no interest or ability to participate in these kinds of activities.



Factors that facilitate family engagement in a school or program setting

Respondents were asked about what factors make their participation in family engagement activities at their child’s early education and care more likely (Table 4).



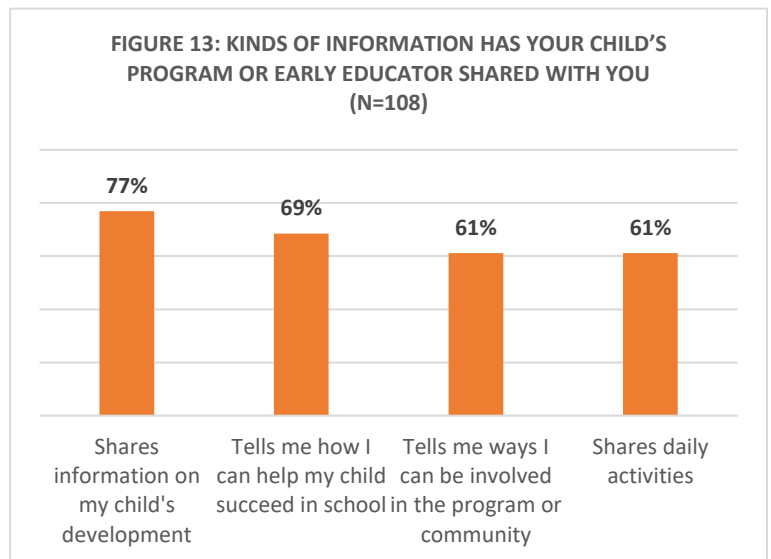
- The most frequently cited factor is that *they feel welcome* – which requires little expenditure on the part of programs. Over three quarters said that feeling welcome makes their participation in early education activities more likely. Over half said that the *convenient timing* and *proximity to home* would encourage their participation.
- Factors rated to be *somewhat important* included *educators speaking their language* (43% of all responses) and *childcare for siblings* (30%). Knowing other parents and being told they had to attend were less important to participation.

TABLE 4: FACTORS THAT MAKE PARTICIPATION IN EARLY EDUCATION ACTIVITIES MORE LIKELY

Factors	Number	Percent
I feel welcome	88	77%
The times are good for me	77	67%
The program is close to my home	61	53%
The educators speak my language	50	43%
There is childcare for my other children	35	30%
I know other parents	18	16%
I was told that I had to attend	4	3%

Information shared with parents by early education programs or educators

Respondents were asked what kinds of information their child’s program or early educator has shared with them. Figure 13 shows that early educators shared all four types of information at least 60 percent of the time, and on average, they provided 2.7 different kinds of information per respondent. They most frequently shared *information on their child’s development*, closely followed by *how they can help their child succeed in school*; *how to be involved in the program or community*; and *daily activities*.





Preferred method of communication

The most preferred methods of communication were mail/letter and email, with about one-third of respondents preferring these methods respectively. Texting, website, phone, and Facebook were considerably less popular.

TABLE 5: PREFERRED METHOD OF COMMUNICATION (N =121)

Preferred type of communication	Number	Percentage
Mail/letter	43	36%
Email	41	34%
Text message	12	10%
Lowell Public Schools Early Childhood Education website	10	8%
Not interested	7	6%
Phone	6	5%
Facebook	2	2%
TOTAL	121	100%

Unenrolled families participation in community activities supporting language and social development

Respondents whose children are not enrolled in an early education and care program were asked about their participation in programs that support language and social development. These parents most frequently cited that their child *participates in play dates* (65% of the time). They next most often *attend weekly playgroups* (44%).

TABLE 6: FOR UNENROLLED, PARTICIPATION IN OTHER PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (N=63)

Programs	Number	Percent
Play dates with peers or relatives	41	65%
Weekly playgroups	28	44%
Day trips to museums, library, or other cultural events	21	33%
Library story hours	15	24%
Sunday school	10	16%

Need for other education and social services

Parents (both unenrolled and enrolled) provided an average 3.3 needed services:

- The most common needs were: *Places to go and have fun with their child; help with their child’s speech and language; transportation; places to be with other parents; and financial assistance to obtain education and care.*
- The next most frequently needed services, cited between 17 and 25 percent of the time, were: *health and wellness assistance; help transitioning between programs; housing; ESL; food; and home visits.* Note that nearly one in five respondents (17%) indicate food insecurity; while over one and five respondents (22%) indicate housing insecurity. Access to home visits, early intervention, adult basic education, and a library represent more targeted needs and were cited less frequently.





TABLE 7: SERVICES NEEDED (N=110)

Services Needed	Number	Percent
Places I can go to play or have fun with my child	44	40%
Help with my child’s speech and language development	42	38%
Transportation	41	37%
Places I can go to be with other parents and children around my child’s age	33	30%
Financial assistance to participate in an early childcare program or home	33	30%
Help with health and wellness (physical and behavioral)	28	25%
Help moving my child from one program, family child care, or school to another	25	23%
Help with housing	24	22%
English Language Learning (ESL)	20	18%
Help with food	19	17%
Home visiting	16	15%
Early Intervention (ages 0 to 3)	15	14%
Adult Basic Education/GED/HS Diploma	13	12%
A library	9	8%

Section Two: Results of Focus Groups and Focus Group Survey

Eight parents participated in one of two focus groups held in April 2018 to provide additional qualitative information on parents’ preferences for and barriers to early education and care. One focus group was held at the Lowell Collaborative Preschool Academy for families participating in that center-based program, and the other at the Lowell Family Center, which drew parents who had children in a public school program. Flyers to recruit parents were distributed two weeks prior to the focus groups at each site. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, which was available in Spanish, Portuguese, Khmer, Vietnamese and Arabic. Each family received a high quality children’s book for participating, and was entered into a raffle to win one \$25 gift certificate. The focus groups were 30 to 40 minutes, and were led by a moderator from ECA.

The questions asked parents why their child was in preschool; how they found out about their program; what they believed their child was learning; what they liked least and best about their child’s program; what kinds of opportunities their children had to learn outside of the program setting; and whether they believed preschool was helping their child become ready for kindergarten.

Each parent participating in the focus group completed a brief questionnaire prior to the discussion. These findings are integrated into the focus group discussion findings below.

Characteristics of parents and children participating in the focus groups

Parents enrolled their children in preschool to improve their socialization skills, literacy, English language, and to provide structure for their day and prepare their children for kindergarten. Six of the eight participants spoke English as a second language. Most were able to participate in preschool because it was offered for free. Just under half of the parents’ children (38%) were diagnosed with some kind disability, although only one child was reported to be on an IEP. One parent indicated on the survey that their child had behavior problems. Another parent’s child had been terminated from an early education and care program.





What the parents liked about the child’s programs

Parents uniformly praised the staff, and appreciated their responsiveness and connectedness to families. They appreciated that information on services was translated into multiple languages. Parents at the full time program appreciated the longer days, with several explaining that the program allowed them to work. Parents at other public school pre-K programs around the City expressed the need for more care. These findings are similar to those in the larger survey. With regard to benefits for their children, parents shared that their children were enjoying their programs, engaged in learning, and getting ready for kindergarten.

Reasons for selecting their child’s program from the survey: When asked from a prescribed list why they selected their child’s preschool, parents most frequently said so their child would be ready for kindergarten. They next most frequently cited socialization skills, followed by learning English; and finally, because of the parent’s work/employment.

SURVEY QUESTION: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO SEND YOUR CHILD TO PRESCHOOL?

Reason for selecting program	Percent (Multiple Responses)
So my child would be ready for kindergarten	87.5%
For my child’s socialization and social skills	75%
My child to learn English	50%
Because of my work/employment	25%

The parents were also asked to note – from a prescribed list on the survey - the top three reasons why they chose the particular program their child was attending. Top reasons were related to program quality and academics and included the quality of the teachers, the child-teacher ratio, and reputation. Program hours and curriculum were also important. Characteristics such as convenient location, outside activities offered by the program, the provision of meals; transportation and cleanliness were not categorized as major reasons for their selections. Interestingly, the program preparing their child for kindergarten and cost also were not cited as major reasons either, which is inconsistent with the focus group and other survey data.

SURVEY QUESTION: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THE PRESCHOOL THAT YOU CHOSE FOR YOUR CHILD?

Important to less important	Reason for selecting their child’s preschool
Mentioned 38% of the time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hours met my needs • The curriculum
Mentioned 38% of the time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hours met my needs • The curriculum
Mentioned 25% of the time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The location of the school is convenient • What the school offered in addition to preschool (e.g. parent group and extra curricula activities) • The program serves lunch or other meals • This program will prepare my child for kindergarten
Mentioned 13% of the time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost • The program provides transportation • The early education program is clean



Preferences for hours: On the survey, half of the parents (four) had their child enrolled for a full day (either full year or school year); and the other half had children enrolled for a half day (either full year or school year). Six out of the eight parents said their family would benefit from more hours; while the remaining two said no or not sure.

Parent views on kindergarten readiness

Parents overall recognized the importance of pre-K as the beginning of their children’s education, with one claiming that kindergarten is the “beginning of my child’s future”. Another parent felt that her child’s experience at preschool will ease the transition to kindergarten, explaining that “the home day care setting would not have prepared her as well.” Parents believed that their children were learning, developing language, reading, socialization, discipline, and were safe and secure in their respective programs. Some parents especially appreciated the ways the programs acknowledge the importance of social emotional skill development; while others preferred to see more work and less play, stating “My daughter can’t use scissors.”

Family Supports

With regard to family supports, parents loved the Parent Café; that materials were translated; and that staff connected them to resources either in person or through email. Some parents said that they did not get information about what is going on in the City, although did receive information on school-related activities. A few remarked that preschool has improved their own parenting. As one said, “the preschool experience has helped me be consistent with the routines my grandchild experiences at home”.

Barriers to participation

All of the focus group families completing the survey were either paying nothing because the program was free; or were on a reduced fee or voucher. All of the families said that nothing interfered with their child’s participation in preschool. That is, there were no barriers with regard to cost, hours, transportation, language or being unsure about quality.