

# PRESCHOOL FOR ALL

## Supply and Demand Assessment

August 2024



*Equity, Excellence, Empowerment.*



## I. INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the launch of the Lowell Early Childhood Council (LECC) in 1990, Lowell has been on a mission to develop and expand preschool access for all three-, four-, and five-year-olds within the city. In 2023, Lowell Public Schools (LPS) contracted with Pear Associates to conduct a needs assessment and develop this supply and demand assessment that will inform a strategic plan. LPS and Pear Associates, in a collaborative effort, co-facilitated monthly Preschool Strategic Planning Committee (PSPC) meetings. These meetings ensured that the community's voice and direction were included throughout the project implementation.

To assess the demand for preschool programming, Pear developed and distributed a family survey to gather information from Lowell families about their experiences, needs, and recommendations regarding preschool access. Simultaneously, six (6) interviews were conducted with key community champions to gather feedback and insight into strategies, funding, opportunities, and challenges. To understand the supply of preschool programs, Pear conducted a program survey among school and community-based preschool providers. Finally, Pear compiled and reviewed secondary data sources to understand population trends, best practices, and academic performance indicators to enhance survey and interview findings.

This comprehensive report summarizes the key findings from the family survey, program survey, community champion interviews, and secondary data sources. We also present recommendations for the LECC and LPS to consider when developing its strategic plan to expand preschool access in Lowell.

### Key Findings

#### 1. Kindergarten Readiness and Achievement Gaps

- Lowell early education specialists note significant academic, social, and emotional gaps in students with no preschool achievement upon their arrival in Kindergarten
- Lowell teachers note a correlation between a lack of participation in early education programs and academic performance gaps among high-need students
- Less than 25% of Lowell students met 3rd-grade English Language Arts and Math expectations during this past school year, with 54% of Lowell 3rd graders reading below grade level.

#### 2. Current Enrollment in Preschool

- Approximately half (56%) of the survey respondents with preschool-age children had their children enrolled in preschool.
- Of those enrolled in preschool, 53% were enrolled in LPS preschool and 28% in center-based programs.
- Among survey respondents whose preschool-age children were not currently enrolled, 32% indicated they would like them to be enrolled.
- Families prefer school day and full-day programming (62%) and prefer the program to be offered following the school year calendar. If full-day preschool was available in Lowell 72% of respondents would access it.

### 3. Barriers to Enrollment

- Lack of knowledge about preschool options was the main reason children were not enrolled, with 32% of unenrolled families stating they did not know what programs were available and 27% reporting they were unsure where to get information about programs.
- Cost was a primary barrier for 22% of unenrolled preschool families. Among those citing cost as a barrier, 70% were English-speaking, and 23% were Portuguese-speaking.
- The limited availability of preschool slots was another common barrier, with unenrolled families indicating spaces were unavailable in their desired location or for the age of their children.
- Challenges related to transportation can prevent families from enrolling their children, with 57% of respondents stating they could only travel up to five miles for an early learning program.
- All families, whether they are enrolled or not, cite the lack of seats that meet their needs, cost, and transportation as their top three barriers. Khmer-speaking respondents experience these barriers at higher rates, followed by other non-English-speaking respondents.

### 4. Support for Preschool

- A significant majority of families (72%) expressed strong support for the implementation of full-day preschool programs, whereas only 51% claimed they would access a part-day program.
- Factors that contribute the most to a family's decision about early learning programs include location (51%), whether the program meets their basic needs (39%), program quality (33%), and knowing another child who was enrolled in that program (32%).
- The top reasons families enrolled their children in preschool were the children's social development, children's interest in learning, language development, emotional development, cognitive development, and kindergarten readiness.

### 5. Interview Subjects Validated Family Survey Results

- Community champions echoed family survey respondents, claiming cost, limited knowledge of programs, and transportation were the greatest barriers to preschool enrollment.
- While there is a desire to expand preschool access in Lowell, community champions claim the lack of preschool slots is due to limited space and funding.

Preschool providers, families, and community champions are eager and supportive of a preschool-for-all program in Lowell. The potential academic outcomes and social return on investing in space, workforce, and transportation are shared across the Lowell community.

Based on the supply and demand assessment, LPS may wish to consider the following strategies presented in no particular order of importance or priority:

1. Development of a multilingual informational campaign that educates families about the value of early education, available school- and community-based programs, and eligibility and enrollment requirements;
2. Completion of a facilities assessment to identify current preschool space and potential locations for child-friendly programming, including satellite classrooms and mobile preschools;
3. Engagement of policymakers and philanthropic organizations to allocate sustainable multi-year financial resources in support of the preschool-for-all model;

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4. Exploration of safe, convenient, and affordable transportation options (i.e., private and public transportation, carpooling, employer reimbursement) to ensure children can get to and from preschool regardless of their home location;
5. Implementation of an early childhood educator recruitment and retention strategy that prioritizes teacher preparation, professional development, and utilization of innovative curricula and instructional tools; and
6. Creation of collaborative partnerships with family-serving providers to ensure access to wraparound supports to address the social, emotional, and financial needs of children that may impact learning.

Given that families and community champions recognize the value of preschool for all in Lowell, L.P.S. must address the barriers to access -- lack of knowledge about programs, limited available seats for all children, cost for enrollment, and limited transportation. Furthermore, LPS must ensure all preschools provide equitable, high-quality programming delivered by early childhood educators. LPS will convene a diverse group of diverse (racial, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic status, programmatic focus) community partners to develop and oversee a strategic plan that includes initiatives to address these barriers.

## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESCHOOL

Lowell is the fifth-largest city in Massachusetts, with 113,608 residents, 5.6% or 6,362, of whom are under age five.<sup>1</sup> Among Lowell's increasingly diverse population, 46% identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), including a significant Asian population (23%).<sup>2</sup> Lowell's racially and ethnically diverse population is reflected in the 14,274 students currently enrolled in the Lowell Public Schools, with 79% of students identifying as BIPOC, 45% as non-native English speakers, and 29% as English language learners.<sup>3</sup> The majority of Lowell Public School students (72.3%) are low-income and 20.3% have disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

Children can begin public Kindergarten in Lowell if they are five years old as of September 1. Unfortunately, like many children across the state and nation, Lowell children enter Kindergarten lacking the critical social and developmental skills needed for success. In the United States, less than half of kindergartners begin school fully prepared, with notable differences based on race and income.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, these disparities have long-term consequences that impact academic success and self-sufficiency.

While Massachusetts has led the nation in 4th-grade reading and math indicators, there are striking disparities in outcomes when the data is disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income level. For BIPOC students and students in low-income households, the divide is as wide as 20 to 30 percentage points by fourth grade and deepens further by eighth. Lowell has witnessed lower-than-average rates of Math, English Language Arts, and Science and Technology proficiency across all grades compared to students across the Commonwealth.<sup>6</sup> In fact, less than 25% of Lowell students met 3rd-grade English Language Arts and Math expectations during this past school year,<sup>7</sup> with 54% of Lowell 3rd graders reading below grade level.<sup>8</sup>

Preschool programs have been found to reduce achievement gaps, with the skills and knowledge that children gain in their early years laying the groundwork for literacy, numeracy, and social skills that will be essential throughout their lives.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, access to high-quality early education is linked to long-term advantages, such as enhanced prosocial development, better childhood performance on cognitive tests, and significant lifelong improvements in attentiveness.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, accessible early education directly contributes to increased family income by promoting educational attainment, skill development, and workforce participation.<sup>11</sup> Nearly every early education specialist who participated in the LPS district's most recent strategic planning process noted the existence of significant academic, social, and

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<sup>1</sup> US Census, Population estimate, July 1, 2022

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Lowell School District Profile, 2023-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Family Engagement to Support Kindergarten Readiness and Early School Success. US Department of Education in partnership with Carnegie Corporation of New York and Overdeck Family Foundation. 2023

<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Lowell School District Profile, 2023-24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Lowell Public Schools Strategic Plan

<sup>9</sup> Strategic Action Plan MA Department of Education and Care State of MA 2020-2025

<sup>10</sup> Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) Strategic Plan 2020-2025

<sup>11</sup> Bustamante. A, et al. High-Quality early child care and education: the gift that lasts a lifetime. Brookings. November 4, 2021.

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emotional gaps in students with no preschool experience upon their arrival in Kindergarten.<sup>12</sup> Also, Lowell teachers have observed a clear correlation between a lack of participation in early educational programming and performance gaps in achievement data among high-need student populations, including students with disabilities and English learners.<sup>13</sup>

Lowell has benefitted from the MA Department of Early Education and Care's Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative (CPPI) grant program. School and community-based CPPI classrooms benefit from board-certified behavioral analyst and consultative services, professional development to reinforce an inclusive learning environment, coaching and mentoring to help teachers utilize evidence-based curricula, and support for English language learners and students with disabilities. These valuable CPPI resources have helped enable Lowell to sustain a high-quality preschool program, expand access to preschool among three- and four-year-olds, and support the needs of diverse families in the community.

Despite the benefits of preschool programs, many Lowell families lack access to affordable and accessible programs. The average annual cost for early education for a 4-year-old in Massachusetts is over \$15,000 annually, with families having to pay between 20% and 40% of their income for such care. While financial resources are available for eligible families, navigating the early education and care subsidy system can be daunting for families. The application process, lack of awareness of resource and referral agencies, and waitlists can deter eligible families from accessing care. Locally, the Community Teamwork, Inc. 2021 Community Needs Assessment identified affordable childcare as a critical need to address issues of poverty in the Greater Lowell region. While the federal recommendation for childcare expenditures is at or below 7% of household income, childcare costs in Greater Lowell are among the highest in the state, on par with or exceeding the cost of rent.<sup>14</sup>

Given the value of early education, it is not surprising that the Lowell Public Schools Strategic Plan includes as Strategic Priority # 1 to Increase access to and coordination of early learning opportunities for children from birth to age five by supporting the work of community partners to ensure that every child in Lowell is academically, emotionally, and socially prepared for Kindergarten. The LPS strategic plan also asserts that reducing the discrepancy in early learning access will result in the reduction of opportunity gaps experienced in later grades and position more students to excel in high-quality programming throughout their LPS careers regardless of background or circumstance.

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<sup>12</sup> Lowell Public Schools Strategic Plan

<sup>13</sup> Lowell Public Schools Strategic Plan

<sup>14</sup> Economic Policy Institute Family Budget Fact Sheet 2018 via CTI 2021 Community Needs Assessment

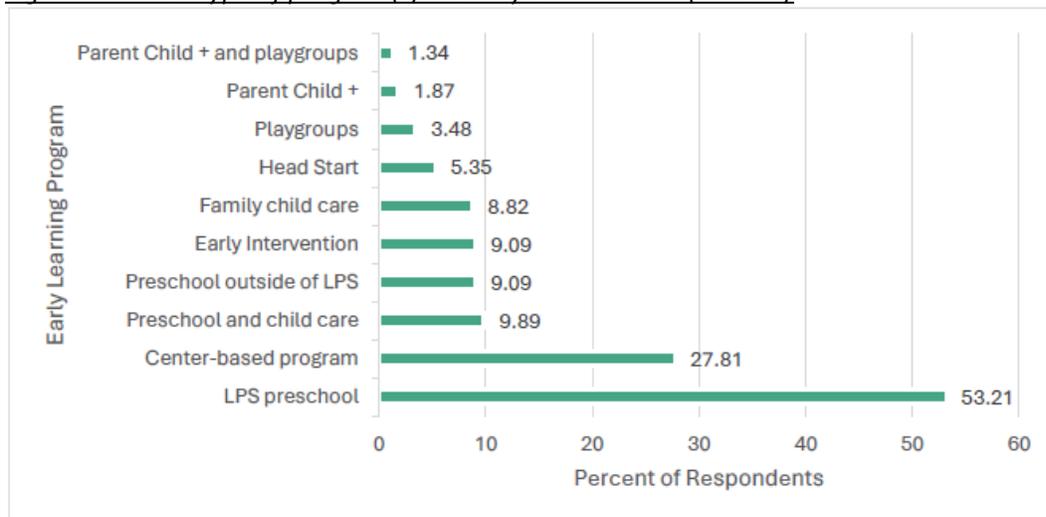
### III. DEMAND FOR PRESCHOOL IN LOWELL

#### Preschool Enrollment

Lowell Public School (LPS) and the Preschool Strategic Planning Committee (PSPC), in collaboration with Pear Associates, administered a comprehensive family survey from January 2024 to March 2024 (Appendix A). The survey was developed in English, Khmer, Portuguese, and Spanish -- the four predominant languages spoken by the majority of residents in Lowell -- to ensure equitable access to families. The survey included questions related to the demographics of participants, enrollment and engagement in early learning programs, early learning program preferences, and challenges and barriers to accessing early learning programs. The survey also captured respondents' definitions of quality and their level of access to information. The successful multi-pronged translated outreach strategy resulted in 926 completed responses to the survey. Of those respondents, 130 did not meet the survey qualifiers, which included being a resident of Lowell and having at least one child between the ages of three and six. The total number of included respondents was, therefore, 796.

Eligible respondents were asked, "Is your child currently enrolled in an early learning program?" More than half (56%) indicated that their children were enrolled. A majority (63%) of enrolled children utilize the LPS preschool program, continuing the trend from the 2018 and 2021 family surveys. As shown in Figure 1, center-based programs were the second most frequently used program type.

*Figure 1: "What type of program(s) are they enrolled in?" (n = 374)*



#### Experience

##### Lottery Model

Lowell utilizes a lottery model for preschool enrollment. Families of children who will be four years old by September 1 can register for preschool. They will receive a lottery number to enroll in one of the 358 seats held for the peer model. Families will receive a placement letter asking them to provide information on their preschool program of choice. Using this information, LPS will do its best to assign children based on family preference and will alert families of their assignment. In addition to these peer model classrooms, Lowell holds 434 seats for three- and four-year-old children with a diagnosed disability. During the 2023-24 school year, there were 792 preschoolers enrolled in the LPS preschool program. The demand for seats within the peer model exceeded seat availability. All children with diagnosed disabilities 3-5 years are placed in a program based on their IEP team's placement decision.

### Transportation

Reliable transportation is critical to ensuring preschool engagement. Both enrolled and unenrolled families experience transportation as a barrier to preschool access, especially given that the Lowell Public Schools does not provide transportation to preschool-aged children as they do for K-12 students. The lack of LPS-provided transportation has led families to implement creative solutions, such as adapting hours, utilizing public transportation, walking long distances with their children, or carpooling. Unfortunately, in some cases, the lack of transportation has resulted in families losing access to preschool altogether.

### Meeting Needs

Both families who are enrolled and those who are not enrolled experience challenges when it comes to finding a program that meets their needs. Of all the families that selected "There are no seats available to meet my needs" as their top barrier, 31% needed a minimum of a full-day program, followed by 27% that needed at least a school day program. Nearly 50% of these individuals also reported they needed a minimum of a school-year program, followed by 39% looking for a program that was offered during the school year and summer. While preferring the full-day and school-year options, 42% stated they would need a free program, 29% said they would need transportation support, and 34% stated they would need meals for their children during program hours to be able to access and use this program option. There are linguistic differences within the response to "there are no seats available to meet my needs." For example, 100% of Khmer-speaking respondents selected this option as one of their top three barriers, as opposed to 83% of English-speaking, 82% of Portuguese-speaking, and 80% of Spanish-speaking respondents. This data indicates that Khmer-speaking families are experiencing a higher rate of this barrier.

Among respondents with a child enrolled in an early learning program, the majority (66%) indicated that the program fully met their needs. However, 29% of respondents reported that the program only partially met their needs or was not their preferred choice.

Among the respondents who are not enrolled, 16% of respondents claim that the hours available for early learning programs do not meet their needs. Of those who reported, "The hours available don't meet my needs," 27% require a minimum of a full-day program, 19% require a minimum of a school day, 10% require a minimum of a half-day program, and 7% require at least a part-day program.

### Affordability

The cost of early learning programming has been a top three barrier for families since 2018. When evaluating the impact program cost has on each linguistic community, 94% of Khmer-speaking respondents rate this as one of their top three barriers compared to 89% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, 84% of Spanish-speaking respondents, and 82% of English-speaking respondents.

### **Reasons for Enrollment**

Among respondents who shared multiple reasons why they want their children engaged in an early learning program, 60% claimed the reason was their children's social development, and 57% of respondents said their children's interest in learning was also a key factor in their decision-making. Other reasons respondents wanted their children engaged were for language development (52% of respondents), emotional development (42% of respondents), and cognitive development (39% of respondents). Another reason shared by respondents in the open-ended question about their children's enrollment was kindergarten readiness.

**Barriers to Enrollment**

Unenrolled Families

Among survey respondents whose preschool-aged children were **not** currently enrolled, 32% indicated they would like them to be. There were differences between each language group, with 57% of all Portuguese-speaking respondents, 43% of all Spanish-speaking respondents, and 30% of Khmer-speaking respondents selecting this enrollment status compared to 26% of all English-speaking respondents. Based on this data, it is clear that more non-English-speaking families want their children enrolled but are experiencing more barriers to enrollment than English-speaking families.

As shown in Figure 2, the top three barriers for families who stated their child **was not enrolled but would like them to be** were "I don't know what programs are available," "I don't know where to get the information about available programs," and "The cost is too much."

*Figure 2: Respondent answers to "Why is your child not enrolled?" (n = 198)*



Limited access to information, as defined as the top two barriers, was selected by 59% of survey respondents. Of these, 32% reported not knowing what programs were available, and 26% were unsure where to get information about programs. Among those who were unsure which programs were available, 57% were English speakers, and 27% were Portuguese speakers.

Of those who were unsure where to get the information about programs, 44% were English-speaking, 29% were Portuguese-speaking, and 23% were Spanish-speaking. Lack of information in native languages can compound an engagement gap for Portuguese-speaking and Spanish-speaking participants. While Khmer-speaking individuals only reflected 4% of participants who reported "I do not know where to get information about available programs," due to the smaller number of respondents to this question, it is important to note that within the Khmer-speaking sample, 40% selected this as a barrier to enrollment.

Preschool programming can serve children three, four, and five years old. However, according to Lowell families, despite wanting their three-year-old enrolled in an early learning program, there are no seats available for their child. Of the English-speaking respondents, 22% reported experiencing this barrier to enrollment. The inability to find a program that serves their three-year-old child was also selected by 40% of Khmer-speaking respondents, 14% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, and 3% of Spanish-speaking respondents. When evaluating the related barrier to enrollment of "We are not eligible because of the age of my child," the families who selected this barrier previously identified that their children were "4 years old by September 1" or "2-3 years old," the two age groups that include three-year-olds. This data corroborates the need for additional preschool programming, particularly for three-year-old children.

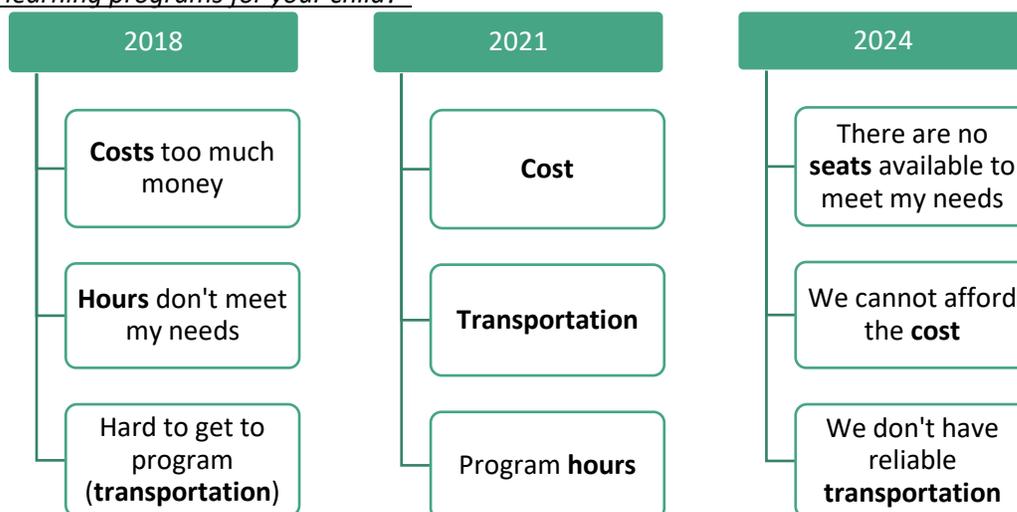
Among Khmer-speaking respondents, 40% reported language barriers as an issue. While not understanding the language spoken at the program was a barrier for all non-English speaking respondents, the impact varied based on the respondent's native language. Khmer-speaking respondents reported this as a barrier at the highest rate at 40%, followed by Spanish-speaking respondents at 6% and Portuguese-speaking respondents at only 2%.

Spanish-speaking respondents rated "I don't have reliable transportation to, from, or between programs" as a top barrier, which is not surprising given the significant number of Spanish-speaking respondents who live in the Belvidere and South Lowell communities, which are separated from the rest of Lowell by the Merrimack River and Concord River.

### All Families

All survey respondents, whether their child was enrolled or not, were asked, "What are the top barriers you've experienced when trying to access early learning programs for your child?" We can assume that the families that are enrolled have been able to, to some degree, overcome these challenges one way or another, whereas those who are not enrolled could not overcome them. "There are no seats available to meet my needs" was the top barrier experienced by 38% of respondents. The second top barrier was "We cannot afford the cost," which aligns with the data gathered on the amount families can pay and their top decision-making factors. The third top barrier was "we don't have reliable transportation." Families also noted that eligibility, in terms of income, their child's age, or disability status, was a barrier they experienced when trying to enroll in an early learning program. **As shown in Figure 3, the primary barriers families experience has been consistent over the last seven years.**

*Figure 3: Top three responses to "What are the top barriers you've experienced when trying to access early learning programs for your child?"*



Of the families that selected "There are no seats available to meet my needs" as their top barrier, 31% needed a minimum of a full-day program, followed by 27% that needed at least a school day program. Nearly 50% of these individuals also reported they needed a minimum of a school-year program, followed by 39% looking for a program that was offered during the school year and summer. While preferring the full-day and school-year options, 42% stated they would need a free program, 29% said they would need transportation support, and 34% stated they would need meals for their children during program hours in order to be able to access and use this program option.

### Facilitators to Preschool Access

#### Program Hours

A majority (32%) of families continue to seek full-day (6-10 hours) early learning programs or school-day programs (30%). Close to half of families (49%) would prefer to enroll in programs that are available for the school year (September to June).

#### Affordability

Most families (74%) are very likely to participate in early learning programs that are free of cost. Still, 61% of families are at least "somewhat likely" to participate in a program that costs up to \$40 per week per child. To facilitate access to preschool, programs should leverage opportunities to keep the costs under \$40 - \$100 per week per child, as only 33% were likely to access such programs. These rates align with family feedback from 2021. Lowell residents (57%) are seeking early learning programs that cost the same across all families and follow a model similar to the k-12 education system. Other pricing models that were selected but less favorable include income-based cost (15%) and expense-based cost (13%).

#### Transportation

While providing transportation to preschool or offering preschool options close to home offers numerous benefits that enhance accessibility, convenience, safety, and overall well-being for children and their families, transportation has been a top three barrier since 2018. Having preschools close to home or providing transport reduces the time spent commuting, allowing families to better manage their schedules. Convenient preschool access also helps working parents balance their responsibilities with their children's educational needs, reducing stress and time pressures.

### Eligibility

Almost half (47%) of families seek information regarding eligibility criteria when researching preschool programs. Clear and concise age, income, and disability status eligibility requirements that are shared broadly with families with preschool-aged children would facilitate access to preschool programming.

### Language

While a majority of participants (60%) indicated that they spoke English "very well," 60% stated that they speak a language other than English at home. While not understanding the language spoken at the program was a barrier for all non-English speaking respondents, the impact varied based on the respondent's native language. Khmer-speaking respondents reported this as a barrier at the highest rate at 40%, followed by Spanish-speaking respondents at 6% and Portuguese-speaking respondents at only 2%. One facilitator to preschool access would be to ensure that marketing materials (i.e., flyers, website, social media posts) are available in the common languages within Lowell. Also, having multilingual early education staff would improve communication and increase access.

### Meals and Nutrition

Regardless of the length of the day, at least one third of families are seeking programs that offer meals to their children so that they can access the program. Serving meals and snacks in preschool offers a variety of nutritional, developmental, educational, and social benefits. Providing meals and snacks at preschool can also reduce the burden on busy parents to prepare food, saving time and effort. Preschool meal programs can be more cost-effective than individual meal preparation at home, especially for low-income families, ensuring that all children, regardless of their family's economic status, receive at least one nutritious meal a day.

## **Decision-Making Factors**

### Quality Considerations

According to survey respondents, the top three quality factors were that the program engaged them in their children's development, educators know about child development, and the program provides access to other supports and services for their children and family, such as health and wellness programs and referrals to community resources. Access to other resources and supports was a top-three priority for every language group except English-speaking respondents.

### Teacher Education Considerations

As a follow-up, survey respondents were asked, "What level of education do you want your child's educators to have." Of the respondents, 40% preferred educators to have a bachelor's degree, and 26% prefer a master's degree. Of the 6% of families that selected "other," the common sentiment is that passion, nurturing, and the ability to connect, keep children safe, and experience with children (including those with special needs and behavioral challenges) are more important than a degree.

### Needs Considerations

When asked, "What are the most important needs," respondents reported the following as their top three priorities: the cleanliness of the program, the safety of the program, and the program location being near their home, work, or somewhere else that is convenient. Khmer-speaking respondents also included "the program provides transportation" among their top three priorities. Of the respondents who provided additional details about needs factors, the majority called attention to the cost of programs, the need for transportation, and tailored support for children with disabilities, special needs, or who have experienced trauma.

## **Access Disparities**

### Linguistic Differences

When asked, "Is your child currently enrolled in an early learning program?" 57% of Portuguese-speaking respondents, 43% of Spanish-speaking respondents, and 30% of Khmer-speaking respondents reported, "No, but I'd like them to be enrolled," compared to just 26% of English-speaking respondents. Families who are not enrolled but want to be are significantly more likely to speak a language other than English at home compared to just 27% who fall into this category and speak English at home. Based on this data, it is clear that more non-English-speaking families want their children enrolled but are experiencing more barriers to enrollment than English-speaking families.

### Geographic Differences

Families who are not currently enrolled but would like to be are evenly spread across the neighborhoods within Lowell. Of these families, 36% live in Centralville (01850), 33% live in Highlands (01851), 31% live in Belvidere and South Lowell (01852), and Pawtucketville (01854) is home to 30%. Across all neighborhoods, 59% of families not enrolled but who want to be can only travel 1 to 5 miles to bring a child to an early learning program.

### Special Needs Differences

Of the families who selected their child as not enrolled but want them to be, a statistically higher percentage reported that their child did not have a disability (36.06%) compared to those families whose children do have a disability (15%). This trend continues for families who have concerns about their child's development but have yet to be evaluated by a professional (38%).

#### IV. PRESCHOOL SUPPLY IN LOWELL

To understand the supply of school and community-based preschool programs, LPS, the Preschool Strategic Planning Committee, and Pear Associates administered a program survey (Appendix B) that included questions regarding capacity, enrollment, workforce, funding, and systemic structures. Figure 4 provides the names of school and community programs that completed the survey or provided information through email or telephone outreach efforts.

*Figure 4: Program Survey Completion Summary*

Program Name	Public School	Community-Based
Abraham Lincoln Elementary	X	
Acre Family Day		X
Bailey Elementary	X	
Bartlett Community Partnership	X	
Bethel		X
Cardinal O'Connell Early Learning Center	X	
Charles W Morey Elementary	X	
Charlotte M Murkland Elementary	X	
Children's Village at the Mill		X
Christa McAuliffe Elementary	X	
CTI: Family Child Care Systems <sup>15</sup>		X
Clarendon		X
Greater Lowell YMCA Preschool		X
Greenhalge Elementary	X	
James Houlares Center		X
John J Shaughnessy	X	
Joseph McAvinnue Elementary	X	
Learning Latta		X
Little Sprouts		X
Lowell Collaborative Preschool Academy		X
Lowell Day Nursery		X
Merrimack Valley Christian Day School, Inc.		X
Moody Elementary	X	
Peter W. Reilly Elementary	X	
Pyne Arts Elementary	X	
Small Steps		X
UTEC <sup>16</sup>		X
Washington	X	

#### Data Limitations

Several limitations to the preschool program dataset may impact a true supply assessment. First, given that program survey completion occurred in January and June, there may have been fluctuations in enrollment data during these different intervals. Second, some programs did not provide all requested

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<sup>16</sup> Preschool spaces limited to children of parents enrolled in UTEC programs

data due to time limitations or unavailable information. Third, survey respondents provided data based on their varying definitions of "length of program day" and "capacity" (i.e., licensed capacity, capacity based on being fully staffed, current capacity with temporary classroom closures). Additionally, some programs included their kindergarten classroom capacity even though these classrooms are not accessible to children ages three and four. Pear Associates utilized information provided on the [DESE Lowell School Profiles](#) and [EEC Licensed Child Care Search](#) to validate the provided data.

### Preschool Classrooms and Capacity

Preschool is offered through the LPS, center-based programs, and family childcare providers. The map below (Figure 5) provides a visual of where families can access school and community programs.

*Figure 5: Map of Center-Based and School-Based Preschool Programs in Lowell*

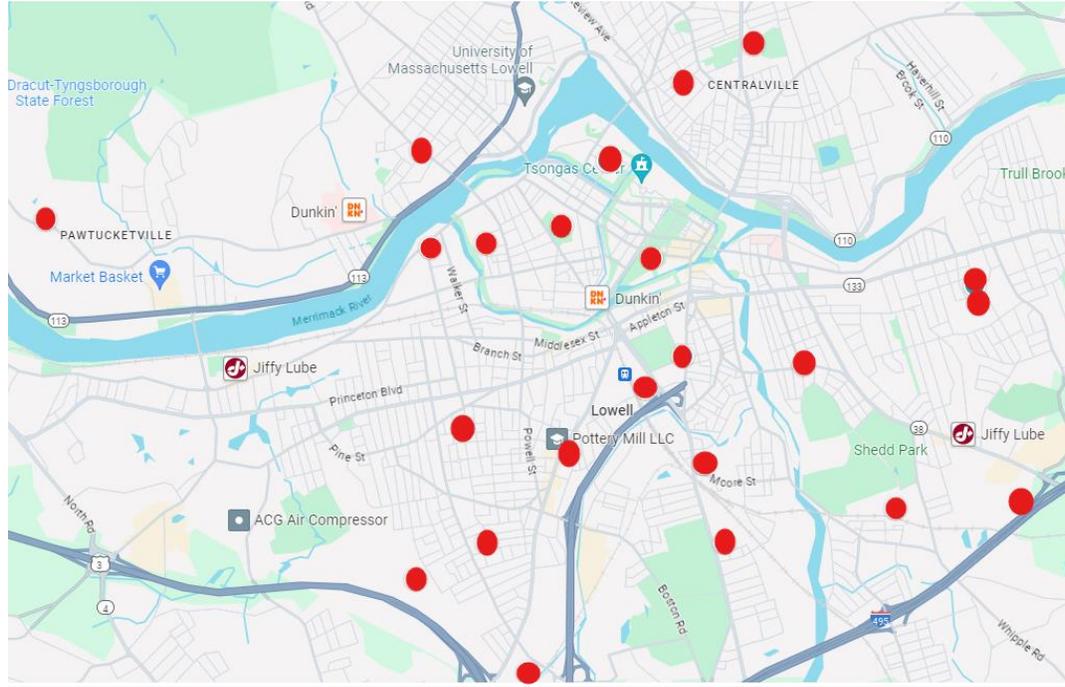


Figure 6 provides the current capacity of these programs to serve three-, four-, and five-year-olds. The chart includes the licensed capacity for each program as well as current enrollment. As indicated in Figure 6, there is an estimated capacity to serve 1,506 preschool children in Lowell, while the enrollment figures are much less. It is important to note that many preschool programs are unable to meet their licensed capacity, given staffing challenges and resulting classroom closures. While some programs may serve children who live outside of Lowell, the enrolled numbers within the chart reflect Lowell students only. Three-year-old students enrolled in LPS classrooms all have special needs, as the District only serves three-year-olds with an IEP. The number of sessions within the table includes classrooms that are open to all students and classrooms that are "sub-separate" or reserved for students with disabilities. The data on the number of children enrolled with an IEP indicates children who receive services within the program or classroom. LPS recognizes that students may receive services elsewhere; however, these students are not reflected in the count. Finally, programs that are CPPI community partners are indicated by orange cells.

Figure 6: Lowell Center-Based and School-Based Preschool Capacity

Program Name	Capacity (Licensed)	Enrolled: Age 3	Enrolled: Age 4	Enrolled: Age 5 ****	Total Enrolled	Total Enrolled With IEPs Serviced at Location/Program	Half Day Sessions	Sub-separate Half-Day Sessions	Full Day Sessions	Sub-separate Full-Day Sessions
Abraham Lincoln Elementary	60	16	45	0	61	27	4	0	0	0
Bailey Elementary	39	10	24	0	34	18	2	0	0	1
Bartlett Community Partnership	54	10	24	0	34	21	2	0	1	1
Cardinal O'Connell Early Learning Center	111	36	127	0	163	78	4	2	3	3
Charles W. Morey Elementary	78	30	42	0	72	41	4	0	0	2
Charlotte M Murkland Elementary	45	7	37	0	44	20	2	0	1	0
Children's Village at the Mill***	70	19	13	12	44	0	.5	0	1.5	0
Christa McAuliffe Elementary	60	18	40	0	58	26	4	0	0	0
Greater Lowell YMCA Preschool	60	20	20	20	60	2	0	0	3	0
Greenhalge Elementary	54	9	37	0	46	20	2	0	1	1
James Houlares Center***	260	44	57	17	118	16	3	0	8	0
John J. Shaughnessy Elementary	39	7	27	0	34	16	2	0	0	1
Joseph McAvinnue Elementary	39	9	24	0	33	16	2	0	0	1
Learning Latta	30	*	*	*	*	0	*	*	*	*
Little Sprouts	80	34	16	18	68	0	0	0	4	0
Lowell Collaborative Preschool Academy	80	12	17	11	40	3	0	0	4	0
Lowell Day Nursery	100	13	32	40	85	2	0	0	4	0
Merrimack Valley Christian Day School	43	16	12	12	40	0	0	0	3	0
Moody Elementary	30	6	19	0	25	10	2	0	0	0
Pawtucketville Elementary	39	13	24	0	37	20	2	0	0	1
Peter W. Reilly Elementary	39	8	23	0	31	18	2	0	0	1
Pyne Arts Elementary	39	11	25	0	36	16	2	0	0	1
Small Steps	18	20	12	0	32	0	0	0	1	0
Washington Elementary	39	8	25	0	33	21	2	0	0	1
<b>Total**</b>	<b>1,506</b>	<b>399</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>673</b>	<b>1,228</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>41.5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>14</b>

\*Data unavailable; \*\*Total count available with data provided; \*\*\* The Program integrates half-day seats into full-day classrooms, and the equivalent number of sessions has been calculated; \*\*\*\*5 year olds not yet kindergarten eligible

Lowell Preschool for All Supply and Demand Assessment

Lowell families also have access to preschool programming through family childcare system providers (Figure 7). The licensed capacity for these programs includes mixed age groups and, therefore, is not an accurate depiction of the seats available to three-, four-, and five-year-olds in Lowell. However, these partners fill critical gaps and ensure that more families have access to early learning opportunities.

*Figure 7: Lowell Family Child Care Systems Preschool Capacity*

Program Name	Capacity (Licensed)	Enrolled: Age 3	Enrolled: Age 4	Enrolled: Age 5	Total Enrolled	Total Enrolled With IEPs Serviced at Location/Program	Half Day Sessions	Full Day Sessions
Acre Family Day								
Bethel								
Clarendon	340	60	40	28	128	3	3	*
CTI Family Child Care Systems (61 programs)	486	*	*	*	190	*	*	61

### Children with Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

The survey collected data on the number of 3-5-year-old children with IEPs enrolled in preschool programs and the extent of special education services provided on-site. This data sheds light on the support available for children with identified disabilities in early childhood education settings. The programs surveyed reported significantly different enrollment rates for children with IEPs. One program reported that 93% (40) of all the enrolled students had an IEP, whereas another program only had one student. Programs were also mixed in terms of their ability to provide services on-site.

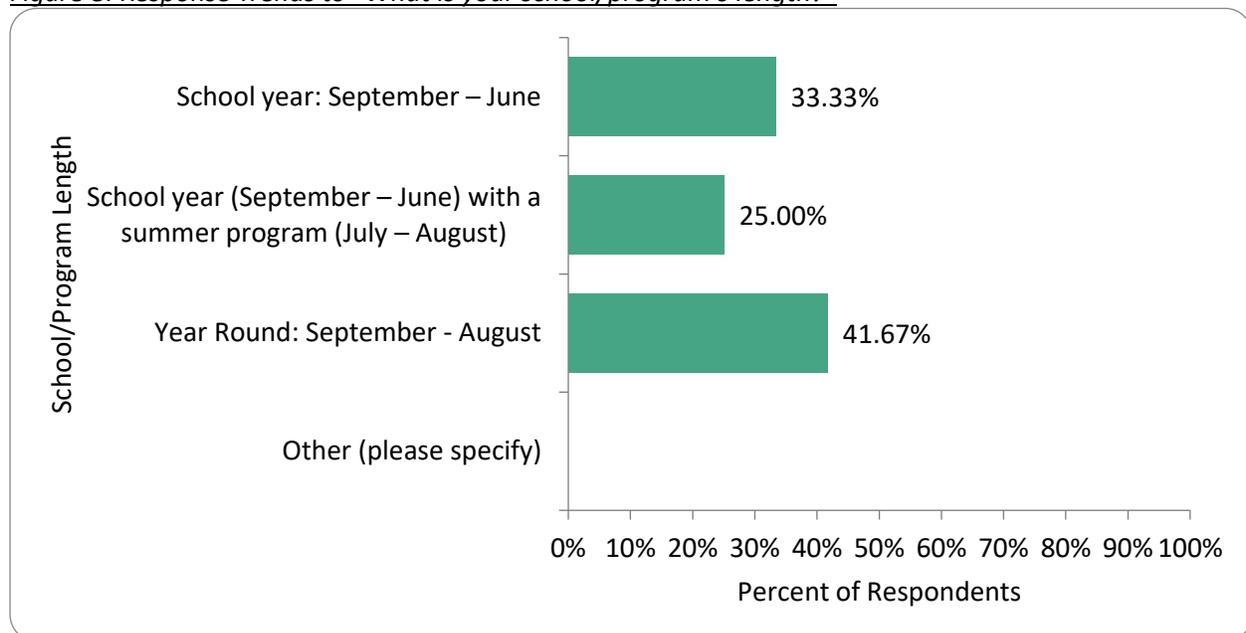
### Enrolling to Capacity

More than 40% of programs reported that they do *not* experience challenges enrolling to capacity. Space, hiring, and supporting children with challenging behaviors were some of the challenges experienced by 27% of the programs. One program also noted that additional challenges arise when unidentified/undiagnosed children are enrolled as "typical peers" when they actually need additional supports to be successful. Finally, one program noted that the PM part-day sessions are challenging to fill.

### **Length of Day and Year-round Access**

Lowell's preschool programs offer a diverse menu in terms of length of day and length of year. A majority (58%) of program survey respondents offer full-day 6-10 hour preschool, followed by 47% that offer part-day for 2.5 hours. Half-day or three to four hours of programming (21%) and school day/five to six hours of programming (13%) were less common. The 21% of respondents that selected "other" provided more detail to their selections, such as "part-day 2.5 hours with both a morning and afternoon session and a full day session," "at least 10 hours a day," and "we offer integrated morning and afternoon program (2.5 hours per session) and also have a substantially separate preschool program for children on Autism Spectrum (full day)." Only 29% of respondents report offering wraparound services to children between the ages of three and five-years old. As indicated in Figure 8, 42% of programs operate year-round, from September to August.

*Figure 8: Response Trends to "What is your school/program's length?"*



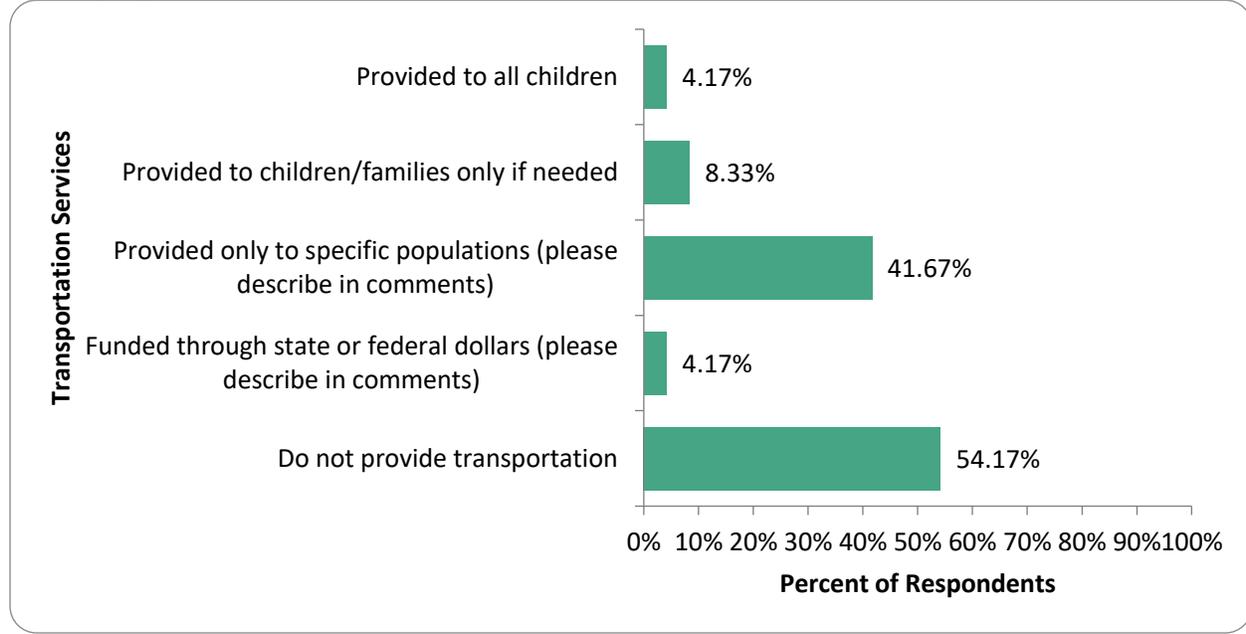
The MA Department of Early Education and Care maintains a waitlist of families seeking seats in state-contracted programs; all programs with a contract have access to this waitlist. LPS maintains a waitlist among families seeking seats. With parental consent, this list is shared with programs that respond to the procurement processes to offer seats to children needing full-day preschool. Programs in Lowell can enroll students who are currently on waitlists, including their own program waitlist, the waitlist managed by LPS, and/or the statewide child care waitlist. While the LPS lottery and statewide child care waitlists offer a broader pool of students, programs that utilize these systems do not have access to the waitlist data. Some programs were, therefore, unable to report on the number of children on a waitlist or the estimated time a child is on the waitlist.

Of those who provided waitlist data, 38% reported they had a waitlist for three-year-olds, with wait times ranging from 3-12 months. Half (50%) of programs serving four-year-olds have a waitlist. Just under half (42%) of all programs have a waitlist for five-year-olds. The data indicates that there is significant demand for preschool slots, with waitlists being a common issue. Families who enroll in the summer can expect shorter wait times (1-2 months), while those enrolling in January might wait until the new school year begins. Due to high demand, the waitlist duration can range from six to nine months.

### **Transportation**

While all neighborhoods have access to a preschool program, not all can attend due to transportation barriers. Unfortunately, due to budgets, pick-up routes, and staffing challenges, more than half (54%) of preschool programs are unable to provide transportation to or from their locations.

*Figure 9 Survey Responses to "How is transportation provided to support children's access to your school/program?"*



When asked to provide additional transportation details, respondents reported that caregivers provide transportation. Of the programs that were able to provide transportation services to only specific populations or needed to prioritize students who received this service, the most common responses were students who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). One program provided additional priority populations, including children experiencing homelessness, children with young adult parents, and children who are involved with the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

**Funding and Staffing Barrier**

Survey respondents were asked, "If funding and staffing were not a barrier, would you have the space and ability to increase your capacity to serve more children?" Of the 16 respondents, only three reported that they may be able to increase capacity if different strategies were implemented. Those strategies included downsizing their school-aged program, filling all classrooms to their capacity, and having the appropriate number of staff to open classrooms that have closed. Space was the main barrier to increasing capacity. Two programs shared that they are mindful of their capacity to ensure access to shared spaces such as playgrounds, access to peer models, and access to safe spaces and supports for staff.

**Student Demographics**

English Language Learners

The survey gathered data on the languages spoken by families enrolled in various preschool programs. Many responses highlighted a range of languages, while some programs were unable to provide specific data. Commonly reported languages include Spanish, Khmer, English, and Portuguese. Some programs specified additional languages such as Haitian Creole, Arabic, Chinese, Swahili, French, and Gujarati. Additional responses included Thai and Marathi. One program noted that 18 different languages are spoken by families, illustrating the extensive linguistic diversity within the community. Another mentioned having too many languages to list specifically.

### Low-Income Families

The survey collected data on the enrollment of 3-5-year-old children from low-income households, as well as the extent of state or federal funding supporting their enrollment. The number of low-income children served varied significantly among the programs. Some programs reported serving children from low-income households, representing nearly 68% of their total enrollment. One program serves 40 children, with 93% coming from low-income households, while another enrolls 35 children, 83% of whom are identified as low-income.

Some programs provided specific data on financial assistance. Public schools indicated that their preschool programs were free to all families, whether they were low-income or not. Similarly, a Head Start program reported that all enrolled children require some form of financial assistance due to the program's eligibility requirements. A community-based program shared that 20 of the children it serves meet the criteria to receive state or federal funding to support their enrollment.

### Race

The survey data on the enrollment of 3-5-year-old children by race and ethnicity across various preschool programs in Lowell reveals significant diversity. The enrollment percentages for Asian children range from 2% to 49%. Black or African-American children make up 3% to 17% of enrollments in various programs. Hispanic/Latino children are also well represented, with percentages ranging from 10% to 67%. Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic children have enrollment percentages between 0% and 30%. Native American and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander enrollments are minimal, with most programs reporting no children from these groups, except for one program that enrolled one child from each group. White children make up 7% to 67% of enrollments.

### **Funding and Cost**

Lowell families benefit from the following federal funding sources:

- **Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)**, authorized by the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act pays for subsidies for early education and care for kids up to age 13, so low-income families can work or pursue education or training.
- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)** allows spending directly on early education and care assistance (subsidies to families). States may also transfer up to 1/3 of TANF to CCDF. Massachusetts does shift a portion of TANF to CCDF each year.
- **Head Start** (and Early Head Start) send direct grants to local agencies that support services in center-based programs, family child care, and home visiting for income-eligible children ages 0-5. Head Start has a required state match.
- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** includes grants to states to serve young children with disabilities, ages 3-5. These funds flow to DESE, which grants to local school districts.

The Commonwealth provides financial assistance to eligible families via three programs.

- **Income Eligible Child Care:** This line item in EEC's budget includes federal and state funds (approximately a 50/50 match). It provides child care financial assistance for low-income families with a service need on a first come/first served basis.
- **Supportive/DCF-Related Child Care:** This line item in EEC's budget includes federal TANF funds (referenced above) and state funds. It provides childcare placements for families referred to by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). EEC both directly enrolls children through contracts with providers and provides vouchers.

- **Transitional/DTA Related Child Care:** This program provides child care vouchers to families receiving Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) cash assistance and participating in the Employment Services Program.

The Commonwealth also directly funds individual slots for children ages 0-5 via:

- The **Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative** is a grant to nine communities for local planning and high-quality preschool services. Currently, there are 14 CPPI classrooms in Lowell. Six community programs have eight CPPI classrooms, and four public schools have six CPPI classrooms.
- Part of **federal Head Start** is paid for through state matching funds. Community Teamwork is the only Head Start provider in Lowell. All of its slots are center-based, and 45% were four years old in SY 20-21. Community Teamwork has three centers in Lowell.
- **Chapter 70 State Aid** goes to each city, town, and regional school district to support the PK-12 public school system. This program is run through DESE. It is based on the types of students (grade, program, demographics) and the community's ability to pay. Districts receive credit for their non-tuition-paying preschool students at a half-day rate.
- **Title I** provides financial assistance to school districts and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. It is calculated via a statutory formula and administered through DESE. It can be used in preschool programs.
- **Growing Literacy Equity Across Massachusetts (GLEAM)**, which supports eight preschool classrooms in Lowell, supports the implementation of equity-driven and sustainable improvements in programming through multi-tiered ELA/literacy efforts.
- The **Coordinated Family and Community Engagement (CFCE) Network** is an EEC program that provides funds to support parent education and programming for young children who are not enrolled in preschool.

Beyond state and general resources, Lowell preschools benefit from local and private funding: The survey collected information about the various sources of funding received by early childhood education programs to cover the costs of providing education. Each provider operates with a different combination of funding sources, making their own decisions regarding how to balance these sources across classrooms and preschool students.

When asked about funding for program quality initiatives, responses varied. Some programs receive federal and state subsidies, district funding, and grants like CPPI and C3, which are used for staff pay increases, bonuses, recruitment, and purchasing materials and supplies. However, several programs reported uncertainty or lack of knowledge about specific funding for these initiatives. A few programs indicated they do not receive dedicated funding for quality improvements.

Respondents highlighted the need for additional funding for program quality initiatives, including flexible funding, higher salaries for educators, and funds for professional development, materials, and support staff. Some mentioned the importance of maintaining continuity and consistency in staffing to ensure high-quality education.

Estimates of the full cost per child to provide care and education varied. Some programs provided specific figures, such as \$60 per day for full-time care and \$42 per day for part-time care. One program

estimated an annual cost of \$29,000 per child for comprehensive services, especially for the most vulnerable children. Another program reported an estimated cost of \$11,000 per child per year, while others mentioned weekly costs of \$271.

### **Understanding of Universal Preschool**

Program survey respondents were asked, "What does the term 'universal preschool' mean to you in ensuring access to preschool for all children 3-5 years old regardless of where they are served?" Of the 17 respondents, a majority (67%) shared that universal preschool starts with ensuring every child from three to five years old within Lowell has access, with a total of 25% specifically stating that family voice and choice are essential. Universal preschool should be free or at least low-cost to all families, according to 33% of survey respondents. Respondents shared that no matter the setting, teachers must be qualified (13%), and the space and curriculum must be developmentally appropriate (17%). Finally, 13% of respondents believe universal preschool is implemented utilizing multiple settings.

### **Barriers to Implementation**

In addition to the data gathered from families, LPS gathered data about what barriers exist, from the program perspective, to offer preschool for all three- to five-year-olds in Lowell. The 17 respondents identified a diverse list of barriers. Space was the most common theme, shared by 38% of respondents, followed by cost/funding (33%) and transportation (29%). Consistent and systematic financial support is essential for the successful implementation. Funding was further defined as the lack of funding to pay qualified staff by 17% of respondents, with an additional 25% stating that quality staff in general is a barrier. The limited number of seats (13%) is compounded by the need to ensure adequate staffing and support to provide needed services and attention to children experiencing behavioral challenges (13%). Other themes included inconsistent offerings across programs, not meeting the needs of families, especially those who are working, and the lack of family knowledge or interest in early learning. While facilities and location were indicated by a small number of respondents (4%), it was also proposed that a program "census" be completed to understand where programs are offered in comparison to where families are and need access.

### **Public and Political Will**

Only 11 respondents shared their thoughts on the level of public and political will that exists to implement "universal preschool" in Lowell. Three respondents stated that there was strong will within the community. Nine indicated there was at least some political and/or public will to implement preschool for all three- to five-year-olds. Responses also shared that will could be increased and nourished through information sharing about how programs meet family needs.

### **Bureaucratic Hurdles**

Fourteen respondents provided information about the bureaucratic hurdles they believe will impact access to preschool for all in Lowell. Funding was a hurdle identified by a third of respondents. The need for consistent and systematic funding is crucial for the successful implementation of universal preschool. Yet, the current funding mechanisms are often inadequate or misaligned with the needs of early childhood education programs. Several respondents shared that one key to overcoming these bureaucratic hurdles is to make preschool for all a long-term funding priority among Lowell School Committee and City Council members.

Respondents indicated several staffing and educator bureaucratic hurdles. A major concern within this category, noted by 8% of respondents, is the disparity in pay between early educators and public school teachers. This pay-equity issue not only affects teacher morale but also impacts the recruitment and

retention of qualified staff. Additionally, 8% of respondents mentioned challenges related to licensing and teacher certification requirements, which can complicate and slow down the process of staffing preschools with qualified educators. Furthermore, respondents pointed out that staff retention is difficult due to various stressors and a lack of support. Respondents believe the mandates placed on staff in universal pre-K classrooms, including requirements for degrees, curriculum adherence, and regular observations, can create a high-pressure environment. Without adequate support and well-designed systems, these pressures lead to high turnover rates as staff leave the field.

Other significant hurdles include space limitations and the need for more facilities to accommodate preschool children. Respondents also emphasized the importance of balancing mandates and requirements with desired outcomes, ensuring that the regulatory requirements do not overshadow the core goal of providing quality education.

### Workforce Assessment

The program survey revealed a diverse range of educational qualifications among early childhood professionals. Based on the limited data provided by respondents, Figure 10 provides information about the early childhood workforce serving Lowell children.

*Figure 10: Responses to "Please indicate the number of staff you employ according to their highest degree."*

Degree Level	Total Number Reported Across all Surveys
No high school or equivalent degree	3
High school diploma or equivalent	51
High school diploma from a technical high school and EEC-approved program	7
High school diploma or equivalent and some college	31
Child Developmental Associate Credential (CDA)	15
Other college-level early childhood certificate programs	2
Associate degree	30
Bachelor's Degree	68
Master's Degree	59
Total	266

The workforce's language proficiency is diverse, reflecting the multicultural environment in early childhood education in Lowell. The most commonly spoken languages are Spanish, Khmer, English, and Portuguese, with other languages such as Haitian Creole, ASL, Arabic, and French also represented.

Various organizations offer professional development programs to enhance the skills of early childhood educators. Many organizations offer tuition reimbursement, in-house training, and online platforms for mandatory training. Funding and support are provided for attending conferences, workshops, and certificate programs. Some programs also offer coaching and consultation services for mental health and behavioral issues. Lowell Public Schools, in collaboration with other organizations, offer professional development days and training, focusing on curriculum development and special education. Training programs are often tailored to meet the specific needs of staff. The most popular benefits among early childhood professionals include sick days (63%), health insurance (58%), dental insurance (54%), and

coaching (46%). The least common benefits include a discount(s) for a child(ren) enrolled in your school or program (21%), accidental death and dismemberment insurance (21%), and pension (25%).

Of all respondents, 33% of programs reported experiencing challenges when hiring staff for their program. Programs specifically identified challenges in hiring Assistant Teachers, Lead Teachers with Bachelor's Degrees, full-time Teachers, and Preschool Teachers who spoke the same language as the students. One program stated that they are finding success with hiring by leveraging a "grow our own" model in which they are able to leverage easy-to-fill entry-level positions to nurture long-term staff transition from Aids to Assistant Teachers.

### **Strategies for Establishing Universal Preschool**

LPS sought to understand what programs believe it would take to implement preschool for all in Lowell and to gather innovative strategies that could facilitate the successful implementation of this program. Of the 17 respondents who shared what it would take to establish access for all, 29% cited funding as the primary focus, including exploring creative and accurate cost models. Funding will also need to be set aside to support teacher pay in addition to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Increasing seats (4%) and space (38%) must also be addressed to all three, four, and five-year-olds who can access preschool. One participant recommended utilizing a phased approach to focusing on one age group at a time and then expanding slowly to full universal preschool. Transportation is still a barrier that will need to be addressed for all families to access the additional seats in new locations with qualified teachers. According to respondents, a specific early childhood center within LPS, coordination among programs (including those in the community), and collaboration with families are all key systemic changes that could facilitate successful implementation. Finally, two of the 17 respondents stated that supports and structures to serve children with severe behavioral challenges and children with developmental disabilities are needed for preschool for all.

Respondents were ready to share innovative strategies to provide access to preschool for all three to five-year-old children in Lowell. These strategies include:

- Launch a community collaboration model that brings together early care and education providers with school principals to develop shared definitions and data-sharing agreements and offer shared professional development and peer training opportunities, all while honoring the unique elements of programs as they all come together to provide the services that families are seeking.
- Triage children to programs based on level of need. For example, the children experiencing the greatest needs should have access to five days of a program, while children with strong skills have access to two half days of a program.
- Implement a true public-private partnership model where all individuals and programs feel valued. This partnership could lead to voucher opportunities or even more shared curriculum implementation.
- Implement an early childhood center model within Lowell where preschool-age students have access to dedicated spaces for their learning that are developmentally appropriate and safe. These centers should be located throughout the city and will likely still need to require transportation to increase access.
- Develop and leverage a committee of teachers, families, and community champions to advocate for preschool for all.
- Expand funding of current funding sources (CPPI) and leverage new funding options.

- Ensure families have access to the information they need and want to make their choice about preschool for their children.

**Advocacy for Universal Preschool**

Nearly 59% of all responses indicated that they would advocate for establishing access to preschool for all three to five-year-old children in Lowell. Some respondents either did not provide an answer or shared that they were unsure if they would advocate for preschool for all. Those who stated they were unsure reported that they would advocate if their job required it, and another shared that there are some concerns about advocating for all preschool programs without risking some programs closing. Of those who would advocate for preschool for all, their engagement activities include support in data gathering, building relationships with legislators, helping with data dives, participating in committees, support in event implementation, and providing grant writing assistance. When engaging community members in advocacy, it will be important to provide clear roles and expectations for participation.

## **V. Perspectives from Community Champions**

To understand the perspectives on the supply and demand of early learning programs from champions within the Lowell community, LPS and the PSPC conducted six 30-45-minute virtual interviews with key leaders. Interviews followed a standard protocol (Appendix C) that focused on kindergarten readiness and the current preschool system.

### **Definitions**

All interviewees were asked, "What does the term *universal preschool* mean to you in ensuring access to preschool for all children 3-5 years old regardless of where they are served." All interviewees shared the sentiment that every family and every child within the Lowell city limits who wants the opportunity to engage in preschool is given that opportunity. Four interviewees specifically mentioned equitable access and defined it similarly as ensuring no difference in access across all families.

Interview subjects indicated that the implementation of preschool for all children must consider language diversity, support for newly arrived families (including immigrants, refugees, and asylees), and acknowledge the impact of poverty on families within Lowell. While historically, the term "universal preschool" has been associated with free programming for families, only one interviewee stated that the program should be free of charge.

### **Preschool in Lowell**

In order to gather additional information about the community and perspectives of these champions, six (6) interviewees were asked, "What have you heard or know about preschool for 3-5-year-olds in Lowell?" and five (5) interviewees were asked, "What have you heard from families and early educators about preschool programming in Lowell." There were limited themes to be garnered from these two questions as respondents utilized this time to share general feedback and ideas about programming.

Among interview subjects, four believed that there is not enough supply of early learning slots to meet the needs of Lowell families and that this lack of supply needs to be addressed for this initiative to be successful. Two interview subjects felt the currently available options are expensive and flagged cost as a concern. To resolve these challenges, interview subjects suggested that a public/private partnership is needed to ensure access and family choice. While all interview subjects were champions for preschool for all, none had direct communication with families or early childhood educators about preschool. Interview responses were based on their past experiences or on what they heard from colleagues, family, and friends, as illustrated in Table 3.

### **Kindergarten Readiness**

Interview subjects were asked, "What have you heard from parents and caregivers about how well they believe their child is being prepared for kindergarten?" Subjects were also asked whether they were aware of the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) preschool curriculum frameworks and the MA Department of Early Education and Care's (EEC) early learning guidelines and how they inform kindergarten readiness.

In response to this inquiry, interview subjects reflected on whether there was consistent quality across programs that would equally prepare children for Kindergarten. For example, one interview subjects shared concerns about the high student-to-teacher ratio in some early learning classrooms. Another interview subject was unsure whether all programs have the same skilled educators as those leading Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms.

In relation to the DESE and EEC frameworks, none of the interviewees had experience using the frameworks, but all were aware that they existed. Interview subjects believed the frameworks helped differentiate "preschool" from "daycare" by ensuring children are educated on consistent content and based on their learning style, no matter the setting. Additionally, interview subjects asserted that the frameworks support equitable and safe learning that engages parents, early educators, and community partners. Two interview subjects suggested utilizing these frameworks to support the implementation of a public/private partnership. One interview subject suggested that family childcare providers as "small businesses" within the community could serve as key partners in implementing preschool for all.

### **Barriers to Implementation**

Interview subjects were asked to consider barriers to implementing a preschool-for-all model. Space was identified as a key barrier, with three interview subjects stating the importance of keeping preschool students together in age-appropriate locations that include play space. From a fiscal standpoint, interview subjects claimed purchasing space will be a challenge as LPS is currently at capacity. Beyond space, interview subjects identified the diverse linguistic and cultural makeup of Lowell families, posing potential barriers to implementation. In addition to ensuring families are engaged and have access to resources, interview subjects mentioned the importance of building trust and connection with all families.

During the interviews, subjects emphasized the consequences of poverty on students, families, and the community. Financial challenges impact the affordability of early learning for families, as well as the transportation costs. In addition to affecting families, financial challenges also impact programs, given the cost of recruiting, retaining, and training qualified educators. In creating a preschool-for-all model, interview subjects urged LPS to consider costs associated with the time and effort needed to build and maintain partnerships that lead to more successful funding and program implementation. Interview subjects also mentioned the importance of policy change at the city, state, and federal levels to ensure a diverse funding pool. Finally, interview subjects mentioned the implications of a potential tax increase to fund the model.

### **Facilitators to Implementation**

Despite the barriers listed above, there is significant political will to engage in this work and few political hurdles to implementation. Of the three interviewees who were asked if they would advocate for expanding preschool for all three- to five-year-olds in Lowell, all of them said yes and were eager to learn actionable steps they could take.

Interview subjects were asked to share any innovative strategies within and beyond Lowell that could support the implementation of this initiative. Interview subjects identified Chapter 70 and the City Maintenance of Effort budget as two funding streams for potential fiscal support for this work. When seeking fiscal support, one interview subject shared how the communication should speak to this initiative as an *opportunity* as opposed to an expense or cost for the city. Finally, interview subjects identified the collaboration between preschool providers and LPS, as well as the early childhood business pilot funded by the Community Foundation of North Central MA, as potential models to replicate. When speaking about the costs of a preschool for all, interview subjects emphasized the importance of the social return on investment for early learning programs for children in Lowell.

## **VI. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The current landscape of preschool education in Lowell reveals a critical imbalance between demand and supply, with demand significantly surpassing available resources. This disparity underscores the urgent need for increased funding and strategic investments to expand preschool access and improve educational outcomes for young children. As families increasingly seek high-quality early childhood education to support children's development and prepare them for academic success, addressing funding gaps becomes paramount. Collaborative efforts involving policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders are essential to secure sustainable funding sources, foster program expansion, and ensure equitable access to preschool education, thereby meeting the growing demand and promoting long-term benefits.

LPS is committed to creating a preschool-for-all model that aligns with the quality benchmarks designed by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER),<sup>17</sup> which include early learning and development standards, teachers with a Bachelor's degree and specialized training in pre-k, assistant teachers with a CDA or equivalent, professional development and coaching for staff, class size of 20 students or fewer, staff-child ratio 1:10 or better, vision, hearing and health screenings and referrals, curriculum supports, and continuous quality improvement system.

Lowell may wish to consider the following strategies presented in no particular order of importance or priority:

### ***Recommendation 1: Development a multilingual informational campaign***

A multilingual information campaign for parents, caretakers, and families is essential for creating a supportive, inclusive, and effective educational environment. Creating a campaign that educates families about the value of early education and promotes available school and community programs assures that all family members, regardless of their primary language, can engage with and support their child's early education effectively. Providing information in a family's native language can build trust and make family members feel more comfortable engaging with programs and schools.

LPS may consider the following strategies to help ensure all families have the knowledge and resources they need to contribute positively to their child's early learning experiences:

- Brochures and flyers with clear and visually appealing information, including the use of infographics to simplify the registration process
- Family workshops and information nights that allow family members to ask questions
- Traditional and social media outreach that includes posts and videos explaining the importance of preschool and how to enroll
- Collaboration with community organizations to share information through their email lists, meetings, and newsletters
- Personalized outreach through phone calls and text messages

### ***Recommendation 2: Conduct a comprehensive facilities assessment***

Conducting a facilities assessment is a critical step for ensuring that the expansion of preschool-for-all is effective, sustainable, and meets the needs of the community. LPS will want to first determine if existing facilities have enough space to accommodate additional preschool children without compromising the quality of education or safety standards. Next, LPS will need to evaluate the condition of other facilities –

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<sup>17</sup> <https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/benchmarks-check-list-png-410x1024.png>

including classrooms, restrooms, and playgrounds -- to identify any repairs or upgrades needed to create a conducive learning environment for young children. Once spaces are identified as potential preschool classrooms, LPS will need to ensure the facilities comply with local, state, and federal regulations for preschool education, including health, safety, and accessibility standards.

A key consideration for the facilities assessment is the location of existing and potential classrooms, considering the transportation challenges within Lowell. LPS must, therefore, assess physical accessibility to ensure facilities are reachable and usable by all families, including those with disabilities. LPS may want to explore alternatives to "brick-and-mortar" locations that offer flexibility and an innovative educational experience. For example, a mobile preschool uses a converted bus or van equipped with educational materials and staffed by teachers to bring preschool education to different neighborhoods.

***Recommendation 3: Engage policymakers and philanthropic organizations***

By engaging policymakers and philanthropic organizations and educating them about the value of early childhood education, LPS can build a strong foundation for its preschool-for-all model, ensuring that it is well-supported and creating a sustainable system that promotes educational equity. Policymakers and philanthropic organizations can allocate public and private funds and in-kind donations, as well as create financial support structures.

Engaging with policymakers can lead to the creation or amendment of laws and policies that support the establishment and expansion of preschool-for-all. Policymakers can also implement policies that ensure all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, have access to high-quality preschool education. Local policymakers can also use their platforms to raise awareness and garner public support for universal preschool initiatives.

Local and regional philanthropic organizations often focus on equity, providing funding and support to underserved communities and populations that might otherwise lack access to preschool. Given the importance of long-term sustainability, philanthropic organizations can help create endowments and other financial mechanisms that provide ongoing support for preschool programs.

***Recommendation 4: Explore safe and affordable transportation options***

Promoting safe and affordable transportation options for preschool is essential for ensuring equitable access to education, supporting families, enhancing child safety and well-being, and promoting consistent attendance and positive academic and social outcomes. Transportation simplifies daily logistics for families, especially working families, those with multiple children, or single-parent households.

Because public school transportation does not currently include services for preschool children, LPS may wish to explore policy changes and funding options to enable school bussing. Also, LPS should research ride-sharing apps, such as Uber and Lyft, and local taxi services, which may offer programs designed for families with young children. LPS could promote available resources through the Lowell Regional Transit Authority and Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority so that families know how these public transportation options could support their needs. Finally, LPS may wish to explore creative carpooling models that would encourage a sense of community while allowing families to share the transportation burden.

***Recommendation # 5: Recruit and retain highly qualified educators***

Recruiting and retaining highly qualified educators for preschool is crucial for Lowell's effort to provide high-quality early childhood education. Qualified educators enhance early learning outcomes, promote long-term academic success, support diverse learners, ensure compliance with education standards, and encourage innovation. LPS and its community partners should utilize proven educator recruitment strategies, including targeted promotion, networking and referrals, and partnerships with colleges and universities.

To retain educators, LPS and community providers must offer competitive compensation and benefits, professional development opportunities, access to evidence-based educational resources and tools, and ongoing coaching. Programs that offer a positive and supportive workplace culture that values collaboration, creativity, and mutual respect among staff members will likely retain its staff versus a less supportive and collaborative employment setting. Finally, programs should offer mentorship programs for new educators to facilitate professional growth and integration into the preschool community.

Educator retention positively contributes to continuity of care and relationships, the quality of education, and community and family engagement. Furthermore, retaining educators reduces the costs associated with recruitment, training, and onboarding and allows programs to reallocate resources toward educational programming and staff development.

***Recommendation #6: Strengthen partnerships with family-serving providers***

Preschool programs can address a variety of family needs through partnerships with other providers, enhancing the overall support and resources available to families. Ensuring families have access to wraparound supports helps to address the social, emotional, and financial needs that may impact learning. Also, preschools can serve as a resource to help connect families with financial assistance programs, nutritional supports, housing supports, and childcare subsidies, among other resources.

Collaborating with local health providers, for example, will allow preschools to facilitate access to regular health check-ups, vaccinations, and medical screenings for children. Preschools may also partner with healthcare professionals to offer workshops on child nutrition, developmental milestones, and health-related topics so that parents and caregivers can support their child's development at home. Working with mental health professionals to provide referrals for counseling services or behavioral support for children and families promotes emotional well-being and addresses social-emotional challenges. Preschools can also promote parenting classes or support groups focused on stress management, positive discipline, and fostering resilience.

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**GLOSSARY<sup>18</sup>**

Child Care Center: Any facility operated on a regular basis, whether known as a day nursery, nursery school, Kindergarten, child play school, progressive school, child development center, daycare center, preschool, or known under any other name that receives children, not of common parentage, younger than seven years old, or younger than 16 years old if such children have special needs, for non-residential custody and care during part or all of the day separate from their parent(s). Child Care centers shall not include any part of a public school system or privately organized educational system unless the services of such a system are primarily limited to Kindergarten, nursery or related preschool services; a Sunday school conducted by a religious institution; a facility operated by a religious organization where children are cared for during short periods while persons responsible for such children are attending religious services; a family child care home; an informal cooperative arrangement among neighbors or relatives; or the occasional care of children with or without compensation therefore.

Children with Special Needs: Children younger than 16 years old who, because of temporary or permanent disabilities arising from intellectual, sensory, emotional, physical, or environmental factors or other specific learning disabilities, are or would be unable to progress effectively in a regular school program. Such children may include, but not be limited to, a school-age child with disabilities as determined by an evaluation conducted pursuant to MGL c. 71B, § 3, and as defined by the Department of Education in 603 CMR 28.00, or an infant or toddler with an individual family service plan (IFSP) receiving early intervention services.

Family Child Care: Temporary custody and care provided in a private residence during part or all of the day for no more than ten children younger than 14 years old or children younger than 16 years old if such children have special needs. Family child care shall not mean an informal cooperative arrangement among neighbors or relatives, or the occasional care of children with or without compensation, therefore.

Family Child Care System: Any entity or person who, through contractual arrangement, provides to family child care homes that it has approved as members of said system, central administrative functions including, but not limited to, training of operators of family child care homes; technical assistance and consultation to operators of family child care homes; inspection, supervision, monitoring, and evaluation of family child care homes; referral of children to available family child care homes; and referral of children to available health and social services, provided, however, that family child care system shall not mean a placement agency or a child care center.

Preschooler/Preschool Child: Any child at least two years and nine months old but not yet attending first grade. (Note: LPS is focused particularly on children ages three, four, and five years old)

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/doc/family-group-school-age-child-care-programs-606-cmr-7/download>

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A – Family Survey

#### Preschool In Lowell – Family SURVEY

##### Criteria

This question requires an answer.

Thank you for your interest in this project. Unfortunately, you do not meet the criteria to complete this survey. If you feel this is inaccurate, please contact Pear Associates at [blittle@pearassociates.com](mailto:blittle@pearassociates.com).

1. Are you a resident of the City of Lowell, MA? You will be asked to provide your Lowell mailing address if you want to be entered into the raffle. Gifts will only be mailed to Lowell addresses. Addresses outside of Lowell, MA, will be deemed ineligible.
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
2. Do you have at least one child between the ages of three and six?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No

##### Demographic Data

3. Are you Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin?
  - A. No, not of Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish origin
  - B. Yes, of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
  - C. Prefer not to answer
4. What is your race?
  - A. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - B. Asian
  - C. Black or African American
  - D. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - E. Multi-racial
  - F. White
  - G. Prefer not to answer
5. How well do you speak English?
  - A. Very well
  - B. Well
  - C. Not well
  - D. Not at all
  - E. Prefer not to answer
6. Do you speak a language other than English at home?
  - A. No
  - B. Prefer not to answer
  - C. Yes (please specify)
    - i. Please enter the other language you speak at home
7. What is your zip code?
  - A. 01850 (Centralville)
  - B. 01851 (Highlands)
  - C. 01852 (Belvidere, Downtown, Back Central, South Lowell)
  - D. 01853
  - E. 01854 (Pawtucketville)
8. What are the ages of your children? Check all that apply
  - A. Birth – 15 months old
  - B. 15 months – 2 years old
  - C. 2 – 3 years old
  - D. 4 years old by September 1
  - E. 5 years old by September 1
  - F. 6 years old by September 1
  - G. 7 years old or older by September 1
  - H. Other

## Lowell Preschool for All Supply and Demand Assessment

9. Do any of your children **under age six** years old have a diagnosed disability?
- A. Yes, I have at least one child with an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)
  - B. Yes, I have at least one child with an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
  - C. Yes, I have at least one child with a diagnosed disability, but they do not have an IEP or IFSP
  - D. No
  - E. Unsure
  - F. I have concerns about my child's development, but they have not been evaluated by a professional yet.

### Current Enrollment And Engagement Status

The following questions will use terms to help us better understand your needs and experience. When we use the term "early learning," we are referring to any experience in which young children learn, for example, center-based child care, family child care, Head Start, home visiting, playgroups, pre-kindergarten, and preschool for children ages 3, 4, and 5-year-olds.

10. Is your child currently enrolled in an early learning program?
- A. Yes
    - i. What type of program(s) are they enrolled in? Check all that apply
      - a. Center-based (child care or preschool program not in someone's home)
      - b. Early intervention (services such as speech or physical therapy for children under 3 years old)
      - c. Family child care (child care in a home setting)
      - d. Head Start
      - e. Lowell Public Schools preschool
      - f. Parent-Child +
      - g. Parent-Child + and playgroups
      - h. Playgroups
      - i. Preschool outside of Lowell Public Schools
      - j. Preschool and childcare
    - ii. Do the programs your child is enrolled in meet your needs?
      - a. Yes, it fully meets my needs
      - b. Yes, but it was not my preferred choice
      - c. Yes, but it only partially meets my needs
      - d. No, it does not meet my needs
    - iii. What factors influenced your decision to select the specific program? Check all that apply.
      - a. Knowing other children who are or were previously enrolled (your other children, children of friends and family)
      - b. The program is located near my home, near my work, or somewhere else that is convenient.
      - c. The program was offered by the school district
      - d. The quality of the program
      - e. The program met my basic needs
  - B. No, but I'd like them to be enrolled
    - i. If no, why do you want your child enrolled? Check all that apply
      - a. For myself or my partner to be able to work
      - b. My child is interested in learning
      - c. My child's social development
      - d. My child's cognitive development
      - e. My child's emotional development
      - f. My child's language development
      - g. My child's motor development
      - h. Other (please specify)
        - a. Please enter a comment
    - ii. If no, why is your child not enrolled? Check all that apply
      - a. No seats available at the school I prefer
      - b. The hours available don't meet my needs
      - c. The cost is too much
      - d. I am on the waitlist for a voucher
      - e. The program does not serve 3-year-olds
      - f. The program is only open during the school year, not in the summer
      - g. I do not understand the language spoken at the program
      - h. I don't have reliable transportation to, from, or between programs

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- i. We are not eligible for a seat because of income
  - j. I cannot find a seat because of my child's disability or special needs
  - k. We are not eligible because of the age of my child
  - l. I don't like the quality of the available programs
  - m. We missed the enrollment period
  - n. I don't know what programs are available
  - o. I do not know where to get the information about available programs
  - p. My child was asked to leave a program
  - q. I can't access programs to fit my work schedule
  - r. I work 2<sup>nd</sup> shift
  - s. I work 3<sup>rd</sup> shift
  - t. Other (please specify)
    - a. Please enter a comment
- C. No, and I don't want them to be enrolled
- i. Please explain why you do not want your child to be enrolled in an early learning program.
11. What other early learning experiences does your child or family take part in besides formal preschool on a regular basis? Check all that apply.
- A. Community playgroups
  - B. Cultural programs
  - C. Early Intervention Playgroups
  - D. Faith-based or church programs
  - E. Home visiting
  - F. I or another adult in my household stay at home with my child
  - G. Library story hours
  - H. Lowell Public School playgroups
  - I. My child stays with a family member or friend
  - J. Online learning experiences
  - K. Parent leadership (school council, Head Start Policy Council, PTO)
  - L. Parenting support groups
  - M. Playdates with friends or family
  - N. Trips with family or friends to museums, libraries, or cultural events
  - O. Workshops on parenting or child development
  - P. None of the above
  - Q. Other (please specify)

### Needs And Preferences

The following questions will use terms to help us better understand your needs and experience. When we use the term "early learning," we are referring to any experience in which young children learn, for example, center-based child care, family child care, Head Start, home visiting, playgroups, pre-kindergarten, and preschool for children ages 3, 4, and 5-year-olds.

12. What is the absolute minimum program length of day you **need**?
- A. Part day: 2.5 hours
  - B. Half day: 3.0 – 4.0 hours
  - C. School day: 5.5 – 6.0 hours
  - D. Full day: 6.0 – 10.0 hours
  - E. I don't need my child to be enrolled
  - F. I'd prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren't formal preschool.
13. What program day length would you **prefer**?
- A. Part day: 2.5 hours
  - B. Half day: 3.0 – 4.0 hours
  - C. School day: 5.5 – 6.0 hours
  - D. Full day: 6.0 – 10.0 hours
  - E. I don't need my child to be enrolled
  - F. I'd prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren't formal preschool.

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14. What is the absolute minimum program yearly length you **need**?
  - A. School year: September – June
  - B. School year (September – June) with a summer program (July – August)
  - C. Full-year: January – December
  - D. I don't need my child to be enrolled
  - E. I'd prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren't formal preschool.
15. What program yearly length would you **prefer**?
  - A. School year: September – June
  - B. School year (September – June) with a summer program (July – August)
  - C. Full-year: January – December
  - D. I don't need my child to be enrolled
  - E. I'd prefer my child to participate in playgroups or other informal early learning experiences that aren't formal preschool.
16. If full-day (6.0 – 10.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5-year-old was available in Lowell, would you access it?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Unsure
  - D. Not applicable – my children will be older than five years by September 1, 2024
17. What support would you need to access full day (6.0 – 10.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5 year old? Check all that apply.
  - A. Transportation
  - B. Help with cost
  - C. Free program
  - D. Second shift options
  - E. Third shift option
  - F. Meals for my child during these hours
  - G. Translation of enrollment and other materials
  - H. Other (please specify)
18. If part-day (2.5 – 3.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5 year old was available in Lowell, would you access it?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Unsure
  - D. Not applicable – my children will be older than 5 years by September 1, 2024
19. What support would you need to access part-day (2.5 – 3.0 hours) preschool for your 3-5-year-old? Check all that apply.
  - A. Transportation
  - B. Help with cost
  - C. Free program
  - D. Second shift options
  - E. Third shift option
  - F. Meals for my child during these hours
  - G. Translation of enrollment and other materials
  - H. Other (please specify)
20. How likely are you to use early education programming at the following cost per child per week?  
[Very unlikely, Somewhat unlikely, Not sure, Somewhat likely, Very likely]
  - A. No cost to my family
  - B. Up to \$40
  - C. \$40 - \$100
  - D. \$100 - \$200
  - E. Over \$200
21. How do you think the amount you are required to pay for early learning programs should be calculated?
  - A. Monthly income-based eligibility
  - B. Monthly expense-based eligibility
  - C. Both monthly income and expense-based eligibility
  - D. Everyone pays the same amount
  - E. Universal preschool should be provided to all, similar to K-12
  - F. Other, please specify

## Lowell Preschool for All Supply and Demand Assessment

22. How far would you be able to travel to bring your child to an early learning program?
- A. Less than a mile
  - B. 1 – 5 miles
  - C. More than 5 miles
23. What are the **most important needs factors** when choosing an early learning program? Either drag and drop your selections or utilize the up and down arrows to indicate your selections. Number 1 is most important.
- A. The cleanliness of the program
  - B. The program is located near my home, near my work, or somewhere else that is convenient.
  - C. The program provides transportation
  - D. The program serves lunch or other meals and snacks
  - E. The safety of the program
  - F. We can afford the program
  - G. Not applicable. I don't want my child to be enrolled.
24. If your important needs factors were not listed above, please describe those here.
25. What are the **most important quality factors** when choosing an early learning program? Either drag and drop your selections or utilize the up and down arrows to indicate your selections. Number 1 is most important.
- A. The program provides access to other supports and services for my child and family (ex. health and wellness, referrals to community resources)
  - B. The program engages me in my child's development
  - C. Educational background of the teacher
  - D. Educators have knowledge of child development
  - E. Educators have knowledge of developmental disabilities
  - F. Educators are passionate about the work they do
  - G. The curriculum, or what is taught in the program, is developmentally appropriate.
  - H. The program engages my child in activities that support their development
  - I. The program helps my child be ready for kindergarten
  - J. My child's social interaction with peers their age
  - K. My child's interest in learning
  - L. The program offers special needs support
  - M. Other, please describe
  - N. Not applicable. I don't want my child enrolled.
26. If your top important quality factors were not listed above, please describe those here.
27. What level of education do you want your child's educators to have?
- A. Associates (2 years)
  - B. Bachelors (4 years)
  - C. Masters (6 years)
  - D. Other, please describe

### Challenges and Barriers

28. What are the top barriers you've experienced when trying to access early learning programs for your child? Either drag and drop your selections or utilize the up and down arrows to indicate your selections. Number 1 is the biggest barrier.
- a. There are no seats available to meet my needs
  - b. We cannot afford the cost
  - c. We don't have reliable transportation to, from, or between programs
  - d. We are not eligible for a seat because of income
  - e. We are not eligible for a seat because of disability
  - f. We are not eligible because of the age of my child
  - g. I don't like the quality of the available programs
  - h. I don't feel like the programs are safe
  - i. The hours available don't meet my needs
  - j. We missed the enrollment period
  - k. I don't know what programs are available
  - l. The teachers don't speak our native language
  - m. I don't feel welcome in the program
  - n. Finding a program that offers special needs support for my child
  - o. My child was asked to leave
  - p. I missed the enrollment date
  - q. Not applicable. I don't want my child enrolled

## Lowell Preschool for All Supply and Demand Assessment

r. Other (please describe)

29. If the top barriers you experience when trying to access early learning programs for your child were not listed above, please describe those here.

### Definitions

30. What does quality in early learning programs for children ages 3 – 5 mean to you?

### Access To Information

31. Do you feel like you have enough information to select an early learning program for your child?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Not applicable. I don't want my child to be enrolled.
32. What information would help you select an early learning program for your child? (select all that apply)
- A. Why is early learning important
  - B. What programs are available
  - C. Locations
  - D. Transportation support to programs
  - E. Enrollment timeline
  - F. Eligibility criteria
  - G. How to enroll
  - H. Not applicable. I don't want my child enrolled
  - I. Other, please describe
33. If your family wanted information on early learning programs, how would you prefer to receive it? Select all that apply.
- A. Mail
  - B. Email
  - C. Text
  - D. LPS website
  - E. Facebook
  - F. Flyers in the community
  - G. Through places I already go like the library or playgroups
  - H. Other – please specify
  - I. Not applicable. I don't want information on early learning programs

### Other

34. Is there anything you'd like to share or suggest regarding universal preschool in Lowell?

## Appendix B – Program Survey

### PRESCHOOL IN LOWELL – PROGRAM SURVEY

#### CONTACT INFORMATION

Please enter the following information:

1. Name
2. Title
3. Organization Name
4. Email and Phone number for follow-up questions

#### INCREASING ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL

Please provide your feedback on the following questions.

5. What does the term “universal preschool” mean to you in ensuring access to preschool for all children 3-5 years old, regardless of where they are served?
6. What barriers exist to offering access to preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
7. To what degree does public and/or political will for universal preschool exist in Lowell?
8. What bureaucratic hurdles do you see to providing access to preschool in Lowell?
9. In your opinion, what would it take to establish access to preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
10. What innovative strategies would you suggest to provide access to preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
11. Would you advocate for establishing access to preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell? If so, can you provide examples of how you would advocate (not limited to lobbying)?

#### PROGRAM AND CAPACITY (SUPPLY) INFORMATION

Please answer the following questions regarding your program and its capacity to enroll 3, 4, and 5-year-old children.

12. Do you serve 3, 4, and 5-year-old children in Lowell?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
13. What type of school or program do you operate? Check all that apply
  - a. Center-based program (e.g., Head Start or private preschool)
  - b. Elementary school in Lowell
  - c. Family Child Care System
14. What is your school/program’s length of day? Check all that apply
  - a. Part day: 2.5 hours
  - b. Half day: 3.0 – 4.0 hours
  - c. School day: 5.5 – 6.0 hours
  - d. Full day: 6.0 – 10.0 hours
  - e. Other (please specify)
15. Does your school/program provide before or after-school services (wrap-around) to children between ages 3, 4, and 5 years old?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
16. What are your hours of operation? (open-ended)
17. What is your school/program’s length of year?
  - a. School year: September – June
  - b. School year (September – June) with a summer program (July – August)
  - c. Year Round: September - August
  - d. Other (please specify)
18. How many classrooms are in your program?
19. What is your CAPACITY for 3, 4, and 5-year-olds?
20. What is your current ENROLLMENT for 3, 4, and 5-year-olds?
21. Do you have a waitlist for 3, 4, and 5-year-olds?
  - a. Yes
    - a. If yes, indicate the # of children on your waitlist and the approximate length of time the child will remain on the waitlist.
  - b. No
22. Do you experience challenges specific to enrolling to capacity?
  - a. Yes
    - a. If so, please explain.
  - b. No

## Lowell Preschool for All Supply and Demand Assessment

23. Do you experience any other challenges regarding enrollment or serving 3, 4, and 5-year-olds?
  - a. Yes
    - a. If so, please explain.
  - b. No
24. If funding and staffing were not a barrier, would you have the space and ability to increase your capacity to serve more children?
25. How many 3-5-year-old children with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) (identified disability) are enrolled in your program? Of that number, how many of those students receive special education services on-site?
26. How many 3-5-year-old children who are English-language learners do you serve?
27. How many 3-5-year-old children from low-income (as defined by your program's eligibility) households do you serve? Of those, how many receive state or federal funding to support the enrollment?
28. Indicate the percentage of 3-5-year-old children enrolled in your program by race and ethnicity.
  - a. Asian
  - b. Black or African-American
  - c. Hispanic/Latino
  - d. Multi-race, Non-Hispanic
  - e. Native American
  - f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - g. White
29. What languages are spoken by families enrolled in your school/program?
30. What community zones does your school/program typically draw families from? Check all that apply
  - a. 01850 (Centralville)
  - b. 01851 (Highlands)
  - c. 01852 (Belvidere, Downtown, Back Central, South Lowell)
  - d. 01853 (Downtown)
  - e. 01854 (Pawtucketville)

### QUALITY

Please answer the following questions regarding quality indicators for your program serving 3, 4, and 5-year-old children.

31. What is the teacher-to-student ratio for each age group? If an age group does not apply to your school/program, type "N/A."
  - a. 3-year-olds
  - b. 4-year-olds
  - c. 5-year-olds
  - d. Mixed age groups
    - a. If mixed age group, % of 3-year-olds, % 4-year-olds, % 5 year olds
32. What is the ratio of children with disabilities to peer models (typically developing children)?
33. What types of professional development do you offer to your staff?
34. What curriculum do you implement for each age group? If an age group does not apply to your school/program, type N/A
  - a. 3-year-olds
  - b. 4-year-olds
  - c. 5-year-olds
35. What developmental and/or educational progress tool do you administer for each age group? If an age group does not apply to your school/program, type N/A
  - a. 3-year-olds
  - b. 4-year-olds
  - c. 5-year-olds
36. What screening tool do you administer for each age group? If an age group does not apply to your school/program, type N/A
  - a. 3-year-olds
  - b. 4-year-olds
  - c. 5-year-olds

### WORKFORCE

Please respond to the following questions about your staff that serve 3, 4, and 5-year-old children.

37. Total number of educators that serve 3, 4, and 5-year-olds:
  - a. Teachers:
  - b. Paraprofessionals/assistants/subs:
  - c. Full-time:

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- d. Part-time:
38. Please indicate the number of staff you employ according to their highest degree level.
- a. No high school or equivalent degree
  - b. High school diploma or equivalent
  - c. High school diploma from a technical high school and EEC-approved program
  - d. High school diploma or equivalent and some college
  - e. Child Developmental Associate Credential (CDA)
  - f. Other college-level early childhood certificate program
  - g. Associate degree
  - h. Bachelor's Degree
  - i. Master's Degree
  - j. Other: (please specify)
39. What is the typical starting annual salary/hourly rate for your teachers by education? Indicate salary per year or rate per hour, as applicable.
- a. High school diploma or equivalent
  - b. Some college
  - c. Child Developmental Associate Credential (CDA) or other early childhood certificate
  - d. Associate degree
  - e. Bachelor's Degree
  - f. Master's Degree
  - g. Other: (please specify)
40. Languages spoken by staff (please list):
41. What benefits are offered to your teaching staff? Check all that apply
- a. Accidental Death & Dismemberment Insurance
  - b. Coaching
  - c. Dental Insurance
  - d. Discount for child(ren) enrolled in your school/program
  - e. Employer-matched 401K/403(b)/SIMPLE IRA or similar retirement plan
  - f. Fee reimbursement for professional development activities
  - g. Funds for professional development during the workday
  - h. Health Insurance
  - i. Life Insurance
  - j. Long-term disability
  - k. Pension
  - l. Short-term disability
  - m. Sick Days
  - n. Tuition Reimbursement (for college coursework)
  - o. Vacation
  - p. Vision Insurance
  - q. Other (please specify)
42. Have you experienced challenges hiring staff for your program? If yes, which positions are challenging to fill?
- a. Yes
    - a. Position titles:
  - b. No
43. Estimate your turnover rate using the following formula: average number of teachers who leave annually divided by the number of teachers that would make your school/program fully staffed multiplied by 100. Example: 12 teachers leave annually divided by 50 teachers needed to fully staff multiplied by 100 = 24% turnover rate.

### FUNDING

- 44. What funding does your program receive to cover the cost of providing education?
- 45. What funding is provided for program quality initiatives?
- 46. What additional funding is needed to provide program quality initiatives?
- 47. Estimate the full cost per child to provide care and education to 3, 4, and 5-year-olds in your school/program. (Type #)
- 48. What strategies and/or innovations do you suggest to augment existing funding for early childhood education?

### SUPPLEMENTARY SERVICES & SUPPORTS

Please answer the following questions regarding supplementary services and supports available to 3, 4, and 5-year-old children in your program.

- 49. How is transportation provided to support children's access to your school/program? (check all that apply and include an option for comments)

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- a. Provided to all children
  - b. Provided to children/families only if needed
  - c. Provided only to specific populations (please describe in comments)
  - d. Funded through state or federal dollars (please describe in comments)
  - e. Do not provide transportation
50. How many families are unable to access your program due to transportation?
51. Does your school/program provide food to children?
- a. Yes
    - i. What meals do you provide? Check all that apply
      - 1. Breakfast
      - 2. Lunch
      - 3. Dinner
      - 4. AM Snack
      - 5. PM Snack
    - b. No (skip logic to next question)
52. Does your school/program provide other supplementary services and supports, such as extracurricular activities, to 3, 4, and 5-year-old children and families? If so, list all that apply.

### **OTHER**

- 53. What resources does Lowell Public Schools provide to your program (PD, mental health, coaching, etc.)?
- 54. What additional resources do you need from Lowell Public Schools to help provide access to preschool for all 3, 4, and 5-year-old children in Lowell?
- 55. Is there anything else you'd like to share or suggest regarding preschool in Lowell that this survey did not cover?

### **CLOSING MESSAGE**

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input will be incorporated into the Supply and Demand Assessment and shared with Lowell Public Schools.

## Appendix C –Interview Tool

### Lowell Universal Preschool Interviews

#### Interview Information:

- Audience: up to 5 key leaders
- Format: 30-minute virtual interviews, recorded with permission for notetaking purposes
- Location: Zoom
- Proposed Timeframe: Jan. – Feb. 2024

Proposed Questions (What do we want to know? How will responses inform Supply and Demand and more if possible?):

#### INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us about access to preschool in Lowell. My name is Lara Quiroga, and I am a Senior Consultant with Pear Associates and my colleague, Brittany, is joining us as well. We are working with Lowell Public Schools Early Childhood Department to conduct a Supply and Demand Assessment. As part of this process, we are conducting interviews with key leaders and the early childhood sector. Your responses will help us gain insights that will be considered along with results from a survey of families about their experience, needs, and preferences regarding preschool and early education for their young children and a survey of preschool providers in Lowell about their programs, capacity, funding, and workforce.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we are about to ask you. If at any time we ask you a question that you do not have an answer for or you prefer not to provide an answer, we can skip the question and move along in the interview. Your input will be grouped with responses from other interviewees and not directly attributed to you so your identity can remain confidential. With your permission, I would like to record our conversation to support note-taking and accuracy in collecting your important insights. Would that be ok with you? (RECORDING BEGINS)

To get us started, please share your name, title, and organization.

As I ask you these questions, it is important to keep a few definitions in mind. If at any time you need a reminder or clarification, please let me know.

- Preschool: Formal educational experience for children ages 3-5 years old.
- Early learning: Any experience in which preschool young children learn e.g., Head Start, center-based education and care, public schools, home visiting, playgroups, Pre-kindergarten, for children ages 3, 4, and 5-year-olds.

#### LOWELL PRESCHOOL

1. *\*For Policy Leaders*: What does the term “universal preschool” mean to you in ensuring access to preschool for all children 3-5 years old regardless of where they are served?
2. What have you heard or know about preschool for 3 to 5-year-olds in Lowell?
3. What have you heard from families and early educators about preschool programming in Lowell?

### KINDERGARTEN READINESS

4. What have you heard from parents/caregivers about how well they believe their child is being prepared for kindergarten?
  - Prompt: What does kindergarten readiness mean to you?
5. Are you aware of the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) preschool curriculum frameworks and MA Department of Early Education and Care's (EEC) early learning guidelines and how they inform kindergarten readiness?
  - Prompt: What have you heard about how LPS aligns with DESE and EEC early childhood frameworks and guidelines?

### SYSTEM

6. \*What **barriers** exist to offering access to preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
7. What **fiscal hurdles** do you see to implementing preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
8. What public and/or private funding is used to implement preschool? What public and/or private funding opportunities are you aware of to implement preschool access for all?
9. What **political hurdles** to implementing preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell do you see?
10. \*To what degree does **public** will for universal preschool exist in Lowell?
11. What **innovative strategies** in Lowell are you aware of currently to implement preschool for all 3 to 5-year-old children in Lowell?
12. What **innovative strategies** do you see/know of elsewhere that would help the community of Lowell?
13. Are you an **advocate** for expanding preschool for all in Lowell? If so, can you provide examples of how you would advocate (not limited to lobbying)?

### CONCLUSION:

That concludes the questions that we had for you today.

14. Is there anything that you were hoping to share that we have not already discussed?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. As we mentioned in the beginning, your thoughts and feedback will be essential to understanding preschool supply and demand in Lowell. Our Supply and Demand