

CEED-Multnomah County Preschool for All Research & Evaluation Partnership

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Envisioning Success in Multnomah County Preschool for All

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Overview

The Preschool for All (PFA) initiative in Multnomah County, Oregon welcomed its first children into Preschool for All pilot site programsⁱ in September 2022. PFA's goal is to provide free, culturally responsive, inclusive preschool experiences to 3- and 4-year-old children living in the County. Funded by a ballot measure that passed in 2020, PFA will provide universal access by 2030.ⁱⁱ During program roll-out, priority is given to children who currently have the least access to high-quality early learning experiences and face barriers to accessing preschool.ⁱⁱⁱ

Clear indicators for implementation progress are defined in the PFA Implementation Plan^{iv}. This includes markers such as number of slots offered to children and families. However, the success of a program is more than just the number of people it serves. As PFA scales up to include more preschool providers and serve more children and families, attention must be paid to how the program and community will define success. The Center on the Ecology of Early Development (CEED) partners with Multnomah County to study the PFA program. During the first year of PFA implementation (2022-2023), the CEED research team collected data from community leaders, preschool pilot site program directors and families with children enrolled in PFA to better understand how the community envisions and defines success for PFA.

Research Question

How do community leaders, preschool providers and families define success for Multnomah County Preschool for All?

Methods

The research team asked three different groups how they would define success for PFA – community leaders, preschool providers and PFA enrolled families. Twenty-three community leaders were interviewed (i.e., government leadership engaged in planning and implementing the program, leaders and staff from community organizations, and representatives from state and local level organizations with roles in early education and/or data systems). During the interviews, participants were asked about how they would define success for PFA and what outcomes they believe would be influenced by PFA. In addition, twenty-two preschool pilot site directors and seventy-five families with children enrolled in PFA completed open-ended

survey questions that asked them how they would define success in PFA. Data was collected during the first year of PFA and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Key Findings

In the PFA program, diverse groups play unique and vital roles in shaping its success. Community leaders advocate for a transformative educational system, viewing education as a fundamental right and seeking to dismantle barriers for all families. Site directors and families also contribute distinct perspectives, with the former focusing on creating enriching learning environments and the latter finding success in their children's happiness and developmental progress.

Community Leaders	They envision a system where education is a right, not a privilege, breaking down barriers for all families.
Site Directors	They measure success through the enriched learning environments they create and the professional development they foster.
Families	They see PFA's success in the smiles of their children and the educational foundations laid for their future.

The PFA initiative marks a significant step forward in Multnomah County's approach to early childhood education. It is more than just an educational program; it represents a collective dream and a commitment to the well-being of society's youngest members and future leaders. By listening to the voices of community leaders, site directors, and families, we gain a rich and varied understanding of what 'success' really means in the context of this innovative program. Together, these perspectives form a multifaceted picture of success, encompassing themes like accessibility, the quality of education, and the well-being of children and families.

Community Leaders' Perspectives

Community leaders approach the PFA program with diverse ideas and stress the importance of making big changes in early childhood education. They work hard to make sure every child can get a good education, no matter who they are or where they come from. They think about more than just individual classrooms; they want to improve the whole education system to remove any obstacles that make it hard for families to get the same chances and access the resources. By doing this, community leaders hope to build an education system that welcomes every child, helping them do well right from the start. Collectively, they believe that **success includes accessibility and community support:**

Advocating for financial accessibility: Multiple participants expressed that a key success story of PFA is that families that who would not be able to access preschool are now able to. One participant expressed that PFA would be defined success by **"Expanding access to families who could not otherwise afford pre-K..."**

- **Emphasizing the need for countywide inclusivity:** Participants also expressed that success can be defined by universal access across the county, with one participant stating success could be defined as **"Any family that wants to send their children to preschool in Multnomah County to be able to do so."**
- **Recognizing the importance of supporting children with unique needs and circumstances:** While participants noted the importance of access for families they also stressed that PFA must support the

unique needs and circumstances of families. This included the importance of the mixed delivery system, providers who speak languages preferred by families, and services that support the needs of children with disabilities. One participant shared that PFA would be successful if **“families that have children with essential needs find what they're looking for.”**

Site Directors' Perspectives

The site directors are at the heart of the PFA program. They work hard every day to make positive changes in schools and classrooms that benefit students in Multnomah County. Their role is to put the program's ideas into action, making a real difference in the educational environment. They ensure that children and teachers experience the benefits of PFA every day. These leaders are essential in connecting the program's goals with the community's needs, focusing on what works best for our children. Their success is seen in the happy faces of children excited to be at PFA sites, in teachers who feel supported, and in stronger connections between schools and families.

They specifically cited that success includes **family and community engagement and support and professional development for the workforce:**

- **Family and Community Engagement:**
 - Directors expressed the importance of building strong partnerships with families to enhance the educational experience with the goal that **“Families and students feel welcome and supported in their school(s).”** This includes opportunities to connect programs and families together as well as celebrating diversity and ensuring representation in educational materials and activities in PFA programs.
- **Support and Professional Development:**
 - In order for PFA to be a success, directors shared the need to provide comprehensive support to educators such as fair compensation, enabling them to deliver high-quality education confidently and joyfully.
 - They also shared the need to support educators by championing continuous professional development: **“All children and providers receive the support they need to fully access all parts of the classroom and do their jobs with confidence and joy.”**

Family Perspectives

Families provide the most personal insights into what PFA means for their families, with a focus on their children's development and the support they receive.

- **Foundations for Future Success**
 - Early preparation is key, according to families, who highlight PFA's role in getting children ready for kindergarten and beyond. The optimism with which children approach learning can be a testament to the program's effectiveness. One participant shared: **“Children being able to be prepared for kindergarten and future schooling in an optimistic manner.”**
 - Social and academic readiness go hand in hand. Families treasure the sight of their children's smiles, indicating both happiness and social engagement. **“Smiles on every kid's face, at the end of the day!”**

- **Inclusivity, Accessibility and Support**

- Accessibility is a cornerstone of PFA, making sure it meets the needs of all children, including those with special needs.
- The program's effort to eliminate financial hurdles was also shared by families as a way to measure PFA success, ensuring every child has the opportunity to learn and grow.

- **Emotional Well-Being and Parental Empowerment**

- The nurturing environment PFA provides is crucial for children's emotional health, a priority for families.
- Additionally, the program is a significant support for parents, enabling them to work while knowing their children are in a safe, supportive setting.

This multifaceted approach by PFA to early childhood education underscores its promise to influence the entire community. The program's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility means the potential that every child, regardless of their background or needs, can have the opportunity to benefit from this educational experience. For parents, PFA offers not just high-quality childcare but also peace of mind that their children are being prepared for life in a holistic, caring environment. This comprehensive support system can foster a community where children can grow, learn, and succeed, reflecting PFA's role in shaping a brighter future for all families involved.

Bringing Together Multiple Perspectives

The success of PFA is a tapestry, woven from the contributions and aspirations of a diverse community. It reflects the voices of those who work tirelessly on the ground to provide quality education, the families who entrust their children to the program, and the leaders who advocate for systemic change. This success will not be defined by a single metric but by a collection of stories, experiences, and testimonies:

- **A shared vision of educational excellence that includes learning joy, educators' empowerment, and family support.**
- **A commitment to continuous improvement and adaptation to meet the evolving needs of the community.**
- **A future where every child can succeed, fostered by a program that cherishes diversity, practices inclusivity, and celebrates the achievements of its participants.**

PFA stands as a testament to the power of collective action and a shared vision in early childhood education. This initiative transcends traditional educational models, paving the way for a more inclusive, responsive, and nurturing approach to preschool learning that is focused on racial equity. It breaks away from conventional teaching methods to establish a learning space that welcomes everyone, prioritizes fairness, and caters to the diverse needs of children. The program's achievements will be reflected in the rich variety of personal triumphs, shared joys, and collective progress. By weaving together the dedication of teachers, the engagement of families, and the foresight of community leaders, PFA is working to create a nurturing educational setting where the potential of every child is recognized and nurtured.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Considerations for the Future

As PFA evolves, it becomes more than an educational program; it transforms into a movement that redefines the landscape of early learning in Multnomah County. It stands as a beacon of hope and progress, demonstrating how educational systems can adapt and respond to the diverse needs of a community. The initiative's focus on inclusivity, accessibility, and support ensures that the doors of learning are open to all, irrespective of socio-economic backgrounds or individual challenges. This inclusive approach is vital in breaking down barriers and leveling the playing field for all children, setting them on a path to lifelong learning and success. The program's impact can be measured not only in the academic readiness of its young participants but also in the profound sense of community and belonging it fosters.

These lessons learned, distilled from the experiences and perspectives of the program's leaders and participants, provide a roadmap for delivering a comprehensive, responsive, and high-quality educational experience to every child. Drawing from these insights, the PFA program is continually refining its approach, securing its reputation as a pioneering force in inclusive early childhood education in Multnomah County. **These findings emphasize the necessity of adopting a broader perspective on evaluating the program's impact, suggesting that true success encompasses more than just conventional indicators of school readiness and academic achievement. Instead, a holistic view that includes children's academic and social development, families' well-being, as well as community metrics will be needed.** By integrating these comprehensive metrics of success, the PFA program not only advances its mission but also challenges the traditional parameters of educational excellence, setting a new benchmark for early childhood education initiatives worldwide.

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About the CEED: The Center on the Ecology of Early Development (CEED) at Boston University is led by Dr. Stephanie M. Curenton. CEED conducts and disseminates applied research using a strengths-based equity impact framework that examines young children's positive growth and development within health, education, and community settings. The CEED-Multnomah County Preschool for All Research and Evaluation Partnership is a partnership between CEED researchers and Multnomah County's Preschool and Early Learning Division to examine implementation and impact of the Preschool for All program. For more information visit: www.bu-ceed.org

Endnotes

ⁱ Preschool for All pilot sites are existing and new preschool programs that applied and were accepted to receive Preschool for All funding for children. Pilot sites include the mixed delivery system of family child care homes, center-based programs, and public school preschool programs.

ⁱⁱ Preschool for All website: <https://www.multco.us/preschool>

ⁱⁱⁱ 2023-2024 Preschool for All Application. Priority populations included: Black, Brown, Native American Indigenous, and all Children of Color; children who speak languages other than English; children with developmental delays and disabilities; children living in or at risk of placement into foster care; children from families experiencing low incomes, and children experiencing homelessness. <https://www.multco.us/preschool/families>

^{iv} Preschool for All Plan. 2020. <https://www.multco.us/file/93380/download>