

Early Childhood Transition and Kindergarten Decision-Making

Think Small + Generation Next

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March 2019

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Introduction

This study is intended to help Think Small and Generation Next understand how families navigate the pathway of transitioning their children from an early childhood education provider to identifying and enrolling into kindergarten. The aim is to gather data from families, particularly families of color and low income, for which there exists a limited amount of information, to understand their transition practices. This study examined how families gather information, weigh factors, and eventually decide on an Early Care and Education (ECE) program and a school for their children's kindergarten year. Additionally, the study explored how parents supported their child's transition between ECE and Kindergarten.

The findings and knowledge gathered from this study may be used by Think Small and Generation Next in a number of ways, including but not limited to (1) understanding the pathways and experiences of students who are arriving to kindergarten academically prepared or unprepared, (2) informing future program and policy decisions regarding how best to help families make enrollment decisions for their child, and (3) linking public investment to changes in outcomes.

Framing

The report is laid out in five key sections. This first section sets the stage, provides a frame for the findings, methodology of the study, and characteristics of the respondents. The next section covers the findings related to ECE decision-making. This is followed by a section on summer transitions that covers children's activities during the summer before kindergarten. Next is a kindergarten enrollment decision-making section that highlights the most salient factors respondents discussed during their interviews. The fifth section covers the post-decision activities of respondents and how they stayed connected and communicated with their child's new school during the summer. This is followed by a section on how respondents' children adjusted to their new school. The report closes with a section of reflections from respondents and a conclusion.

The findings from this report are framed by three key concepts. As will become clear through continued reading, data analysis and meaning-making of parents' decisions demonstrates that privilege, access, and agency play a pivotal role in the process. While they were not specifically explored with the interviewed parents, responses illustrated the presence of these concepts for many of the parents. In the context of this report, these concepts are not to be interpreted as negative or with ill-judgment, but as strengths to strive towards.

First, in this context privilege determines how families perceive their options. Not every family has or is able to recognize the kindergarten options that are available. As the data below illustrates, not all potential options can be realistically considered by every parent because of cost, lack of knowledge, timing, etc. Thus, even the perception of having more than one school to choose from is a privilege. Being able to move into a preferred district is a demonstration of resources and therefore privilege. Prioritizing niche factors that are not universally present is another example of privilege, as it operates in this setting.

Second, access to information is a consistent theme. As discussed in future sections of this report, many parents felt "in the dark" and believed they did not have the information necessary

to make decisions about child's education. This left some continually wondering if they were making the right decision or whether they were making the best decision possible with their limited information.

Third, parents' agency surfaces in two ways. A degree of agency is necessary to seek and obtain what feels like missing information, and agency is also needed to utilize that information to advocate for their child. Some parents do not know how to navigate the complicated education system to get the information. Others can find the information, but will not or cannot make efficient use of the information, and run the risk of making a decision that is not in the best interest of their child.

When reading this report, one should consider how the demographics of the respondents, described below, coupled with the presence or absence of access, agency, and privilege influenced their decision-making. This lens should be used to frame how one understands the data and findings presented.

Methodology

To identify participants for this evaluation, Think Small designed a promotional flyer to recruit 30 parents with a child who would be entering kindergarten in the fall of 2018. The flyer detailed the purpose of the study, commitment and responsibilities of the participant, and informed individuals of a \$40 gift card stipend available for their participation. Using a convenience sampling method where participants are selected based on their accessibility, the flyer was e-mailed from Think Small to ECE providers in the Pathways to Quality program. This program primarily serves ECE providers from, or primarily serving communities of color and low-income populations. Interested individuals contacted the evaluator to enroll into the study. The evaluator compiled a list of all interested individuals, including a list of demographic characteristics.

Rather than a one-time interview encompassing a wide range of topics, the study was separated into two phases and individuals were asked to participate in a 30-minute interview during each phase. The first phase, which took place in April and May 2018, included 34 individuals, two of whom were a married couple who were interviewed together. The interview instrument for phase one included questions regarding how parents access information about ECE, how they weighed multiple options, and the factors that influenced their decision-making. It also asked about participants' kindergarten decision-making (i.e. whether they had begun the process, where they were in the process, and whether a decision for kindergarten enrollment had been reached). The second phase took place in September and October of 2018. Thirty-two individuals participated in the second interview, including the couple from phase one. This phase explored the kindergarten decision that had been made, how participants helped their children transition during the summer, engagement with their newly enrolled school, and reflections on the entire decision-making process. Interview instruments for phase one and phase two can both be found in the appendix of this report.

Following the completion of each data collection phase, the recorded audio was transcribed by Parsimony Inc, a data science provider based in Minneapolis, MN.¹ All of the transcripts from both phases were reviewed for accuracy to ensure the quality of the transcription software. Once completed, a brief summary was drafted for each of the transcripts to surface salient insights.

¹ <https://parsimonyinc.com/index.html>

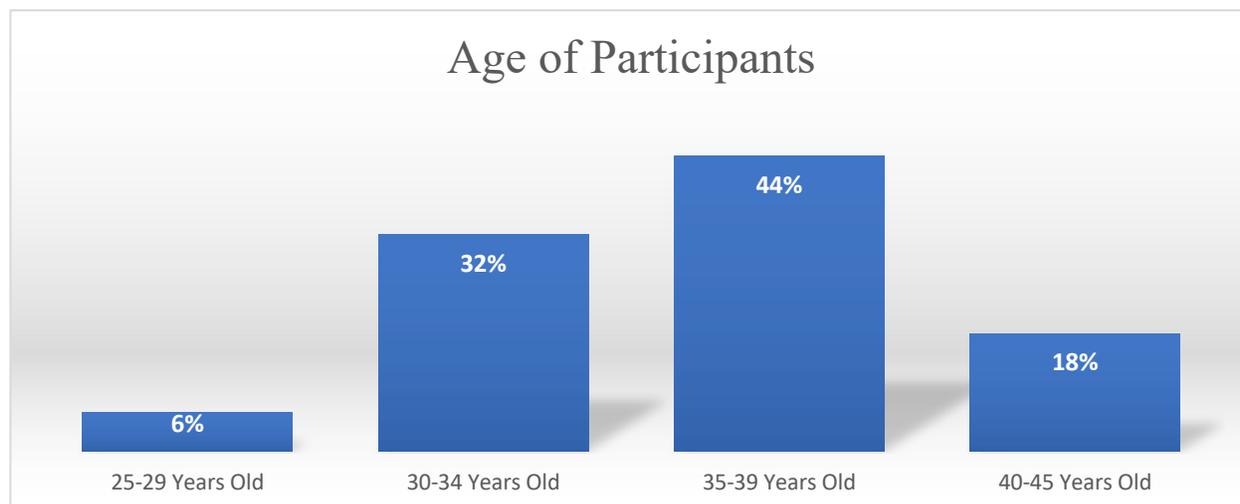
Using the research questions and the interview questions, a coding framework was developed to guide the coding of data. This framework supported the surfacing of key findings specifically from the interview transcripts. A data analysis software, MAXQDA, was then used to code the interview transcripts. Lastly, the coded segments from the software analysis were used to making meaning of the data and ensure that the broader evaluation questions were being addressed. From there the frame and narrative of the final report was outlined and drafted.

Population

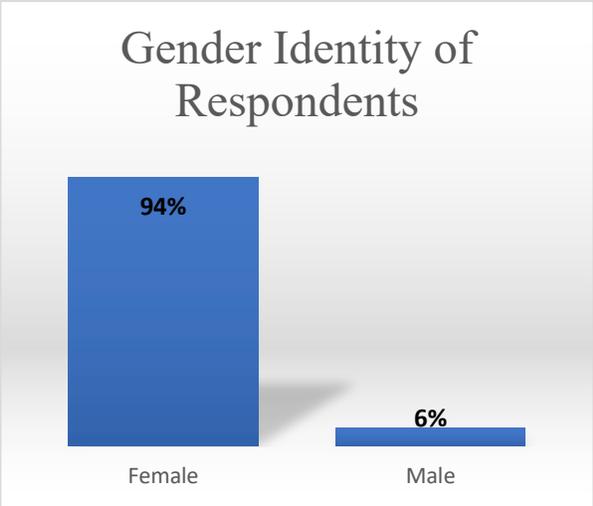
As mentioned above, 33 individual interviews were completed during phase one, with 34 individual participants (one married couple who interviewed together). Phase two involved 31 individual interviews with 33 individual participants (same married couple from phase one). For clarity, the data reported in the demographic section will look at the total pool of respondents, while the findings will discuss the total number of completed interviews.

Demographics

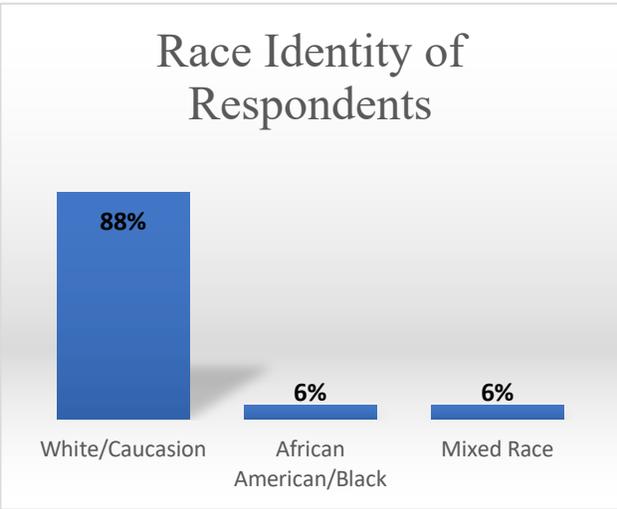
The first set of graphs below illustrate the age, gender, race and ethnicity, academic achievement, and household income of the respondents in this study. This information was self-reported by the participants who were also given the option not to share this information. While the intention was to obtain a sample of participants that were largely persons of color and low-income, the group of individuals who participated in the study were largely white, highly educated, and represented high income households. The participants are in no way a reflective sample of the general population, and as such the findings from this report should not serve as the basis for general policies impacting populations who were not represented in this group. The unrepresentative nature of the sample could create harm if extrapolated for systemic decisions. The data should be utilized in an inclusive manner with attention to the interaction of participant characteristics and their practice of access, agency, and privilege.



Age of Respondents: Of the 34 total respondents, close to half (45%) were between 35—39 years old. The next largest age group represented were 30—34-year-olds who made up 32% of the sample. The two smallest groups were 40—45-year-olds and 25—29-year-olds, who made up 18% and 6%, respectively.

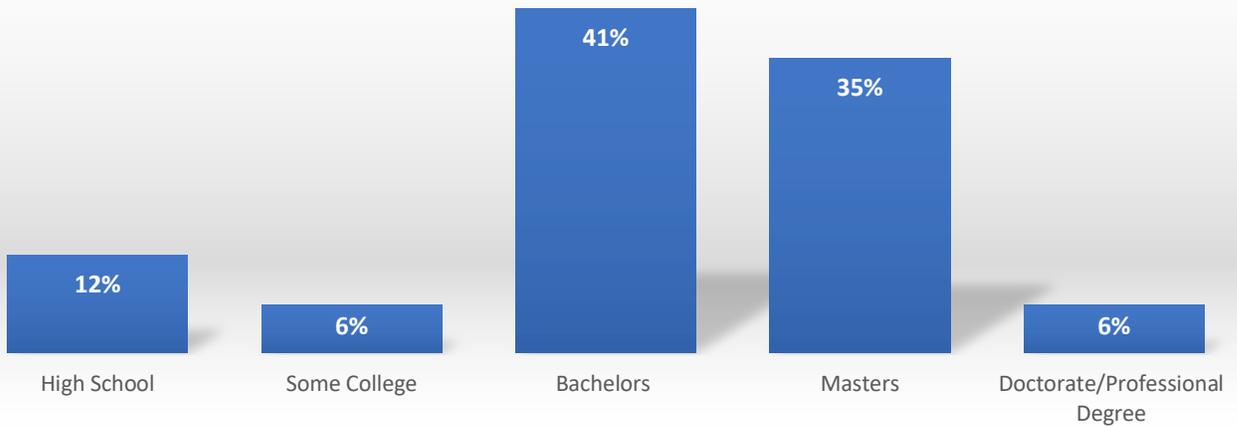


Gender Identity of Respondents (N=34): There were a total of two respondents who identified as male, one of which participated in the interview with his wife. The gender breakdown for respondents was 94% female and 4% male.



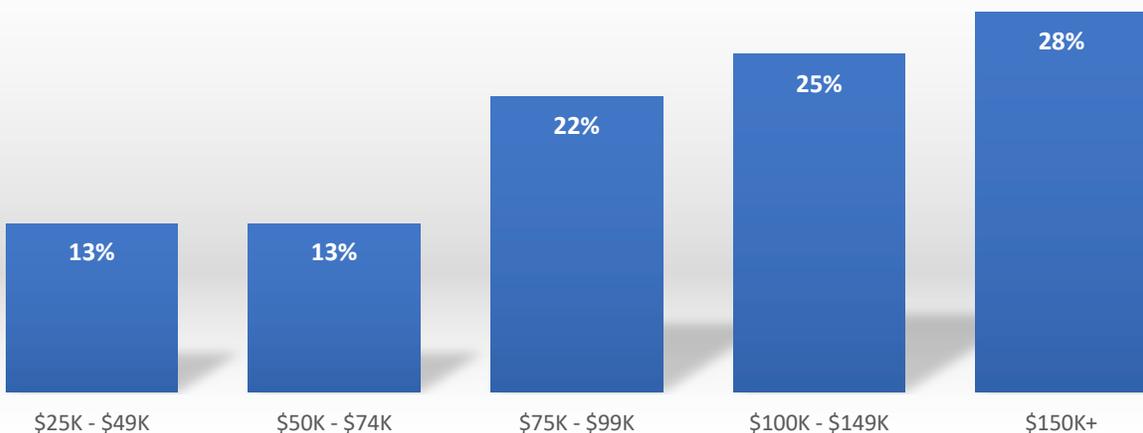
Racial Identity of Respondents (N=34): By far the largest race represented in the sample was white (88%). African Americans and Mixed-Race persons each made up 6% of the sample.

Education Achievement of Participants



Educational Achievement of Respondents (N=34): The degrees most represented in the group were respondents with a Bachelor’s degree (41%) and those with a Master’s degree (35%). This was followed by those with some college experience (6%). Those with Doctorate/Professional degrees and those with high school diplomas each made up 12% of the sample.

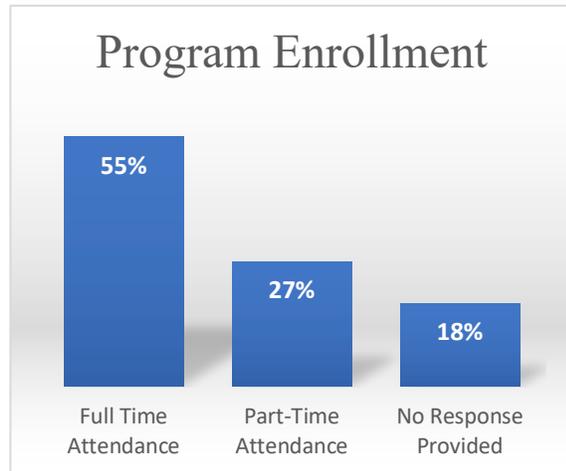
Household Income Level of Participants



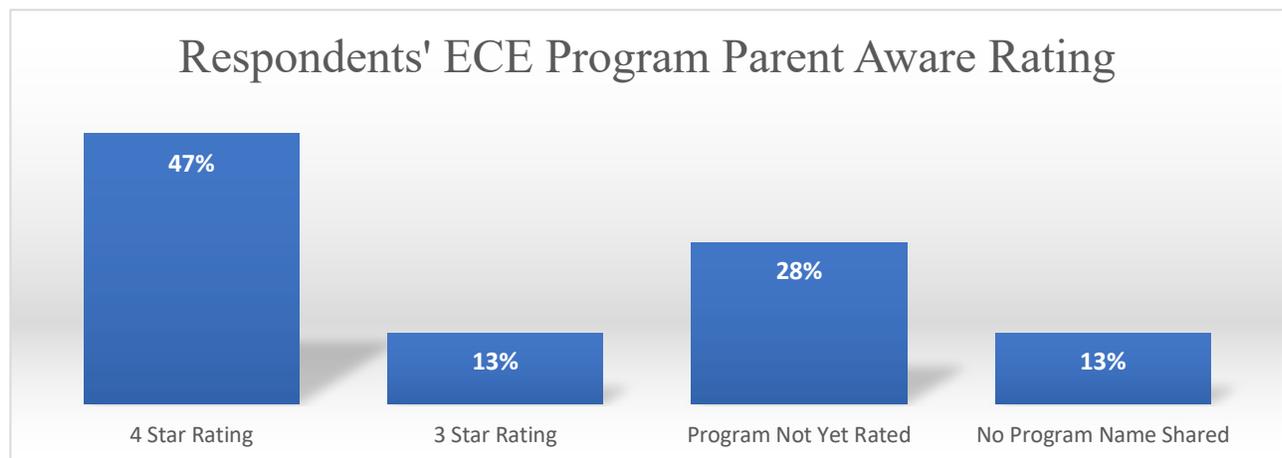
Household Income Level of Respondents (N=32): Respondents who reported an annual household income of \$25,000—\$49,000 or \$50,000—\$74,000 each made up 13% of the sample. Those with an annual household income of \$75,000—\$99,000 made up 22% of the sample. Lastly, respondents with annual household incomes of \$100,000—\$149,000 or \$150,000+ made up 25% and 28% of the sample.

Early Childhood Care Program Characteristics

This second set of graphs illustrates the types of ECE programs respondents' children attended, the enrollment time of children, and the Parent Aware Ratings of the programs. By far, the large majority of respondents' children were attending a center or school-based preschool program.



Across the 33 interviews, 55% of participants' children were enrolled full-time in an ECE program. This included children who attended the same program five full days every day of the week and some who attended multiple programs each day, five days a week. Twenty-seven percent of participants' children attended an ECE program for less than full-time. This includes attendance 2—3 full days a week, and morning ECE program and afternoon with a nanny. Lastly, 18% of participants did not provide information about their child's program enrollment.



The table above depicts the Parent Aware ratings of the ECE programs respondents' children attended. This data totals more than the number of respondents as some children attended more than one program. The majority of ECE programs were received the top rating of 4 stars. This was followed by programs that have not yet been rated. The program rated with 3 stars and programs where a specific name was not shared represented equal proportions of the data.

Early Care Education Decision Making

Purpose of an Early Care Education Program

Many questions were posed to respondents to learn about their child's past and current ECE activities, and their program selection process. One such question asked why it was necessary to enroll their child in an ECE program. Many of the respondents remarked on the need to start

preparing their child for school. Kindergarten preparation was discussed in the form of academics, the need for children to develop soft skills, and to prepare them for socialization beyond their nuclear family.

“I knew that he was gonna need more than just me for socializing and he is a, he's a very social child and he's a very articulate child and so he needs the extra stimulation.”

“She just needed more structure, and she needed, she just needed more rules to prepare her for kindergarten.”

These three purposes (academic preparation, development of soft skills, and general socialization) were prevalent in many of the conversations with respondents.

Sources of Information

The ECE search for many respondents typically began through online search engines and browsing the state provider licensing website. This was the first step to exploring the various options and determining what was feasible given the factors that were most important to families, including but not limited to scheduling, location, and overall feel. Once a handful of options were determined, respondents then turned to their personal networks to seek individualized advice. By far the most used and trusted source of information when selecting an ECE program were people in the respondents' family and social network. This included co-workers, friends, and neighbors. In some instances, individuals in their network voluntarily shared resources about ECE options, and in other cases, respondents themselves made direct asks of others. Most of the advice that was said to be shared was related to logistics, as quality was assumed. Information from within their trusted network was said to be highly trusted because it came from someone they knew and not from anonymous online reviewers.

“I actually started to ask people. For me, I'm more on personal experiences versus just like Googling something because I like to know from my personal experience in whether it's good or not or whatever, so I can do my own investigations or something on the Internet that may not be true or falsely written or anything like that. So just kind of ask people where do you send your kids, you know, how much are you paying, do you like it and you know, is it open door policy? Um, you know, how many people were in the daycare, stuff like that.”

“I think it was actually through [Name of Preschool Program], and we learned about [Name of Preschool Program] through neighbors down the block whose kids had gone there.”

The seeking or voluntary exchange of ECE information, resources, and advice typically followed significant life changes. When respondents transitioned to a new job or new neighborhood, others were likely to recommend ECE programs their own children attended, or programs they were aware of that might be conveniently located.

“We had just moved a few months before that and a co-worker of mine, her kids went here. And then as soon as she found out where we moved to, she said, ‘oh, there's this great daycare center close to your house. You should check it out.’ Um, and then I must've heard one other person say something similar.”

“We heard about it through a friend that went there. We had moved into the area, and they were going there, and they said, ‘Oh you should look there because its literally two miles from our house.’”

“So, there was someone in that class [child's music class] who said, when she found out we lived in [Name of City] and she said, ‘hey, we live in [Name of City] too. Our preschool is great. It's called [Name of ECE Program]. It's in [Location of Program], and it's not religious.’ And I said, ‘that sounds great.’ So, we went over and checked it out. We just did like a, like a, like a walking tour on the night that they had that available and met the people and they seem good.”

Parent Aware

In identifying the various options and avenues utilized to support the ECE decision-making, respondents were asked about their knowledge of, interest in, and use of the Parent Aware Rating System. Below is an overview of what was shared.

Have Heard of the Parent Aware Rating System

About half of respondents knew of the Parent Aware system with varying degrees of knowledge. While some reported using it extensively, a small number of respondents did not use the rating system at all. The reasons for not using the system include: already having a relationship with a provider they trust and thereby having little to no use for the system, a belief that home centers have a hard time scoring well on the rating system, and having a preference for parent-specific reviews and just not trusting the rating system.

The two quotes below are from respondents who were aware of the rating system. The first quote is from a respondent who used the rating system extensively, and the second is from a respondent who did not use it at all.

“I remember there was like a kind of filtering system where you can search for specific, you know, whether you wanted a center or in-home care and certain days of the week and the all different kinds of things. It was a really useful resource.”

“I do not think it's a very high-quality program or it doesn't really meet the needs that I have, because it seems to be more focused on the education that they provide the children than the actual quality of care.”

I am Somewhat Aware of the Parent Aware Rating System

Some respondents said they were vaguely aware of the rating system, but did not know too much about it. They could say how many stars their provider had, but rarely knew how the number of stars was determined or what it meant. Similar to those who reported being very aware of the rating system, a few respondents in this group made use of the rating system as a starting point for their search. Those who did not utilize the system shared that it was because they questioned the usefulness of the information. The quotes below illustrate the perspectives of respondents who fall into this category.

“I just know that different daycares and preschools can go through this sort of rating system. I'm not even actually sure where the ratings come from, I guess, but you know, that there's some different scale for it. So, I guess I'm not that familiar with it. I've just heard of it and kind of seen it a little bit.”

“I think because of the home daycares do not typically have websites that you can go to and get a lot of information about them. And so, I think I was using it more just as a way to find home daycares too. I think it's easier to find centers if you just Google it, but I do not, that doesn't really come up when you try to look for home daycares. I think it was just an easier way to look for home daycares whereas I could just google for centers.”

Have Not Heard of the Parent Aware Rating System

After explaining the rating system to respondents who were not familiar with it, two of them reported that it would be a resource they may be interested in using. An additional three were not interested in using it. Others were unsure about whether they were interested in using it.

“I for sure would've looked at it...But I actually really think the socialization for me, it's kind of the most important piece right now. At least at school.”

“You know honestly, with like my oldest daughter, maybe it's something I would've looked into, but now having like the beauty of hindsight, I feel like it probably wouldn't be as important to me now.”

Early Childhood Education Decision Making

Conversations with respondents helped surface primary factors in their ECE decision-making. These factors were often informally assigned weights of significance based on the individual's personal values. The factors that were mentioned most frequently and prioritized most often are described below.

Scheduling and Logistics

Of those interviewed, there was great variety in the types of ECE programs respondents' children were attending, and how often, as evidenced in the characteristic tables. This includes half-days each day of the week, 2—3 full days per week, full days every day of the week, morning ECE program and afternoon with a nanny, and many other combinations. The complexity of attendance options created a unique set of challenges as respondents faced the task of finding programs that would allow them to create an ECE schedule that best aligned with their work schedule. Rather than having to adhere to a program's set schedule, some respondents spoke of wanting to select the days their child would attend a program, as well as only needing to pay for the days when their child was present, as critical factors in their decision to enroll in an ECE program.

“I could go Tuesday, Wednesday if I wanted. I didn't have to choose Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Tuesday, Thursday.”

“The days I do not work I do not have to bring my kids there, and I do not have to pay, and the days I do work, well obviously then I would take them. So, I really liked that flexibility, not that many places would offer me flexibility.”

For a small number of respondents, the decision to enroll their child in an ECE program was based on the logistics of scheduling, specifically transportation. The concern of getting their child to and from a program, or how their child would get from a half-day ECE program to a daycare, was a constant worry for many respondents.

Location + Neighborhood

Some respondent made their decision based on the convenience of where a program was located. This meant respondents were primarily selecting ECE programs that were either close to home or close to their place of work. Additionally, respondents with multiple children were factoring in the proximity of another child's elementary school or other daycare options. The factor of location was considered with a host of additional places and commutes in mind.

"The only reason we would change is if we moved quite a bit farther from [Name of Preschool]."

"I would say, you know, the, the location and then the reputation, how we chose it."

Program Cost

Slightly less than half of the respondents discussed the cost of their child's ECE program, with an even smaller number identifying cost as a significant concern. The reality of cost not discussed as a major concern is not reflective of the narrative of rising child care costs, but the result of a sample with household incomes that skewed higher than expected. One respondent who sends her child to a licensed family child care, says she never considered any private center because of the costs. This sentiment was echoed by another respondent who considered the high-quality private center in her neighborhood, but its high cost of attendance removed it as an option for her family. The first quote below comes from a respondent who reported their household income as \$150K+, the second from a respondent with a report a \$75K - \$99K household income.

"I've worked in the center, and you know, I think they're great, but I just knew that we would never be able to afford it. It just was not cost effective for us."

"Just started staying home and try to figure out what we could afford and could not afford and what was in the realm of possibility. I mean, there's a million super nice private preschools in this area, you know, you pay a mortgage payment to get your kid in for one day a week."

Cost was typically raised as a discussion point for respondents who had multiple children currently enrolled in ECE programs. One respondent talked about wanting their preschool-aged child and infant child to attend the same program. Instead of having both children attend an expensive, private ECE program or both attend the same cheaper, licensed family child care, they opted to split the children. They enrolled their preschooler at the private center and their infant at the licensed family child care. This decision was influenced by cost, as well as a desire to prep their older child for kindergarten in an academic-focused program. This example also highlights the competing factors, where for this family academic preparation in a private ECE program was weighted more important than the convenience of having both children at the same location.

“I think the big factor was that way with that as money. In-home daycares are a lot cheaper, and when you're talking having multiple kids, it's a big factor.”

Tuition and Scholarship Assistance

In Hennepin County, the per child weekly cost of child care for toddlers and preschool-aged children in 2017 was \$190 and \$179, respectively. In Ramsey county, the cost for toddlers and preschool-aged children in 2017 was \$170 and \$173 respectively. For the majority respondents who were paying out of pocket for ECE, this can amount to \$8,800 to 9,800 for a full year of ECE¹.

Average Weekly Cost for Child Care in Hennepin and Ramsey County			
County	Age Group	Weekly Cost of Family Child Care	Weekly Cost of Child Care Center
Hennepin	Infant	\$200.00	\$339.00
	Toddler	\$190.00	\$289.00
	Preschool	\$179.00	\$253.00
	School-Age	\$155.00	\$213.00
Ramsey	Infant	\$180.00	\$332.00
	Toddler	\$170.00	\$282.00
	Preschool	\$163.00	\$246.00
	School-Age	\$146.00	\$199.00

However, for five respondents, the full cost of their child's ECE program was offset through tuition or scholarship assistance. Below is the type of support each respondent receives.

- One of the five respondents received recurring tuition support that she is required to re-apply for each year. Without that assistance, she would not be able to afford the cost of all three children being enrolled in an early childhood program.
- A mother of twins says that her school district covered 100% of her childcare cost for one of her children, who tested on the autism spectrum. She paid the full cost for his twin sister.
- One respondent, who was attending the University of Minnesota for graduate school, received a needs-based grant for childcare totaling \$1,000 each semester.
- The fourth respondent in this group received a hardship scholarship from the center where her child was enrolled.
- The last respondent received a Think Small scholarship (formally known as an Early Learning Scholarship) provided by the State of Minnesota via the Department of Education.

There are a number of financial supports available for families who qualify for ECE financial assistance. These include: (1) CCAP/BSF Child Care Assistance Program, which includes MFIP

¹ https://www.thinksmall.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/2017-Metro-County-Average-Rates_0717.pdf

Child Care, Transition Year, and Basic Sliding Fee; (2) Early Learning Scholarships; (3) Hennepin County offers special scholarships with county money to families in particular high needs groups; and (4) Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) awards about \$1 million per year via a large grant to North Minneapolis families. However, for the respondents who received financial support, only one reported 100% assistance. The rest received a scholarship that covered part the cost, and with a close to \$10,000 yearly price tag for ECE, a \$1,000 per semester scholarship can only go so far.

Site Visit

Nearly all respondents visited their selected ECE before enrolling their child. The majority of respondents visited different ECE options when deciding on the right program. Some respondents opted to visit all the ECE options they were considering and used the visits as an opportunity to eliminate programs and narrow their list of options.

"I toured [School Name One], [School Name Two], [School Name Three], [School Name Four]. Did those in the fall and then narrowed it down to [School Name Four], [School Name Two]. And then um, I brought my stepmother-in-law to meet with each of the social workers at [School Name Four] and [School Name Two] to talk to them about, um, you know, some of it was general school policy and classroom stuff, but primarily to kind of get a feel for how my son would fit in. And then we did, we met with them and they each give us a tour again. So, it was a long process."

Others narrowed their initial list and only visited their top choices (typically two to four sites). This practice often resulted when respondents had other factors for their decision-making that could be assessed prior to an actual visit. In such instances, respondents would only visit programs that they strongly favored.

"We searched in the area where we live for bilingual daycare services, and we just did a Google search, um, and after that, we toured a few different places, and we decided on one."

Lastly, a small number only visited a program once a decision was finalized.

"We looked at, we just had looked at the [Name of licensed family care program] one and did a tour, and the executive director, you know, showed us around and um, that was the only one that we toured, and we liked it right off the bat. So, we reserved a spot."

For those who visited different sites, the visits were said to provide a level of intuitive certainty for the ECE programs they felt positively strong about, and for programs they doubted would be a good fit. For one family, their site visits confirmed that they preferred to have their child stay at home with a nanny rather than attend an ECE program.

There was variation among the respondents regarding whether they brought their child along on these visits. Some believed bringing such a young child along was unnecessary and that their child did not need to be part of the decision-making process. These respondents either never brought their child along on a visit, or only brought their child once a program was selected. Other respondents brought their child on all or as many of the visits as possible to give their child an opportunity to weigh in on the different options. This was primarily about ensuring their child

would be comfortable in their new space. A few wanted to bring their child but were not able for logistical scheduling reasons.

“Once we did decide on [Name of Specific Center], we did go and take her with us, just so she could see the space and get her thoughts about it. And she loved it. It was really hard to get her to leave so we know that would be very easy to transition her over there full time. And it was; it was super smooth.”

“That informed our decision a lot. So, the places . . . at one place he, you know, all that was happening was he was going to stay in the classroom where we walked around the rest of the building, my husband and I and um, and he lost his mind. Panicking. Um, and then like three, four days later at the next, um, at [Name of specific center], we told them, we were like, “just like the other day, we’re not leaving the building, we’re going to be here, we’re just going to look at the other classrooms.” He’s like, “yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” And I was like, OK, obviously this school feels a little more comfortable to him.”

All but two respondents reported making a visit to their selected center before enrolling their child. Of the two who did not visit their selected center, one was familiar with the center through personal experience and the other learned of the center through the recommendation of someone they trusted.

Program Culture

Connected to site visits was the culture of the program. Beyond academics, respondents expressed a desire for an ECE program that would provide their child engagement to diverse persons and access to new experiences. One respondent with biracial children mentioned that the diversity of the students in the program was an essential factor in her decision-making. Others added diversity and exposure to people of different and marginalized identities, and intergenerational engagement. Some talked about the access to music, arts, dance, theater, and other humanities-based topics. Lastly, one respondent shared that she wanted a culture where her child could feel at home when walking into the program she selected.

“They get this culture that they would never get anywhere else and it’s really good because you’re in central [Name of City] here in [Name Neighborhood]. These are your neighbors. It’s a very eclectic community and I, I really like it for him. Kids don’t know any different.”

“It’s intergenerational; they had a music program on the day she was going to be there. That’s really important to me actually.”

“Because the kids were running around and they didn’t have shoes and socks on. It was like summer, and they were like in and out, and it was like, it looked like they were like at home, like they felt like they were at their own home and I was like, this is what I want for my kid.”

Social and Cognitive Developmental Delays

Four of respondents shared how the social and cognitive developmental needs of their child were the highest weighted factor in their ECE decision-making. For these individuals, the decision

was about finding a program that would provide the best suite of services for their child, finding a teacher with the right training and temperament to engage with their child, and finding a site with an approach that would not make their child feel othered. Sometimes families had to place less emphasis on other factors in order to do what was best for their child.

“He got the autism diagnosis, and we also had some issues with one of the teachers there. She was just like, she wasn't very understanding of the situation, and it was like since [Name of Child] had the speech delay, it became, it was hard for him to go between the Spanish and the English. Just one language was confusing enough. So due to that sort of combination of things, uh, we decided to find a different daycare.”

Reflections and Key Takeaways

When it comes to gathering information about the selection process, parents want to review all possible options, while having the opportunity to filter those options based on the variables that will most affect their decision. This includes location and drive time, flexibility of scheduling and payment, knowing their child is in a fun and safe environment, and trusting that they are adequately prepared for school. But once the options are narrowed, parents want direct and personal feedback from others whose lives mirror theirs. They want to hear from other moms in the neighborhood, the dad at the music class, the grandparents at the park, because if an option is good enough for someone they can relate to and trust, then the decision is likely to be good enough for their child as well.

Given this reality, it should come as no surprise that some people may never use the Parent Aware system because they hold an aversion to information and resources that do not come from a personally trusted source in their network. However, the feedback received about Parent Aware sheds light on a few aspects of the system that can be improved to increase use. Below are recommendations that were generated based on the responses from respondents and should be considered with the demographics of respondents and their practice of access, agency, and privilege in mind.

- Make distinctions between private preschool centers, school-based preschool, and licensed family child care program clear for parents.
- Provide easily accessible and user-friendly transparency regarding the qualities that factor into program ratings.
- Present separate ratings for academic rigor, social competency, quality of care, etc. in addition to an overall score.
- Ensure that ECE providers have adequate knowledge of the tool and promote it in the same way.

Improving the system for those who are already ardent supporters and users will increase the likelihood that they will share this resource with other parents. Promoters of Parent Aware should consider including language that encourages users of the system to pass it along to others in their social network, making it a personally shared resource rather than something that is disseminated by an organization or institution.

Site visits appear to be a common practice for parents selecting an ECE program. What is not common practice is visiting multiple sites to gather intuitive perceptions of the programs or

vising during program hours. This meant respondents could not observe students in real-time to form an opinion about the structure of the program and observe how their child will be cared for during the day. Parents should view the visits as an information-gathering opportunity that can strongly influence their decision-making. Depending on the age of their child when making this decision, parents should bring their child along to site visits. The experience of seeing their child demonstrate comfort in a new space will serve to quiet the anxiousness parents may feel and foster a smooth transition process for the child.

The conversations with parents generated a lot of discussion about the logistics of scheduling, and yet little discussion or complaint about the costs of ECE programs. While it appears that parents have accepted the excessive costs as a necessary reality, it also speaks to the financial privilege of the respondents to not think of or worry about cost. When cost is not a factor, parents can expand their pool of options and increase their access to different types of programs. Additionally, it can be assumed that scheduling and logistics as a factor was belabored because it is an area where parents can exercise a greater degree of individual control. It is where agency can be used as parents feel empowered to negotiate a schedule that is most convenient for them. Depending on the circumstance, the ability to determine and control one's own schedule, by not needing to work or only working specific days, can be interpreted as a privilege.

Although parents desire the agency to op-into specific days of programming and only pay for the specific days their child attends, it is important to highlight that ad-hoc attendance in an ECE program is inconsistent with best practices. For children to receive the full benefits of their ECE program, they must have regular attendance². ECE providers should help parents understand that the ECE curriculum is just as vital as kindergarten curriculum and recognize the necessity of the foundational knowledge ECE programs provide. scaffolded nature of it. This will help parents recognize that each day builds upon the last and absences leave their child at a risk of falling behind. While parents may wish to design an attendance plan that takes into account their work schedule and financial cost, it would likely happen at the detriment of their child getting the most out of their ECE experience and preparation for kindergarten.

Summer Transition

The Transition Prep

For many respondents, their child's transition into kindergarten began prior to the summer before enrollment into their elementary school. In one way or another, respondents were thinking about the transition to kindergarten before beginning to weigh their options for a specific school. Often the decisions they made about their child's ECE program were indirectly related to their considerations for kindergarten. Below are a few examples of some initial considerations.

Shifting ECE Programs

Preparing their child for school required respondents to have a concrete understanding of their child's strengths and needs, and what may be their most significant challenges in transitioning to kindergarten. One example comes from a respondent who described their child as "wild." Having primarily been enrolled in a licensed family child care, this respondent knew that her child would

² <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/early-education-toolkit/>

need more structure in order to prepare for kindergarten. A year before kindergarten, they moved their child into a private center five days a week to begin the transition process.

“My four-year-old is, she's a little wild child. She just needed more structure, and she needed, she just needed more rules to prepare her for kindergarten... Otherwise, I knew she wouldn't succeed as a kindergartner if she didn't have a year of something like this.”

Another example of a program shift comes from a respondent whose child was previously attending a Montessori school. Recognizing that her child was unlikely to participate in a Montessori kindergarten, coupled with the challenges her child was having with that style of learning, she followed the advice of others and moved her child into another setting that was more similar to the traditional kindergarten classroom.

“Things just weren't really clicking; it was kind of advised to us that maybe we should go to a more, you know, where they're more verbal and kind of, it would kind of mimic more of a kindergarten classroom to kind of prepare him for that.”

A Steady Change in the Time Spent in ECE

Respondents with children who were not attending a full-time program talked about slowly increasing the number of days their child attended their ECE program. This was done in an attempt to slowly ease them into a new schedule and avoid the shock of a full-day kindergarten structure.

“I didn't want them, like have a shock of all the sudden going from two half days or two whole days to five days and they go to kindergarten. So, I just kind of wanted to work our way up. And then for me, like why like my five-year-old, initially we thought we would have him five days this year, and I was just like, I'm, he's little once, like let's just all be home together one day a week.”

As the second half of the quote above illustrates, a small handful of respondents shared that as kindergarten went from an abstract concept in the distant future to a full-on reality, they decreased the number of days their child attended their ECE program. While this decision was often made because of shifts in work schedules and changes in family income, respondents also made it very clear that they elected to cut back on the number of program days so they could spend more quality time with their child before school started. These respondents spoke of a shared intimacy in the time they were able to spend with their child, and it was clear from their responses that their priority to protect that time superseded any additional days of formal instruction before kindergarten. This mindset implies a privilege that instructional time can be easily made up elsewhere.

“She would have been easily fine going five days afternoon, but I still wanted some afternoons with her since next year she'll be gone all day, every day.”

Formal Summer Support

Respondents were asked to talk about the types of programming their child participated in during the summer.

No Enrollment in a Formal Program

Of the 31 interviews during phase two, eight reported that their child did not participate in a formal program during the summer. For three of the respondents, cost and ability to save money during the summer was a top factor in their decision to refrain from a formal academic program. For these three, a parent was able to stay home, or childcare consisted of grandparents and babysitters. For some respondents, spending quality time together was the primary factor in their decision to keep their child at home. For one respondent who would go back to work after spending years as a stay-at-home-dad, the summer before kindergarten felt sacred. He preferred to use that time doing activities together rather than enrolling his child in a program. Another respondent determined their child was academically on track and would either be bored with a summer curriculum or not benefit from the additional instructional time. All of the respondents who did not enroll their child in a program talked about wanting to enjoy summer or the various ways they kept their child engaged through trips to the library and continuous reading at home.

Summer Enrollment

For the 23 respondents who kept their child enrolled in a program through the summer, a little over half continued to attend their ECE program from the previous school year. For many, this was not a decision they revisited, as continuation was beneficial for their child and convenient to their schedule. A small number worried that sending their child to a different program three months before the start of kindergarten would result in too many transitions within such a short period of time. Thus, it made the most sense to continue with their current practice. Two respondents cut back on the number of days their child attended their ECE program so they could spend time at home together. One family, who made the decision to keep their child at his current center out of convenience regretted their decision. Upon realizing how bored their son was and how understandably “checked-out” the staff were, they would have preferred to enroll him in various camps so he could have enjoyed his summer more.

The remaining respondents either sent their child to a summer-specific program in their enrolled school district or specific school, or a kindergarten readiness camp for the duration of a few weeks to half the summer. Enrollment at the same elementary school was said to help with the transition as it familiarized students with the building once the regular school year began. The high cost of their ECE was no longer sustainable for one of the respondents who opted for a cheaper summer program for their child. In some cases, the decision for summer programming came at the suggestion of an ECE teacher who recommended continued exposure to academic concepts throughout the summer.

Informal Summer Support

Beyond the formal and organized support of ECE and summer programs, respondents were asked to share about the types of informal strategies they used to prepare their child for the transition into kindergarten. They were asked specifically about social, academic, and structural preparation. Many respondents engaged in transition activities that fell across all three areas; below are the key themes reported.

Social

Much of the social preparation respondents shared took the form of general conversation about school and what it would be like for their child. These were typically unplanned conversations,

though sometimes intentional time was carved out to discuss this momentous next step and answer any lingering questions their child had.

“We’ve always gone out to lunch before her preschool on the first day and um, this year it actually worked too because the kindergarten was started a couple days later, so we had a couple days of just me and her there, which was nice. Then we did our usual little pizza lunch date and talked about how the year is gonna be different, and the schedules are going to be different and stuff. So, I think that’s probably about kind of how we got her prepared there.”

“We spent a lot of time talking about how much she’s going to love kindergarten and how, I mean, just because [Name of Child]’s a kid that doesn’t transition real well, we just spent a lot of time talking about, well, you know, it’s twelve days, so kindergarten, kindergarten, this is what we do in kindergarten.”

“We did go back-to-school shopping, and we made it kind of fun because we went to McDonald’s first and we actually ate at McDonald’s instead of just going through the drive-through, and we made a big deal about it.”

Some respondents took time off work and spent quality time with their child as a way to facilitate the transition and maximize the last few weeks of the summer. Enjoying the summer and engaging in summer activities came in the form of play dates with other children in the neighborhood or friends from their ECE program. Others talked about going school supply shopping, purchasing back-to-school clothes, and picking out new backpacks and lunch boxes as a social activity to support the transition. This provided both the excitement of buying new supplies for school and the autonomy of choice as many respondents allowed their child to select a backpack and lunchbox that reflected their interests.

“The only back-to-school shopping we really do is like, we get them in really nice backpack so they get to pick out a backpack and I mean we got them. It’s like one of those from Pottery Barns where they can get their name embroidered into it, like a really big deal.”

“The only other thing that we did was one of the things [Name of Child] was excited about was she, gave her the freedom to pack her own lunch with, um, with like you can pack this, but then you also need to see a fruit and a vegetable, you know, so we were kind of giving her that freedom.”

One respondent, who described her child as having “zero patience,” prepped her son for how to address the unpredictability of social exchanges and the lack of immediate results he would encounter once school began. In anticipation of the new economic diversity of their selected school, another respondent talked to her child about how kindergarten would bring a new group of students with different types of behavior. This respondent advised her child to “let the teacher worry about it.”

“[Organizational Name of ECE provider] is such a big employer. There were definitely, um, that I felt like there was good racial diversity there and cultural, but there was not economic. And so, I kind of talked to her like that there’ll be kids that might have different

behaviors or there will be kids that have never been to school before or they might not know how to do things and um, we, so we talked a little bit about being um, you know, just kind of letting the teacher handle it. You don't need to worry about it, worry about yourself, that kind of stuff."

Another talked to her child about the many emotions she might feel during the day, reminding her that "Anything you feel is an okay thing to feel." Lastly, another respondent with a "funny kid" reminded him to take kindergarten seriously, and about respecting, listening, asking for help, and being kind to others.

It was helpful for respondents to communicate with their child about a familiar face they could look for on the first day of kindergarten. Whether this was a sibling, a former classmate from preschool, or a friend from the neighborhood, parents made a point to mention to their child who else they could expect to see during the school day. A family that was new to the area made intentional visits to public spaces like lakes and parks to connect with other families. This allowed their child to make a friend and, in turn, have someone to look forward to seeing on the first day of school and sit with at lunch.

One parent remarked that the focus of the summer was about having fun. She avoided pushing too many academic activities onto her child to avoid making learning burdensome. In her words, "I want learning to be fun, I do not want it ever to be something that like, we're like forcing her to do, so I feel like we did not focus on that." For her daughter, the summer was primarily about processing the emotions of missing preschool friends and grieving through the sadness of the transition. She felt added academic lessons were not fitting for what her daughter needed.

Academics

Beyond the social activities done to support the transition process were the academic efforts respondents mentioned. Some worked on writing and a few worked on math problems, but the most significant things, respondents said, were reading and the use of kindergarten prep workbooks. Reading activities included short, informal reading sessions at home, as well as more structured library programs where respondents and their children visited libraries across the city and engaged in letter identification and phonics exercises.

"He has probably 100 books in his room, and I mean, and that's probably underselling it a bit. And, and we read chapter books every night and, and have for probably the last two, three years, and you know, as he's gotten older, the books that have changed, we're now reading Avengers and Spiderman and whatever."

"Read two books each night. We did a mommy and [Name of Child] library tour. We visited a different library each week, and it was a lot of fun. He picked out four books."

Some of this academic preparation was said to calm the nerves of the child. This helped prepare children for the topics they would learn once school started and to reassure them that it would be fun and not scary. One respondent, whose child was beginning a Spanish language immersion program, spent the summer reviewing Spanish words with her daughter and getting her prepared to speak a different language 100% of the time at school. Another child, who had a speech delay, worked with a private speech pathologist over the summer. Lastly, one respondent remarked that

more than anything they did over the summer, the best preparation they gave their child was full-time in an ECE program over the past several years.

Structure

The final area of informal preparation respondents discussed was talking to their child about what to expect from the day-to-day routine of kindergarten. One respondent mentioned that sending their child to [ECE Program Name] helped get them into a structure of waking up early and not napping during the day. In anticipation of the long days, others mentioned moving bedtimes, integrating a bedtime routine, or slowly decreasing the prevalence of naps as the school year grew near. Lastly, enrollment in a taekwondo class was said to help one child learn direction-following and compliance.

Many respondents wanted to give their child the big picture of what the school day would be like for them. This included what it would mean to ride the school bus, making sure they knew where to get on and off and who their driver would be, and what to do when they first arrive in the classroom. Kindergarten open house visits also gave respondents and children a visual reference from which to construct the day, and it allowed respondents to take the conversation from abstract to concrete.

“Giving him advanced information so that he can sort of see the big picture of things, and that seems to really help him a lot.”

Others made a point to talk about the differences their child would face in the move from their ECE program to kindergarten. At home, this included waking up by themselves and taking more responsibility for getting dressed and eating breakfast. At school, this involved making smart decisions at lunch and opening their own milk cartons, a task previously supported by program teachers. One respondent used this transition as an opportunity to change their child's daily chore list.

Not all respondents reported engaging in much of the informal activities to ease the transition. One respondent did not feel any additional actions were necessary given that her child was remaining in the same school and under the support of the same teacher. In her opinion, the biggest hurdle her child needed to face was the length of the school day. Another respondent said she had no concerns about her child's readiness and was confident her child was academically and socially on par, or exceeding others in his age group. One mother whose child was attending a full-day program did not want to overwhelm them with more activities at home, and opted not to do anything specific or informal to prepare.

“I want learning to be fun. I don't want it ever to be something that like, we're like forcing her to do, so I feel like we didn't focus on that.”

While many respondents extensively spoke about kindergarten with their children, others opted not to over-communicate about kindergarten in order to avoid overwhelming their child. They worried that constant communication about kindergarten would raise an alarm that it was something to stress over, rather than a simple next step in their educational journey.

Reflections and Key Takeaways

Much of what was learned in this section directly reflects the high-income level of the participants. With only 10% of respondents identifying cost and an incentive to save money as a rationale for not enrolling their children in a formal program during the summer, the assumption is that the remaining 90% of parents have the financial privilege to keep their child in programs to further social and academic enrichment during the summer months. Additionally, the decision to decrease time spent in ECE or choose to refrain from summer programming implies a confidence in one's ability and agency to personally ensure that academic proficiency is not lost or sacrificed.

Parents are on the front line when it comes to providing adequate support and transitioning for their child. However, parents must first recognize what is needed to support and prepare their child for kindergarten. That recognition is dependent on the ability to accurately assess a child's strengths and weaknesses and compare that to what is necessary to succeed in school. Because every parent believes their child is brilliant, intelligent, and academically proficient, obtaining a parent's objective assessment of their child's abilities and kindergarten readiness may prove to be challenging. However, only when parents understand whether their child is on-track and when they are provided with actionable activities to address any gaps, can they support their child's kindergarten-readiness. Knowing a child is not kindergarten-ready but lacking the access to necessary options or the agency to provide adequate support will leave parents feeling frustrated and disempowered. So, while some parents may want to decrease the number of program days in the final year or summer before kindergarten, that option should be weighed against the academic preparation needs of each child. ECE programs should provide parents with more options to spend time having fun and learning with their child, rather than creating a forced, either-or choice between learning and social engagement. There are ways to integrate aspects of learning with trips to the park, the zoo, or the state fair. Balance is key, and there can be time carved out for parents to enjoy the summer and spend quality time with their child without it happening at the expense of kindergarten readiness.

In addition to academic support for the summer transition, attention should be given to the structural and social aspects of transition preparation. This can begin with processing emotions about children's loss of friendships from their ECE programs. Parents should recognize that children may have spent years strengthening friendships, and create space for their child to adequately grieve the end of a significant chapter in their lives. Conversations about the structure of the school day can help increase a child's confidence and ensure they know what to expect during the first few weeks of schools. During these conversations, parents should balance the amount of conversation about kindergarten to generate excitement and ease fears of their child, while reducing the potential for causing unnecessary alarm or anxiety. Only a parent can determine where the line is for their own child, but social activities like back to school shopping can help to build positive anticipation and signal a celebratory transition without the marked fear of a problem.

Kindergarten Decision Making

Every family approaches the decision of where to enroll their child for kindergarten differently. To better understand their processes, respondents were asked whether they approached this choice as a short-term decision, which could be changed with minimal consequences, or a long-

term decision that would have a consequential impact on their child's educational and life success. The majority of respondents believed it to be a long-term decision, with the smallest number of respondents seeing it as both. The quotes below illustrate these perspectives.

“I think it's something that we're trying not to put that much weight on it, that it's going to be twelve years that you know, we can try it out, and we happen to live in a place of course in [Name of City] where there are options and if it doesn't feel right to us, but that's OK. You know, one year is not going to make or break the rest of her academic career.”

“I see it more as the second, more of a long term. I mean, of course, if there's something not going right, we can make changes to it. But really seeing it as like, this is where she's going to be going to elementary school, which sets up middle school and high school.”

How respondents viewed this decision influenced their approach to the decision-making process. Those who saw it as a long-term decision detailed a more systematic review process, in which factors were diligently weighed and control was exerted. Those who saw it as a short-term decision depicted an informal process and a high trust of the system for success.

Key Factors for Decision-Making

During each interview, respondents were asked to reflect on the factors that most influenced their kindergarten decisions. Many vital factors surfaced, and an overview of what was shared is below.

Previous Decision Made for Older Child

For eight of the individuals interviewed, their soon-to-be kindergartner was not their first child to enter kindergarten. When this was the case, respondents defaulted to sending their incoming kindergartner to the school older siblings were already attending. Some shared that a lot of research went into the decision for their oldest child, and thus there was a solidified confidence that the best decision had already been made. Many of these families had built attachments to the school and relationships with staff, and the incoming kindergartner often expressed wanting to be in the same school as an older sibling. Some respondents even remarked that the personality and needs of all their children were factored into the first decision. One respondent added that her incoming kindergartner's needs were more of a factor when selecting a school than the needs of her first child because her second child had a unique personality, while her first child would easily thrive in any environment.

Academics and Test Scores

For close to half of respondents, academics, quality of instruction, and test scores were critical aspects of their decision-making. Respondents were willing to move or open-enroll in other districts to secure a school with high test scores and ensure their child would be academically challenged in the classroom.

“I think the biggest thing is the rating of the school, right? So, it starts with that, I want him to go to a good solid school. But because our assigned schools had that, then you can kind of look at the other secondary factors. I would say even if our whole

neighborhood went there and the school was horrible, we would probably look at something new, right.”

Many of the respondents who explicitly remarked on academic quality as a factor often also spoke of the extensive work they were doing at home to prepare their child for kindergarten. This included reading at home, quizzing children on facts, colors, sight words, etc. There was an intentional investment on the part of these respondents to maintain and exceed academic proficiency, and it was made clear that this was not something they were willing to compromise during the processes of weighing other factors in their decision-making.

Although academic rigor was of high importance to some respondents, others were willing to give up some academic quality to gain other priority aspects of schooling, such as social-emotional learning. One participant specifically mentioned that test scores were not of vital importance to her. A small number of respondents shared this sentiment. One rationale is that some respondents operate within the mindset that all schools are of adequate quality with minimal variation between schools and teachers, and thus no decision could significantly jeopardize the quality of education their child receives.

“I do not care too much about like the test scores, every teacher in every classroom is different.”

The academic quality of a potential elementary school was often determined by respondents who turned to district websites and the Minnesota Department of Education website to review standardized test scores. Respondents reported viewing scores from 3rd grade to high school students in a specific school, or across multiple schools they were considering.

“I looked it was online at different school ratings across both districts, not only for the kindergarten but also just generally outcomes, um like on test scores or on just like different sort of criteria like that, um, parent ratings, things like that.”

“My husband leveraged some, state sites to get the scores. He did his own analysis around where the elementary schools were scoring and then some of the statistics that are provided.”

Other times it appeared that respondents’ assessment academic quality arose from biased assumptions of a school’s reputation and other characteristics of a school such a location and neighborhood, size of school, and demographic make-up.

Positive Word of Mouth

As was the case for sources of information for ECE programs, one of the most significant and most reliable factors mentioned for kindergarten options was insight and feedback from people parents knew personally. More often than not, respondents said that they considered a school because they heard good things from a family member, friend, child-care provider, colleague, or neighbor. They found it comforting to talk to other parents who were also sending their child to the same school. For one respondent, the school she chose was one she described as least desirable. However, knowing so many other families loved it made it an obvious choice for her child. Often the reviews came in-person, but one respondent mentioned using Facebook to solicit feedback about schools she was considering.

“I have my whole family in this area, and three out of four of my siblings that have kids in school have their children in the [Language immersion program] at the same school.”

“So, we had really great access to like, ‘OK, what do you like and do not like? What, are things that you wish they did, or they didn't do? What would you recommend, you know, what do you think, do you think we could do it? We shouldn't do it?’ Like what, you know, all that kind of stuff. Um, which helped a ton.”

In contrast, there was one respondent that said despite the positive reviews they heard about their neighborhood school, the test scores were not up to their standard, and they chose to open enroll in a different city.

Financial Cost

Cost was a mostly negligible factor for these respondents, as many of them were considering public school options for their child. A respondent who was only considering public school options expressed concern about the cost of sending her child to before- and after-school care for four hours each day if she were to select the school of her choice. For respondents with the privilege of a high household income, access to private school options were also discussed. For them, cost was mentioned as a deciding factor, albeit not a consequential one. One mother is currently considering a private school after not getting into her first or second choice in the neighborhood public school lottery. She expressed frustration over having to pay for a private school when she could be saving that money for her child's college tuition. For this respondent, having the ability to realistically consider private school options is an example of how financial privilege results in increased access.

“It's about five grand a year, but that's still with two kids. It's ten grand a year. That's ten grand a year I could be putting towards their college fund, and instead, I'm putting it towards what should be in my mind free because my kid can't get in.”

Demographics and Diversity

The diversity and demographics of a school surfaced as a consideration factor for some respondents. Several wanted their child to attend school with people of different ethnicities and religious backgrounds. One respondent said she attended a diverse public school and wanted the same for her child. Another parent with older children added that although he could easily send his children to the neighboring private school where all the students look alike, he prefers the diversity of the local public school, where the students at the bus stop represented many different countries and ethnicities.

“I'm definitely diversity. Um, I feel like the public schools are more diverse culturally and just kinda like ethnically and religions and all that kind of stuff.”

“Our bus stop, [Name of Oldest Child]'s bus stop. His kindergarten year was, it was like a UN meeting, at the bus stop. Like, um, there was a kid who had, who was born in Somalia, there was a kid was born in Israel, there was, you know, every possible ethnicity represented, and it was uh, you know, just really cool.”

Diversity was so crucial to a mother of a bi-racial child that she reported counting the number of children of color during a school visit. Diversity was also discussed in the form of socio-economic class, as one participant said she decided against a school because she felt the families were classist. She worried about the impact it would have on her son to not be in the same income bracket as his classmates.

“I toured one school which was [Name of School]. Um, and I liked it but I didn't like it for him because it felt, yeah, it felt very classist and kind of um, you know, all of his friends would live by [Name of Nearby Lake] and have all these nice things, and you know, I don't drive a Volvo or Lululemon yoga pants and you know, it was just very, like, it just felt very stuffy.”

Keeping in mind the limited representation of participants of color, none of the three respondents who identified themselves as persons of color made mention of diversity as a factor in their decision making.

School Tours

Touring a school was an opportunity to gather untraditional data and non-tangible information. Although the individual and group tours helped respondents gain answers to a variety of specific and general questions, they also provided intangible information or a “feel” for the school. The following two sub-categories are themes that resulted from respondents’ participation in school tours.

Emotional Instinct

For some respondents, the factors used in their decision-making were less objectively determined and based more on emotion and instinct. These respondents spoke of the vibes and intuition they felt were a critical factor in their decision-making. Resulting from a school tour, having attended the school themselves, or being familiar with a school from the neighborhood, the feeling was a gut instinct that respondents were challenged to describe.

“I'm a vibes person, so I vibe off of individuals in the school and how the schools itself feels and I would um, if I get a good vibe and it fits her, I'll actually bring her to see how she reacts.”

“It was just kind of, to be honest, that gut feeling that you got when we toured, that was a big part of it.”

“It's our neighborhood school, and when I went there I just felt like it was very, um, just like it looked like a really small and caring environment, and I really liked that, and it's only K through two, and so it felt really like almost like an extension of her preschool, you know, because it just seemed like the only little kids were there and you know, just like was kind of nice in that way. And we really liked the people that we met, and everything seemed really good. And so I thought for sure we were just going to do that.”

School Culture

The culture of the school also surfaced as a factor. School culture was assessed from respondents' familiarity with the school—from personal experience, word of mouth, or tours. This factor included having an active school community and parent-teacher-organization, a school with a caring and supportive environment, and a positive atmosphere. Other aspects mentioned about school culture were lack of chaos, school uniforms, and safety.

“I also liked the fact that they offered STEM and that they have a uniform so that kids are more concerned about their curriculum versus what people are wearing. You know, I remember how that felt when I was a kid.

“Last year they had an incident where a kid has a water gun. I just, I don't see him going there.

Some respondents expressed concern about school culture, especially when there was a high prevalence of disciplinary issues.

“Honestly my first question when we walked through the doors at the [Name of Elementary School] was, do those doors lock? I hate that I have to ask that question.

Scheduling Logistics

A small number of respondents talked about how the start and end time of different schools factored into their decision. For many families with two full-time working parents, scheduling was a major concern for them. Specific to this factor was not wanting their children to attend before-and-after- school-care every day, or not wanting them to have long bus rides to and from school.

“We moved to the east side of town, and so then I had to start thinking about the schools and you know, what would work with my work schedule and my husband's work schedule. He's kind of out of the picture for pickups because he doesn't get off work till six and you know, not wanting to put kids on a bus and things like that.”

“A huge perk about a Jewish school for us is that you do not need to attend afternoon Hebrew School. If you do not go to a Jewish school, you have to go to afternoon Hebrew School for two to three times a week for two to three hours until you're at least 13 and that's really challenging as you can imagine for working parents.”

Location/Neighborhood

The proximity and location of a school is a factor also brought up in the interviews. For some, it was about having a school that was close to home, to their place of work, or even conveniently located to the ECE program of younger children. One respondent shared that she wanted to select an elementary school close to her job so she could quickly access her child if there was an emergency. Many of the respondents picked their neighborhood school as a top choice for their child. The reasons varied and included wanting their child to attend a school with other children in the area, and feeling comfortable with the school because of their child's familiarity with it.

“A lot of our neighborhood kids all go there, so they can ride the bus with their friends. I think that's a big, huge, important social piece of it.”

“It's like three blocks away from our house. We play in the playground all the time. We've looked in the windows in the kindergarten room, so it's really nice because she's familiar with it, so just helping with the transition. She knows how to walk there because we walked to the playground all the time.”

For one respondent, wanting their child to attend the same school as the other children in the neighborhood was less about location and proximity, and more about the community feel of all the children on the block attending the same school. Given this reality, it was essential to have her child attend the nearby language immersion school that the majority of students on the block attended, rather than the neighborhood school which no child on the block attended.

“But if our son didn't get into [Name of School], he'd be the only one in the neighborhood that actually would be going to the neighborhood school. So, it wrecks that neighborhood feel. It'd be different if everyone was going to the neighborhood school, but they're not.”

While the location was critical, for some people, the convenience it brought was outweighed by the positive word of mouth of trusted confidants.

“We just knew it was, it was a pretty good school, but they do not have, there was no real word of mouth about the school as much, and it was like different for the first one because we knew a lot of people who are affiliated there and just kind of like knew more about it.”

School Specific Approach

Language Immersion

Language immersion was one of the most sought-out school-specific approaches. Spanish and Chinese language immersions schools were discussed and weighed heavily in the decision-making process for some respondents. More often than not, respondents were not interested in second-language fluency but instead were motivated by research that posits that learning a new language positively impacts students' critical thinking and cognitive ability. These families spoke of language immersion as a pathway to academic proficiency. There was a substantial overlap in the families that prioritized this factor and those who also prioritized academic rigor.

“We did language research and based on what we found, um, Mandarin, it, learning Mandarin Chinese does something that, my husband did most of the reading on this . . . but it does something to where it helps not unlock, but like open up different areas of the brain where they can learn things differently because it is so wildly different from what their first language is. It forces them to essentially think outside the box they've already been accustomed to.”

Beyond the focus on academics, some respondents were interested in language immersion schools for their child because they themselves were also fluent in the language. Other respondents remarked on the cultural aspects of the Chinese and Spanish cultures as the motivator for considering language immersion schools.

“We like language immersion, I mean Chinese is interesting but more so from the perspective of cognitive development and like the cognitive development that goes along with language. We liked the science and math focus. We liked the discipline that's kind of built into the Chinese culture.”

“[Name of School District] also has a Chinese immersion, um, opportunity and I personally just like Spanish culture, and so we didn't even look into those because I like kind of the color in the songs and kind of the happiness of the Spanish culture.”

One respondent that considered a language immersion school but opted against it stated concerns about their child's proficiency in the English subject matter as the rationale. Both parents excelled in math and science, but struggled with English and language arts, so they worried their children might share those same struggles. They wanted to avoid their belief of that introducing a second language would bring additional challenges for their child.

“For both my husband and I, our strengths were more aligned with the math and sciences, and English writing where it's harder for us. So, realizing that may be a common theme for them as well. I, we were both concerned how far behind would they be then, and would that put them more at a deficit than the benefits that come with the second language.”

Instructional Approaches

Different instructional approaches surfaced as a factor in respondents' decision-making. A frequent mention was the option of Montessori schools. This often surfaced from respondents with a child diagnosed with a learning disability or social cognitive disorder. Some worried that the autonomous nature of Montessori would be too flexible, and that their child would struggle to thrive in that setting. Others believed the Montessori approach would provide the fluidity their child needed to succeed.

“We tried for like a Montessori. We thought maybe it would just be good for him at, at that point to just get used to being around different people without necessarily having a real set routine on things like the Montessori method a little bit different.”

One respondent who considered a Montessori school eventually chose a traditional public school for her child. She worried the Montessori approach would be too foreign for her child and she wanted a model she was familiar with, so she could provide at-home support as needed.

“I didn't pick [Name of School] because he's never been exposed to the Montessori platform and I do not- I think he'd get lost... So, I'm, I'm more of just a very classic education approach I think because then I can assist my child with homework and you know, I wanted to be able to learn with him.”

Child's Personality and Learning Style

Respondents were asked to reflect on how their child's personality and learning style factored into the decision they were making. A large number shared that their child was someone who could adapt easily to various settings and would thrive in any context. Others discussed how their child's personality and specific needs played a role in the type of learning environment they

sought. For example, one respondent talked about wanting a school with smaller class sizes to accommodate her child's shy personality. Another considered keeping her child in the same school where he attended preschool because of his difficulty with transitions and attachments.

"She's just an awesome girl. She's just really cool. She's very adaptive to change and so she also, I think is just can get along with a lot of different kids. So, I think we haven't really been looking for anything in particular for her, for her needs because there's not, she's not like she's super shy and needs a smaller class or something like that."

"In our son is um, transitions are harder for him. He gets very attached to people and places. Um, and so realizing with his temperament that it will be harder to transition him to a different school."

For some respondents, their child exhibited high academic performance, and they were keenly focused on finding an environment that would continue to challenge their child's learning and meet their intellectual interests.

"He's kind of a little engineer. He does Legos or Magna tiles or any sort of building construction, loves that um, and loves kind of non-fiction books about animals or science volcanoes, clouds, that kind of thing. And when I toured [Name of school], they had, um, a 3D printer in the library that they were printing out some sort of kind of engineering projects that they're working on it. So, I thought, oh he'd love that. Like he, he'd be really into that."

"He's reading and doing math and things like that already at like a first or second-grade level, and so I'm really worried about the ability of schools like [Name of school], to be able to challenge him and keep up with where he's at already at this point."

The quote below illustrates how the school tours provided an opportunity for one respondent to assess which of the two schools she was considering would be most suitable for her son's personality and temperament.

"The atmosphere at [School Option 1] was calm and quiet. Every classroom I saw was, um, kids were, they were on task and the classroom was, there wasn't, I didn't see any chaos at [School Option 1]. And at [School Option 2] I thought there just was a lot more going on. The structure of the building was noisy and very stimulating. And um, you know, we saw some classrooms where kids were throwing boots, and I very much felt like none of this would have mattered to me except for my son. Um, those are things that would, would be really hard for him because he needs, he, he just bounces off the walls when there's too much stimulation, and it's hard for him to focus on things. So, I think like the, the two schools, I kind of decided like the two schools were both really good options, but [School Option 1] felt like they had more of a well-oiled machine to me."

Reflections and Key Takeaways

Many of the factors discussed for the kindergarten decision-making were also prevalent for ECE decision-making. Similarly, parents assign factors informal weights of importance. Ten respondents could identify the location of a school as a factor in their decision-making, but the importance of location would likely differ for each individual. This underscores the reality that

the factors are a proxy for values. Albeit not comprehensive, the factors parents weigh most heavily informally shed light on what each family values most. This is helpful in framing the kindergarten decision-making process as not only a value-laden decision, but also a fact-based decision. Any support provided to parents for this decision-making process should emphasize both the necessity of practical activities, like participating in school tours, cost, and scheduling logistics, but should also elevate the importance of articulating family values and using that to drive the future decision-making.

Given the busy lives of families and the burden of scheduling children's hectic schedules with drop-off, pick-up and after school care, it came as little surprise that parents opted to send younger children into the same school as older siblings. With the exception of a younger child who had a specific personality and learning needs, most families will continue to opt for a single school for their children. That being said, when respondents are making a kindergarten decision for the first time, they should make a decision that will suit the needs of all their children, rather than centering the needs of their oldest.

Overall, academics, quality of instruction, and test scores surfaced far less than might be expected. One rationale is because many families view academic quality as a non-compromising factor, and as a result, it was not a debatable part of their decision-making. The school options were schools they believed to be of high academic rigor and felt no need to mention it as a critical decision-making factor. This serves as an example of the prevalence of privilege and access in the sample. Parents should be reminded that academic quality between schools should not be assumed but rather a factor to explore and confirm.

When it comes to these crucial decisions, personal recommendations and advice from friends and family go a long way. So, when it comes down to receiving the kinds of information that would drive parents towards one school over another, they would much prefer that information to come from someone they know and trust.

Enough cannot be said about the vital role of visiting schools, having an opportunity to experience the school in-person, and talking to staff and school leadership. Despite all of the tangible and objective factors that were brought up, for many parents the decision came down to an indescribable feeling they received upon visiting a school. Parents should be encouraged to visit the schools they are considering for their child. There is something unique about experiencing the culture firsthand, as opposed to reading about it on the website, in a brochure, or hearing about it from others. Even if parents feel confident in their decision about a particular school, they should tour other schools in order to make a comparative assessment of their choice.

Additionally, being able to factor a child's personality or learning style into a decision also requires that parents make a full assessment of their child's personality and learning needs. It also requires parents to have the knowledge of how that'll support or detract from their child's abilities to succeed in kindergarten. Part of the conversation parents should be having during school tours is an explanation of who their child is so they can assess the fit of the school with their child's personality.

Many of the parents who discussed location as a factor were interested in a supportive community. To meet this need, schools should implement resources and opportunities to help students and families form a community and support each other. This would allow families who

may not live in the neighborhood of the school to feel less isolated, and see their school community as a place they can come to for support.

Other school-specific approaches respondents mentioned included schools with a STEM, environmental, or religious (specifically Jewish) faiths. However, unlike language immersion or faith-based schools, STEM and environmental focus schools were less of a necessity and regarded as an added luxury. This further represented the degree of privilege and access respondents exhibited in their ability to review and consider such niche-specific interests.

Through the discussion of factors, two key challenges were brought up by respondents. The first was how the lottery system in specific districts can serve to exacerbate the issues associated with location and neighborhood. For example, if parents select schools outside their neighborhood community and fail to gain admittance, they often have to face the reality that their local neighborhood schools are already full. They are then forced to enroll their child in a school much farther away, creating new challenges, such as scheduling, lack of bussing options, and lack of community social support.

The second challenge was the complex and widespread challenge of scheduling. Through the process, parents constantly felt at the whim of the district's scheduling for schools, and also at the whim of their professional schedules and responsibilities in the workplace. This left many respondents feeling caught in the middle with little power to exercise any degree of agency. While little can be done to alter parents' personal work schedules, one parent suggested that by moving the lottery and decision-making process earlier in the year, parents would have more time to address the logistics scheduling. It would give them more opportunity to find childcare for before and after school, and likely increase their feelings of flexibility and empowerment in the process.

The factors detailed above shed light on what was most important to the respondents of this study. On the surface, each factor demonstrated the motivations behind the decision-making, but each factor also provided a window into the personal values of each respondent. So, while it may appear simple to alter parents' focus on specific factors and persuade them to prioritize other factors, understanding that factors are rooted in personal values reveals what a challenging undertaking it would be.

After the Decision

Looking Back on the Enrollment Decision

When reconnecting after the summer months for the phase two interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on their decisions and report any changes to the kindergarten choice they made for their child. This section provides an overview of what was shared.

A New Enrollment Decision

Of the 26 respondents from phase one who had reached a school choice for kindergarten enrollment, two had changed their mind between their first and second interviews. One respondent, after open-enrolling her child into the Chinese-Mandarin immersion school, changed her mind over the summer due to some criticism from family members and other parents about her open-enrollment decision. Facing disapproving remarks about her decision, she backed out of

the Chinese-Mandarin immersion school in June. Following this decision, she sat down with the principal at a Spanish immersion school, her top choice, and her neighborhood school. After some difficult conversations about what would be best for her child, she enrolled her daughter at their neighborhood school and joined the waitlist for The Spanish immersion school. Currently, her daughter is enrolled at her neighborhood school, and she described her teacher as “outstanding,” adding that “She’s firm but kind and I love that.”

At the time of the second interview, another respondent was making plans to determine a new school for her son. Although he “transitioned amazingly” and loves the school, there were a few things the respondent was unhappy about with the school itself. Despite the school describing themselves as effective in the approach of differentiated instruction, her child is not being challenged and is engaging in work better suited for his younger siblings. In addition to the lack of air conditioning in the building, the school’s physical infrastructure provides some safety concerns for the parent. Currently, she is considering a charter school, open-enrollment in another public school, and keeping the option of home-school on the table. It should be noted that this respondent was not entirely thrilled with her initial school placement and remains stressed about the future decision as well.

“I think overall, I feel really stressed out about it in general, just because you know, you want the best for your kids, and you want to know that you’re making the right decisions for them. And so, it’s really stressful to feel like, you know, maybe we didn’t make the right decision for him this year, and you know, will we be happy with wherever he ends up next year? And, you know, we also, it’s stressful that he’s going to make friendships and then we’re going to kind of bounce him around. So, you know, I think overall, I’m just mostly just really stressed about it.”

This is a great example of the agency some respondents exercised in their decision-making. While some in a similar situation may have felt locked into a decision that was not the best fit for their child, this respondent exercised her agency to explore alternative options and gain access into different schools. Her dissatisfaction empowered her to act and take control of a situation in ways not everyone would. Lastly, both of these cases illustrate, even after the initial school selection is made, how stressful the process can be, and how much personal interactions, and the perspectives of friends and family shape the decision-making.

Late Decision Makers

At the time of the first interview, seven respondents had yet to make an enrollment decision for their child. By the time of the second interview, each of these respondents was satisfied with the decision they had made and how the transition process unfolded. One respondent was thrilled to have enrolled in her neighborhood school, also her top choice, because twelve other students would be riding the bus with her son. According to the respondent, even though not all of the children are incoming kindergartners, it helped with the transition because it meant her son knew other children in the school.

Living on the border of two metro area cities gave one respondent the option of schools in either district. After settling on an ECE program in a specific district, she was all but certain that her son would enroll in a kindergarten in that same district. However, the district assessment to determine her son’s eligibility for special education support identified areas of concern, which

she was not previously aware of. The scores in certain areas of the assessment felt so inaccurate that she doubted the legitimacy of the assessment.

“There's this one test that measures cognitive ability for example, and they had him put at like a point five percentile, not fifth, point five percentile for cognitive development for his age. And like if, if my son was at that level, I would know.”

The experience was so unsettling that she decided to enroll in their neighborhood school rather than in the district she planned for her son to attend. When asked how she feels about the change in decision, she said,

“I'm satisfied. It seems like the school is good, a high-quality school, at least from what we can see on. It's also closer, which is nice as well. It seems like there are lots of opportunities to be involved with the school. There's sort of like a culture around it. Yeah, we're, we're happy so far. The teacher seems great so far. And it's actually a brand-new, parts of the building, are brand new and just got remodeled. So that's also great. Nice. Yeah, so far it seems to be going pretty well.”

Another respondent who was considering options between a Spanish immersion school and her neighborhood school chose a private Catholic school for their child. Two weeks before school started, they were notified that they had made it off the waitlist for the Spanish immersion school and would need to decide to accept or decline in 24 hours.

“We were kind of all set on one direction and then now here's an option that they told us wasn't an option and now it is. Um, and so we, it was, it was really difficult, and it was a really bad position to be in actually.”

After speaking with her pediatrician who has children at the Spanish Immersion school and other educators, they learned that the school does not do well with non-traditional students, and made the decision to move forward with their original choice for enrollment.

In weighing their options between a private Catholic school and a Chinese immersion school, one respondent opted for the Chinese Immersion school. This decision still baffles the respondent who stated, “If you asked me five years ago would we be sending our kid to a Chinese school? No, absolutely not.” One of the factors they considered in the final decision was that the Chinese immersion school needed to start enrollment at Kindergarten, and was not an option they could come back to. Given that reality, the \$15,000-a-year alternative for the private Catholic school made less practical sense. While she does not hope to make any more changes, she remains open to something different should the need arise.

The final late decision-maker was a respondent who was waitlisted at [Name of School 1] and waiting to hear back from [Name of School 2]. In the end, she was not able to secure a spot in either of those schools and eventually enrolled at [Name of School 3]. The respondent feels good about the decision, specifically, her son's teacher who, similar to his preschool teacher, is an older black woman. She loves that fact that it's a "progressive school," with lots of diversity that caters to the needs of its student population. After touring the school and speaking with other educators, she felt confident it would be the right school for her son.

Decision Sustained

The remaining 24 respondents enrolled their child at the school they indicated during the first interview and planned to remain at the school. All but one of the respondents expressed satisfaction about their decision and how things were progressing. Respondents' satisfaction with their decision was intertwined with how well their child had transitioned and adjusted over the first couple weeks. Respondents were pleased with their children's educators, and most of the students experienced a smooth transition into kindergarten. One respondent, who previously expressed hesitancy about her decision, remarked, "There's like a communal aspect both in school and like in our neighborhood that we get as a result of him going to [Name of School]. So, I mean, the only thing that's sad to me is that there's no language option. Um, but otherwise, yes, it's great." A high degree of communication and regular updates about the school day and how their child was adjusting was a commonly stated rationale for respondents' satisfaction with their decision. Others mentioned the school having a good community and positive environment, feeling welcomed in the building, and a teacher they trusted. All of the previously weighed factors that respondents held as a high priority were rarely if ever mentioned as they reflected on their decisions.

Connection and Communication

ECE and Kindergarten Staff Communication

Across all respondents, 95% reported no communication between their child's summer or previous ECE teacher and their assigned kindergarten teacher. For the few respondents where this type of conversation did happen, two were children who were receiving special education support from the district. For one respondent, the special education staff at the preschool was part of her son's transition team and was in continuous communication with the support services team at his newly enrolled school. For another respondent, her son's speech therapist spoke with district staff about his needs. She presumes that information was then shared with the classroom teacher, but cannot say for certain. These two examples underscore a thinly veiled assumption that colored all of the responses to this question, which is that communication means concern. Respondents made direct and indirect comments to illuminate that the primary purpose of this type of connection would be to share concerns, and because there were no academic concerns for their child, there was no need for previous ECE teachers to communicate with kindergarten teachers.

"I feel like if he was like, had more like behavioral issues or learning issues, then it would be like crucial. Because he doesn't have any real issues, it's not a significant issue, and you know, his father and I are both engaged in daycare and school so we kind of act as that intermediary."

Respondents who reported no communication of this sort were asked if this is something they would have wanted to have happen. About two-thirds said that it was unnecessary, or they were just not interested. One respondent felt this way because there was such high turnover at the center and none of the staff had good insight on her child. Another respondent said the summer program was not academic and so it was not necessary, and lastly, another said she did not have concerns about her daughter. Some respondents went so far as to say they were glad there was no communication. One respondent said she was not in favor of her child's preschool teacher, and would not have wanted them communicating about her child. Others talked about relying on the kindergarten assessment/conference and wanting the kindergarten teacher to have an opportunity

to form their own opinions about their child without influence from others. Specifically, one respondent said she was curious to see if the kindergarten teacher would identify the same areas of concern as the preschool teacher, which would serve as a type of validation for the information.

“I guess it's not something we necessarily sought out, but if the teacher had approached us, I guess and said, Hey, can I like maybe there's an issue, or maybe she just wants to get to know him better and brought that as a possibility, I'd say, Yeah, for sure. That's totally fine. But again, it wasn't something that we were trying to do or thought of doing.”

“I feel like it's also kind of nice to have fresh eyes to see where she's at and see if the areas she was struggling with really were area she was struggling with or just like things that, that teacher really focused on from preschool. And so, um, yeah, so I think it just gives her a nice opportunity to just kind of be [Name of Child] and see where she's at.”

Close to one-third of those who did not have this type of communication expressed a desire for it when asked. Some saw this as an opportunity to pass the baton and share the non-academic aspects about their child's personality, learning style, and social-emotional abilities. Others talked about being able to inform the kindergarten teachers of the curriculum or concepts their child was most recently working on, or an assessment of their strengths and areas of opportunity for growth. One respondent remarked that although this type of communication would have been nice, it felt impractical to expect given the number of students assigned to each teacher and the number of people they would need to connect with.

“I honestly wish that they did communicate. Like there was like a, and I don't know, maybe there is like a database, like where the, the teacher from the previous year leaves like a note like this child excelled when we did x, y, z, or had struggles when we did this, this, this. Or was really great at making friends, or really struggled with making friends or stuff like that so that the teacher has like a little bio to read.”

“It would have been nice, but I think it's a little impractical because being kind of in the Twin Cities in [Name of City], it's kind of a transitional city and so very, it was like maybe there were two or three that went to the same school, but it would have been, like 20 different schools. So, um, so yeah, I think that, I mean it would be above and beyond, but it was um, so it'd be, it would be harder I think for them.”

Respondents serve as the primary link between the ECE program staff and their child's new teacher. However, some respondents hesitated to ask questions of their child's new school and inform new teachers of their child's learning style and personality for fear of being “that mom.” When probed further about what they meant, it was clear that these individuals did not want to be the parent who oversteps boundaries and does not allow teachers or school staff to preside over their domain of schooling their child. Being “that parent” meant asking too many questions, sharing what may be unnecessary information, or being overbearing. It is arguable that there is a line that should not be crossed, but many of the things respondents worried about were far behind this imaginary line. This theme demonstrated a potential hesitancy a small number of respondents expressed about specific types of communication with teachers or knowing which

position to take during those conversations. The quotes below is an example of a respondent action of demonstrated agency, as was encouraged by the ECE teacher.

“Her preschool teacher said, “well, you have to have that conversation, and you have to be that mom. [Child's Name's] really smart, and you need to not let her get bored in school.” And so, I sort of, when I went into the conference said, so here's the message from her preschool teachers, I don't want to be that mom, but I'm going to be that mom.”

School and Family Communication

The communication patterns during the summer months between families and schools varied from respondent to respondent. Some respondents had no communication for much of the summer, while others heard from their school at least once a week. Some were perturbed by the lack of communication they received, while others thought the e-mails, newsletters, and mailings were excessive. Most of the parents interviewed received a teacher assignment during the month of August, with a minimal number receiving assignments earlier in the summer. One respondent, who was informed of her child's teacher assignment in June, said finding out so early helped to avoid the anxiety of having to wait all summer to find out.

When other parents were asked if they would have preferred to know sooner, many said it would not have made a difference whether they found out in June, July, or August.

According to respondents, schools hosted a range of events and activities to maintain communication and engagement with newly enrolled families. These included parent informational sessions, kindergarten round-ups, open-houses, family picnics, and ice cream socials. Parents used different titles to describe the sessions, but the events fall into three distinct categories. Below is an overview of these categories. Each paragraph is a combination of participants' experiences and the suggestions they provided.

Informational Sessions

The first engagement events are informational sessions that target newly-enrolled families. These sessions are less about convincing parents to enroll their child, and more about communication with parents about school policies and procedures, curriculum and academic approach, dates for the summer and the school calendar. Based on what was learned from respondents, a session like this should be held at the end of the previous school year, when a vast majority of enrollment decisions have been made. The information can then be summarized and shared with new families who later enroll throughout the summer. The central piece of this session should be to inform parents of the types of information they will receive during the summer and when to expect it. Respondents wanted to know how to acquire a lunch PIN for their child and how to put money in the account. They wanted to learn about ensuring the bus would pick up their child, how to sign up for before- and after-school care, when to expect a school supply list, etc. Knowing when the information would be shared can help parents feel comfortable during the weeks of no communication and assure that they were not missing anything. The earlier parents know about events and activities to be held during the summer, the better they can work to schedule around it. Some respondents spoke of the short window of notice for events and would have preferred to plan vacations and other activities around essential school events.

Open Houses

The second type of event respondents talked about and appreciated was an open house. The purpose of this event type was to help students become comfortable with their new school. This should first and foremost include an opportunity to meet and interact with their new teacher. School-hosted opportunities to visit classrooms and to engage with teachers were much appreciated by respondents. One respondent, who was not able to attend an information night with her child, reached out to the principal who offered them a private tour and spent one hour talking with her son. This level of support should be offered to all families who are unable to attend, and not just those with the agency to reach out and ask. During an open house, one respondent was able to speak with the special education teacher to discuss her child's IEP. She described the process as going smoothly. Another respondent spoke extensively about how great the "meet your teacher" day was, and how accommodating the school was in scheduling evening events for working parents.

This event should also be a time for students to visit their classrooms and explore other areas of the school they will likely frequent (e.g., lunchroom, gym, library, etc.). Time should be spent going over every-day processes that can cause distress for parents and children during the first day of school, including how to ask to use the restroom, the lunchtime routine, and what to do if the student gets separated from the class. These are all worries that respondents reported in their child's first week and which became a challenging reality for some children. Others mentioned having an opportunity to ride the bus, which was well received by students and much appreciated by parents. This provides a chance to go over bus safety rules, help children know where they will be dropped off, and how to navigate their way to and from the bus and classroom.

Social Hours

The last event type families attend during the summer were social events, such as ice cream socials, picnics, and play dates. The purpose of these was for families to connect with one another and for students to begin making friends with classmates. Sometimes these events were held at the school and other times they happened at a nearby playground. Some events were held for just kindergartners, other times for the whole school. Regardless of how expansive the list of attendees was, parents who felt welcome during the social event appreciated an opportunity to connect with other incoming families and students assigned to their same teacher. This was sometimes structured through informal means, such as same-color buttons or stickers, allowing families to self-organize. Other times, it was more formal with intentional grouping and activities for specific classrooms. Even families with older children opted to attend these events to refresh their memories and connect with new families. These social events should be held throughout the summer, providing multiple opportunities for families to attend. They may also be informally hosted by the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and parents within the school. A respondent who attended a social gathering at her school described the process as very organized, and appreciated additional play dates organized on Facebook by the PTO for children in specific classrooms.

A few other things respondents noted that helped them remain connected and informed throughout the summer were:

- Facebook Groups: These were often not formally administered by the school, but by the PTO or parents who took the initiative to connect with other parents of the same classroom.

- Parent Ambassador: One respondent talked about being assigned a parent ambassador, who was a parent of an older student in the school, that they could reach out to with questions. This process would allow parents to connect with one another and alleviate the potential burden of schools fielding similar questions from parents throughout the summer.

The examples respondents shared of what they most appreciated illustrates the social connectedness of the participants in the study, and their privilege to be linked on Facebook and PTO. For others who are not as connected, an inability to learn of or attend these events could make them and their child feel less welcome in the school, on the outside of a tight community that has already formed.

Some respondents were impressed with the school's communication, others wanted less, and some wanted more. Respondents typically did not reach out to the school during the summer and trusted that information would come to them when it was intended. Many spoke about trusting the process, though as the summer crept to a close, worry set in as some parents still did not know who their child's teacher would be or have other information they wanted. Overall, the majority of parents were content with the communication from the school, though it should be noted that some had nothing else to compare it to.

Reflections and Key Takeaways

The majority of the parents from the first interview had either reached a final enrollment decision or had already completed the enrollment process. The seven families that were undecided or were exploring new options during the first interview had all made a decision by the start of the school year. Summer enrollment can create some challenges as parents may miss important events held by the school for incoming kindergarten families, and experience diminished options and increased stress. However, the respondents who fell into this late decision-making category did not report any less satisfaction in their eventual decision. Parents should be assured that while time is of the essence, and that starting early is strongly encouraged in order to maximize their options and exercise their agency in decision-making, a late decision will not result in significant negative impacts on the decision they make.

As schools aim to be responsive to the needs of incoming families, the three events types respondents categorized can best provide parents with the academic, logistic, and social assuredness they need to feel in control of the process. Parents can sometimes feel at the whim of the schools once the decision is made and enrollment is complete. The informational sessions, open house nights, and social events, can help parents feel like informed partners in the transition and enrollment process. Access to and knowledge of the necessary information can help to increase parents' agency to seek out the additional information they need to remain active and engaged

As mentioned, there was one parent who reversed their original enrollment decision and opted for a new school for their child. To some, this may appear simple, but having the information and fortitude to navigate multiple schools or districts in what has been described as a cumbersome enrollment process should not be overlooked. It speaks to the degree of agency a parent must possess first to know that a reversal of their decision is even a possibility and to know who to contact and how to make the change happen. The weight of this action is further underscored by the fact that other parents expressed feeling foolish for even calling the school to seek answers to

enrollment questions. More parents should be made aware of the opportunity to change their mind. While the window of this opportunity may be smaller in some districts than others, parents deserve to know that they have the right to change their minds, to reverse a decision, and to be satisfied knowing that they did what was best for their child.

Lastly, respondents' expressions of a hesitancy to communicate with teachers about their child's specific needs illustrated a concern that even a low-level form of advocating and championing in favor of one's child is negatively perceived by some as overstepping. Schools should welcome and seek out the plethora of questions parents may have and demonstrate understanding of their need to receive answers to their questions.

Adjusting to a New School

Smooth and Positive Adjustment to Kindergarten

During the phase two interviews, respondents were asked to talk about how their child adjusted to the first few weeks of school; specifically, how their child felt about school and how the respondent themselves felt about the decision they had made. Two-thirds of respondents provided strong positive remarks about their child's adjustment to their new school environment. Respondents talked about how well things were going, how smoothly their child transitioned, and how much fun their child was having at their new school. Since transitioning from a half-day preschool program to a full-time kindergarten, one respondent's child felt like a "big kid" and quickly began demonstrating her maturity and experience.

"She loves kindergarten. Um, she, I mean she just absolutely is the kid that has always loved school, but she is just so excited. —I mean, she's so excited to get on the bus. She's so excited to come home. She's got great stories to tell, this is what I did, and this is what I did. Um, so yeah, she loves it, and her teacher's doing a really nice job."

Respondents who were transitioning a second or third child into kindergarten found that having watched older siblings participate in the process of school made for a smooth adjustment period for their new kindergartner. Older siblings provided support and guidance and brought familiarity to a process that otherwise can feel so unfamiliar. Also, for children who attended preschool or a summer program in the same building, the adjustment was easier.

Teachers received a lot of praise and were described as a source of the positive adjustment. A respondent shared that she appreciated that her child's teacher is really committed to urban schools.

Additionally, when respondents were able to secure the same teacher for their incoming kindergartner as older siblings, this was mentioned as a positive factor in the adjustment. Respondents remarked on the communication they received about the first days of school from teachers' e-mails, newsletters, and phone calls. Consistent information about how their child was doing, the activities of the classroom, and a short response time were all mentioned when respondents talked about the adjustment to kindergarten.

Other factors that made for a smooth adjustment included having other neighborhood children at the bus stop or transitioning with classmates from an ECE program to start the school year with familiar faces. Additionally, respondents remarked that being academically prepared decreased

their child's feeling of nervousness about starting school. Some described their child as having adjusted very well to school.

"Yesterday when I picked him up, I was waiting out there. They had called his name three or four times, but he was too busy talking with friends [...] There's really been no negatives whatsoever."

Overall, respondents felt happy about the choice they had made. Even respondents who expressed concern over their child's early math scores, struggles with some academic concepts, or the respondent whose child moves back and forth over their love of their Chinese-immersion program, still expressed contentment in their decision and with their child's adjustment to a new environment.

Challenging Adjustment to Kindergarten

Of the one-third of respondents who mentioned a challenge their family faced during the kindergarten adjustment, the exhaustion children felt during the first few weeks of school was expressed most often. This exhaustion often led to emotional outbursts once students returned home from school. Another challenge respondents expressed was related to the size of the school and their child feeling lost among the sheer number of students. One respondent worried about her child feeling lost among such older and taller students, specifically since the school serves kindergarten through 8th grade. Due to its size, one respondent has found it hard to tap into the social network of the school and connect with other parents. This lack of connection has made it difficult to be excited about the school. For other parents, the major challenges were the logistical aspects of the transition. This included finding time for breakfast in the morning, arriving at the bus stop on time, the long drive to school, packing lunches, and the increased number of forms to be completed. For the respondents of the sample, these were described as minor adjustments which simply took time to get used to.

"Definitely tired more so than probably my other one. She's tired. The days are very long there, and she's ready for bed early and yeah, by the weekend it's just, the first couple of weeks too, Thursday, Friday we're like, oh, I have to go again. But she likes it. It was just, yeah, it just tires her out, but that's not a bad thing really."

In describing her son's first days of school, one respondent shared that her son was distraught about having to be around so many people all the time. She believes this was in reaction to spending so much one-on-one time with him during the summer. Additionally, having transitioned from a Montessori school, it took her son a few days to adapt to the cultural norms of the traditional classroom. When students would engage in whole class activities, her son would wander off and engage in an independent activity. Things are shifting, and according to the respondent, "he's starting to get that, oh, if everyone's sitting in the circle, I need to sit there too, type of thing."

After refusing new clothes and shoes, and protesting against the first day of school, one respondent's daughter loved school by the second day. One day she cried because she missed her family, but the adjustment has been smooth and positive since then.

Bathroom

There were a few respondents who shared bathroom-related issues as a marked part of their child's transition.

“The thing I didn't expect was the bathroom situation. He's fully potty trained, but ... and he's never had issues with going to the bathroom on his own, and I'm not really sure where it started with, but for the first couple of weeks, so I think maybe he was like too shy to ask to go to the bathroom or wasn't sure. I do not really know, but he was like holding his bladder like he wasn't going to the bathroom. So, he was having accidents for a couple of weeks and so I think that was probably his adapting to a new structure.”

To address this, the respondent spoke with the teacher, and together they encouraged her son to try and use the restroom at least three times during the school day.

Similarly, another respondent shared that her son experienced bathroom accidents each day for the first several weeks of the school year. This respondent also shared that her son experienced some bed-wetting when he transitioned out of his previous ECE program, and that this was typically stress-induced. Eventually, the respondent was able to connect with the teacher, and they were able to implement a sticker chart to encourage him to use the restroom four or five times a day. Since then, he has been accident-free.

Reflections and Key Takeaways

The majority of parents reported positive transition and adjustment experiences for their child. This was often due in part to the comfort that came from watching older siblings partake in the morning ritual of getting ready and heading off to school. Reportedly, this decreased fears and increased the excitement younger siblings felt about finally getting to partake in the process. As much as is possible, parents should expose their incoming kindergartner to the morning routine of attending kindergarten.

In hope to increase the likelihood of a challenge and worry-free adjustment, parents and educators should build a relationship upon their first meeting. Building rapport will serve to increase a parent's confidence in the teacher's abilities and open the lines of communication so information about the child can be shared. Parents should also foster relationships with other parents and families as soon as possible. Schools should be intentional about bringing parents together and helping them get to know one another. This will help increase parents' sense of connection to the school and increase their likelihood to be satisfied with their decision.

Lastly, the high percentage of positive adjustment experiences may be due in part to the majority of the children having the privilege of attending full day ECE programs and were fairly accustomed to early mornings and long days. Children who attend half-day programs, only a limited number of days each week, or programs that are not similarly structured to the typical elementary school may likely have a harder time with adjusting to kindergarten. In such instances, parents should be observant of the challenges mentioned, such as exhaustion, emotional outbursts, and bed-wetting, and have plans in place to address them. Lastly, ECEs and schools should also anticipate and support these challenges families will face.

Respondent Reflections

Most Helpful Resources for Decision-Making

In the interest of surfacing knowledge that can be used to support and strengthen parents and families making decisions about ECE and kindergarten, respondents were asked about the most helpful resource during their decision-making process.

Personal Social Network

Many respondents listed more than one resource in their answer, however, the response most commonly shared and confidently stated was talking to other parents. Respondents mostly turned to trusted and well-known parents, but others were comfortable asking strangers with school-aged children about their school choice decision. Strangers were said to provide a degree of comfort that the information shared was free from bias. One respondent noted how helpful her child's ECE teacher was in providing advice about which school would be best for her child, given his strengths and areas of challenges.

“Talking to parents that have children in the schools we were considering.”

“It was a lot of talking to parents who have had experiences at school whose kids have been there, whose kids go there. Yeah. Because for me, like I said, I grow. I grew up here, and even the schools that I went to are not the same, so you know, just more of learning, you know, and asking parents, what was your individual experience with this school and you know, just ask them they'll um, academically and you know, how does the school handle behavior issues and you know, just what is your response and just things like that really came from speaking to other parents who had like similar situations.”

Respondents turned to other parents in their social network, including parents with older children at the school they were enrolling into, and parents at their current ECE program. Engagement with other ECE parents provided an exchange of information, an opportunity to compare notes, and to confirm that they were completing all of the necessary tasks. One respondent credits the conversations with other ECE parents for learning that it was time to begin the enrollment process because after completing the kindergarten assessment he received no communication from the district. Conversations with parents who already have children attending the school helped respondents get answers they had not yet received from the school or district, learn about the day-to-day realities of the school, and hear about other parents' individual experiences with the school. This meant they could ask targeted questions like one parent did about the school's disciplinary actions and how the school handles behavior infractions – topics reportedly glossed over in conversations with school staff.

One respondent shared that their selected school has a parent mentor program that pairs incoming parents with an experienced parent. This can be helpful for families who are enrolled and seeking answers and support about the logistics of transition, but it would not help much for parents who are still making the decision. Furthermore, because some respondents say they prefer receiving information from parents whose moral and family values align with their own, they may be skeptical of information shared by a school-appointed mentor.

“I’d say mostly it was like friends within our social network, but also family, friends and family, um, families who we looked up to and, or we felt like their, um, their morals and family values were more in line with ours.”

School-Specific Resources

Other commonly noted resources were school-specific events and school-shared information. Events held by the district or schools were listed as important resources in the decision-making process for respondents. District events were held to inform respondents about the different schools within the district, and events to learn about the curriculum of specific schools were also listed as beneficial. One respondent, who articulated that help choosing the school came from parents and other families, added that the school provided excellent guidance once the decision for enrollment was made. Another respondent, who talked about school-shared information as most beneficial, stated that she preferred the neutral information from schools because, unlike other respondents in the previous section, she found parents to be biased based on their own experience.

“Information from their [the school’s] information sessions and other parents and talking to teachers.”

“The schools themselves were probably the most significant help just in terms of like knowing like what opportunities are there for my son and like what the environment’s like and what the people are like, et cetera.”

“The district does a night in January that they kind of talk about all the different options in [Name of City]. Um, and that was really helpful to know kind of what our other options are.”

The frequent communication through the summer was the most helpful for one respondent. The “how-to sheets” and other checklists and mailers from the school and district helped ensure she was on track. Lastly, the parent information night held for current and newly enrolled families was also helpful to solidify respondents’ decisions. Some preferred these events to e-mail communication.

School Tours

Only some respondents listed school tours, but those who mentioned the visits as a beneficial resource spoke about it with unmatched enthusiasm. The tours were primarily helpful in the decision-making phase as they allowed respondents to talk to staff, observe teachers and students, and experience the physical space of the school. One respondent admitted that the tours were primarily for the benefit of the parents and not so much for the child. For one respondent with a child on the autism spectrum, multiple private tours created the opportunity to speak about the needs of her son and inquire about the types of resources and support the school could provide for him. Lastly, one respondent shared that what she appreciated most about the tours was being guided by other parents with years of experience at the school and not “someone who is getting paid to show you around.”

“Doing tours of the school to understand the environment. Effective communication with my husband and effective assessment of my daughter’s needs. Knowing this we were able

to anticipate what environment she would need in kindergarten. Our knowledge of her, coupled with our communication and what we need from the various schools.”

One respondent, who has the benefit of working at her child’s school, said being able to be present in the building on a regular basis was the most helpful in her decision-making and enrollment. Similar to the tours, she gets to be consistently immersed in the culture of the school and know with certainty that it is a safe environment. Recognizing the value that this brings, she remarked that she feels bad for other parents who do not get this opportunity and wonders how they are able to get a sense of the school if they are not in the building.

“I feel so bad because I don't know how other parents would . . . you know, like how do you do this if you're not in the school building, but I mean for me the most beneficial was just like being in the building and feeling comfortable with just the people that work here and knowing that it's a safe environment.”

Online Resources

Online resources were also mentioned by a small number of respondents. Of the four respondents who cited online resources, two spoke of reviewing kindergarten curriculum in order to prepare their child. The other two mentioned the district website specifically, and the types of demographic data it provided about each school.

“I looked up things like a kindergarten curriculum, what sorts of things should they know going into kindergarten, you know, how to prepare your child for kindergarten, those sorts of things I guess, or, you know, we pack my son's lunch every day, so I guess looking up lunch ideas and stuff.”

“The [Name of School District] website. They had some nice stats, and for me, it wasn't stats about like academics, it was just more like diversity stats.”

No Use of Resources

One respondent reported not using any resources to aid in her decision-making and did not elaborate further on her process.

“I'd probably have to say I didn't use anything...I just went with [Name of Enrolled School].”

Challenges Faced

The largest areas of general challenge from respondents were lack of information and concern about the accuracy of the information they received. Respondents expressed frustration over having to make a decision with what felt like incomplete information. This ranged from a lack of information about the district lottery system, private school options, special education services, due dates for enrollment, logistics, etc. Respondents expressed a desire for greater communication of information during the selection process. Access to the necessary information would help parents plan ahead and plan better. Two respondents mentioned missing pivotal parent information nights, and as a result felt uninformed because the school made no attempt to share what was discussed. Another respondent said when talking to schools about special education resources, she often received a stock statement of “we are required to meet the needs

of your child,” but this lacked the detailed information and care she needed in order to feel comfortable enrolling her child in any specific school. Lack of information meant respondents had a hard time adequately preparing their children for the logistical aspects of the school day, all of which led to added anxiety for the first day of school.

Another area of expressed frustration was how the enrollment lottery stripped respondents of their choice and of their agency to act in the best interest of their child. The perceived guarded and secretive nature of the lottery process coupled with the timing of submission and the eventual decision left respondents feeling dissatisfied. In what was described as a denial of information, one respondent was left feeling in "free fall" and forced to move at the whim of the system. Another respondent shared that needing to submit choices in February for the lottery, but not getting placement until June left her questioning the legitimacy of the lottery. In her opinion, it should not take that long if the process is not being tampered with behind the scenes.

“It was really frustrating, and I’m a Type A personality, so I get that I’m more on the extreme, but I also want to be an advocate for my kid, and I want it to be fair, and it didn’t feel fair. But hey, I’m trying to use the public system. I want to use the public system. I think it’s crappy that not everybody can because there’s not enough space. We can have him go to private. That’s not our first choice, but, because I did go public, I don’t want to be paralyzed and not even be able to get to private because you took so long to tell me if I could get in right. So, all of that felt really crappy, I guess is my best way to summarize it.”

Additional challenges shared were specific to the logistics of the process. These include:

- **Accessible Calendar:** Parents want a downloadable school calendar that will sync with their iCal or Google calendar to make for easier access.
- **Enrollment Deadlines:** The disparate enrollment deadline for schools across different districts created challenges for respondents who were comparing and making decision for schools in different districts or different types of schools.
- **Bus Transportation:** Respondents expressed worry about whether their child would know where to get off the bus, and who would step in should an issue arise.

Additional Support Needs

Respondents were asked to reflect upon and share what additional support their systems and networks could provide. This included support they wanted from individuals in their personal social network, specific schools, schools district, state-wide networks, or organizations such as Think Small and Generation Next. The need for access to more information is evident across the majority of the thematic areas below.

Communication to Families

There were many suggestions regarding communication with families and sharing information. These include how information was shared, the types of information shared, and the consistency of communication. Respondents wanted more consistent communication during the summer. The silence some respondents experienced during the summer was difficult because they worried that they were missing out on crucial information. One respondent suggested that with every interaction, schools should share when next to expect an update. This way parents can be assured that they are not outside of the communication loop. Below is some specific feedback.

- More continuous engagement and sharing of information through letters, robocalls, and mailed prompts.
- Increase use of social media as an avenue to share information with parents.
- Use of multiple forms of communication (email, phone, mail, etc.) in case it is missed the first time.
- Develop, share, and update a list of frequently asked questions to help provide parents answers to their questions and help them feel connected to the necessary information.

School Specific Engagement

Needs were expressed about how schools should engage with incoming families. One respondent, who made an enrollment decision during the summertime, requested an additional open house night hosted by the school to support families who enroll in the summer. Hosting only one open house night during the spring leaves later enrollees without the information they need. Overall, respondents typically wanted more formal opportunities to connect with the school, as well as informal events held by the PTA that allowed parents to interact socially.

Enrollment Options

Knowing which options were available to them and weighing those options proved challenging for many respondents. Individuals requested more information about available private and public school options, and general information about lottery systems, open houses, and other important dates. Another respondent, who selected a private school for her child, admitted that had she wanted to enroll in a public school, she would not have known where to begin the process. She expressed a desire for the district to provide a list of options to choose from. This could include summarized information about the schools, comparison data across schools, important dates, and steps for enrollment. While there may be a lot of information online about schools, it can sometimes be difficult to determine the quality and accuracy of the information. Respondents requested a way to assess who is providing accurate information and who is not. Additionally, one respondent said they want hard facts and not anyone's interpretation of the information. He wanted data across multiple schools and information about what is going into each specific data point. Below is summarized feedback shared by participants.

- Resources for comparing public and private school options, including but not limited to, comparing across different standardized test scores.
- A pamphlet informing families about the different school options in a district and when upcoming parent nights are being held.
- Access to data regarding the benefits of language immersion schools, specifically highlighting how students benefit when compared with non-language immersion students.
- Increased support from the district placement center to answer questions about school options, district redlining, and the lottery process.

Access to Logistical Information

Respondents wanted more information about the logistics of the start of the school year. They requested schools adequately inform parents about drop-off, lunch account information, and transitions into kindergarten. Respondents expressed a need for an enrollment timeline or checklist of tasks. This might begin with the assessment and end with the first day of school. Some

first-time enrollment respondents worried that they had forgotten or overlooked something, so having a checklist to make sure all the formal and informal tasks related to decision making and transition are addressed would help put respondents at ease. Similarly, others wanted ECE teachers to do a better job of reminding them of upcoming kindergarten enrollment and ensuring that steps are being made towards decision-making and through the transition.

“I just wish that maybe like the education center, like our district center would have sent something out saying, you know, what our status was, um, after we open enrolled or even when they would be letting families know if they were going to be accepted or not, because yeah, I mean it was just really weird not knowing what was going on with the process because it was like is there going to be a spot or do we need to go to [Name of District]”?

Lastly, a small number of respondents talked about wanting a student and family directory. This could consist of all incoming kindergartners or be specific to their child's class so that they could connect with other parents. One individual shared that the PTA does this informally, but the process would benefit from a formal and systematic approach. As the children make friends, parents become eager to connect and schedule play dates, but are hindered without the necessary contact information. One respondent, who was able to make an early decision, shared that she would prefer this type of list as soon as possible. She mentioned that her child has a difficult time making social connections, so if she is able to connect with families and schedule play dates during the summer, she would feel better knowing her child already established social relationships before the school year starts.

Increased Support for Transitions

A request was made for schools to do more to provide emotional support for parents during the transition. During information nights for parents, respondents requested that parents be reminded that the transition will affect them as well and be provided with resources to help process their emotions because it is not just the children who are known to shed a few tears during those first few days of the year. On the first day of school, one parent recounted being invited to walk her daughter to their classroom. However, on the second day, she and her husband were abruptly informed that walking their child to class was no longer allowed. This respondent would have preferred to have known that ahead of time rather than feeling pushed out of the school so quickly. In her opinion, it demonstrated a disregard for how parents were dealing with the transition. One respondent reported that although she did not anticipate having such strong emotions about the transition, she realized that it was a lot for her to process as well.

A related request was for updates from the teacher about the first day and week of school. For some respondents, it was the first time their children were away for such long periods of time, and they were curious to know how their children fared in a new context. A short e-mail update would help put parents who regularly use e-mail as source of communication at ease. This practice should take into consideration the written and fluent language reflected in the school community.

“I think it's a harder transition on parents than kids. For some reason, I didn't think it would be any big deal for me or my husband, but there's a lot of logistics and a lot of things to keep track of and just a high anxiety I think for parents, leading up to the first day, everything. I underestimated that piece, and I just thought it was more of a kid and

the kid's anxiety of new school, new friends, getting on the bus and like totally forgot how much stress it is, I guess on the parents to get everything lined up and ready for the first day of kindergarten.”

“It was a much, much harder transition and still is I think for me. So, I was used to having him home every day. So, it was very, very hard for me to transition.”

Lastly, one respondent suggested more support staff to help incoming kindergartners transition and move toward independence. Regardless of whether children attended an ECE program during the summer or not, many described the transition as feeling abrupt, especially as students shift from being cocooned in their ECE programs to demonstrating their independence for kindergarten in a short window of time.

Advice Shared for Other Parents

In reflecting on the complete process of selecting an ECE program, selecting a school for kindergarten and supporting their child through the transition between the two, respondents were asked what advice they would give other parents who were making the same decisions. All the advice shared was related to the kindergarten decision-making and enrollment process. This may be due in part to the kindergarten-specific focus of the questions during the phase two interview, or because the kindergarten enrollment, as compared to ECE decision-making, proved more challenging and thereby more fitting for advice giving. Below are the seven advice areas from respondents.

1. Maximize your time for kindergarten decision-making by beginning the process as early as possible.

The most commonly shared advice from respondents was for parents to start early. When probed about what it meant to start early, respondents recommended exploring options as early as two years before enrollment. Parents were advised to conduct the childhood screening as soon as a child is eligible and begin exploring different options available to them.

“Start early. and take the time. Your kids are worth it. Take the time.”

“I would say at least two, at least two years or more. Um, and if there was any school you're interested in open enrolling, submit your name right away.”

2. Identify your key values.

Respondents advised parents to move away from prioritizing the factors they have been told are essential, and instead focus on what is most important for their child and what their family values. If a school is a place where children will spend 30—40 hours each week, parents were advised to ensure that the values they are instilling at home are being maintained at the school. Respondents recommended that parents determine what their values are in a school (e.g., size of the school, athletic and extracurricular activities, diversity, teaching style, etc.) and focus on the schools that can best align with their values. Rather than making a decision based on where other families are enrolling or which high school the elementary school feeds into, respondents suggested that parents make a decision based on the current and immediate needs of their child because so much can change between kindergarten and high school.

“Make the decision that is best for YOUR family, not what other people deem as the best school.”

“Make a list of what is most important for your family and your child—and make the decision based on what your family needs right now, and not what you think you'll need five, ten years from now.”

3. Experience the school in its entirety by attending a school tour.

Multiple respondents advised parents to tour all the options being considered. Rather than only touring a sample of the top schools, parents were advised to make visits to all the schools on their list because of the intangible information learned from being in the school building. Additionally, parents were advised to schedule small or one-on-one tours in order to ask questions about their child's specific needs, and big tours to gather general information about the school. Tours that happen during the school year allow parents to get a full experience of the building. During the tour, parents should find time to connect with the principal and engage with teachers, because they can make or break the decision. Respondents recommended that parents assume they know nothing about the school and ask as many questions as they can to gather enough information for their decision.

“Trust the process and trust your gut. I think doing the visits is an opportunity to trust your gut.”

4. Explore all possible options available for your family.

Respondents advice to other parents included exploring all possible options and not limiting oneself to the options that are readily available. Parents were advised not to feel locked into a neighborhood school or any other school just because it reflects their experience as a child. Instead, parents were encouraged to start with their neighborhood school and continue adding more options that better meet their child's needs and their families values. Respondents recommended that parents do their research to compare school ratings, school size, and test scores as they explore new and different options.

“I would tell them to not be afraid to check out other options and see what fits your kid.”

5. Network with other families.

Parents were advised to connect and network with other families in order to learn and exchange information. Respondents recommended that when possible, parents should ask the schools to connect them with current parents because the more information they receive, the better they will feel about their eventual decision.

“Talk to, you know, anyone you meet who has kids in school. Ask them where they go, why they decided that, what else they looked at, you know. Find out as much as you can from other parents.”

6. Relax

The final advice respondents shared was to relax and understand that "it's just kindergarten." Respondents advised that there are plenty of great schools for parents to choose from, and that the decision they make will not be the determining factor in their child's success. Additionally, parents should not worry so much about their child's readiness, because kindergarten is where they will grow socially and academically. Though, as stated above, the respondents were not a representative sample of the statewide population of parents transitioning a child into kindergarten. As such, it is very likely that the respondents have more and better school enrollment options than other families, based on where they live, their race, and their income.

"I would probably tell them to relax a bit. Because you get anxious and worry about how things will go, the child picks up on that."

7. Other notable advice.

Other notable advice includes:

- Enroll your child in an academic program as early as you can.
- Find someone in the school or district who you can quickly and continually turn to for answers when you have questions; and do not let up until you get answers.
- Secure adequate transportation for before/after-school care if you choose a school outside of your home district. Also, before/after-school care can fill up quickly so plan ahead.
- Recognize your child's strengths and make a decision that takes their personality and learning style into consideration.
- Avoid overscheduling evening activities for the first month, as your child will be exhausted from the long days.
- Trust that you know your child and what they are capable of.
- Prepare yourself for the hardships and anxiety you may feel about the decision-making process. Additionally, if your child is enrolled in an ECE program, the transition will be easier for you and them.

Conclusion

When parents talked about how they reached a kindergarten enrollment decision, they rarely recounted the process in a systematic way. The decision-making story was rarely told in a sequential narrative, but rather a combination of sporadic activities that eventually led to the first day of school. The process for parents is in part doing what is necessary and expected, and part holding true to what is important to them. Some trusted their feelings and sought out an already-preferred school. Some utilized their privilege to increase their access to various options, including niche-specific and private schools. Others exercised their agency to advocate for their child's specific needs. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, as many practiced some combination of the three.

Regardless of how parents approached the process, the findings generated from this study have further illuminated that the process of early childhood education and kindergarten decision-making is both personal and public. It is simple and complex, and it is an art and a science. It is a

personal decision that parents make about which school to entrust with their child's education, yet the information needed for that decision is largely publicly accessed. Some parents have the tools (access, agency and privilege) to simplify the process, while those lacking these same tools are forced to make complex tradeoffs in their decision-making. The value-laden and fact-based approach make this process both a science and an art, as it is fluid and ever-changing as new options are identified and new information is gathered.

Much of what schools and systems do to improve the process of kindergarten decision-making falls out of the scope of impact for access, agency, and privilege of individual parents. While strong attempts and efforts have been made to strengthen the process, there should be increased intentionality about improving the aspects of the process which most influence these three concepts. Increased efforts should be made to empower parents to expand their access, exercise their agency, and leverage their privilege.

Expand Access to Information: Evident across the majority of the thematic areas was a need for access to more information. Respondents continuously reiterated feeling in the dark about information they did not have. Real or perceived, not knowing what they should know, how much they should know, and when they should know it created a lingering anxiety for many of the respondents. Improving access to information will require efforts from organizations, districts, and schools working collaboratively to provide consistent information. Resources will need to span the ECE decision-making, kindergarten-decision making, and kindergarten enrollment phases, and inform parents about what information they should seek before reaching a final decision. When parents are made aware of the information they need, they will be emboldened to find out what they do not know. Previous sections of this report have listed the various types of information parents wish to have, which can be made accessible from ECE providers, committed organizations, school districts and schools. This information would help parents feel confident that they are not at a disadvantage in the process while others are gaining selective access that is being kept from them.

Exercise Agency: As discussed in the findings, parents hesitated or avoided speaking with newly assigned teachers about their child's abilities and skillsets, as it was falsely assumed that communication should be reserved for other issues or topics of concern. This mindset should be reframed to help parents see that communicating with their child's teacher can be an opportunity to build a relationship with the teacher and engage in their child's education. To achieve this shift in perspective, efforts should be made to provide parents with the permission and skills to positively advocate for their child. Permission, which is divorced from authority but situated in affirmation, can empower parents to champion their child's needs. Whether their child has areas of concern and needs additional supports to increase competence, or if their child needs special supports to remain challenged and expand proficiency, schools can do more to promote partnership in the education of students. Teachers can help parents see that they too hold a piece of the puzzle, and that they should be empowered to share what they know about their child. More should be done to help parents realize that while they may not be content or curriculum experts, they are experts of their children and that alone makes their contributions important. However, permission to do so is not enough, and resources should be provided to help parents build the necessary skills for advocating. This task may not be easy for all parents, and many will need support to increase their comfort in taking on this new role. Support for when to advocate, how to have one-time and ongoing conversations, and how to position themselves as an expert of their child, and not an authority in the classroom, will go a long way to help parents. Greater

understanding of how necessary and valuable this role is will help ensure that parents feel empowered and comfortable to exercise their agency.

Leverage Privilege: The reality of privilege makes it a difficult concept to address. As it relates to the exploration of options, however, organizations should do more to help parents recognize the full scope of their options. While access to information is important, it can also be limiting if it does not increase the breadth of school-choice options parents can explore. Respondents spoke of wanting to look into charter and private school options, but were often met with extremely long wait lists and/or deadlines that had already come to pass. School districts may not be inclined to provide this type of information to parents, but organizations like Think Small and Generation Next can inform parents of public, private, and charter options, what it would take to gain admission, and options to cover costs. Having access to the necessary information about alternative options and knowing what will be required of them, will create a pathway for exercise of agency with their decision-making.

While the enrollment decision is often branded to parents as "school choice," there is doubt around how much control parents have, based on varying degrees of control they have over that choice. It appears that what parents are given is the ability to narrow the scope of their options, while still feeling as though choice is largely out of their hands. However, the full degree of choice is possible, as it typically exhibited by parents with access, agency and privilege. For all parents to believe in their full control of the process and exercise their choice, access, agency and privilege must be more equitably practiced by all.

Moving forward, a formulaic process that expects all parents to follow the same set of prescriptive steps to achieve a decision would not improve parents' sense of agency. Parents want guidance, but they do not want to be controlled. They do not want to be forced into "best practices," which assume that what has worked for other families will inherently work for them. The utilization of guiding principles will provide counsel and direction. Principles provide guidance that parents can interpret and adapt to their own context without attempting to force compliance to an optimal or singular pathway to decision-making. These principles will allow parents to maintain the autonomy to effectively modify their activities to meet the specific needs of their family and values. Without this, processes will remain the same. Those with the tools will continue to utilize them in their decision-making and those without them will continue to make the best decision they can.

Appendix

Phase One Interview Instrument

Background

1. How many children do you have? What are their ages?
2. What school or child care program do each of your children currently attend?
 - a. What other child care programs did each of them attend?

**Participants will be asked to answer the questions below with their rising kindergartner in mind, while being asked to respond to shifts in practice from older children.*

Early Learning Experiences:

3. Where did you turn for information about child care providers and programs?
4. Do you know what the Parent Aware quality rating system is?
 - a. [If Yes] Did you use Parent Aware in selecting your current child care program?
 - b. [If No] *Parent Aware is an online tool designed to help parents find useful information about the best child care programs for preparing young children for kindergarten.*
 - c. Does it sound like something that would have been helpful to you in picking a child care program for your child?
5. Did the child care program(s) your child attended require you to pay fees or tuition?
 - a. [If Yes] Did your family receive Child Care Assistance (also known as CCAP) to help you pay tuition for the program(s) your child attended?
 - b. [If Yes] Did your family receive an Early Learning Scholarship to help you pay tuition for the program(s) your child attended?

Transition and Decision Making

7. Have you started thinking about kindergarten options for your child?
 - a. [If yes] What prompted that thinking? - Friends/Family? Child care provider?
 - b. Where have you turned to for support or advice about your options for kindergarten?
 - c. [If No] When do you anticipate you will begin thinking about options for kindergarten?
8. Which schools are you currently considering for your child?
 - a. What is about that school/those schools that make them attractive to you?
9. What role does the personality or learning style of your child play into the type of schools you are considering?
10. What factors are currently most important in your decision? (i.e., culture, neighborhood/location, quality, siblings, etc.)
11. Has anyone offered or reached out to provide support in helping you select an elementary school for your child?

12. Do you view your decision for kindergarten as a short-term decision that can be adjusted if it's not a good fit, or a long-term decision that will have significant impact on your child's academic and/or professional success?
13. Anything else I should know about the process?

Demographic Questions

- What is your age.
- What is your gender identity?
- What is your Race/ethnicity?
- City/Neighborhood you reside in.
- What is the highest level of education complete?
- Which category best describes your household Income?
 - Less than \$25,000
 - Between \$25,000 \$49,999
 - Between \$50,000 to \$74,999
 - Between \$75,000 to \$99,999
 - Between \$100,000 to \$149,999
 - \$150,000 or more

Phase Two Interview Instrument

Introduction

- When we last spoke, you had decided to enroll your child at [school name], is that where your child is currently attending kindergarten?
 - If yes,
 - How is that going for [him/her]?
 - Are you satisfied with the decision you made?
 - If no,
 - What school did you decide to enroll your child??
 - What factors contributed to your change of decision?

- When we last spoke, you were still considering different options for kindergarten, where did you choose to enroll your child this fall?
 - How is that going for [him/her]?
 - Are you satisfied with the decision you made?

School Choice

1. What were the elementary school options you considered, and what made them stand out?

2. Did you visit or communicate with any of the schools in other ways (email, phone)? If yes:
 - a. How did you communicate with the school?
 - b. Who was your contact at the school?
 - c. What questions did you ask?
 - d. What kinds of things did you learn that you found helpful?
 - e. What did they ask about you or your child?

3. What factors were important in selecting an elementary school? (i.e., culture, neighborhood/location, quality, siblings, etc.)

4. Was there anything that happened that caused you to prefer one school over another?

5. How did you choose an elementary school?

Supportive Transition

6. Was your child in child care or any other program this summer?
 - a. If yes, where?
 - What, if any, information was shared about your child between the child care program and the elementary school?

 - What information would you like to have had shared between them to help smooth the transition from child care to kindergarten?
 - b. If no, why did you choose for your child to not participate in child care or a summer program?

7. Was there anything you did to prepare and support your child for the transition into kindergarten? – academically, socially, structurally?

Reflection

8. What were the most helpful resources or sources of information you utilized during the process of identifying and enrolling your child in kindergarten?
9. What information or resources did you need but didn't have during the process of identifying and enrolling your child in kindergarten?
10. What more could have been done by the systems and networks you are connected with to support you in this process?
11. What advice would you give to a parent who is starting the kindergarten selection process? – What do you wish someone would have told you?

For the Interviewer:

- Listen for responses around agency/choice/control, and probe as necessary.
 - When parents talk about agency/choice/control, do they feel they had it? Do they want more of it? Less of it?