

Evaluation of the New York City Pre-K for All Initiative, 2014–15

Implementation Study Report: Family Engagement and Communication



Submitted by:

Westat
1600 Research Boulevard
Rockville, Maryland 20850-3129
(301) 251-1500

–and–

Metis Associates
120 Wall Street
New York, New York 10005
(212) 425-8833

–and–

Branch Associates
1628 JFK Blvd., Suite 800
8 Penn Center
Philadelphia, PA 19103
(267) 232-0261

Submitted to:

New York City Center for
Economic Opportunity and the
New York City Department of
Education

Pre-K for All 2014-15 Evaluation Response Memo

Pre-K for All is New York City's historic initiative to provide every four-year-old with access to free, full-day, high-quality pre-kindergarten through a two-year expansion that began in the 2014-15 school year. Before Pre-K for All, only 19,287 four-year-olds were enrolled in full-day pre-K in New York City; as of the 2015-16 school year, enrollment was 68,647.

The City implemented the rapid, at-scale universal pre-K program within a short two-year timeframe because filling the gap in access to full-day pre-K was crucial—four-year-olds eligible to enroll in September 2014 would not get another chance to attend pre-K. The City secured funding and quickly began to prepare for the 2014-15 school year. In the summer of 2014, the NYC Department of Education (DOE) and partner agencies worked closely with pre-K providers to ensure they were ready to open their doors on the first day of school. At the same time, the City launched an unprecedented grassroots campaign to recruit and enroll families. This included establishing an Outreach Team of dedicated pre-K enrollment specialists to call families and canvas local communities.

The City's comprehensive approach was grounded in creating a sustainable, high-quality, full-day pre-K model. From its inception, the expansion focused not only on ensuring access but also on investing in pre-K quality. The City built a single system of free, full-day, high-quality pre-K and developed a quality infrastructure to support long-term sustainability and quality improvements. The DOE's model provides all pre-K programs with differentiated support at the classroom- and program-level that focuses on implementing research-based instructional and family engagement practices. Some examples include: free and targeted professional learning for leaders, lead teachers, assistant teachers, and paraprofessionals; on-site support for leaders and teachers from Instructional Coordinators (ICs) and Social Workers (SWs); and guidance through online tools and other resources.

The first year of the expansion marked the beginning of a rigorous two-part research study of this work. The DOE, in conjunction with the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity, collaborated with Westat, Metis Associates, and Branch Associates, with supplemental support from the New York University's Institute for Human Development and Social Change, to undertake a study to inform future years of program delivery as well as lay the foundation for long-term research in the future. The Year 1 evaluation of Pre-K for All included an evaluation of the effectiveness of the implementation process and a snapshot of student learning in the first year of the Pre-K for All initiative.

This memo summarizes the findings of the Year 1 evaluation of Pre-K for All and concludes by outlining accomplishments and improvements made in the 2015-16 school year that address many of the report findings.

Year 1 Evaluation Overview

The analysis conducted over the course of the 2014-15 school year was based on surveys, focus groups, interviews, and assessment data from a variety of stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals, site directors, DOE staff, and staff from other City agencies. The evaluation covered seven areas of Pre-K for All's implementation and are captured in separate reports:

1. Family perceptions of the program
2. Family engagement and communication

3. Curriculum and instruction
4. Using data for programmatic and instructional purposes
5. Expansion rollout
6. Program supports
7. Executive functioning and academic skills

Overall, the studies found:

- 92 percent of surveyed parents rate the quality of their child’s pre-K program as “good” or “excellent” and 83 percent of surveyed parents report that Pre-K for All improved their child’s learning and behavior “a lot.”
- Sites offering Pre-K for All report using a variety of family engagement and communication practices.
- Sites offering Pre-K for All report that they feel supported by the DOE in implementing curriculum.
- Sites offering Pre-K for All report using a wide variety of data to inform instruction and make programmatic decisions.
- Most providers that applied to offer free, full-day Pre-K for All report that the application process was clear and well-supported.
- Nearly 80 percent and 88 percent of site leaders report that staff recruitment and staff retention, respectively, did not pose significant challenges.
- A majority of site leaders and teachers report using each type of support provided by the DOE (*ex: coaching, professional development, etc.*). In general, Pre-K for All sites report that these supports are helpful.
- A positive impact on students—across income levels, race, and home language status—was seen through their gains in executive functioning skills and academic skills over the course of the study period.

Year 1 Evaluation Report Summaries

1. Report on Family Perceptions

- 92 percent of surveyed families rate the quality of their child’s pre-K program as “good” or “excellent,” and 83 percent report that Pre-K for All improved their child’s learning and behavior “a lot.”
- Nearly 80 percent of surveyed families report receiving resources from their Pre-K for All program to support learning at home.
- Families report that the availability of Pre-K for All affected decisions about child care and labor force participation.
 - Of the families that were surveyed, more than half (56 percent) report a decrease in spending on childcare from 2013-14 to 2014-15. Surveyed families report an average decrease of \$78 per week in spending.
 - Of the families that reported that Pre-K for All affected the number of hours they worked, half report an increase in hours worked, which they attribute to the availability of full-day pre-K.

2. Report on Family Engagement and Communication

- Overall, sites report undertaking a variety of family engagement and communication practices as a component of Pre-K for All. These include, but are not limited to: using face-to-face communication, providing updates on students’ achievements, having accessible program staff and multi-lingual staff, translating communications, using family input to make decisions, and providing opportunities for families to be involved with the program.
- Survey and interview findings also demonstrate that site leaders and instructional staff express a commitment to involving families in the education of their children.

3. Report on Curriculum and Instruction

- Overall, Pre-K for All sites report using a range of curricula to meet the needs of their students and that curriculum satisfaction is high among staff.
- The large majority of site staff report that their curriculum is vertically aligned to kindergarten and beyond, either to a moderate or large extent.
- Pre-K for All sites report using their curricula effectively and confidently to meet students' needs; however, program staff also report requests for continued training and support to improve quality.

4. Report on Use of Data for Programmatic and Instructional Purposes

- Overall, Pre-K for All sites report using a wide range of data to inform site-level programmatic decisions and classroom-level teaching practices, which include: authentic assessments of children's learning, program quality assessments, and feedback from DOE support staff and families.
- Authentic assessment data is a valuable data source for children's learning and development and 89 percent of sites report using these data for a variety of purposes. However, sites' perceived comfort with the authentic assessment systems vary by site type.
- 89 percent of site leaders report that their site uses data to engage families to a moderate or large extent.

5. Report on Pre-K for All Expansion Rollout

- Most providers that applied to offer full-day pre-K report that the application process was clear, easy to navigate, and well-supported. In general, sites report understanding how to be in compliance with DOE and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) expectations.
- Key stakeholders report that the engagement of a large number of key players and City agencies, increases in City agency capacity and infrastructure, and collaboration within and between City agencies, demonstrated a high-level of commitment to reach the initiative's goals and were major successes.
- Nearly 80 percent and 88 percent of site leaders report that staff recruitment and staff retention, respectively, did not pose significant challenges.
- On average, lead teachers report having five years of experience in a pre-K educational setting and almost 13 years in any educational setting. Approximately eight out of every ten lead teachers report having the NYS Early Childhood certification and almost all of those who did not have certification were currently pursuing it.
- Overall, the large majority of surveyed pre-K instructional staff report being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their pre-K teaching experience in 2014-15.

6. Report on Program Supports

- A majority of site leaders and teachers report receiving or using each type of support provided by the DOE (*ex: coaching, professional development, etc.*), and a majority also report that each type of support was "moderately" or "very" helpful.
- Nearly all site leaders (96 percent) report that they or their staff participated in the DOE-sponsored training that took place four times during the year. Overall, the large majority of site leaders and instructional staff (80 percent) report finding each of these professional development opportunities to be helpful.

- Sites report using a variety of resources and materials to support implementation of their Pre-K for All program. Nearly all site leaders (96 percent) report that their site used the DOE website to access units of study, lesson plans, and guidelines for the daily schedule, among other resources. They report the website is useful.

7. Report on Executive Functioning and Academic Skills

- A unique feature of this study is the collection of data on children’s executive functioning skills, a set of skills that includes their inhibitory control, working memory, and ability to shift between pieces of information, that together support children’s self-regulation. Executive functioning skills were measured by two widely-used assessments known as the Pencil Tap task and the Hearts and Flowers task.
- Statistically significant fall-to-spring gains were observed in both measures of executive functioning. The gains in the percentage of correct responses in the Pencil Tap and Hearts and Flowers tasks were 10 percent and 18 percent, respectively.
- Children attending Pre-K for All made statistically significant gains across all academic skills (Letter Recognition, Pre-writing, and Early Math) over the course of a 5.5-month testing window. By the end of this time period, Pre-K for All children outpaced the learning of four-year-olds nationally and were classified as being in the average range across all academic skills.
- This study featured a pre-post design without a comparison group, which means that observed gains in child learning cannot be attributed solely to participation in Pre-K for All. Children naturally learn and develop over time, and the study design means that these gains are confounded with the effects of the Pre-K for All program. Therefore, we cannot estimate the extent to which Pre-K for All was responsible for the children’s learning and development.

2015-16 | Year 2

Updates

The accomplishments and improvements in the second year of the expansion build on the work done in Year 1 to develop a high quality Pre-K for All system. They were informed by the results from the 2014-15 evaluation of Pre-K for All, feedback from Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) field staff, ongoing program assessments, and partnerships with early childhood education experts.

In the second year of the expansion, the DOE introduced the Pre-K for All Program Quality Standards (PQS), which define the DOE’s vision for high-quality Pre-K for All programs in NYC. The PQS describes the key practices of family engagement, rigorous and developmentally appropriate instruction, professional collaboration, and leadership that support children in gaining the knowledge and skills outlined in the [NYS Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core \(NYS PKFCC\)](#). The PQS establishes a shared set of expectations for all pre-K programs; the DOE, leaders, educators, and families all use the PQS to understand and advance program quality.

EXPANSION AND POLICY

- The 2015-16 school year marked the first time that every four-year-old in New York City had access to free, full-day, pre-K. As of the 2015-16 school year, 68,647 children were enrolled across all Pre-K for All programs—a number more than triple the number of children who were enrolled before the expansion and larger than the entire school population of major cities like Boston. Enrollment is high across every community, with the highest participation among low-income families.

- The DOE introduced a streamlined pre-K enrollment process for families, which provides one application for families to apply to pre-K programs. Overall, 88 percent of families received a pre-K offer to one of their top three choices through the new streamlined application process.
- The DOE developed and shared critical policy guidance for NYC Early Education Centers (NYCEECs) to ensure they are adequately supported as they join or continue as Pre-K for All partners.

DIFFERENTIATED SUPPORTS: In 2015-16, the DOE continued to advance its differentiated supports to all programs, tailoring support to each program’s needs in order to meet Pre-K for All’s Program Quality Standards.

Instructional Tracks and Lanes

- The DOE launched its Pre-K for All Instructional Tracks, providing every pre-K site with differentiated professional learning through a Summer Institute for teachers and leaders and a series of four teacher sessions and three leader sessions during the school year. Based on a variety of factors such as interest, demonstrated need, recommendations from Instructional Coordinators and Social Workers, site quality, and geography, sites were selected to participate in one of the following professional learning tracks and lanes:
 - *NYC Pre-K Explore*: Pre-K sites that participated in the Explore track used the evidence-based Building Blocks math curriculum together with the Pre-K for All Interdisciplinary Units of Study. Paired together, these materials provide a comprehensive, developmentally-appropriate approach to learning in pre-K.
 - *Advancing Social Emotional Development*: Pre-K sites in this lane advanced ways to support pre-K learners in developing social emotional skills needed to build a positive sense of self, form positive relationships, self-regulate, and adapt to change.
 - *Using Data to Inform Instruction*: Pre-K sites in this lane moved each child forward by learning new strategies to identify and meet each learner’s needs, using authentic assessments and other data points.
 - *Supporting Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners*: In this lane, pre-K sites built on the diverse backgrounds and languages children and families brought to the classroom, with strategies for developing learning environments in which all children can thrive and all families are strong partners.

Coaching

- The DOE expanded its cadre of staff to provide on-site support to programs, including Instructional Coordinators and Social Workers.
- To more effectively differentiate support, in the 2015-16 school year, Instructional Coordinators and Social Workers conducted over 1,800 Foundational Support Visits (FSVs) to pre-K sites. Instructional Coordinators and Social Workers used information from these initial visits, ongoing observations, and pre-K program quality assessments to tailor their supports.
- The DOE established partnerships to provide specialized coaching for programs in targeted areas such as the Building Blocks math curriculum and using data to inform instruction.

Interdisciplinary Units of Study

- The DOE created the Pre-K for All research-based Interdisciplinary Units of Study to support student learning in all domains using developmentally appropriate practice. Throughout the year, the DOE released ten interdisciplinary units grounded in the NYS PKFCC.

PROGRAM MEASUREMENT AND USE OF DATA

- Because of its commitment to consistent quality measurement through program assessments, the DOE increased its capacity to provide more frequent program assessments, the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The DOE committed to a three-year cycle for each assessment by the 2016-17 school year for ECERS-R and the 2017-18 school year for CLASS.

OTHER KEY INITIATIVES AND PARTNERSHIPS

- The DOE partnered with researchers at New York University to develop a system of differentiated support that utilizes data on program needs and quality levels; the purpose of this system is to make decisions about the supports each program in our system receives across various aspects of the Pre-K Quality Standards. This is part of an ongoing partnership between DECE and NYU.
- In 2015-2016, the DECE continued its partnership with the Office of Special Education to develop resources and professional learning opportunities so that Instructional Coordinators, Social Workers, teachers, and leaders further strengthen their work to ensure that all children are successfully supported in achieving high expectations for their learning and developmental progress.
- The DOE launched a historic Teacher Incentive Program to support NYCEECs in recruiting and retaining top talent. Through the Pre-K for All Lead Teacher Incentive Program, there are two types signing incentives for certified lead teachers in Pre-K for All classrooms: the Retention Incentive Program for returning certified lead teachers and the New Hire Incentive Program for newly-hired certified lead teachers.

YEAR 2 EVALUATION

The Year 2 evaluation will produce actionable findings that will inform how the DOE can support pre-K programs to advance student learning. The Year 2 evaluation seeks to inform:

- How programs can better support students of different backgrounds and needs and how differentiated supports can serve students with special needs, students whose home language is a language other than English, and students living in poverty.
- The impact of the Pre-K for All's coaching models and professional development to understand how well the DOE is targeting sites for the right kinds and dosage of support based on the areas of growth identified in Year 1 and the Foundational Support Visit.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	i
Introduction	1
Site Practices	3
Ongoing Effective Communication	3
Sharing Expectations and Making Joint Decisions	5
Welcoming Environment	11
Extending Learning at Home and Partnering With Families for Student Success	14
Supporting Transitions	18
Resources For Supporting Family Engagement	21
DECE Staff Support	21
Print Materials and Policy Guides	22
Professional Development	23
Challenges and Requested Supports	25
Challenges	25
Additional Needs	27
Site Staff’s Views of the Most Successful Strategies	30
Conclusion	33
Appendix	34

Pre-K for All Evaluation

Family Engagement and Communication

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Westat, Metis Associates, and Branch Associates are conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the *Pre-K for All* initiative in New York City to assess the implementation and outcomes of this effort. As a demonstration of its commitment to learning and quality improvement, the City—the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) and the New York City Department of Education (DOE), in cooperation with the New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS)—undertook this evaluation beginning in 2014 as a means of gaining actionable information to inform implementation. Work in this area is expected to continue into the future.

This report presents implementation findings on the topic of family engagement and communication from the perspective of *Pre-K for All* site administrators and instructional staff.

Sources of data include surveys of site administrators and instructional staff from a sample of 201 sites, and in-depth interviews with administrators and staff at 40 of these sites, as well as from a review of available documentation. The sites included in the study were sampled to be representative of all *Pre-K for All* sites and recruited to participate in the evaluation. Findings are based on self-reported data; family engagement and communication practices were not directly observed. Survey response rates were 91 percent for site administrators and 69 percent for instructional staff.

In addition to presenting survey and interview findings across all study sites, selected data are reported for the following subgroups of programs and respondents:

- **Site type.** This includes three categories, two of which include programs known as New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEECs) operated by independent organizations under contract to DOE (DOE NYCEECs) or ACS (ACS NYCEECs). The third category is district schools. Because of the small sample size, results for charter schools are not presented separately, but are included in the aggregate.
- **Program length.** All *Pre-K for All* sites operate full-day programs. In this report, sites are categorized as: “existing or expanded” (full-day program that maintained their same size enrollment or expanded the number of seats), “conversion” (programs that converted from a half to a full day), and “new or newly contracted” (district schools or NYCEECs operating a pre-K program for the first time as well as programs in existence for various lengths of time prior to contracting with the DOE or ACS).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. **Site Practices.** *To what extent do sites use effective family engagement practices? What practices are most frequent? What practices are most helpful in improving families’ ability to support their children’s development?*
2. **Site Supports.** *What supports have sites received in the area of family communication and engagement? Which supports were most helpful? What additional supports are needed to effectively engage families?*
3. **Challenges.** *What challenges do sites experience in communicating and engaging families?*
4. **Best Practices.** *According to sites, what are the most successful strategies for cultivating effective family engagement?*

- **Staff position.** This includes site leaders (i.e., school administrators or site directors), lead teachers, and teacher assistants who may be teacher aides or paraprofessionals.

Findings are presented that address each research questions. Within the Site Practices section (research question 1), findings are organized according to the pillars of effective family engagement, as outlined by DOE Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) in *5 Pillars of Early Childhood Family Engagement in the Partnership Standards Framework*. It should be noted, however, that during the summer of 2015, the DOE began to shift away from the five pillars as standalone guidance and chose to embed family engagement standards into the newly released *Pre-K for All Program Quality Standards*. According to the DOE, while the structure of the guidance has been revised, the content of the five pillars has carried through under the broader focus of “Strong Family-Community Ties.”¹ Site supports and their perceived effectiveness (research question 2) are described next. This is followed by a discussion of the challenges facing site leaders and staff (research question 3) and strategies providers found most successful for promoting family engagement (research question 4).

SITE PRACTICES

Ongoing Effective Communication

Effective communication is a core element of effective family engagement. According to the DECE, ongoing effective communication occurs when families experience “multiple methods of communication between themselves and the pre-K program throughout the school year.”²

Survey and interview findings indicate that most sites report using multiple methods of communication. The most prevalent methods reported were **face-to-face communication during drop-off and pick-up; regular program and classroom newsletters; as-needed telephone calls, written communication, and progress reports; and electronic forms of group communication**. In addition to the above, several communication practices were identified by site leaders and instructional staff as important for facilitating family engagement.

- **Frequent updates on children’s accomplishments.** Staff at multiple sites agreed that it is important to provide frequent updates so that parents and families are kept informed of students’ good work.
- **Accessible program staff.** Interviewed staff emphasized the importance of ensuring that they were easily accessible to parents and families. To remain accessible, staff recommended practices such as sharing their contact information, encouraging drop-in visits, and remaining present when parents and family members are likely to be on site.
- **Translated communications and presence of multilingual staff.** Survey findings indicate that almost all sites (96 percent) had on staff someone who was proficient in a language other than English, with the two most prevalent languages being Spanish (91 percent of sites) and Chinese (21 percent of sites).

¹ In the second year of implementation, the family engagement standards were; “Strong Relationships,” “Two-Way Communication,” and “Capacity Building.” See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/EarlyChildhood/educators/PKAPQS.htm>.

² Source: New York City Department of Education, *5 Pillars of Early Childhood Family Engagement in the Partnership Standards Framework*.

Sharing Expectations and Making Joint Decisions

A critical element of effective family engagement is the involvement of parents and caregivers in decisionmaking about the educational and behavior needs of their own children. Results show that:

- **Almost all sites (97 percent) indicated that they explicitly used family input to meet the needs of individual students** (with 85 percent of sites reporting doing so to a *moderate* or *large extent*).
- **Furthermore, the large majority of instructional staff (93 percent) reported that they engage with families directly to identify and address students' academic or behavioral issues.**
- **More than half (58 percent) of the sites reported working with families to establish individualized academic and behavioral goals for their child at the beginning of the school year.** ACS NYCEECs are more likely to report this (80 percent) compared to DOE NYCEECs (56 percent) and district schools (54 percent). It should be noted that, according to DECE staff, many ACS sites have extensive experience operating Head Start programs, which require specific structures and practices around family engagement. This could explain some of the differences observed between ACS NYCEECs and DOE sites.

According to study participants, the large majority of sites also involve families in programmatic and curricular decisions. Survey and interview findings show that:

- **Almost all sites (95 percent) reported eliciting feedback from families and caregivers and use that feedback to make programmatic and/or instructional decisions.** In fact, 87 percent of sites indicated that they use the feedback this way to a *large extent* (51 percent) or to a *moderate extent* (36 percent). Based on these survey results, sites undertake a variety of activities to elicit feedback, including focus groups, surveys, and involvement in the site's self-assessment process.
- **The large majority of sites (82 percent) also reported offering opportunities for parents and caregivers to volunteer outside of the classroom, for example, on committees.**

Welcoming Environment

DECE expects that pre-K sites will provide a welcoming environment for families.

- **Almost all sites (95 percent) reported facilitating an orientation** for families and students and providing families with information about their program at the beginning of the school year.
- According to survey results, the large majority of sites also provided families and caregivers with **updated information about scheduled programming and events (93 percent), as well as the units of study that are covered in the classroom (92 percent)**, at least on a monthly basis.
- **Almost all sites (99 percent) indicated in their survey responses that they cultivated a welcoming environment by organizing celebratory events for families and caregivers.** Furthermore, almost two thirds (65 percent) of site leaders indicated that their sites hosted these celebrations at least once a month.
- **Interviewed site staff consistently described the importance of implementing an "open-door" policy** as a means of creating an ongoing welcoming environment.
- **The majority of teachers (79 percent) indicated that they provided parents and caregivers with at least one opportunity to volunteer in the classroom.**

- **Sites also described the importance of sharing students' individual accomplishments with parents and caregivers** as a means of increasing family engagement.

Extended Learning at Home and Partnering with Families for Student Success

Pre-K for All sites are expected to partner with families to help students succeed, for example, by providing educational activities that families can do at home with their children (also known as extended learning activities), as well as family workshops and services that support family well-being.

Extended Learning

- **According to site leader survey results, almost all sites (90 percent) provided families with written materials about extended learning activities at least once a month.** In addition, almost half of the surveyed sites described providing these materials either weekly (40 percent) or daily (8 percent).
- **Sites varied in the manner in which they encouraged parents and families to undertake extended learning activities at home.** Reported strategies included using weekly and monthly newsletters to provide information about extended learning activities, emailing activity suggestions, and providing handouts to students to take home.
- **Yet, while site staff recognized the importance of extending learning at home, feedback from site leaders and staff made clear that many were also hesitant to make this an expectation of families.** One solution, identified by multiple sites, was to support extended learning by encouraging parents and families to view routine activities of family life (such as trips to the grocery store) as potential learning experiences.
- According to DECE, **effective extension of learning also includes the incorporation of the extended learning activities into subsequent classroom lessons.** This more challenging element of family engagement was undertaken to a *moderate* or *large* extent by two thirds of the surveyed sites.
- Finally, for a few sites, the extended learning that was described was not limited to academic content, but also focused on **supporting children's social development.**

Family Workshops

- **Almost every site (95 percent) reported offering at least one parent workshop during the year, and 47 percent of sites offered a workshop for parents and families at least once a month.** These workshops were a valuable means of ensuring that parents had the necessary skills and competence to support their children's academic and social-emotional development at home. Workshops were offered on a variety of topics, including the initiative's academic and pedagogical approach, and parenting skills and risk mitigation.

Family Well-Being

- **An element of sites' partnering for student success was their attention to families' general well-being.** Interviewed site leaders and instructional staff at more than one site indicated that the academic success of students was intrinsically tied to the well-being of their families, and therefore, effective family engagement had to include services in this area. Assistance included helping parents and families navigate the process of registering for income supports and helping to find stable housing and healthcare providers.

Supporting Transitions

Evaluation results suggest that almost all sites invest a great deal of time in supporting families as their children transition from pre-K into kindergarten. Based on responses from study staff, support for families falls into two categories.

- **Pre-K sites help families understand what is necessary for their children to be ready for kindergarten.** School readiness efforts are described as focusing on both academic and social-emotional supports as well as helping families and children become comfortable with the transition and the upcoming kindergarten experience.
- **Pre-K sites help families navigate the process of applying to kindergarten.** District schools and DOE NYCEECs were somewhat more likely than ACS NYCEECs to report doing this to a *large extent* (64 percent and 61 percent, compared to 53 percent, respectively). Sites described undertaking multiple efforts, including:
 - Providing multiple reminders in various formats about the kindergarten application process, starting early in the year;
 - Directly assisting with the completion of kindergarten application forms, which according to staff was particularly challenging for families without technological literacy;
 - Using registration information provided by the DOE to follow up when applications had not been submitted;
 - Advising families on how to select a kindergarten program for their children.

RESOURCES FOR SUPPORTING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

DECE Staff Support

Pre-K sites had the opportunity to receive support from DECE instructional coordinators/coaches (from here on referred to as DECE coaches) or other field office staff and from DECE social workers.

- **Four out of five sites (80 percent) reported receiving supports from a DECE coach or other field office staff on family engagement and communication.** DOE NYCEECs were slightly more likely than ACS NYCEECs to indicate receiving these supports (91 percent compared to 80 percent, respectively). The majority of staff (68 percent of site leaders and teachers and 71 percent of teacher assistants) found these supports *moderately to very helpful*.
- **DECE social workers, who worked primarily in district schools, also supported family engagement and communication.** Their role was to build the capacity of *Pre-K for All* sites to provide a socially emotionally safe learning environment for children and to empower families to support their children's education. Following a weekly site visit model, DECE social workers worked with site leaders, teachers, and families, providing a wide range of supports, including observations, coaching, facilitating workshops and conversations, and collaborating on setting goals based on observations and other data sources. According to the DECE, just over 80 percent of district schools received the weekly support of a DECE social worker. Among surveyed district site leaders who received this type of support, the majority (74 percent) found it to be *moderately or very helpful*. In addition, in late February, DECE social workers began to work with a subset of DOE and ACS NYCEECs to strengthen family engagement and behavioral support through capacity building.

Print Materials and Policy Guides

- **Each type of site accessed materials written by the DOE (e.g., information on the kindergarten process, school directory, and examples of extended learning activities) and passed this information directly on to parents and families.** These materials were considered especially useful for sites that had limited resources to create their own materials.
- **Almost all sites reported receiving policy guidance and documentation from the DOE on how best to implement family engagement,** including the *Welcome to Pre-K* guide (97 percent) and the *5 Pillars of Family Engagement* (94 percent). The majority of these respondents found them *moderately to very helpful*, with teacher assistants finding them the most helpful, followed by site leaders and teachers.

Professional Development

- **Most of the surveyed site leaders (78 percent) reported having participated in a DOE-sponsored training on family communication and engagement** and almost all (91 percent) attended at least one other training or professional development opportunity on family engagement. These site leaders were generally satisfied with these trainings, with 63 percent describing the DOE trainings to be *moderately or very helpful* and 76 percent describing the other trainings as *moderately or very helpful*.
- **Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of surveyed instructional staff reported participating in DOE trainings on the topic of family engagement (e.g., during the Summer Institute), and 86 percent participated in trainings led by others** (e.g., external vendors contracted directly by the site or trainings conducted by site staff) on this topic. Over 70 percent of teachers and teacher assistants found both types of trainings to be at least *moderately helpful*.

CHALLENGES

Site leaders and instructional staff reported experiencing some challenges related to family engagement. Aspects of family engagement described both by site leaders and instructional staff as challenging included mobilizing families to address academic or behavioral issues and encouraging extended learning activities. Survey findings also indicate that site leaders found the use of data to engage families to be more challenging than other aspects of family engagement. Instructional staff found communicating with parents of linguistically diverse learners and encouraging families to attend program events (including parent- teacher conferences) to be more challenging.

Interviewed program staff emphasized the following challenges when reaching out to families:

- **Accessibility of parents (scheduling).** Across all sites, the biggest challenge was the difficulty of engaging with working parents and caregivers.
- **Families speaking a home language other than English.** Although survey results show that almost all sites had at least one staff member fluent in a language other than English, communicating with families who were not proficient in English was still seen as a major challenge across sites. The study did not examine the alignment between languages spoken by staff and languages spoken by families.

- **Need for pre-K sites to broaden the scope of their engagement to include whole-family well-being.** Interviewed staff at more than one site explained that family engagement also focused on ensuring that families had access to economic, social, and governmental supports. While they recognized this as a worthwhile priority, they felt underequipped to support families in this area.

In addition, site leaders and staff indicated a need for more training. Twenty-six percent of surveyed site leaders requested additional support in how to train their staff on family engagement. The majority of instructional staff also signaled that they needed at least *some* support in this area. When asked to describe the supports that would be most helpful, interviewed staff from a number of sites identified the following:

- Additional training on locating information for families on the DOE website.
- Additional training on the kindergarten application process as well as how to support families in selecting the most appropriate school for their children.
- Neighborhood-specific trainings on identifying and recommending community resources for families.

SITE STAFF'S VIEWS OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

Pre-K site staff were asked to reflect on the family engagement practices and strategies that they found to be most successful and identify the broad approaches that they would recommend to others. From these responses, seven strategies emerged as most important.

- **Incorporating parent empowerment and recognition.** Sense of value can be communicated through events and celebrations as well as opportunities to volunteer and participate in program-level decisionmaking. The latter, ranging from structured parent councils to informal open-door policies, is viewed by those interviewed as being able to increase parental engagement and shift families into active communicators with program staff.
- **Using multiple means of communication.** Multiple means of communication allow sites to both reach more families and reinforce their messaging. A combination of electronic and face-to-face methods (e.g., by using email and text messaging as well as taking advantage of drop-off and pick-up times to hold in-person conversations) are considered particularly successful strategies.
- **Prioritizing face-to-face communication with families.** Beyond the benefits of multiple forms of communication, face-to-face communication was thought to be invaluable for cultivating strong relationships with parents and family members. Interviewed staff recommended that sites do what they can to encourage this type of interaction as part of the daily schedule.
- **Creating welcoming first-encounters with families.** The initial encounters with site staff or the *Pre-K for All* initiative at-large (e.g., during the application process) can define the tenor of subsequent relationships. Therefore, site staff emphasized the importance of early interactions to create a welcoming environment.
- **Including family well-being as a focus of effective family engagement.** Stressful life situations can have a negative effect on the capacity of families to be involved in their children's lives in addition to having a direct effect on children. Thus, family engagement should include assistance with accessing to health care, counseling, and other resources.

- **Allowing for variation in levels of parental engagement.** Most parents are working at one or more jobs, raising other children, and have additional responsibilities, all of which affect their ability to engage and communicate with pre-K staff. To this end, lapses in communication and engagement should not be perceived as a reflection on families' parenting ability.
- **Understanding family engagement as relationship-building.** Site staff suggested that initial family engagement efforts should focus on establishing trust and developing strong relationships between staff and parents and families rather than focus on conveying large amounts of information or creating extended learning opportunities for children.

CONCLUSION

Based on self-reported data, evaluation findings indicate that family engagement and communication practices are being undertaken as a component of the *Pre-K for All* initiative. Although there is a great deal of variation in the strength of these practices, survey and interview responses demonstrate that site leaders and instructional staff are committed to involving families in the education of their children.

The findings suggest that DOE should consider the following:

- Provide avenues for sites to share their most successful family engagement practices.
- Provide consistent universal expectations for all sites that outline the required family engagement practices and define what constitutes *effective* practices in each area.
- Provide trainings based on identified challenges and requests for additional professional development, including communicating with families about behavioral challenges, finding information for families on the DOE website, the kindergarten application process and how to support families in selecting the most appropriate school for their children, and local referral resources. Identified areas for additional support include support for communicating with families that speak a home language other than English (training, materials, and access to translators) and for engaging with working families (training, staff resources).

INTRODUCTION

Westat and Metis are conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the *Pre-K for All* initiative in New York City to assess the implementation and outcomes of this effort. The implementation study consists of an ongoing assessment of New York City's *Pre-K for All* expansion efforts, both in terms of processes, structures, and policies that are in place to support and monitor the rapid expansion, as well as on-the-ground program implementation and delivery. Results from this study will help identify successful practices, challenges, and areas for growth.

The implementation study uses multiple methods and data sources, including interviews with key agency stakeholders; a survey of staff of the NYC Department of Education (DOE) Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE); surveys of site administrators, instructional staff, and families at a sample of sites, and interviews with administrators and staff at a sub-sample of these sites; and a review of documentation. The evaluation instruments were developed by Westat/Metis in collaboration with staff of the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) and DOE.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. **Site Practices.** To what extent do sites use effective family engagement practices? What practices are most frequent? What practices are most helpful in improving families' ability to support their children's development?
2. **Site Supports.** What supports have sites received in the area of family communication and engagement? Which supports were most helpful? What additional supports are needed to effectively engage families?
3. **Challenges.** What challenges do sites experience in communicating and engaging families?
4. **Best Practices.** According to sites, what are the most successful strategies for cultivating effective family engagement?

This report presents implementation findings on the topic of family engagement and communication. Findings are based on self-reported survey and interview responses from site administrators and instructional staff, as well as a review of documentation provided by DOE. The program sites included in the study were sampled to be representative of all *Pre-K for All* sites and recruited to participate in the evaluation. A total of 201 sites agreed to participate in various aspects of the study, with 40 agreeing to site visits.

- From March through June 2015, Westat/Metis administered an **online survey³ to site administrators and instructional staff** (teachers and teacher assistants). A total of 183 administrators responded, for a response rate of 91 percent. The response rate for instructional staff was 69 percent ($N = 742$) based on email addresses provided for 1,080 staff at the selected sites.
- **Site visits** were conducted at 40 programs from March to May 2015 in order to conduct interviews with administrators and interviews or focus groups with instructional staff.

In addition to presenting survey and interview findings across all study sites, selected data are reported for the following subgroups of programs and respondents:

- **Site type.** This includes three categories, two of which include programs known as New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEECs) operated by independent organizations under contract to DOE

³ To increase response rates, paper surveys were mailed to nonrespondents in June 2015.

(DOE NYCEECs) or ACS (ACS NYCEECs). The third category is district schools. Because of the small sample size, results for charter schools are not presented separately, but are included in the aggregate.

- **Program length.** All *Pre-K for All* sites operate full-day programs. In this report, sites are categorized as: “existing or expanded” (full-day program that maintained their same size enrollment or expanded the number of seats), “conversion” (programs that converted from a half to a full day), and “new or newly contracted” (district schools or NYCEECs operating a pre-K program for the first time as well as programs in existence for various lengths of time prior to contracting with the DOE or ACS).
- **Staff position.** This includes site leaders (i.e., school administrators or site directors), lead teachers, and teacher assistants who may be teacher aides or paraprofessionals.

See Appendix Table A-1 for the distribution of sites that participated in the study.

Findings on family engagement are structured according to the research questions. Within the Site Practices section (research question 1), findings are further categorized by the pillars of effective family engagement, as outlined in the DOE’s *5 Pillars of Early Childhood Family Engagement in the Partnership Standards Framework* (see Figure 1 below). Site supports and their perceived effectiveness (research question 2) are described next. This is followed by a discussion of family engagement challenges faced by site leaders and staff (research question 3) as well as strategies they found most successful for promoting family engagement (research question 4).

FIGURE 1. DOE EXPECTATIONS FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In 2014–15 (the first year of the *Pre-K for All* initiative implementation), *Pre-K for All* sites were expected to incorporate the five pillars of family engagement⁴ into their programming:

1. **Ongoing Effective Communication** – “Families experience multiple methods of communication between themselves and the pre-K program throughout the school year.”
2. **Sharing Expectations and Making Joint Decisions** – “Families are partners in supporting children’s readiness for the next grade through mutual expectation sharing and joint-decisionmaking with the school around policy decisions and program evaluation.”
3. **Welcoming Environment** – “Families will experience warmth and respect from program staff, demonstrated by the collaborative tone of school staff and in the school policies, protocols and offerings that are sensitive to their linguistic, cultural and social emotional needs.”
4. **Extending Learning at Home** – “Families will have the opportunity to support and extend their children’s classroom learning and development at home with the assistance of complementary learning activities shared with families regularly.”
5. **Supporting Transitions** – “Families will be equipped with the resources and skills to support their children through their transition into and out of the school, as demonstrated by school policy, and ongoing, meaningful discussions between school staff and families.”

During the summer of 2015, the DOE chose to embed family engagement standards into the newly released *Pre-K for All Program Quality Standards*. According to the DOE, while the structure of the guidance has been revised, the content of the five pillars has carried through under the broader focus of “Strong Family-Community Ties.”⁵

⁴ Source: New York City Department of Education, *5 Pillars of Early Childhood Family Engagement in the Partnership Standards Framework*.

⁵ In the second year of implementation, the family engagement standards were; “Strong Relationships,” “Two-Way Communication,” and “Capacity Building.” See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/EarlyChildhood/educators/PKAPQS.htm>.

ONGOING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is a core element of effective family engagement. According to DECE, ongoing effective communication occurs when families experience “multiple methods of communication between themselves and the pre-K program throughout the school year.”⁶

Survey and interview findings indicate that most sites are using multiple simultaneous communication methods. The most prevalent of these methods are:

- **Face-to-face communication during drop-off and pick-up.** Interviewed staff at most sites agreed that a face-to-face encounter during drop-off and pick-up was one of the most effective forms of communication available. As such, it was described as particularly important for staff to remain accessible during these times. Teachers described how during these encounters they took the opportunity to speak to parents and families about program-related topics and topics of general interest, the latter equally helpful for building relationships with families. Those who mentioned face-to-face communication unanimously agreed on its importance as a means of communication.

Sites reported using multiple methods of communication to connect with families and caregivers.

Sites recognize the importance of both face-to-face communication for building meaningful relationships as well as the importance of electronic communication to communicate with harder-to-reach families.

A significant challenge was meaningfully communicating with families that speak a home language other than English.
- **As-needed telephone calls.** Staff at some sites described making phone calls to parents and family members. At these sites, according to staff, parents were telephoned when individualized conversations were needed about their children (most often to discuss their progress). Interviewed staff emphasized the importance of including positive information so that parents do not become defensive or feel that their children are being viewed negatively. However, some staff argued that face-to-face communication is better. As one teacher explained, “a phone call is nice and it’s easier, but sometimes you have to make that little effort to... try to get the parents to actually come in to see the environment their kids are in.”
- **Electronic forms of group communication.** Across sites, interviewed staff described using electronic forms of communication such as text messaging, email, and online platforms to share information with parents and families. At one DOE NYCEEC, for example, it was reported that the teachers set up a class website for sharing extended learning activities and regular updates. Teachers also described a program that delivers text messages to all parents in a class to remind them of upcoming events. Teachers at other sites described using online platforms to share pictures. According to one teacher, “visual documentation of what the children have done is great... this makes a big difference” for parents.

⁶ Source: New York City Department of Education, *5 Pillars of Early Childhood Family Engagement in the Partnerships Standards Framework*.

- **Regularly distributed program and classroom newsletters.** Most sites reported frequent use of newsletters to communicate programming to parents and families. Newsletters were also described as being frequently used to share extended learning activities. Sites varied in the frequency in which newsletters were distributed, but staff often reported that they were distributed weekly.
- **Written communication and progress reports.** Site leaders at 94 percent of the surveyed sites indicated that their teachers provided parents and families with written communication, and 40 percent of site leaders indicated that teachers at their site sent student progress reports to families at least once a month.

The following communication practices were also identified by site leaders and instructional staff as important for facilitating family engagement:

- **Frequent updates on children’s accomplishments.** Staff at multiple sites agreed that it is important to provide frequent updates so that parents are kept informed of student’s good work. This was also emphasized as having the benefit of preventing the parents from perceiving the pre-K program as merely “day care,” a frustration voiced by many staff.
- **Accessible program staff.** Interviewed staff emphasized the importance of ensuring that they were easily accessible to parents and families. For some staff, this meant providing their email addresses and contact information. For others, this meant a programwide open-door policy. Certain forms of communication such as email, text messaging, and face-to-face interactions were highlighted as especially accessible. The most important element of effective communication, for these staff, was that it included opportunities for parents to initiate conversations. That is, **parents and families needed to be active participants, thereby transforming the communication from one of conveying information to meaningful engagement.**
- **Translated communication.** *Pre-K for All* sites have access to a number of DOE materials (e.g., school directory, kindergarten application) that have been translated in nine major languages. In addition, according to survey findings, almost three quarters of the pre-K sites (73 percent) also translated at least some site-specific materials when communicating with families. Programs situated in district schools were more likely to translate materials (86 percent) followed by ACS NYCEECs (70 percent) and DOE NYCEECs (64 percent). Interviews with site staff affirmed the importance of translation. These findings may reflect the district schools’ ability to access the DOE’s in-house translation services.

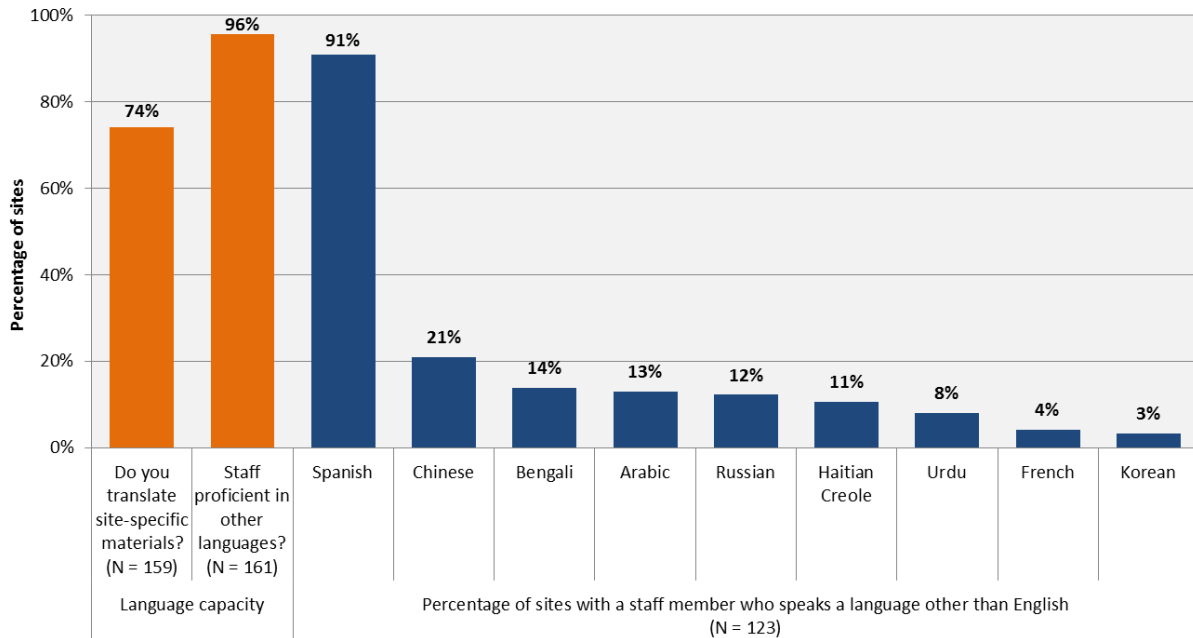
In addition to print materials, some sites also emphasized the importance of maintaining verbal communication in the home languages of families. Survey results show that **almost all sites (96 percent) had staff who described themselves as proficient in a language other than English.** The most prevalent languages were: Spanish (with 91 percent of sites employing a staff member who spoke Spanish) and Chinese (with 21 percent of sites employing a staff member who spoke a Chinese language). Additional languages spoken by pre-K staff included Bengali (14 percent of sites), Arabic (13 percent of sites), Russian (12 percent of sites), and Haitian Creole (11 percent of sites). Findings from site visits indicate that these self-reported language skills were held predominantly by teacher assistants. In fact, more than one site reported that teacher assistants were almost solely relied on for communicating with parents and families who did not speak English proficiently. These findings are presented in Figure 2.

Furthermore, interviewed staff at some sites also indicated they translate at family events and workshops as needed. Depending on the situation, sites may organize parents and families into small

groups based on the language they speak and provide separate presentations. Or, sites may translate simultaneously during larger workshops. As explained by one site leader,

Most of the time, [our teachers] know some kind of Spanish. So we have them do translating. Sometimes we do it simultaneously. Sometimes, if there's not a lot of [parents], we'll set up a little group and someone will translate for them, so as not to make the meeting very long.

Figure 2. Site Leaders' Reports of Site Language Capacity



SHARING EXPECTATIONS AND MAKING JOINT DECISIONS

Pre-K staff were generally committed to engaging families in the collaborative identification of academic goals and expectations.

Sites solicited family input through multiple means, including regular parent-teacher conferences and frequent oral and written communication.

At the majority of sites, families had at least a minimal opportunity to participate in programmatic decisionmaking. There is room for improvement as involvement could be more frequent and more meaningful.

Encouragement of family participation is at the crux of effective family engagement. In this regard, family engagement takes two forms:

- **Family participation in ongoing discussions and information-sharing with staff about individual students, leading to collaborative goal setting and shared expectations.** DECE expects that sites will “provide families with the opportunities to be experts about their children.” In particular, families will be actively involved in academic and behavioral goal-setting for their children.

- **Family participation in programmatic decisionmaking.** According to DECE, it is the expectation that sites will encourage families to provide their input on policy and programmatic decisions. In addition, a sign of effective family engagement is the involvement of family members in volunteer opportunities and governance.

Survey and interview findings indicate that almost all sites provided multiple opportunities for families to become involved in shared goal-setting for their children. Fewer sites offered opportunities for them to participate in programmatic decisionmaking, but those that did offered creative and empowering means of participation. These findings are described in the following two sections.

In planning for our self-assessment, [parents] play one of the major roles. They do class observations. They interview staff. They interview [other] parents. And they also interview community representatives.

Pre-K Site Leader

Collaborative Goal Setting

Sites that effectively engage families recognize the collaborative elements of early childhood education. Illustrating this practice, staff described the importance of discussing long-term learning goals with families during scheduled parent-teacher conferences, but also using the brief encounters during morning drop-off to get a sense of the daily struggles (e.g., a difficult night sleeping) that may be reflected in a student’s classroom behavior.

According to surveyed site leaders, almost all sites (97 percent) explicitly used family input (such as parent-teacher conferences and informal conversations) to understand the needs of individual students (with 85 percent of sites indicating they used input to a moderate or large extent). ACS NYCEECs were more likely to report using family input, followed by DOE NYCEECs and district schools. Importantly, most sites (92 percent) were described by site leaders as seeking input since the beginning of the school year. In fact, not only did the majority of teachers (79 percent) report using family input to a moderate or large extent to understand the needs of individual students, more than half of teacher assistants (65 percent) also indicated doing so in the same manner, thereby exceeding expectations for the use of data in this role.

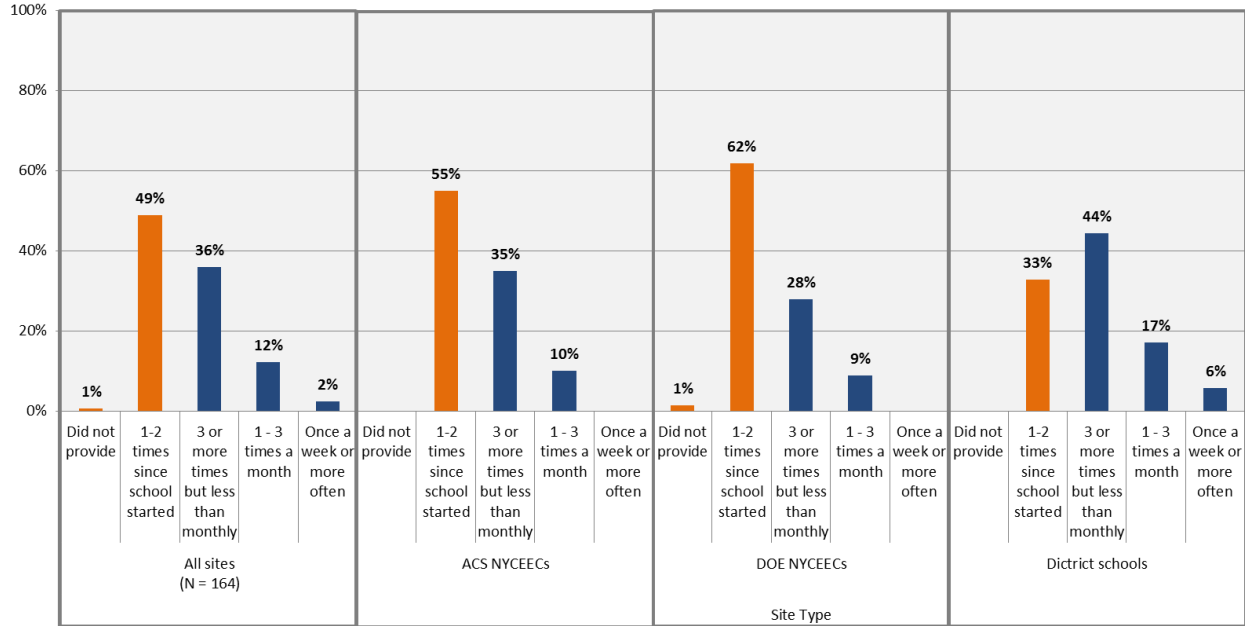
Furthermore, the large majority of instructional staff (93 percent) reported that they directly engage with families to address students’ academic or behavioral issues identified in the classroom. Almost two-thirds of teachers indicate that they directly engaged with families to address student’s academic or behavioral issues to a large extent (as did 42 percent of teacher assistants). Methods of jointly addressing student academic or behavioral issues include:

- **Parent-teacher conferences.** These were reported to occur at almost all surveyed sites (99 percent), with 50 percent of site leaders reporting that their staff had held conferences three or more times a year with each family, thereby exceeding the DOE’s expectation of at least two parent-teacher conferences held each year for each family.⁷ Furthermore, it is possible that the remaining sites planned on holding a year-end parent-teacher conference that was not captured in this survey

⁷ Source: *5 Pillars of Early Childhood Family Engagement in the Partnerships Standards Framework.*

data.⁸ The frequency of parent-teacher conferences, disaggregated by site type, is presented in Figure 3.

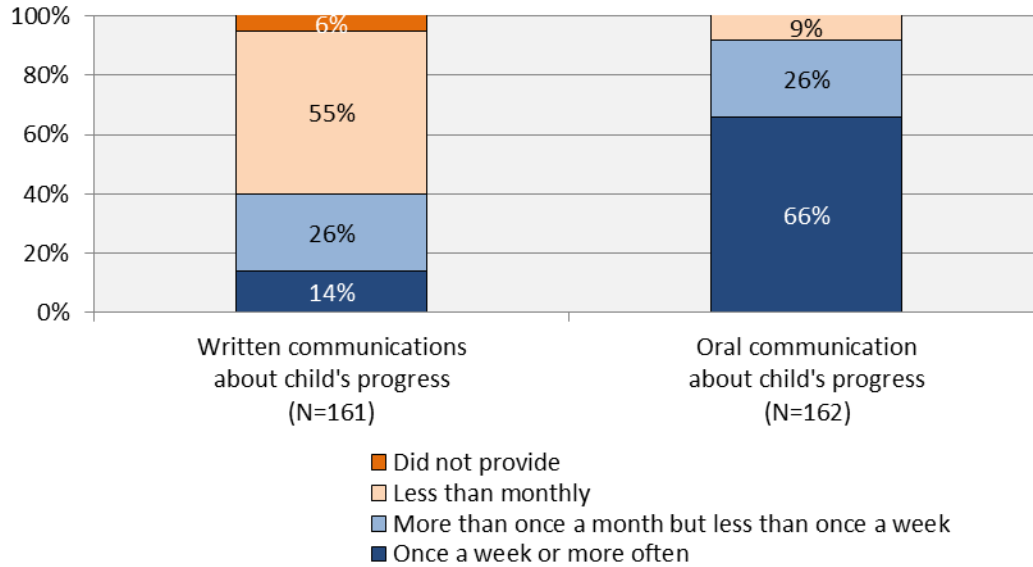
Figure 3: Site Leaders' Reports of Frequency of Parent Teacher Conferences, by Site Type



- Ongoing communication with families.** All surveyed pre-K sites were reported to regularly communicate with family members either orally or in writing about students' individual progress. According to site leaders, teachers spoke frequently to family members about their children's progress (66 percent of site leaders indicated that oral communication took place once a week or more frequently). Written communication about students' progress was also sent to family members by almost all sites (94 percent), but less frequently, with only 14 percent of sites sending written communication to families *at least once a week*. The frequency of written and oral communication is presented in Figure 4.

⁸ The survey was launched in March and closed in June 2015.

Figure 4: Site Leaders' Reports of Frequency of Written and Oral Communication With Families



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

A best practice of family engagement is to work with families at the beginning of the school year to establish individualized goals for the children. Staff at over half of the sites (58 percent) reported this practice. Based on this self-reported data, ACS NYCEECs were more likely to involve families in initial academic and behavioral goal-setting activities (80 percent of these site leaders indicated that they follow this practice) than were DOE sites (56 percent of DOE NYCEECs and 54 percent of district schools). At one ACS NYCEEC site, for example, initial parent-teacher conferences with families were described as being informed by the results of the authentic assessments that were already completed, which allowed teachers to discuss the specific needs of their children. According to one teacher:

When the school year started out, we met with parents and asked, "Is there anything I need to know about your child?" Learning habits, how do you work with the child at home, you know, that sort of thing. So we have an idea of how each child works. [This is] parent involvement.

Pre-K Teacher

[Authentic assessments are] very helpful when my teachers are doing parent teacher conferences, too.

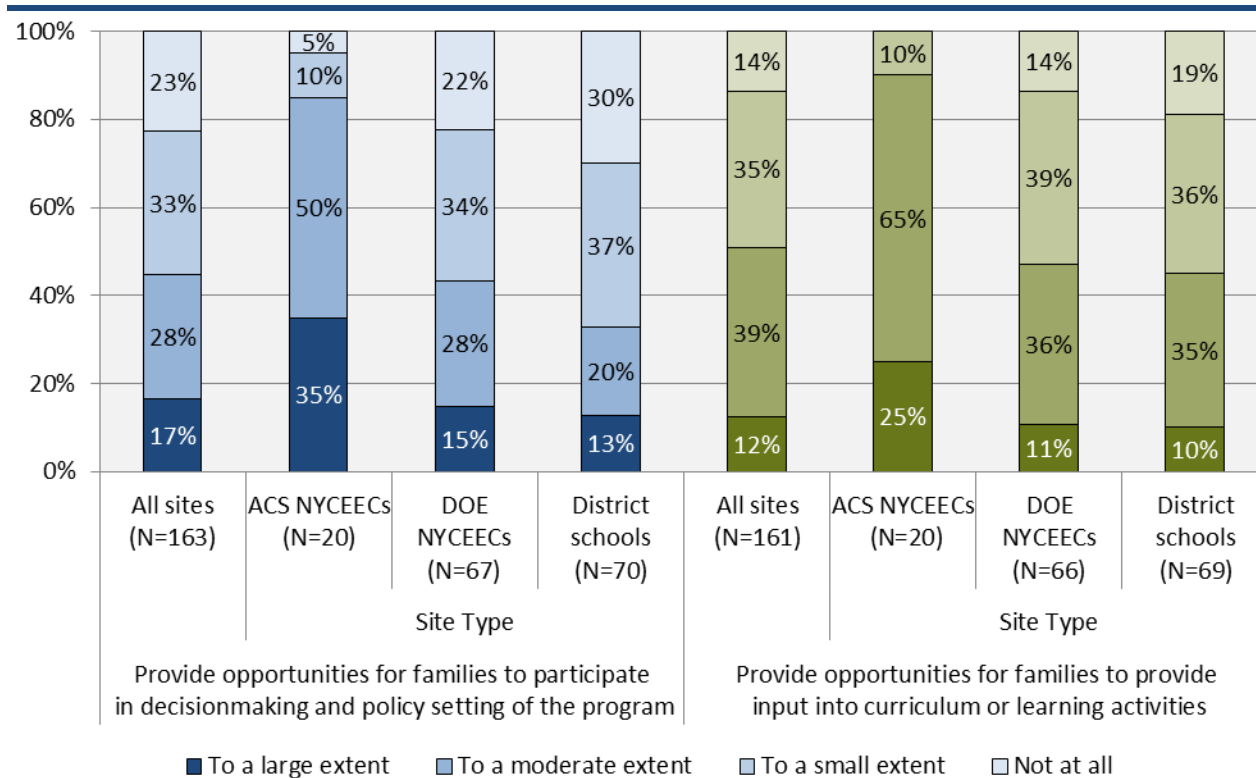
Because you can generate reports that show the parents exactly what their [child's] progress is, it can also generate a list of like, these are their areas of strength, these are their areas of weakness, so the parents can then follow up if they wanted to at home.

Joint Decisionmaking

Pre-K programs are expected to offer families decisionmaking opportunities around policy and to elicit feedback from families on curricular and programmatic choices. **At the majority of surveyed sites staff indicate that families are involved in programmatic and curricular decisions.** According to site leaders, just over three-quarters of the sites (77 percent) provided opportunities for families to participate in decisionmaking and policy setting, and 86 percent of sites provided opportunities for families to provide input into curriculum or learning activities. However, as shown in Figure 5, fewer than one in five sites reported either type of opportunity to a *large extent*. Survey findings also indicate that staff at ACS

NYCEECs were more likely than staff at DOE NYCEECs and district schools to have offered these opportunities, a finding that may be related to a requirement by ACS that those sites engage families in a process of self-assessment.

Figure 5. Site Leaders' Reports of Extent to Which Families Have Opportunities for Input, by Site Type



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Interview findings indicated that joint decisionmaking as an element of family engagement was approached by sites in a wide variety of ways. At many sites, site leaders and staff understood and agreed with the importance of involving families in these types of decisions and were able to illustrate the various ways in which family members were involved. At other sites, however, site leaders and staff were quick to indicate that they did not encourage these practices. Leaders and staff at many of the study sites voiced low expectations for this element of effective family engagement and/or shared a very limited view of what constitutes family engagement in joint decisionmaking. For example, one teacher, when asked if parents can provide feedback on curriculum or lessons, explained that:

Well I think they're mostly satisfied, but I think the teachers would make them feel that they can make suggestions. For instance, if they were having a party, a Halloween party or something, [the teacher] would put up a list and say, 'Anyone want to bring any juice or any cupcakes, things like that,' so the parents have the opportunity [to make decisions] and as I said, the teacher is always available. But, no, we haven't said, 'What do you think we should do next semester?'

Based on interviews with site staff, **the most common approach to involving families in decisionmaking was to elicit feedback from families and use that feedback to make programmatic and/or instructional decisions.** In fact, 87 percent of sites indicated that they

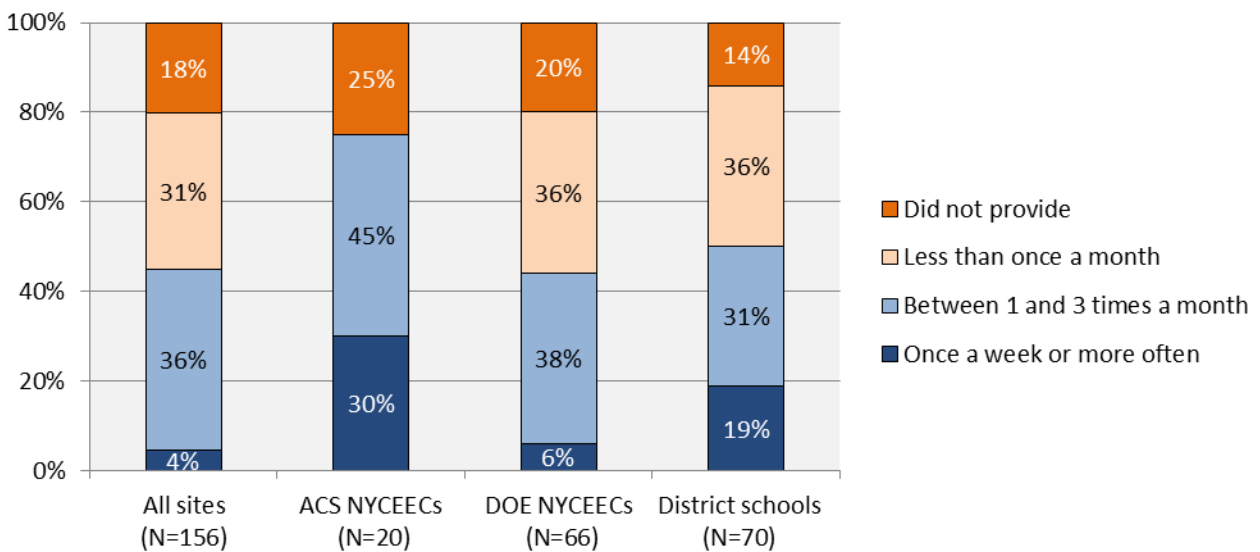
used feedback from families and caregivers for this purpose to a *large extent* (51 percent) or to a *moderate extent* (36 percent). Sites undertook a variety of activities to elicit feedback from families. Examples of these activities include:

- **Focus groups and surveys** asking families how they feel about the program and how it meets their and their children’s needs.
- **Surveys** to determine whether specific practices or policies should be implemented, for example, whether the site should adopt a school uniform.
- **Soliciting family involvement in site self-assessment**, to conduct classroom observations, interview teachers and other parents, and review external service providers in contract with the program.

The large majority of pre-K sites (82 percent) also reported providing family members with volunteer opportunities to join ad-hoc and ongoing decisionmaking groups and committees. Examples provided by staff at ACS NYCEEC sites included parents participating in the process of hiring teachers by reviewing candidates and annually electing a parent committee that meets monthly and reviews program policies. Other examples across sites included the opportunity to join parent-teacher associations and safety committees and creating a parent committee for each classroom.

Survey findings also indicate that the frequency of volunteer opportunities varied considerably across all sites and between ACS and DOE sites, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Site Leaders’ Reports of Frequency of Opportunities for Parents to Volunteer Outside of Classroom, by Site Type



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

DECE expects all pre-K sites to provide a welcoming environment for families. As described in *5 Pillars of Early Childhood Family Engagement in the Partnership Standards Framework*, a welcoming environment depends on effective practices in other areas of family engagement as well: programming needs to be collaborative and communication should be “sensitive” to families’ “linguistic, cultural, and social emotional needs.” Survey and interview findings also indicate that to develop a welcoming environment, many sites:

- host an initial orientation to the pre-K program for families;
- provide families with clear and accessible information about programming;
- provide the opportunity for family members to volunteer within the classroom; and
- organize celebratory events for families to attend.

Pre-K sites used frequent celebrations and events to engage with families.

Staff recognized the importance of sharing positive student accomplishments with families.

Open-door” policies were identified as highly effective means of creating welcoming environments and increasing engagement with families and caregivers.

Orientation Activities

Pre-K programs are expected to ease the transition of children into their program. Staff from almost all sites shared that they oriented families at the start of the year through activities and direct communication. Almost all sites (95 percent) reported providing an orientation for families and children at their site at the beginning of the school year. In addition, almost all sites (95 percent) provided families with information about their program. Staff noted that, along with information about the program and curriculum, it was important to also provide the contact information of site leaders and instructional staff.

Multiple sites emphasized the importance of allowing family members into the classroom at the start of the school year. While the length of time varied from days to weeks, this practice reportedly allowed family members to become better oriented to the pre-K program and cultivated a sense of transparency about the program.

Clear and Accessible Information

Survey responses indicate that most sites provided families and caregivers with updated information about schedules, programming, and events, as well as the units of study being covered in the classroom. **Over 90 percent of surveyed site leaders indicated that their program provided information about scheduled programming and events (93 percent of sites) and units of study (92 percent of sites) at least once a month.** However, 23 percent of site leaders (11 percent at ACS NYCEECs, 11 percent at DOE NYCEECs, and 39 percent at district schools) also reported that their site did not have a program handbook or written program policies that could be shared with families.

Family Events

Almost all sites (99 percent) reported cultivating a welcoming environment by organizing celebratory events for families and caregivers during the year. Furthermore, almost two-thirds (65 percent) of the

I had a grandparent [visit] once when I was in the classroom, I read "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" in English and then she read it in Chinese. So I read a page, she read a page, and it was fun. She didn't really understand English, but she knew what page we were on. [It allowed for the] conversation of "we're all different, we look differently, we behave differently, we speak different languages, and this is all okay and it makes us more interesting people." That's the message here: You be you, I'll be me, and it's okay. We're still friends.

Pre-K Teacher

surveyed site leaders indicated that their sites hosted these celebrations at least once a month. The descriptions of celebrations varied widely. One DOE NYCEEC site, for example, described hosting monthly celebrations for families after the completion of each curricular unit. Staff at another (ACS NYCEEC) site explained that they held a graduation ceremony, which was not only attended by family members, but also planned by them. Staff at multiple sites also described organizing cultural celebrations; staff at one DOE NYCEEC described hosting a celebration for each holiday.

Site leaders from all site types related creating events that were focused on recognizing the contributions of families. One ACS NYCEEC, for example, hosted an event for fathers, recognizing that they were generally under-recognized and under-engaged. As described by the program's site leader:

Sometimes fathers feel that the attention is paid to the mothers and not the fathers, so we have special events planned where they come in and meet with the teachers and the children, and they have, like, a day for fathers, fathers' recognition day, where they participate in a classroom activity.

A unique (among interviewed sites) approach described by a DOE NYCEEC site was hosting celebrations for each student. This site selected a different day for each child, on which the family would come in and talk to the class about the child. According to the site leader:

Each child has a special day where it's all about them. If you go into the hallway, see those big cut-outs of the children? That's each child's special day. So the mother comes in and they talk about how they chose the name, and everything about the child....It is so important that they each have their opportunity [to feel special.]...So that's a really wonderful thing, and the parents come and they talk about their child and celebrate the child, and then sometimes they bring food. It's a day that the child becomes queen of the day.

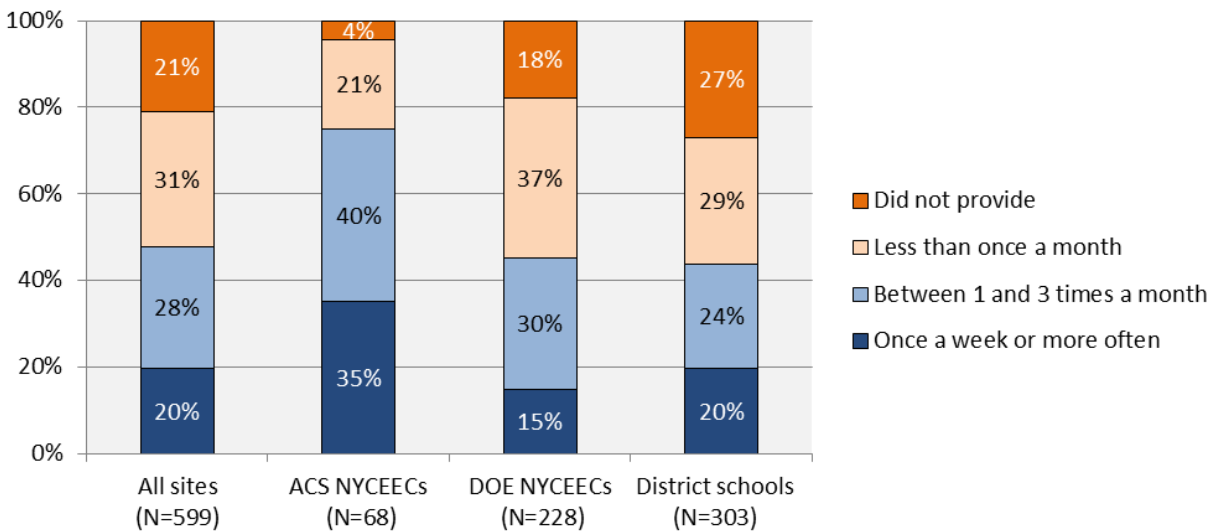
Other family events that sites described as taking place throughout the year included trips to cultural institutions such as museums, the library, and the aquarium, as well as family nights oriented toward providing families with an understanding of their child's program.

Opportunities to Volunteer in the Classroom

The majority of teachers (79 percent) reported providing parents with an opportunity to volunteer in the classroom. During interviews, teachers reported encouraging parents to attend classes and assist in a variety of ways, from giving presentations relevant to the particular unit being taught to sharing cultural practices. In addition, one out of every five pre-K teachers shared that they offered parents an

opportunity to volunteer in the classroom at least once a week or more frequently. Survey findings also indicate that teachers at ACS NYCEECs were more likely to indicate they offered these opportunities than were teachers at district schools (96 percent of teachers compared to 73 percent of teachers, respectively), as presented in Figure 7. These findings are consistent with sites' self-described willingness to offer out-of-classroom volunteer opportunities, as presented in the previous section.

Figure 7. Instructional Staff's Reports of Frequency With Which Teachers Provided Families With Classroom Volunteer Opportunities, by Site Type



Other Welcoming Practices

Interviewed instructional staff consistently described the importance of creating an “open-door” policy as a means of cultivating a welcoming environment. According to those interviewed, staff should always be accessible to families, and family members should feel empowered to reach out to staff with any concerns or ideas. For staff, remaining accessible included, for example, allowing for drop-in and unexpected visits from families, sharing staff’s contact information, being responsive to families’ questions and concerns, and being present and available during daily drop-off and program events.

Sharing students’ individual accomplishments on a regular basis was also cited by staff as an important means of increasing parent engagement. As a corollary to this practice, staff also recommended ensuring that their contact with families is well-balanced between potentially critical comments (e.g., feedback on behavioral or academic challenges) and accolades (e.g., sharing positive experiences). According to those interviewed, one effective means of this type of information-sharing was through pictures. At more than one site, teachers described taking pictures of student work and sharing these images with families. A teacher at a DOE NYCEEC explained the potential pathway between a picture and family engagement as follows:

Well, when I take pictures of the kids’ [work] I try to send the parents a picture a day, so that really gets them [to think] ‘Oh, that was so cute, I wish I was there’ and I’m like, ‘Oh, you could come here tomorrow if you want and we could do a project together.’

Teachers also related finding success in using online platforms (such as websites and Internet-based software programs) to facilitate the sharing of this information. Through the use of websites designed to

upload and share photos, teachers were able to easily document and distribute these classroom moments with relatively little effort.

EXTENDING LEARNING AT HOME AND PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Most sites provided families with extended learning activities, but staff voiced concerns about the burden on students and on working families that these expectations incur.

Parent workshops were provided by most sites at least once during the year, with topics ranging from important parenting skills to introductions to the *Pre-K for All* initiative's academic approach.

Sites recognized the importance of attending to families' overall well-being, for example, by helping parents and caregivers obtain economic and social supports and resources.

This section includes findings on three strategies for partnering with families for student success:

- the extension of learning into the home environment;
- the provision of family workshops; and
- the provision of services that support family well-being.

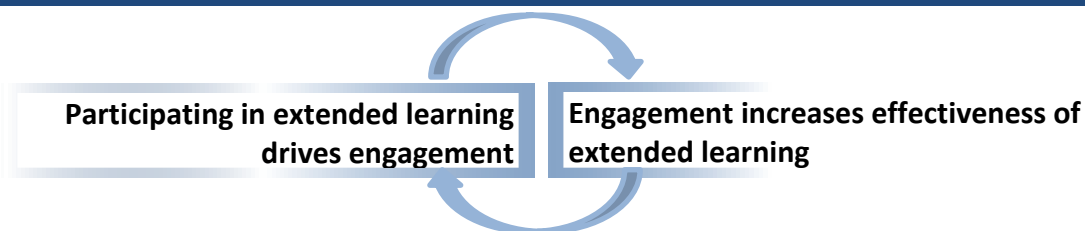
Extending Learning at Home

Best practices in family engagement include encouraging families to provide educational activities at home that align with, and complement, classroom lessons. When undertaken successfully, home and classroom learning become dynamically intertwined, with families reinforcing classroom lessons and teachers expanding on the at-home activities during classroom instruction.

Extended learning activities described by site leaders, teachers, and teacher assistants included guided activities such as creating a shopping list, taking children shopping, and reflecting on the experience afterwards; academic enrichment activities such as the review of vocabulary words; family activities such as trips to the aquarium; and experiences such as planting seeds. According to interviewed staff, examples of extended learning also include the practice of basic skills that are identified by teachers as needing reinforcement. Some parents, for example, were asked to practice using scissors with their children or making sculptures out of modeling clay as a means of developing hand-eye coordination.

Extended learning was found to have a complex relationship with family engagement, as shown in Figure 8. **In some instances, strong family engagement was described as necessary for extended learning to be successful.** That is, without an engaged family, learning cannot be successfully extended into the home environment. **In other instances, extended learning was described as being a preliminary means of building engagement with families.** When understood this way, extended learning became a tool through which strong family engagement could be cultivated. In these instances, it was an entry-point for families to become involved in their children's academic development.

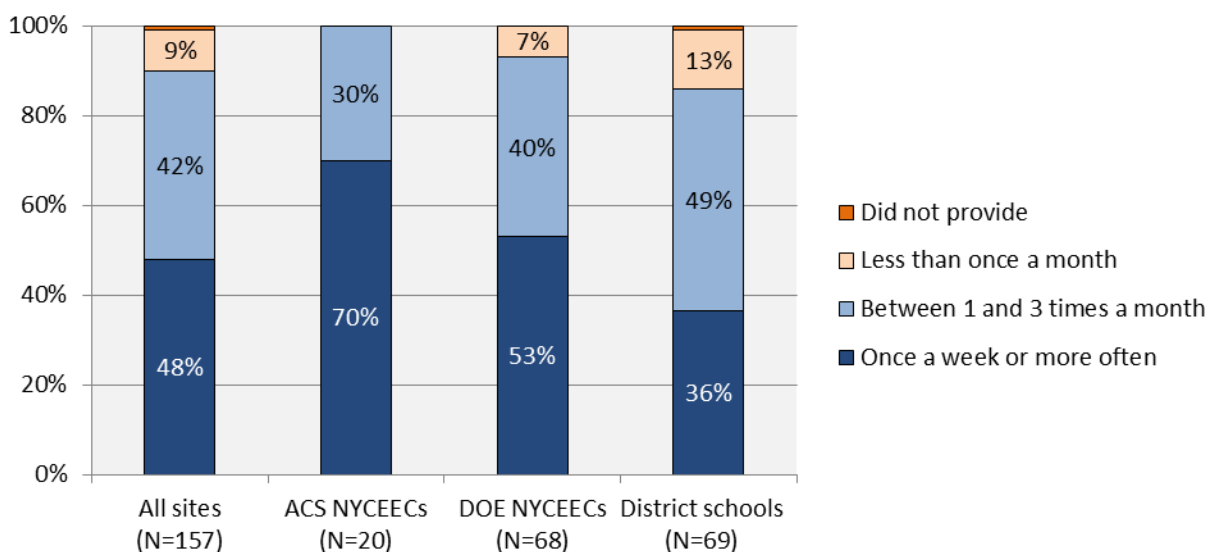
Figure 8. Extended Learning and Family Engagement



Almost all surveyed sites (90 percent) responded that they provided families with written materials about extended learning activities at least once a month. Furthermore, respondents at almost half of the surveyed sites indicated that they provided these materials either weekly (40 percent) or daily (8 percent). The frequency with which extended learning activities are suggested to families and caregivers can indicate the extent to which the activities are closely aligned to the classroom lessons. Based on the feedback of those interviewed, daily communications were more likely to be tied to specific lessons just taught, while monthly communications were more likely to correspond to the curricular unit being taught that month.

Survey findings also indicate substantial differences in the reported frequency of these communications by type of pre-K program, as presented in Figure 9. While 70 percent of ACS NYCEECs reported providing this information at least once a week, only 53 percent of DOE NYCEECs and 36 percent of district schools reported doing this with the same frequency. As noted earlier, this could be the result of ACS sites requiring specific structures and practices around family engagement and therefore could explain some of the differences observed between ACS NYCEECs and DOE sites.

Figure 9. Site Leaders' Reports of Frequency of Providing Families With Written Materials About Extended Learning Activities, by Site Type



Note: Percentages of less than 3 percent are not labeled.

Feedback from site leaders and teachers indicate variation across sites in the manner in which they encouraged families to undertake extended learning activities at home. Common strategies that were described by study participants include using weekly and monthly newsletters to provide information

about extended learning activities such as “family projects that can be undertaken together.” Multiple sites also reported giving families “weekly assignments,” usually provided at the end of each week for families to work on over the weekend. Handouts were also reported to be used to communicate extended learning activities and expectations, as were emails and other forms of electronic communication.

Furthermore, during site visits, multiple sites discussed how they **support extended learning by encouraging families to view the routine activities as potential learning experiences**. This type of approach was especially popular among both ACS and DOE NYCEECs. An example provided by one site was helping parents understand how a weekly trip to the grocery store can be a learning experience if the child is brought along.

Yet, study results suggest that other sites may need further guidance from DOE on how to develop effective and flexible extended learning opportunities for families. For example, several site leaders and staff shared that they were hesitant to make extended learning an expectation, perhaps because of what could be considered a narrow view of what constitutes extended learning opportunities. Some teachers, for example, considered themselves “on the fence” about what they saw as a very structured nature of many extended learning activities, noting that after a full-day of pre-K programming, it might not be the right choice for students to force them to sit for more activities. As one teacher described, “so if they’ve had such a long structured day and they’re going home to more structure...it is overwhelming.”

Effective extension of learning, according to the DECE, includes the incorporation of the extended learning activities into subsequent in-school lessons. This more challenging element of family engagement was indicated as being undertaken to a *moderate* or *large extent* by two-thirds of the surveyed pre-K sites, (with 23 percent of site leaders indicating their sites do this to a *large extent*). Staff often described this aspect of extended learning as the most exciting since it offered opportunities for children to present their work to the class and also offered opportunities for parents to attend class with their children and present their projects together. At the same time, multiple site staff recognized that this was also an area of risk, since, they shared, it was not uncommon for students to feel isolated or left out if their family did not have an opportunity to help with their extended learning project.

Finally, some site staff reported that **extended learning was not limited to academic subjects**. Extended learning was also described as cultivating and supporting children’s social experiences and social development. An example provided was pairing children with “friends of the week” and encouraging families to build off of these in-class activities by asking their children about their weekly friends and exploring the concept of friendship.

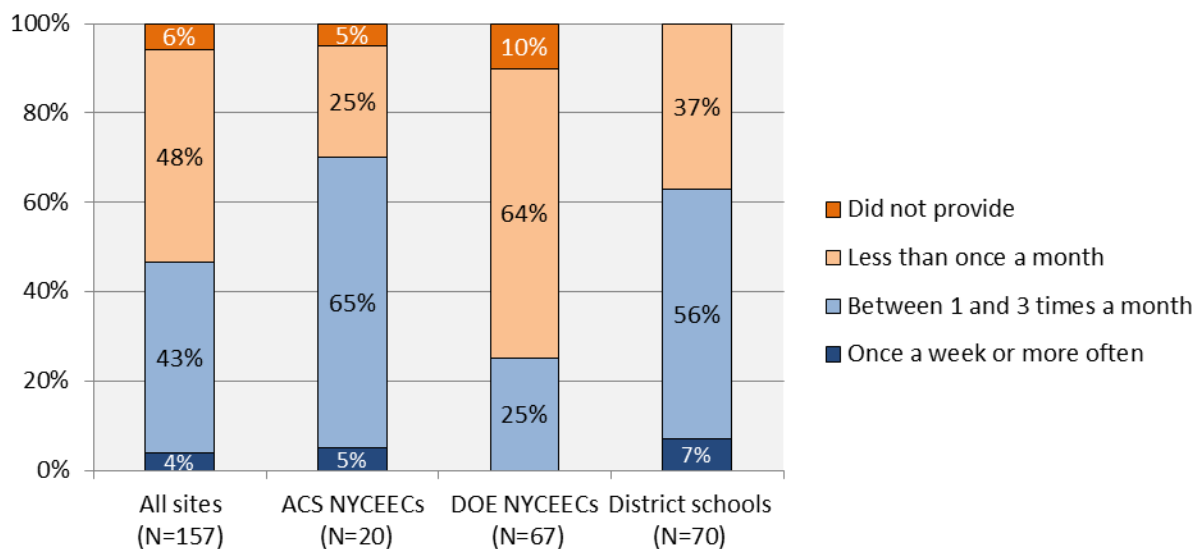
Family Workshops

Almost every site (95 percent) reported offering at least one parent workshop during the year, and 47 percent of sites reported a frequency of at least once a month. According to those interviewed the workshops were a valuable means of ensuring that family members had the necessary skills to support their children’s academic and social-emotional development at home. Sites were also described as using workshops to ensure that families were aware of basic strategies for effective parenting.

Survey findings indicate that ACS NYCEECs and district school sites were far more likely to report hosting family workshops than were DOE NYCEECs. Furthermore, a small proportion of programs at both ACS NYCEECs (5 percent) and district schools (7 percent) reported holding weekly workshops,

suggesting a high level of commitment to keeping families involved and informed. Figure 10 presents the frequency of parent workshops by type of site.

Figure 10. Site Leaders' Reports of Frequency of Family Workshops, by Site Type



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Workshops were offered on a variety of topics, falling within three general categories:

- Introduction to the *Pre-K for All* initiative's academic approach.** Staff at the various types of pre-K sites related their use of workshops to introduce families to pre-K program's overall pedagogical approach as well as their site-specific approach. Topics described included introducing the Common Core and strategies that teachers planned to use to teach English language arts and math. By familiarizing families with the classroom units, site staff believed they were also supporting the extended learning that was taking place. An example of such a workshop was how to teach literacy to one's children, which included elements such as "how to read to children, how to pull information out of a story, how to create puppets [based on book characters], how to create stuff from a book."

And I think a lot of the parents just don't know what it is that we do all day and what the curriculum allows for us to do and the guidelines that we have to follow. We can't just do whatever we want. ... So, I think to really explain it to them in a full way of, "this is what you can expect, this is what we're going to do, obviously if you have any questions throughout the year feel free to ask, but these are also our limitations."

Pre-K Teacher

The described workshop topics also reflected a challenge faced by sites wherein many families are, according to those interviewed, unfamiliar with play-based learning and other elements of the *Pre-K for All* initiative's model. Teachers indicated an ongoing need to inform families about age-appropriate practices, the importance of play-based learning, and the fact that pre-K programs follow a rigorous curriculum chosen by the site.

- Important parenting skills and risk mitigation.** Interviewed site leaders and instructional staff also explained that many of the workshops conducted during the year focused on providing families with

important parenting skills. Workshops of this type presented topics such as preventing and recognizing child abuse, nutrition and the prevention of childhood obesity, pedestrian safety, bedtime routines, and behavior management at home. Staff noted that these skill-based trainings were often most needed by parents and that these trainings also helped parents (who might otherwise be unaware of the requirements) prepare their children to meet the developmental expectations for students entering kindergarten.

- **Transitions into pre-K and kindergarten.** Workshops were also offered, according to site leaders and instructional staff, in support of student's transition into pre-K and transition from pre-K to kindergarten (see following section for more detail). One exemplary workshop (offered at an ACS NYCEEC) was described by a site leader as follows:

We did do the transition to kindergarten workshop. I invited all different local charter, private, and public schools here. Representatives from each of the schools...had tables upstairs, they brought information about their schools. I had three speakers from the different schools that made a panel. And then all my parents that are going to be transitioning to kindergarten were able to come here and find out about the whole process.

In addition, site staff described holding workshops on topics requested directly by families. This was described as an effective means of family engagement, although scheduling workshops in such a way that working parents could attend was also cited as a significant challenge by the majority of sites.

Supporting Family Well-Being

An element of sites' partnering for student success was their attention to families' general well-being. **Site leaders and instructional staff indicated that the academic success of students was intrinsically tied to well-being of their families, and therefore, effective family engagement had to include other types of services.** Multiple sites described helping families navigate the complex process of registering for income supports, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Some sites also described helping families to find stable housing and healthcare providers, often with the assistance of the DECE social worker. When asked what additional resources they would want to receive from the city, staff at more than one site indicated that they would appreciate information on the availability of local providers so that they could better assist families.

SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS

Site feedback indicates that site leaders and instructional staff invested a great deal of time into supporting families as their children transition from pre-K into kindergarten. Support for families falls into two categories.

- **Pre-K sites helped families understand what is necessary for their children to be ready for kindergarten.** Elements of school readiness include academic and behavioral prerequisites as well as helping families and children become comfortable with the transition and the upcoming kindergarten experience. According to surveyed site leaders, every pre-K site educated families on how they can prepare

Many site staff helped families with the logistics of the kindergarten application process.

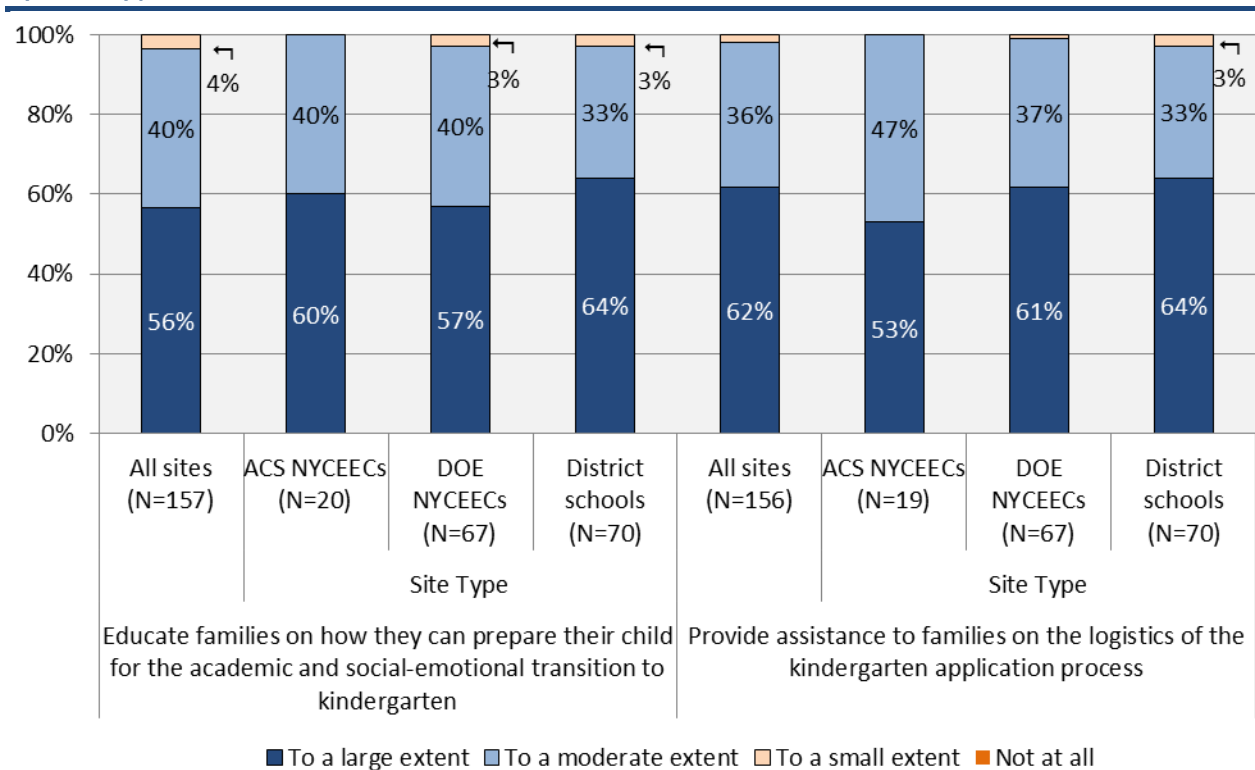
When possible, staff guided families through the process of choosing an appropriate kindergarten for their child.

their children for both the academic and the social-emotional transition to kindergarten, with 56 percent indicating they did this to a *large extent* and 40 percent indicating to a *moderate extent*.

- **Pre-K sites helped families navigate the process of applying to kindergarten at both public and private schools.** Not only did site staff report helping families with the logistics of the kindergarten application process, they also said they helped families identify the best school choice for their children. According to surveyed site leaders, every pre-K site also assisted families this way, with 62 percent of sites providing this type of assistance to a *large extent* and 36 percent of sites to a *moderate extent*.

Pre-K sites of all types supported families in the transition to kindergarten to a relatively equal extent, as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Site Leaders’ Reports of Extent of Support for Students’ Transition to Kindergarten, by Site Type



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Percentages of less than 3 percent are not labeled.

To support the kindergarten application process, sites described undertaking multiple efforts, including:

- **Providing reminders to families about the kindergarten application process, starting early in the year.** As described by study participants, reminders included banners and signs, use of pre-recorded automated

I pretty much have a timeline for them, so ever since we reached eight months to kindergarten, I'm reminding the parents. Eight more months until kindergarten! Seven more months to kindergarten! We're trying to help the parents learn what their child needs help with in order to succeed better in kindergarten.

Pre-K Teacher

calls with messages from the site leader, sharing information at parent-teacher conferences, and the continuing availability of kindergarten applications during pick-up, drop-off, and family events. Sites reported beginning the kindergarten application process with a group orientation, followed by tours of local schools. For example, one ACS NYCEEC described hosting a “family meeting” in February to introduce the process, and then offering school tours in May and June. Other sites mentioned hosting fairs at which representatives from local school representatives would present their schools to families.

- **Directly assisting families with the completion of kindergarten applications.** Staff at multiple pre-K sites shared the belief that they had a responsibility to lead families through each step of the process, both because of its complexity and because it was particularly challenging for those families without technological literacy. Staff at an ACS NYCEEC explained that many of their families do not have the ability to complete the application online and, because they lacked Internet access, were not receiving the DOE’s emails about the process. At other sites, staff reported having to translate the application and materials for parents who were not comfortable with English, indicating that families spoke a language other than one of the nine into which DECE translates official materials. Toward this end, staff at one DOE NYCEEC reported meeting with each family to complete the application forms together.
- **Using registration information provided by the Department of Education to follow up with families that have not yet submitted an application.** At more than one pre-K site, instructional staff described how they received information on which families had registered which enabled them to follow up with families that had not yet applied and provide additional assistance when needed.
- **Advising families on how best to select a kindergarten program for their children.** According to those interviewed, site staff guided families through the various school options whenever possible and, when appropriate, helped the families understand the implications of their children’s education and/or behavioral needs for their school choice. As a teacher explained,

We have fliers and all the things that we give parents to let them know when [local elementary schools] have open school night or open school day, and when [the parents] come back, they let us know what they observed or how they felt, and we also give them some guidance as to what their child’s needs are and what they should be looking for [in a school].

Site staff described sharing information with families about local schools and the differences between charter schools, public schools, and private schools, as well as information about the testing procedures for the city’s gifted and talented programs.

Interview findings also indicate that supports for families may be different at NYCEECs or pre-K programs that are part of an elementary school compared to free-standing sites. At a charter school, for example, all pre-K students are automatically enrolled in their kindergarten if they choose to be (according to interviewed staff), so site staff described the transition as relatively smooth. At other programs located in private elementary schools, it was reported that families are given information about the public school system in general as well as information about applying to a particular school.

On the other hand, staff at programs located in district schools explained that the lack of automatic enrollment in kindergarten for students in their pre-K program was often confusing for families. Some

staff also indicated they were unclear on how eligibility for their pre-K programs aligned with enrollment areas for district elementary schools.

RESOURCES FOR SUPPORTING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

This section presents findings on the resources that instructional staff and site leaders reported receiving to support family engagement practices. Instructional staff and site leaders generally indicated receiving three types of supports:

- DECE staff support from DECE;
- Print materials and policy guides;
- Professional development.

Overall, the majority of site staff perceived these supports as being helpful. Approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of site leaders, teachers, and teacher assistants found each type of support to be *very* or *moderately helpful*.

It should be noted that in addition to these supports, site leaders and instructional staff may also have been supported by the program's own staff, including social workers, family workers, and parent coordinators. While these positions were sometimes described as being shared between programs (e.g., a parent coordinator might serve both the pre-K program and the elementary school in the same building), staff spoke highly of their support. Staff also shared that the additional support was especially helpful for teachers and teacher assistants because of the time-intensive nature of family engagement practices.

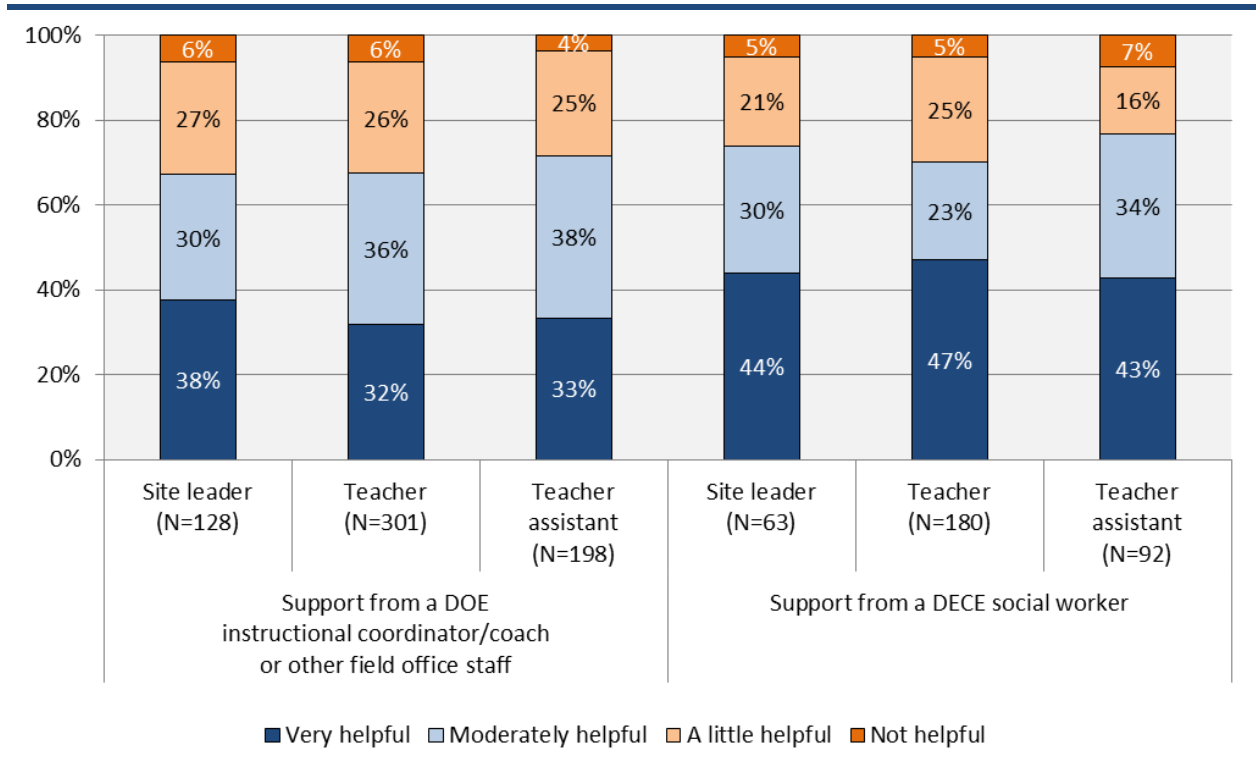
DECE STAFF SUPPORT

Pre-K sites received support from DOE DECE coaches and other field staff and from DECE social workers.

- **In 2014–15, all site types were eligible to receive support from a DECE coach** (responsible for providing a wide range of instructional and logistical supports and resources for site leaders and staff) or other field office staff. Four out of five pre-K sites (80 percent) reported that they received support from a DECE coach or other field office staff in the areas of family engagement. These staff were most likely to provide support to DOE NYCEECs (91 percent), followed by ACS NYCEECs (80 percent), and district schools (74 percent). The majority of instructional staff (68 percent of teachers and 71 percent of teacher assistants) reported that the support of the DECE coaches or other field office staff was *moderately* or *very helpful*.
- **In 2014–15, DECE social workers were assigned primarily to district schools. Their role was to build the capacity of Pre-K for All sites to provide a socially-emotionally safe learning environment for children and to empower families to support their children's education in pre-K and beyond.** Through weekly visits, they worked with site leaders, teachers, and families, providing a wide range of supports, including observations, coaching, facilitating workshops and conversations, and collaborating on setting goals based on observations and other data sources. In 2014–15, 85 percent of district schools in the study sample (and 80 percent overall) reported receiving this support. At these district schools, the majority of staff indicated that support from the DECE social workers was *moderately* or *very helpful*.

Site leaders' and instructional staff's perceptions of support provided by DOE staff are presented in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Perceptions of DECE Staff Support, as Reported by Site Leaders and Instructional Staff



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

DECE social workers were also assigned, on a limited basis, to a subset of DOE NYCEECs and ACS NYCEECs following a leadership resourcing model.⁹ They worked directly with site leaders to strengthen family engagement and behavioral support through capacity building visits, phone conversations, and email conversations. These visits took place between February 2015 and the end of the academic year.

PRINT MATERIALS AND POLICY GUIDES

In interviews, pre-K staff reported using materials written by the DOE to support their family engagement practice in two ways.

- **Staff at sites of all types indicated that they accessed DOE printed materials and shared them directly with families.** They reported using materials such as information on the kindergarten application process (as well as the school directory), recommended activities for extended learning, and

Yes, we have letters, newsletters that are wonderful, that are also translated into Spanish that we have been able to use to inform them of what's going on with the curriculum. And those have been great.

Pre-K Site Leader

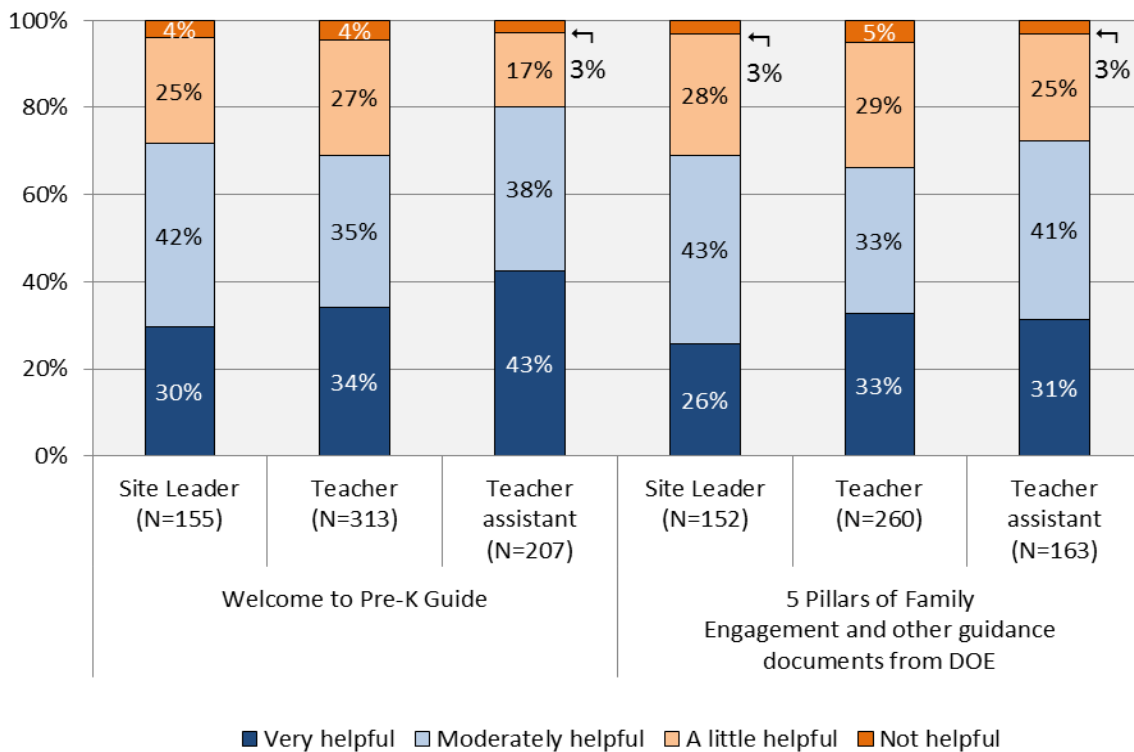
⁹ According to DECE, this model was implemented in 14 percent of DOE NYCEECs and 21 percent of ACS NYCEECs.

newsletters or program guidance materials. These resources were considered especially useful by sites that had limited resources to create their own materials.

- **Staff at almost all study sites indicated that they received policy guidance and documentation from the DOE on how best to implement family engagement.** Almost all sites indicated that they had received the *Welcome to Pre-K* guide (97 percent) and other documents from the DOE, including the *5 Pillars of Family Engagement* (94 percent). Site leaders were most likely to have reported receiving these materials (97 percent), followed by teachers (86 percent), and teacher assistants (81 percent). The percentages of staff who reported having received the *5 Pillars of Family Engagement* document was 94 percent of site leaders, 72 percent of teachers, and 65 percent of teacher assistants. In interviews, staff reported using these types of materials to inform their sites' policies and practices.

The majority of staff that reported receiving the DOE materials found them to be *moderately or very helpful*, with teacher assistants finding them the most helpful, followed by site leaders, and teachers. Site leaders' and instructional staff's perceptions of the usefulness of these documents are presented in Figure 13.

Figure 13. Perceptions of Written Guidance on Family Engagement, as Reported by Site Leaders and Instructional Staff



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Administrators were offered opportunities to participate in training and professional development on family engagement practices offered by both the DOE and other sources.

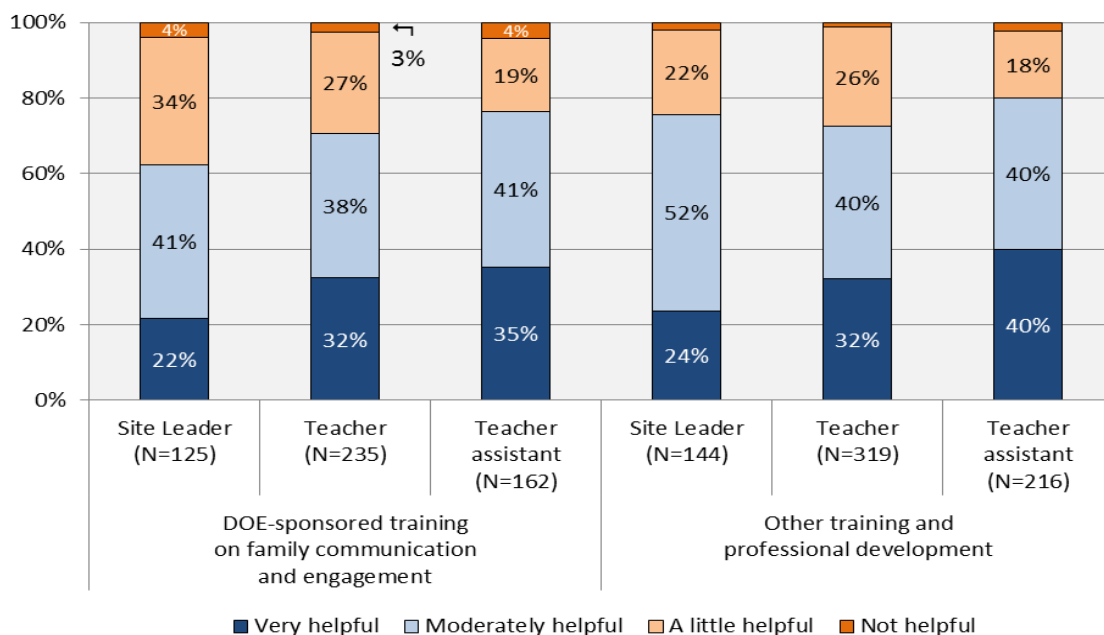
Most of the surveyed site leaders (78 percent) reported having participated in a DOE-sponsored training on family communication and engagement, and almost all (91 percent) also said they had attended at least one other training and/or professional development opportunity provided by external vendors or onsite staff. Those surveyed had mixed opinions about these sessions. While almost half of the site leaders found these trainings to be *moderately helpful*, the remaining administrators were relatively evenly divided between those who found the trainings to be *very helpful* and those who found them only *a little helpful*. Generally, sites found the non-DOE-sponsored trainings to be slightly more helpful than those provided by the DOE. A possible explanation for these differences is that sites were able to determine for themselves the subject matter of the other trainings, which were typically provided onsite.

DOE and ACS sites received both types of trainings (those sponsored by the DOE and those provided by external vendors). Survey results indicate that site leaders of ACS NYCEECs found the other trainings more helpful than the DOE trainings. It should be noted that ACS NYCEECs were less likely to receive the DOE trainings at all; only 55 percent of site leaders at ACS sites indicated that they or their teachers received training from the DOE on family engagement.

The participation rates of instructional staff were very similar to those of site leaders; 65 percent of instructional staff surveyed reported having attended DOE trainings and 86 percent of instructional staff responded that they had participated in other trainings. Almost all teachers and teacher assistants reported that both types of trainings were at least *a little helpful*, but survey findings clearly indicate teacher assistants gained more from the trainings than teachers.

Site leaders' and instructional staff's perceptions of the training and professional development are presented in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Perceptions of Training and Professional Development on Family Engagement, as Reported by Site Leaders and Instructional Staff



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

CHALLENGES AND REQUESTED SUPPORTS

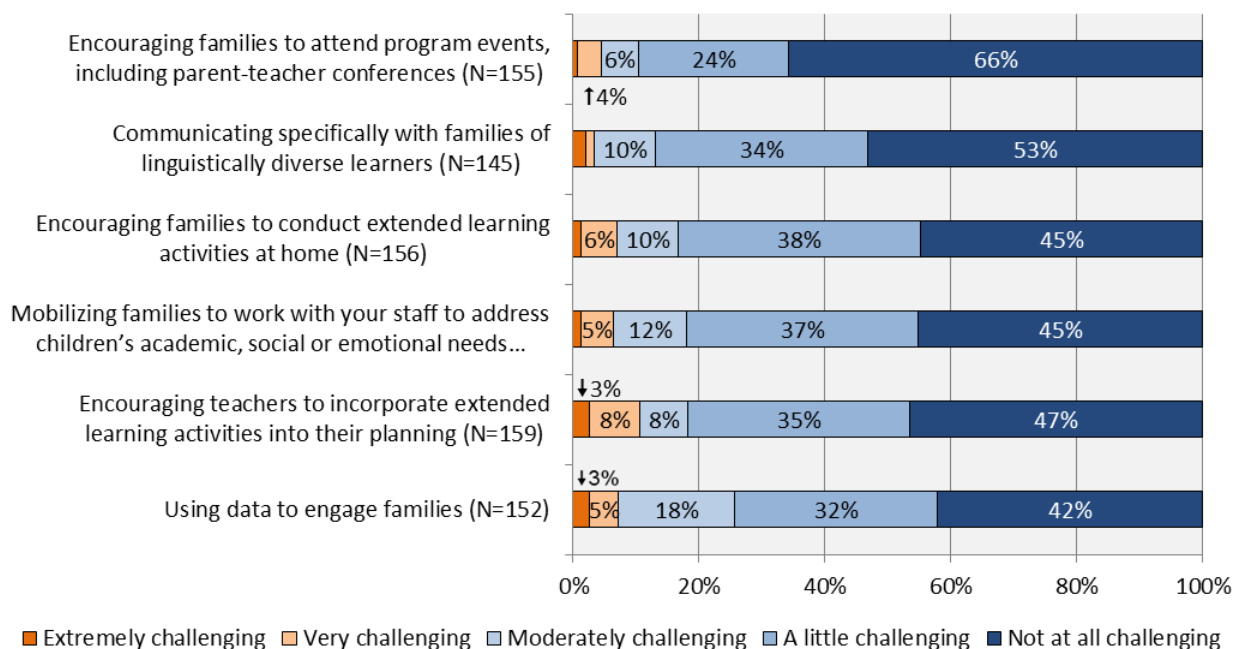
This section discusses the challenges and additional needed supports, as cited by site leaders and instructional staff. The findings represent the perceived barriers to effective family engagement faced by pre-K sites as well as perceived opportunities for improvement.

CHALLENGES

Surveyed site leaders and instructional staff were asked to rate the extent to which the core elements of effective family engagement presented a challenge during the past program year. **Overall, the large majority of site leaders and staff rated each area as *not at all challenging or a little challenging*.** The proportion of site leaders rating these as *moderately to extremely challenging* ranged from 7 percent to 26 percent, depending on the type of challenge.

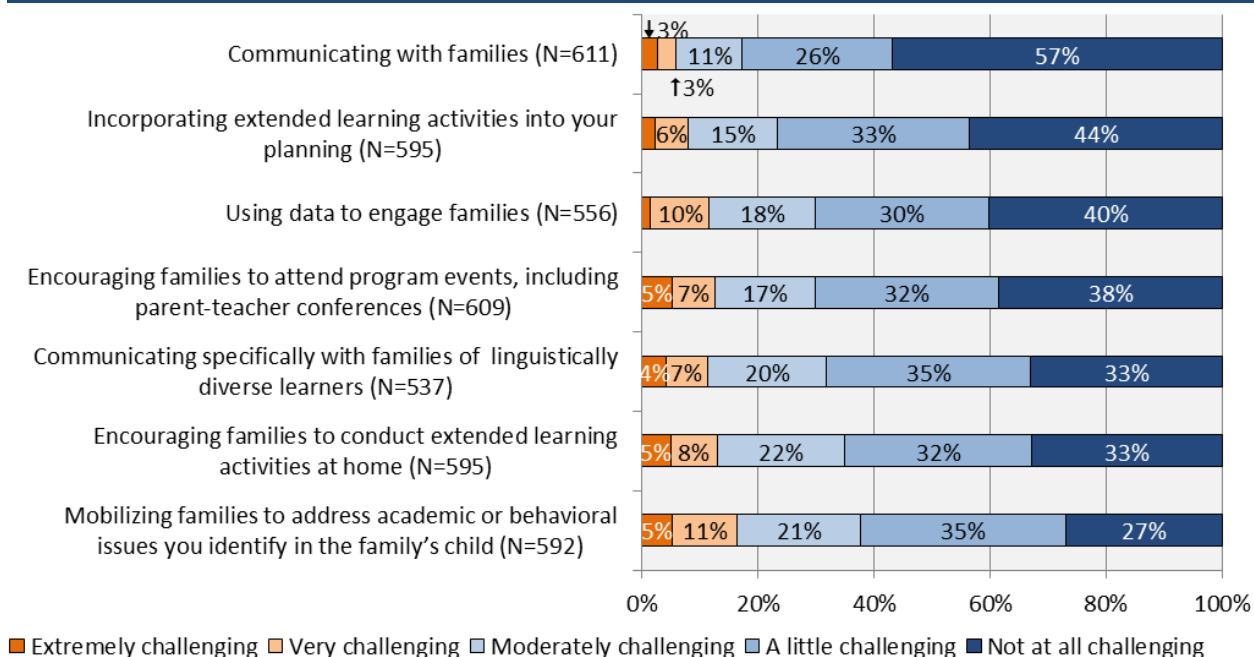
As depicted in Figures 15 and 16, the top challenges shared by both program staff and site leaders were (1) encouraging families to conduct extended learning activities at home and (2) mobilizing families to address academic or behavioral issues.

Figure 15. Site Leaders' Views of Challenges to Engaging Families



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Percentages of less than 3 percent are not labeled.

Figure 16. Instructional Staff's Views of Challenges to Engaging Families



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Percentages of less than 3 percent are not labeled.

According to interviewed site leaders and instructional staff, it was particularly challenging to mobilize families to address academic or behavioral issues for several reasons. First, staff found it difficult to broach the topic of behavioral challenges without family members becoming defensive. Second, staff felt unable to lead families through the process of referring students for special education services, which they found to be overwhelmingly complex. One teacher described this challenge and the possible solution of focusing the conversation on the practical elements:

When they're first coming to us and their child has issues and they are in denial, I think that's a challenge. ...It's like figuring out the right way to approach it. With [one] child, I just focused on his fine motor [skills]. I didn't say 'I think your son's got a lot of issues.' I just say, 'you know, he can't hold a pencil, let's get him evaluated.' I needed that [approach] with mom, [since] she didn't really want to do it. Because she knew [what the result would be].

The challenges identified in the interviews with site leaders and instructional staff were consistent with the survey results. Across all types of sites, the consensus emerged that although effective family engagement and communication required the active participation of pre-K staff as well as families to be successful, **pre-K programs faced a series of barriers which prevented communication from becoming as collaborative and effective as possible:**

- Accessibility of families (scheduling).** Across all sites, the foremost challenge raised by those interviewed was the difficulty of communicating and engaging with working parents that are balancing many competing family priorities. Program staff reiterated that despite their best efforts, many parents did not respond to their communications and/or did not take advantage of opportunities for engagement. Program staff readily acknowledged the difficulty of scheduling family activities when the program takes place entirely during the workday. While pick-up was emphasized, for example, as a highly effective time to engage with families, staff noted that it was

unfair to expect working parents to be available mid-afternoon to pick up their child. In fact, a common complaint among program staff was that other family members and caregivers (grandparents, relatives, siblings, friends, neighbors, and babysitters) would often drop off and pick up students, thereby limiting their ability to engage with the parents directly. Given these challenges, site staff should adhere to a broadened understanding of “family” to include extended family members and other caregivers.

Program staff also indicated that they were unable to increase the flexibility of their own schedules to accommodate families’ schedules. For example, staff described themselves as often unavailable in the evenings or weekends and, according to one site leader, teachers and teacher assistants are not compensated enough for them to work overtime. Given these challenges, site leaders should explore other means of engaging families such as the use of technology that allows for communication with families without placing an additional burden on instructional staff.

- **Families speaking a home language other than English.** Program staff across sites also emphasized the difficulty of communicating and engaging with families that were not proficient in English. Although sites reported access to translated materials, and most indicated that they employed staff who spoke languages other than English, this remained a frequently cited challenge. While communication was often possible, opportunities for *meaningful* engagement were often limited. One reason for this was that the need for planned translation reduced the ability to have organically occurring and unplanned conversations with families.

The children in our neighborhood, the families are predominantly from India, so the language is Punjabi, Urdu, but the children are taught in English. Communication is in English. If we can find something that’s translated—which on the DOE website, you can, which is nice—then we will send it home to the families in the translation, but we don’t have a specific staff person to [translate] at this point.

Pre-K Teacher

- **Need for pre-K sites to broaden the scope of their engagement to include family well-being.** Staff at more than one site explained that family engagement was also focused on ensuring that families had access to economic, social, and governmental supports. Recognizing this as a worthwhile priority, they felt underequipped to support families in this area. Teachers noted that adults in the family and students both needed social services, and until these services were provided, families were less able to support the academic development of their children.

ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Evaluation findings indicate that site leaders and instructional staff would benefit from additional supports. They identified needs in the following three areas: materials, professional development, and support from DECE staff.

Materials

The materials provided by the DOE were considered to be generally helpful by the majority of surveyed site staff; however, those interviewed did have suggestions for how the materials could be improved.

Overall, staff explained that they needed additional materials that could be shared directly with

families more than they needed additional materials to inform their own practices. Site requests included:

- **Materials in languages other than English.** In particular, sites asked for materials that would allow for extended learning activities to be provided in multiple languages, for example, materials for parents and children to read together in their home language.
- **Additional online information that families can access directly, with a particular emphasis on supporting transitions to and from pre-K.** Staff indicated that the DOE should provide information on the transition to kindergarten that is oriented more toward the behavioral elements of school readiness than toward the Common Core and other academic expectations.

Professional Development

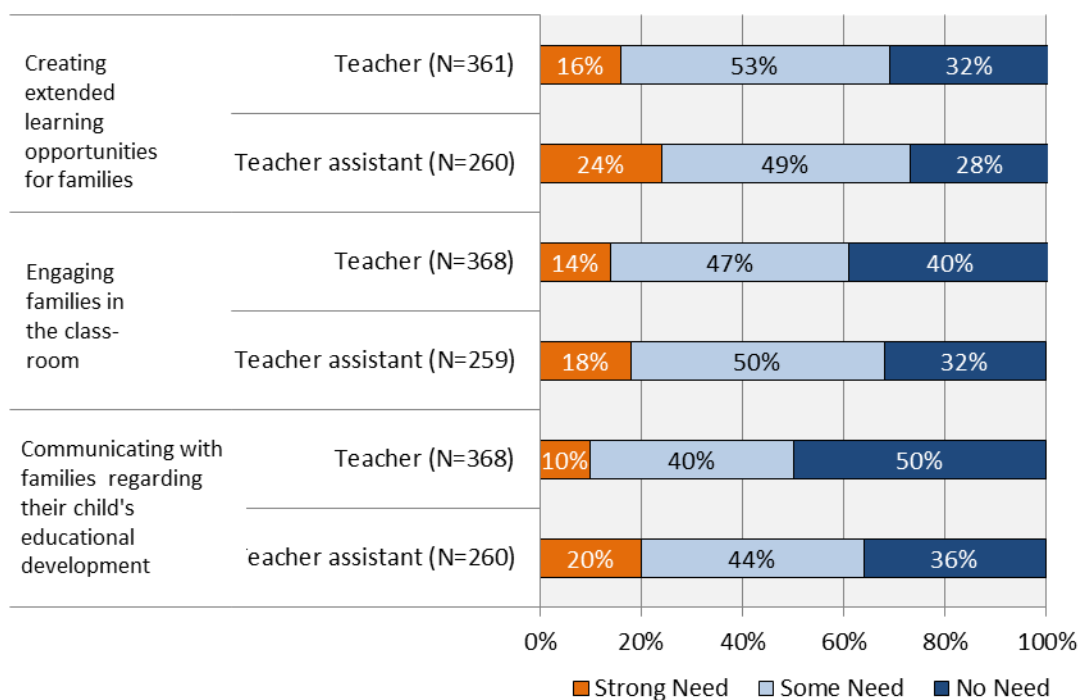
The professional development and trainings provided by DOE were considered to be generally helpful by the majority of surveyed of site staff. Nevertheless, survey respondents indicated a need for additional training. Among instructional staff,

- 70 percent indicated a need for additional guidance on how to create extended learning opportunities for families.
- 63 percent indicated a need for additional guidance on how to engage families in the classroom.
- 56 percent indicated a need for additional guidance on how to communicate with families regarding their child's educational development.

Survey findings also indicate that while instructional staff have a clear interest in receiving additional professional development, site leaders felt largely confident in their ability to continue training their staff as they have been. Only one-quarter of site leaders (26 percent) reported that they would like to receive support on how to train their staff on effectively engaging families. The remaining three-quarters reported that they did not need this additional guidance. This may indicate a lack of self-awareness regarding the need for additional training and support and/or belief that additional training would not help address the challenges that have emerged.

Furthermore, survey findings identify differences in training needs between teachers and teacher assistants, with teacher assistants reporting a stronger need for professional development. These differences are presented in Figure 17.

Figure 17. Instructional Staff's Views of Additional Support Needed to Engage Families



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Finally, those interviewed also had a number of recommendations for additional training related to family engagement. Topics that emerged as most requested were:

- **Training on communicating with families about social-emotional and behavioral challenges.** Staff indicated that they would benefit from professional development on how to constructively communicate with families about the social-emotional and behavioral challenges of their children.
- **Training on how to obtain special education services for pre-K students.** Staff at some sites indicated that they were underprepared to lead families through the special education evaluation process and that they were unsure of their own responsibilities during and after the initial referrals.
- **Additional training on where to find information among the DOE websites for families.** Some site staff recognized that there was a breadth of information available for families online but did not feel knowledgeable about where that information could be found.
- **Detailed training on the kindergarten application process as well as how to support families in selecting the most appropriate school for their children.** Some site staff indicated that they did not feel well equipped to guide families through this application process. As a teacher at an ACS NYCEE explained, "I honestly don't even know how the process works. I don't know any schools around here." This latter concern was echoed elsewhere by teachers who felt unable to explain the strengths and weaknesses of the school choices.
- **Trainings on local resources for making referrals.** Staff recognized the importance of being able to refer families to local service providers (e.g., healthcare, housing), but some of them did not feel they had sufficient knowledge about the local services that were available to support families.

DECE Staff Support

According to interviewed site staff, DECE social workers were particularly helpful with linking families to external service providers, helping to translate materials, and working with families to address students' behavioral and learning-related challenges. Yet, across sites, staff consistently indicated that they would "like to see more social workers supporting the parents." Sites also consistently agreed that social workers should increase their involvement in the special education evaluation process, a complicated element of the pre-K program that requires a high level of family engagement with the potential to alter the relationship between families and teachers.

SITE STAFF'S VIEWS OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

This section, addressing research question four, presents the most successful strategies for effectively engaging with families as identified by site staff. Site leaders, lead teachers, and teacher assistants were encouraged to look beyond particular techniques and instead identify the broad approaches that they would recommend to others. From these responses, the following seven strategies emerged as most important. These strategies represent current practices that are being undertaken across pre-K sites but that have not yet become normalized as standard elements of the *Pre-K for All* initiative's implementation. Thus, the strategies can be understood as kernels of effective family engagement to be further explored and where feasible, supported and encouraged.

According to interviewed site leaders, teachers, and teaching assistants, the following are the most successful and effective strategies for family engagement and communication.

- **Incorporating parent empowerment and recognition**—According to interviewed site leaders, teachers, and teacher assistants, family recognition is important. Even if they do not immediately become active participants, a precursor of family engagement is a parent's sense of empowerment. According to one site administrator, it is important that "they are recognized, and they have some sort of power over the decisions that are made here." Those interviewed shared that elements ranging from structured parent councils to informal open-door policies can all lead to the feeling among families that they are actively valued. Other practices that sites described using to increase this sense of value were family events and celebrations and having parents participate in the staff hiring process. According to one site leader, the most successful strategy was giving parents the opportunity to meet with program leaders. At this site, this meant offering parents an opportunity to have coffee with the school principal and the site's executive director. Other means of fostering recognition highlighted by those interviewed as particularly successful were the creation of family celebratory events such as "dad's day" and providing opportunities for families to showcase a talent or contribute in the same way to the classroom.
- **Using multiple means of communication**—Above all, among those interviewed, it was important to use multiple methods to communicate with families. Staff emphasized the importance of pairing electronic communication (such as email and text messaging) with regular, face-to-face encounters. Staff believed that using multiple methods both enables sites to reach more families and reinforces the message. In addition, staff emphasized that different types of communication can be undertaken with different frequency. As described by one teacher, "the newsletters give them an overall view of the month. Then just talking to them on a daily basis. [Then,] if they're absent we'll

call them and discuss what happened.” Related to this, staff at more than one site emphasized the importance of constant reminders. As a teacher at a NYCEEC explained:

Reminders, reminders, reminders. We remind them in the morning when they drop them off. We remind them in evening when they pick them up. It's just a constant reminder because a lot of them are so busy that they forget.

Finally, another NYCEEC indicated as its most successful family engagement strategy the creation of a parent communication center:

We have a parent communication center outside their door, so all notices that they might have not taken out of the folder are available for them to take, and everything their [children] are doing that particular day is written on the whiteboard.

- **Prioritizing verbal, face-to-face communication with families**—Face-to-face communication was considered invaluable among those interviewed to cultivate family engagement. Staff indicated that this was incredibly important for creating strong relationships with family members. Face-to-face interaction was reported to take place most often when children were being dropped off and picked up. Staff recommended that sites do what they can to encourage this type of interaction as part of the daily schedule. One site leader, for example, described how “the most effective” strategy undertaken so far has been to pay teachers to “come in a half an hour early every day so that pre-K drop-off is an hour earlier in the classroom, and parents can go to the classroom and talk to the teacher and play with their kid for a little bit.”
- **Creating welcoming first-encounters with families**—The initial encounters between families and either the site staff or the *Pre-K for All* initiative at-large (e.g., during the application process) was described as having the ability to define the subsequent relationships that develop. As described by a site leader at an ACS NYCEEC:

One of the things that I always, always tell my staff is that first impressions count. As soon as someone's walking into the program, that person needs to feel welcome. When you feel welcome, you're ready to come back. If you don't feel welcome you're not going to come back. It doesn't matter if you have a beautiful program, if you have the best of the teachers—if the parents do not feel comfortable, able to communicate how they feel—they're not going to come back.

For some staff, the initial orientation was considered the most important element of family engagement. Site staff also indicated that it was important, early on, to reassure parents and caregivers that they weren't expected to have any pre-existing knowledge about pre-kindergarten. Therefore, according to those interviewed, families should be told they do not have to be experts on pre-K curriculum, on the kindergarten application process, or any other aspect of the initiative. They added the importance of emphasizing to families that staff can be approached with any questions.

- **Including family well-being as a focus of effective family engagement**—As noted by a few sites, family engagement should be broadened beyond academic success to include general child and family well-being. For one site, this meant recognizing that if the families are facing emotionally exhausting or stressful situations, this can have negative impacts on the child. For this site and others, family engagement therefore included ensuring that families had access to economic supports, proper health care, counseling, and access to community resources. In addition, one site

recommended bringing in an outside provider that is better equipped to provide these non-academic services and referrals.

- **Allowing for variation in levels of family engagement**—Feedback from site staff demonstrated the importance of recognizing that most parents are working at one or more jobs, raising other children, and have additional responsibilities, all of which affect their ability to engage and communicate with pre-K staff. Thus, any lapses in communication and engagement should not be perceived as a reflection on families’ parenting ability but instead a result of the context in which the family engagement has to occur. A teacher explained, “parents have a lot on their shoulders, and parents are juggling a job, and they’re juggling children, and they’re juggling who knows what! So it is really important to be understanding of the parent.”

Staff at one site extended this recommendation by explaining that because of the challenges that families face, it is particularly important that they do not feel concerned about their pre-K program. While family engagement was considered important, it was more important for families to feel “secure and comfortable in their child’s education” without having to become actively involved.

- **Understanding family engagement as relationship-building**—The belief that family engagement is about developing relationships was expressed across interviews, with staff at more than one site recommending that the initial goals should be about developing strong relationships between staff and families rather than about conveying information to or creating extended learning opportunities. Once these relationships are established, staff indicated, families can be engaged in collaborative goal-setting, shared decisionmaking, extended learning, and other elements of effective family engagement.

Sites also recommended several strategies for emphasizing relationships within the family engagement activities. One site, for example, noted the importance of having a small program, as it allowed for more frequent and more individualized interaction with families. Two other sites emphasized the importance of developing forms of communication that allow for dialogue and easy conversations between families and staff. Teachers at one site recommended sending announcements by email for this particular reason, since it allowed families to respond directly to the teachers if they wish. Teachers at another site described using a journal that would be carried back and forth by students each day, in which parents and staff can write each other messages.

I have parents that can email me any time during the day; they know I will get back to them. They can call me any time of the day; they know I'll get back to them. Stop in my office, because two days a week I'm here late. Whether it's just to vent about something that drove them nuts, a family thing, or something school related.

So, I kind of pride myself on that, to keep the lines of communication open, because I know how important it is and I think it shows.

Pre-K Teacher



CONCLUSION

Based on self-reported data, evaluation findings indicate that family engagement and communication practices are being undertaken as a component of the *Pre-K for All* initiative. Although there is a great deal of variation in the strength of these practices, survey and interview responses demonstrate that site leaders and instructional staff are committed to involving families in the education of their children.

As reported by site staff, sites used complementary methods of communication to reach out to families and adopted strategies such as an open-door policy to increase the accessibility to their staff. Many sites also worked hard to celebrate and welcome families to their community, as well as educate them on academic and parenting topics through workshops and other events. Program staff also shared how they endeavored to engage families in extended learning, but also recognized the need for a flexible definition of what counts as at-home learning opportunities. Almost all pre-K sites also reported providing some assistance to help families transition to kindergarten, with particular attention given to the kindergarten application process. Finally, descriptions of parent involvement in student goal-setting and programmatic decisionmaking signaled that it was being tackled in robust and interesting ways, from parent committees and deep family involvement in policy decisions to ongoing communication about children's needs and accomplishments.

Nevertheless, the evaluation findings indicate large variations in the implementation of family engagement practices, across sites and between site types. Staff at ACS NYCEECs in particular described more frequent family engagement practices, particularly in terms of actively involving families in collaborative goal setting and joint decisionmaking. DOE NYCEECs and district schools differed substantially in the resources that they reportedly received and the practices they indicated undertaking.

The findings suggest that DOE should consider the following:

- **Provide avenues for sites to share their most successful family engagement practices.** This could be achieved through the development of learning communities dedicated to exploring and encouraging family engagement practices.
- **Provide consistent expectations to *all Pre-K for All* sites that (a) identify required family engagement practices and (b) identify what constitutes *effective* practices in each area.** Particular attention could be given to helping sites understand the differences between communication and meaningful engagement.
- **Provide trainings and supports based on identified challenges and requests for additional professional development.** Topics for additional training may include:
 - Communicating with families about behavioral challenges;
 - Finding information for families within the DOE website;
 - The kindergarten application process as well as how to support families in selecting the most appropriate school for their children;
 - Local resources for making referrals.

Areas of additional support include communicating with families that speak a home language other than English (training, materials, access to translators); and flexibly engaging with working families (training, staff resources).

APPENDIX

Table A-1. Participation in Evaluation Activities, by Type of Site and Program Length

Characteristic of Pre-K Sites	Number of Surveys ¹		Site Visits
	Site Leader	Staff	
ACS New York City Early Education Center	20	74	7
DOE New York City Early Education Center	68	249	19
District school	70	321	13
Charter school	1	3	1
New or newly contracted programs	33	117	11
Converted from half to full day	60	227	15
Existing or expanded full day	66	303	14

¹Site identification was missing for 24 site leaders and 23 staff.