

# Barriers and Opportunities: Helping Smaller Immigrant Communities Access the Illinois Preschool for All Program

## *Summary Findings from Three Studies*

---

Gina Adams and Marla McDaniel

Prekindergarten initiatives like the Illinois *Preschool for All* (PFA) program can only fulfill their mission if they actually reach and serve those children who are at special risk of facing challenges in school. Since its inception, Illinois' planners intentionally prioritized PFA services to children at-risk of school failure, and placed special emphasis on low-income children and children with limited English proficiency (among other targeted populations).

In Chicago and Illinois there has been increased focus on meeting the early education needs of immigrant children. An in-depth look at the immigrant community reveals enormous diversity—roughly half of the immigrant community in Chicago is made up by the growing Latino population, while the other half comes from other countries and regions of the world. While there is much to learn about the experiences of all immigrants, relatively little is known about the extent to which children from diverse smaller, or lower-incidence, immigrant communities face challenges accessing services. Though these communities are relatively small when looked at individually, their numbers are far from trivial when considered as a collective

About half of metro Chicago's immigrants are from smaller immigrant communities. This research finds that families from these communities face barriers to accessing the Illinois *Preschool for All* (PFA) initiative, but also highlights promising strategies to address these barriers by partnering with community-based organizations that provide services to immigrant families.

The Chicago area immigrant community is diverse, with roughly half coming from Mexico and Central and South America, and half coming from other countries and regions. This research adds to our understanding of the broader immigrant experience by focusing on PFA access barriers faced by some of these smaller immigrant communities. Understanding and addressing these challenges is essential for Illinois to successfully prepare the *all* of the region's youngest residents for school and future success.

whole with shared experiences, needs, and concerns. In the Chicago metropolitan area lower-incidence immigrant groups are estimated to make up roughly half of all immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

This brief summarizes findings from three studies conducted by Urban Institute. Two studies supported by the McCormick and Joyce Foundations focused on whether smaller immigrant communities in metro Chicago face access barriers to enrolling their children in PFA; and a follow-up study supported by the McCormick Foundation examined whether community-based organizations providing non-early childhood services to these communities could help address these barriers. These studies involved focus groups with Pakistani, Nigerian, Vietnamese, Polish, and Haitian families, and interviews with PFA providers and intermediary community-based organizations (CBOs) serving immigrant families. [For more information, see the full reports listed at the end of this brief.]

## **Lower-Incidence Immigrant Families are Diverse**

Families who participated in the studies differed significantly with respect to culture, language, religion and background; however they shared many common experiences and needs regarding early education. Some of the diversity across and within groups had to do with knowledge about PFA, value placed on early care and education, and whether their children were currently enrolled in school-based or community-based settings. The diversity reflected areas where additional outreach, education, and support could improve enrollment success. Some of the key findings here include

- Within and across these five groups, there was wide variation across every dimension—including race/ethnicity, language, length of time in the country, family composition, population size, parental work status, and other key characteristics;
- Parents varied widely in their knowledge about PFA or early childhood programs, though many parents were not familiar with the program. PFA programs reported little outreach to smaller immigrant groups;
- Parents valued early care and education to varying degrees—some strongly supporting it and others less familiar with it;

---

<sup>1</sup> Unpublished data from the 2007-2009 American Community Survey, analyzed by Urban Institute, show that 51 percent of the immigrants in Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) were from countries other than Latin America, including 23 percent from Europe (the largest group from Poland at 9 percent), 24 percent from Asia (largest representation from India at 7 percent and the Philippines at 5 percent), 3 percent from Africa, and 1 percent from Canada.

- Parent’s experiences and challenges differed depending on whether their children were enrolled in school-based settings or in community-based settings.

### **Lower-Incidence Immigrant Families Face Barriers to Accessing PFA**

Lower-incidence families and PFA providers highlighted several barriers to enrolling children from lower-incidence groups. While the families appeared to face barriers similar to those experienced by other (higher-incidence) immigrant and low-income families, their challenges seemed exacerbated by their smaller population size and the smaller numbers of people speaking their language. It is likely that their smaller numbers mean their communities do not create sufficient demand for certain types of services, and that there are fewer adults available to work in programs to meet the needs for language and cultural diversity. Perhaps, in some cases, it is less likely that there are cultural intermediary groups to help them.

Parents and providers reported language and logistical challenges around enrollment:

- Challenges understanding forms, not being able to communicate, and needing help with the process.
- Additional challenges (related to language, logistics, and eligibility) applying for subsidized child care assistance when working parents needed the assistance to attend PFA in community-based child care settings.
- Challenges of having few or no staff speaking their language, and the speculation that this could deter some families from enrolling.
- Schools having a limited supply of PFA slots.
- Confusion among providers and families about whether Social Security Numbers were needed for enrollment.

### **A Potential Resource: Community-Based Intermediary Organizations**

The above findings led the Urban Institute team to conduct a follow-up study on potential strategies to support PFA outreach to lower-incidence communities. This study focused on intermediary community-based organizations (CBOs) working with smaller immigrant communities. This focus is because of the important role that intermediary organizations can play, because some parents in the focus groups reported the value of intermediary CBOs in helping them deal with the language, culture, and logistical barriers to enrollment, and because CBOs have experience working to help their families’ access services.

Accordingly, Urban Institute conducted focus groups and interviews with a number of CBOs serving immigrant and refugee populations in the Chicago area, and conducted interviews with individuals and organizations knowledgeable about outreach to immigrant parents around early care and education. Respondents were asked what kinds of outreach would be important to support the participation of lower-incidence families in the program.

- One striking finding was that despite the potential resource CBOs could play, many (although not all) were unfamiliar with PFA. When made familiar with PFA services, CBOs believed PFA was important for their families and were interested in being involved in making PFA more available to their communities.
- CBOs report that a subset of families—likely the most isolated and most in need of early education supports—may not understand and value these services for their children’s development.
- CBOs can be important partners in outreach and support as they are actively engaged in numerous outreach and service activities with lower-incidence immigrant families already.
- However, connecting PFA providers and CBOs may require support from a central organization, agency, or entity in some cases. Some immigrant communities are more geographically dispersed than others suggesting a centralized strategy may be most efficient for matching PFA providers to particular CBOs.
- Financial limitations may be a central challenge to CBO participation. While many promising strategies emerged from the discussion, CBOs did not have the resources to engage in PFA outreach without additional support.

## **How Community-Based Organizations Could Help Support PFA Participation**

Discussions with CBO staff and administrators surfaced a number of promising ways that CBOs could support participation of low-incidence families in PFA. These strategies are described below, and range from less-resource intensive approaches to strategies that would take relatively more resources.

- ***Information-based outreach:*** PFA programs could provide basic information, materials, and resources to immigrant-serving CBOs, both about the PFA program and services, and about the importance of early care and education.
- ***Relationship-based outreach:*** PFA providers could develop relationships with the CBOs serving low-incidence families so as to build trust, cultural awareness, and

ongoing communication; do targeted outreach to families getting services through the CBO; and/or build PFA outreach into CBO community outreach efforts.

- ***Screening, enrollment, and retention activities:*** More resource-intensive strategies include supporting CBO involvement in PFA screening, enrollment and retention activities by building on a number of current activities and models for such efforts, such as,
  - Building PFA into existing efforts to screen and enroll immigrant families into core public benefit programs (such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Medicaid/SCHIP);
  - Creating a PFA outreach and retention effort for lower-incidence immigrant groups by building upon parent outreach models used for Head Start in Chicago;
  - Allowing CBOs to function as clearinghouse for early childhood services, and to enroll families directly into PFA programs;
  - Helping CBOs provide ongoing support to low-incidence families who are enrolled in PFA programs through exploring the applicability of efforts such as the Parent Mentor model.
- ***Providing early childhood services and PFA programming:*** With sufficient resources and support for quality, it seems possible that some CBOs could potentially directly provide PFA services and/or other early childhood services to their communities. These could include supporting two-generational models (i.e. providing PFA services to the children of parents attending ESL classes) or delivering parenting education and other early childhood services.
- ***Coordinating with other educational and social service programs around outreach:*** Some of the challenges PFA faces in supporting participation in low-incidence communities are similar to those faced by many other social and educational services (such as health care, services for the elderly, and schools) who are interested in making their services available to these communities. The CBOs suggested exploring whether the lessons learned from this project could be coordinated or leveraged to support a broader agenda around outreach to lower-incidence populations.

## Implications

These studies suggest that families from lower-incidence immigrant groups face barriers in learning about and accessing PFA services. Some of the barriers they face are common to other immigrant and low-income families, while others are compounded by the fact that

these populations are smaller in number. As a result, they are less likely to find programs with individuals who speak their languages, may have less access to intermediary organizations that can help them learn about and enroll in early education programs, and may be more isolated.

The findings also suggest that trusted intermediaries, such as community-based organizations serving smaller immigrant groups, can play a valuable role in supporting participation. Discussions with such organizations identified several concrete strategies, ranging in intensity, which could help support participation among low-incidence families. However, such efforts will require partnership and resources to be effective.

In conclusion, while these reports suggest that low-incidence immigrant families can face a number of barriers to access and enrollment of their children in the Preschool for All program, they also find exciting opportunities to address these barriers. This suggests that taking steps to address these problems could indeed help the PFA fulfill its promise of making prekindergarten services available to *all* children.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

This report was made possible by a grant from the McCormick Foundation. The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not represent the official views of the Foundation, nor does publication in any way constitute an endorsement by the Foundation. Gina Adams was the principal investigator for this study, with Marla McDaniel serving as project director. In addition to extending our deepest thanks to our funders, we are grateful to our colleagues at the Urban Institute for their research and editorial support; the broad range of stakeholders in Illinois who shared their insights and perspectives on these issues; the local community leaders who helped recruit the families for the study, as well as to the families themselves and the providers who served them; the individuals from the immigrant-serving community-based organizations who generously shared their time and expertise to participate in the focus groups; and individuals in other community outreach programs who agreed to be interviewed. For more information, see the full reports listed below.

- Adams and McDaniel, 2009. *Fulfilling the Promise of Preschool for All: Insights into Issues Affecting Access for Selected Immigrant Groups in Chicago*. Urban Institute: Washington, DC.
- Adams and McDaniel, 2012. *Access to the Illinois Preschool for All Initiative: Insights from Five Lower-Incidence Immigrant Groups In Northern Cook County*. Urban Institute: Washington, DC.
- Adams and McDaniel, 2012. *Untapped Potential: Working with Community-Based Intermediary Organizations to Support Participation of Children of Lower-Incidence Immigrants in the Illinois Preschool for All Initiative*. Urban Institute: Washington, DC.

All reports are available at [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org).