

Improving Access to Prekindergarten for Children of Immigrants

Enrollment Strategies

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Immigrant parents may need extra assistance enrolling their children in prekindergarten if they face language and literacy barriers, transportation and work schedule challenges, or difficulties providing documentation.

The experts we interviewed shared their strategies for helping immigrant parents overcome these obstacles and, in many cases, streamlining enrollment for all families.

Helping Parents Meet Paperwork Requirements

Immigrant parents may have trouble providing documents required for enrolling their children. The experts we talked to recommended the following strategies to get past paperwork hurdles.

• **Consider other document sources to fulfill enrollment requirements.** To enroll children in pre-K, parents usually must provide proof of their children's age, residence, and health screenings. When immigrant parents do not have their children's birth certificates, some programs rely on other documentation, such as baptismal or hospital records, to prove a child's age.

Families who live doubled up with relatives may not have their names on a lease or on utility bills, which are typically used to prove residence. Some pre-K programs allow parents to use a notarized letter or affidavit from the person who does rent or own the home. One district allows children to enroll for up to 30 days while parents gather this material.

Also, because immigrant families are more likely than other US families to lack health insurance, they may struggle to afford required child health screenings and immunizations. Programs can connect families to community partners who offer low-cost or free health care for children.

• **Be flexible in the ways families can verify their income.** Over half of states' pre-K programs prioritize low-income families, which means parents must provide proof of income to enroll. However, immigrants are more likely than other parents to have non-standard work situations, and so they may not have all the expected paperwork for documenting their incomes. Some programs allow immigrant parents to verify income, when necessary, through a variety of documents, such as pay stubs, income tax statements, unemployment insurance records, or letters from employers. Others allow parents to self-certify their incomes. Alternatively, state and local policies targeting children of immigrants and English language learners for pre-K can exempt these families from income requirements, skirting documentation challenges.

• **Clearly explain that Social Security numbers are optional** for enrollment. While most children of immigrants are US-born citizens, and many immigrant parents are US citizens or legal residents, some are not or

Project Motivation and Overview

Pre-K has been shown to strongly boost children's learning trajectories. This is as true, or even truer, for children of immigrants and English language learners (ELLs) as for children overall.

But children of immigrants, who make up about a quarter of children in the United States, have significantly lower rates of pre-K enrollment, on average, than children with US-born parents. Issues such as a lack of awareness about programs, language barriers, logistical barriers to enrollment, and lack of comfort with programs can keep immigrant parents from signing their children up for pre-K.

We interviewed local and state pre-K directors and staff, directors of other early childhood education programs, and early childhood education specialists to compile their strategies for stepping up enrollment among immigrant families.

This is the second of three fact sheets based on *Supporting Immigrant Families' Access to Prekindergarten* by Julia Gelatt, Gina Adams, and Sandra Huerta.

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have family members who are not. For these families, asking for Social Security numbers (SSNs) can make parents nervous. Most of the pre-K programs we spoke with do not require SSNs on applications, but some ask for record-keeping purposes or because they blend funding for pre-K with funding for child care subsidies, which can only be used for legal immigrant children and US citizens. Experts suggest that

programs develop enrollment processes that avoid asking for SSNs altogether, by using numbers other than SSNs for recording-keeping, maintaining separate paperwork for pre-K and child care subsidies, omitting the optional question about children's SSNs from enrollment forms, or providing very clear written and verbal instructions that providing an SSN is optional.

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Streamlining Application Forms and Enrollment Processes

Simplifying application forms and making enrollment times and locations more convenient can benefit all families. The experts we interviewed shared these strategies for making the overall enrollment process easier, particularly for immigrant families.

- **Create enrollment forms sensitive to immigrant families' needs** by offering versions in different languages, being flexible about what type of documentation is required, not asking for parents' or children's SSNs, and not asking for proof of income unless necessary. State leaders can make this easier for programs by creating a statewide, standard enrollment form that addresses these concerns.

- **Offer multiple ways to enroll**—by phone, online, in-person, or by mail—to give parents options to fit their needs.

- **Provide enrollment assistance** through family outreach workers, translators, or immigrant-serving community organizations. Some pre-K programs centralize enrollment to have a full range of interpreters, health providers, and social service agency staff on hand to assist parents.

- **Offer a variety of enrollment times and locations** to fit different work schedules. Some programs announce registration dates well in advance or on a monthly basis to give parents time to plan ahead. Online registration can be convenient for parents with inflexible work schedules (if they have access to the Internet) and can make it easier for community organizations to help parents sign up.