

**Latino Public Opinion Survey of Pre-Kindergarten Programs:  
Knowledge, Preferences, and Public Support**

**Conducted for Pre-K Now**

**By  
Valencia, Pérez & Echeveste and Tomás Rivera Policy Institute**

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## **Introduction**

Based on Pre-K Now's Request For Proposal description and subsequent conversations with Pre-K Now, Valencia, Pérez & Echeveste (VPE) and the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) designed a survey that captured Latino adults' opinions about the benefits, importance, and costs associated with enrolling children in pre-kindergarten programs. The objective of the survey was to gauge support for government-subsidized pre-kindergarten programs among the Latino community and better understand Latinos' motivators and barriers in order to develop effective, culturally-relevant messages to increase support for pre-kindergarten programs. In designing the survey instrument, items from previous Pre-K Now surveys were favored to provide consistent comparisons.

A total of 1,000 surveys were completed between March 1, 2006 and March 12, 2006. The survey sample was drawn from Spanish surname samples in the targeted states. Nationality targeted sample lists were also minimally used (24 percent of the end sample) to find Cuban, Central Americans, Puerto Rican/Dominican respondents. The margin of error is approximated at three percent (N=1000) at the 95 percent confidence interval. The interviews were conducted mostly in Spanish (95%), although the fully bilingual interviewing staff was prepared to conduct the interview in English or both. The survey lasted approximately 15 minutes and had 20 questionnaire items and 15 demographic items.

The parameters of this sample address two concerns voiced in conversations with Pre-K Now project staff about the study which are: 1) that Latinos in non-traditional states are represented; and 2) non-Mexican ancestry respondents are adequately represented to make reliable comparison. In order to better understand the opinions of the diverse Latino community, the survey sample targeted Latino respondents from non-traditional states and traditional states and respondents from four different ethnic subgroups (Mexican, Central American, Cuban, and Puerto Rican/Dominican). Specifically, 300 respondents from the four non-traditional states were surveyed: Arkansas, North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. The remaining 700 respondents were from six traditional states: California, Texas, Illinois, Florida, New York and New Jersey. Minimum quotas (N=100, 10 percent) were imposed for the Cuban and Puerto Rican/Dominican ethnic subgroups. Sixty-one percent of the sample was of Mexican origin and 19 percent of the sample was of Central American origin, which included El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, and Belize.

## **Sample Description**

At the conclusion of the survey, it became apparent that the sample was heavily skewed in favor of female representation (65%) and was not reflective of the general Latino populations living in the targeted states. In order to compensate for this bias, we created weights to make sure that gender was evenly distributed for each ethnic group. In the case where results were compared across traditional and non-traditional states, gender was weighed across states.

In general, this sample appears to be a largely working class, first-generation (87 percent are foreign-born), and relatively young. As anticipated, there are some distinct differences between ethnic subgroups and state-of-residence groups within this sample (See Table 1).

*Nationality Comparisons.* In this sample, Mexicans and Central Americans share similar characteristics: have children under 18 at home, less education, are non- U.S. citizens, not registered to vote, and are much more likely to have independent political orientation or not report any political orientation at all. Following the national trend, Mexicans and Central Americans are particularly young compared to other groups in this sample. Central Americans, are also less likely to be married and more likely to work outside the home compared to other ethnic subgroups.

The Puerto Rican/Dominican group presents some unique demographic characteristics in that they are the least likely to live in Spanish-speaking households, are U.S. citizens, are registered to vote, most heavily lean towards a Democrat political orientation, and appear to enroll their children in pre-kindergarten programs at higher rates.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Sample by Nationality Group**

	Mexican	Central American	Puerto Rican/ Dominican	Cuban
% with children < 18 living in household	63%	52%	41%	47.5%
% with grandchildren <18 years	19%	15%	28%	31%
% completed HS or more	35%	37%	61%	55%
% earning less than \$40,000	67%	68%	55%	70%
% < 40 years old	68%	67%	40%	31%
% in Spanish-dominant households	72%	73%	43%	82%
% that are U.S. Citizens	23%	21%	79%	48%
% that work outside the home	69%	80%	59%	55%
% with children (currently or previously) in pre-kindergarten	39%	31%	43%	24%
% registered to vote	22%	22%	68%	39%
% currently married	62%	49%	56%	62%
% living in non-traditional states	45%	16%	7%	8%
% Democrat	19%	25%	45%	21%
% Republican	7.4%	11%	12%	35%

Note: There are statistically significant differences between ethnic subgroups across all of the above measurements at  $p < .05$ .

*Traditional vs. Non-Traditional States Sample.*

Compared to respondents from non-traditional states, respondents from traditional states appear to be relatively more established, are older, and exhibit slightly higher socio-economic status across several socio-economic status measurements (See Table 2). For example, respondents from traditional states appear to have more education, earn slightly more, are more likely to be U.S. citizens, are registered to vote, and are able to enroll their children in pre-kindergarten programs at higher rates. On the other hand, respondents from non-traditional states are more likely to live in Spanish-speaking household, are younger, have young children living in the house and are single or unmarried. Interestingly, 52 percent of respondents from non-traditional states did not report any political orientation, compared to 34.3 percent of the respondents from traditional states. It should also be noted that Mexicans are underrepresented in traditional states but reflect the actual demographic concentration among Latinos living in non-traditional states.

**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Sample by State-of-Residence Groups**

	Traditional States	Non-Traditional States
% with children < 18 living in household	56%	61%
% with grandchildren <18 years	22%	16%
% completed HS or more	44%	28%
% earning less than \$40,000	63%	70%
% < 40 years old	55%	76%
% in Spanish-dominant households	66%	80%
% that are U.S. Citizens	37%	14%
% that work outside the home	67%	72%
% with children (currently or previously) in pre-kindergarten	40%	29%
% registered to vote	34%	14%
% currently married	60%	58%
% Mexican	51%	86%
% Democrat	26%	13%
% Republican	14%	5%

Note: There are statistically significant differences between state-of-residence subgroups across all of the above measurements at  $p < .05$ , except in the percent of respondents that work outside the home and have children under 18.

### **Importance and Benefits of Pre-Kindergarten for Children**

In general, respondents believed that pre-kindergarten programs were beneficial and important for children to attend. When a before and after excerpt describing pre-kindergarten programs was read to respondents, three-fourths agreed that it is very important for children to attend a pre-kindergarten program. An additional 15 percent agreed that it was fairly important for children to attend a pre-kindergarten program before kindergarten. Moreover, 95 percent of the respondents thought that children who attend pre-kindergarten have an advantage in school over children who did not attend pre-kindergarten.

Parents believe that pre-kindergarten is a positive experience but perceived enrolling the child in pre-kindergarten to be less feasible. So we explored different challenges possibly faced by parents. Knowledge about pre-kindergarten programs in the community and affordability were the most common reasons given for why parents do not enroll their children in pre-kindergarten (see Table 3). Although these two reasons also represented the most frequently selected reasons for Mexican respondents, respondents with only a grade school education, and respondents with U.S. citizenship, Mexican and U.S. citizen respondents agreed with these opinions less than expected. Respondents with only a grade school education also did not select knowledge about pre-kindergarten programs in the community as a reason for not enrolling children in pre-kindergarten programs as much as expected. Instead, they were more likely than the other education level groups to reply “do not know” on this item.

Interestingly, respondents from non-traditional states were more likely to believe that the reason parents do not enroll their children in school is because the parents don’t have documents and or because the staff does not speak Spanish. Given the demographic characteristics of respondents

from non-traditional states, where they exhibit less acculturated characteristics, it can be argued that these responses reflect the lived experiences of residents in non-traditional states.

**Table 3: Reasons Parents Do Not Enroll Their Children in Pre-Kindergarten (All Respondents)**

	Frequency
Because the parents cannot afford it	21%
Because a parent is able to stay at home with the child	11%
Because the pre-kindergarten programs available are not good quality or not safe	2%
Because the pre-kindergarten schedule is not convenient	12%
Because they want the children to stay with another family member	8%
Because the parents don't have the documents that the programs requires	12%
Because the pre-kindergarten teacher or staff don't speak Spanish	8%
Because they don't know about programs in their community	33%
Other	12%
DNK	10%

In order to explore other perceived benefits of attending pre-kindergarten, respondents were asked to select potential reasons why a parent would enroll their child in kindergarten (See Table 4). To learn academic skills and to be better prepared for kindergarten were the most frequently selected reasons for parents' enrolling their children in pre-kindergarten. The only significant difference among ethnic subgroups is that fewer Mexicans than expected thought that child care needs was a reason for parents' enrolling their children in pre-kindergarten. On the other hand, respondents that are U.S. citizen, with some high school or with more than a high school diploma were more likely to select child care needs as a reason parents enroll their children in pre-kindergarten.

It was more likely that respondents from non-traditional states and from Spanish-speaking households felt that gaining academic skills was a reason for parents' enrolling their children in pre-kindergarten. Respondents with a grade school education, who are permanent residents, and from non-traditional states were also more likely to select learning English as a reason parents enroll their children in pre-kindergarten.

**Table 4: Reasons Parents Enroll Their Children in Pre-Kindergarten (All Respondents)**

	Frequency
So children can learn academic skills and letters, numbers and colors	47%
So children can learn social skills like following instructions and sharing	28%
So children can learn English	26%
So the children are better prepared for Kindergarten	40%
Because the child qualified for free pre-kindergarten	13%
Because the parents or other family work outside the home and need someone to care for the child	25%
OTHER	2%
DNK/DEPENDS	3%

**Sources of Information**

The most obvious information or enrollment source for pre-kindergarten programs was “the local elementary school”: 51 percent of respondents replied that this would be the location they would approach for information and 58 percent said “the local elementary school” is where they would go to enroll a child in a pre-kindergarten program. More respondents than expected from traditional states or with U.S. citizenship or permanent residency selected this option. The second most frequent response of where to solicit information about pre-kindergarten programs (26%) was “do not know” and 23 percent did not know where to enroll a child in pre-kindergarten. This was particularly evident with respondents from non-traditional states, from Spanish-speaking households, those with a grade school education, and those with unknown legal status.

Slightly more Puerto Ricans/Dominicans and Cubans suggested approaching a government welfare agency or looking online/calling a number to request information about pre-kindergarten programs. However, it should be noted that in all cases and other choices where there are statistically significant differences in responses between ethnic subgroups and state-of-residence groups, less than four percent of the respondents selected these responses.

Overall, 45 percent of the respondents were not very familiar with pre-kindergarten programs or the term pre-kindergarten. Mexicans respondents and respondents with grade school education, unknown legal status, or from Spanish-speaking households reported being less familiar than expected with the terms “pre-kindergarten” and “pre-kindergarten programs”. Similarly, respondents from non-traditional states were not very familiar with pre-kindergarten programs (54%). On the other hand, the percentage of Puerto Ricans who were at least somewhat familiar with the term pre-kindergarten and pre-kindergarten programs was higher than expected (63%).

**Assessment of Public Support**

In assessing the public support for pre-kindergarten programs, TRPI reached two key findings. First, a majority of Latinos from both traditional and non-traditional states and from various nationalities agreed that the government held an important responsibility in funding pre-kindergarten programs. Second, Latinos also concurred that pre-kindergarten played a crucial role in a child’s academic and social development. Latinos’ support for pre-kindergarten

programs persists even when they consider who will pay for the program and what benefits will be achieved.

A clear majority of respondents felt that making voluntary pre-kindergarten available to all children was an important investment, even their taxes were raised by \$100. A majority of Latinos also stated that they would more likely to support a political candidate who wanted to make pre-kindergarten available to all children. There were no significant differences between nationality and state-of-residence groups on these opinions.

When determining costs and benefits of implementing a statewide pre-kindergarten program, only one question elicited statistically significant differences in responses, namely to what extent should the government make pre-kindergarten programs available for non-low-income families. An overwhelming majority of Latinos (83%) agreed that the state should fund pre-kindergarten programs at least for children from low-income families (31 percent agreed that the state should fund only children from low-income families). However, a slightly larger number than expected of Latinos from non-traditional states (18%) argued that parents should be solely responsible for paying for their children to attend pre-kindergarten classes. In contrast, more respondents than expected in traditional states (56%) believed that the state should fund pre-kindergarten programs in the same way that state governments fund kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grades for all children.

Differences across the other demographic groups are significantly varied and illustrate how the issue of who should benefit from government-subsidized pre-kindergarten is less decisive and may be more reflective of individuals' socio-economic status (See Table 5). For example, respondents from English-speaking households seem to believe that pre-kindergarten programs should either be government-subsidized for all or be the parents' sole responsibility. In many ways, it appears that those with marginally better economic and social conditions, i.e. those with some or more, U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and respondents from English-speaking households, do not want to be excluded from directly benefiting from government-subsidized pre-kindergarten programs.

**Table 5: Who Should Pay for Pre-Kindergarten Programs for Whom?**

	It's parents' sole responsibility	State should fund programs for all	State should fund for low-income children only	Do Not Know	Total
Spanish-speaking Household	14%	51%	32%	3%	100%
Bilingual Household	14%	56%	29%	1%	100%
English/Other-speaking Household	27%	56%	17%	0	100%
Grade School	17%	39%	39%	5%	100%
Some High School	16%	60%	23%	1%	100%
High School Graduate	10%	55%	34%	1%	100%
More than a HS Diploma	13%	60%	26%	1%	100%
U.S. Citizen	14%	58%	28%	1%	100%
Permanent Resident	13%	56%	31%	1%	100%
Other Status	16%	47%	33%	4%	100%
Sample Average	15%	53%	31%	2%	100%

Note: There were statistically significant differences between the listed demographic groups for this questionnaire item.

When asked if they believed in specific reasons for sending children to pre-kindergarten programs, Latinos uniformly believed that all arguments proposed were strong arguments. The only variance in opinion came from Cubans who disproportionately agreed with the argument that attending pre-kindergarten classes would ultimately reduce a child's likelihood of getting into trouble or committing crimes later in life (72%).

**Messenger and Language**

As part of this survey, we sought to explore if a particular type of professional or individual would be an effective proponent or spokesperson for pre-kindergarten programs. Overall, teachers were the most frequently selected (67%) as a trusted source of pre-kindergarten information. Other parents were a distant second choice (14%) for disseminating information about pre-kindergarten. Significant differences across ethnic subgroups and state-of residence were present for other types of individuals but choices where significant differences existed were selected by less than three percent of the respondents. However, respondents from English-speaking households or those with more than a high school diploma seemed to not have the same preferences for teachers as spokespeople for pre-kindergarten programs and preferred parents as spokespeople for pre-kindergarten programs at higher rates than other groups.

Many words are frequently used to describe pre-kindergarten programs but Latinos seemed to prefer the terms “pre-kinder and pre-k” (33%), regardless of language spoken at home. (Because, 95 percent of the surveys were conducted in Spanish, only Spanish terms are discussed here.) Nineteen percent of the respondents selected “educación de temprana edad” and 14 percent selected “educación de primera infancia” as the terms they would use to describe a pre-kindergarten program. There were no significant differences between any of the demographic groups and the terms they would use to describe a pre-kindergarten program.

### **Program Preferences**

Respondents overwhelmingly need and desire pre-kindergarten programs for children but some differing opinions exist about the instructional details of pre-kindergarten programs. Over 96 percent of respondents say they would enroll children in a free, voluntary pre-kindergarten program if it were made available. Most respondents also rated program components like resources to encourage parent participation, programs which strengthen reading, academic, and social skills, and the presence of bilingual teachers in the classroom “very important” (88% – 95%) to have in a pre-kindergarten program. There were no differences between any of the nationality subgroups or state-of-residence groups.

In general, respondents overwhelmingly (83 %) thought that it was “very important” that pre-kindergarten teachers have four-year college degrees but there were some differences between the demographic groups about the extent to which it was important for teachers to have a four-year college degree. Unexpectedly, Central Americans and Cubans view pre-kindergarten teachers having a four-year college degrees as somewhat unimportant and/or not important more so than Mexican or Puerto Rican/Dominican Republic respondents. More non-traditional state respondents were “not sure” or did not have knowledge of the importance of pre-kindergarten teachers having four-year college degrees, compared to traditional state respondents. Those respondents with only a grade school education or some high school education ranked teachers having four-year college degrees as “very important” at higher rates than high school graduates and those with more than a high school diploma.

Preference for bilingual instruction and bilingual teachers also presented some differences in opinions among the respondents. When respondents were asked about the importance of having a bilingual pre-kindergarten teacher, over 96 percent of respondents replied that it was “very important” or “somewhat important” and there was little variation among nationality or state-of-residence groups. Respondents from bilingual and Spanish-speaking homes ranked having bilingual teachers as “very important” at a slightly higher rate than expected. In contrast, respondents from homes in which mostly English is spoken ranked “very important” at far lower rates than expected. Also, U.S. citizen respondents ranked having bilingual teachers as “somewhat unimportant” or “not important” more than expected.

Respondent were asked about the importance of delivering activities and instruction in both Spanish and English. Over 84 percent of traditional and non-traditional state groups thought that bilingual activity and instruction were “very important”. Puerto Rican/Dominican Republic respondents ranked bilingual activities and instruction slightly lower in importance than the other Latino groups. Similarly, those with more than a high school education thought including

bilingual activities and instruction was important but not to the extent that the group with a grade school education thought.

### **Messaging**

The survey identified key messages, terminology, and messengers that would resonate with Latinos. While there are nuances that can be applied to specific ethnic subgroups based on geographic distribution (traditional vs. non-traditional states) or educational attainment, there are key messages that considerably resonate across all Latinos.

Note: When translating the messages into Spanish, the term “Pre-kinder” should be used when referring to pre-kindergarten.

Suggested messaging:

*Pre-kindergarten prepares your child to succeed in school.*

*Pre-kindergarten gives children an advantage once they start school.*

Rationale: Across the board Latinos were surprisingly sophisticated about their general understanding about the advantages of pre-kindergarten with an overwhelming majority of survey respondents (95%) believing that children who attend pre-kindergarten have a strong educational advantage over those who do not attend. This educational advantage can include a child’s ability to follow instructions, enhanced social skills, and ability to understand or speak English.

*All children have the right to be prepared when entering school, regardless of a parent’s ability to pay.*

*A child’s education begins in pre-kindergarten.*

Rationale: These messages continue to focus on the educational advantage pre-kindergarten offers children, yet introduce the issue of affordability and who should pay. A majority of Latinos consider it important for the government to offer pre-kindergarten programs for children, even if it means paying higher taxes. They also expect the government to pay for pre-kindergarten the same way that they pay for kindergarten-12<sup>th</sup> grade public education. Linking pre-kindergarten with public education reinforces the fact that states currently make education possible for all children; thus pre-kindergarten should receive the same consideration.

*Having your child be prepared to succeed in school is closer than you think.*

*Your child’s success in school is within reach.*

Rationale: The survey identified the majority of parents either do not know about programs available in their community or consider it cost prohibitive. Lack of information is preventing a majority of Latino parents from gaining access to a valuable educational resource for their

children. Reminding parents of the proximity of quality pre-kindergarten options hit on Latinos' preference for pre-kindergarten to be offered through their local elementary schools.

### **Conclusion**

The results from this Latino Public Opinion Survey indicate strong support for pre-kindergarten programming across Latino sub ethnic and state-of-residence groups. The local elementary school and school teachers emerged as preferred resources for seeking information about and enrolling children in pre-kindergarten programs. It became apparent that academic and literacy reasons were perceived as strong arguments and true reasons for enrolling children in pre-kindergarten. Overall, there was strong support for government responsibility in funding pre-kindergarten programming, albeit with some differences along socio-economic status. This survey also addresses some knowledge gaps for certain demographic groups in the Latino community. For example, the most often cited reason for not enrolling children in pre-kindergarten programs is that parents may not know where to enroll children. There is also evidence that parents may not know that there are multiple sources of pre-kindergarten information. Future campaigns promoting pre-kindergarten programs may also serve to disseminate information for parents seeking to enroll their children in pre-kindergarten programs.