

The Opportunities and Challenges of Expanding Boston Universal Pre-K to Family Childcare Providers

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In July of 2022, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu announced an [investment of \\$20 million](#) in the city's Universal Pre-K (UPK) program. [Boston UPK](#) is a partnership between Boston Public Schools and the city's Office of Early Childhood tasked with providing families with access to free, high quality early childhood education for their three- and four-year-old children. The \$20 million investment from Mayor Wu's office will allow for Boston UPK to [expand its mixed delivery model](#) to include a greater number of community-based providers (i.e. privately owned, licensed early education centers) into the UPK program in the [2023-24 school year](#). This expansion will also integrate [family](#)

[childcare](#) providers – licensed early education and care professionals that provide childcare services within their home to non-family members. There are a number of key benefits to the integration of family childcare providers into Boston UPK, but there are also potential barriers.

The integration of family childcare into Boston UPK will expand quality early education to reach families that have not previously accessed center-based preschool options in their communities. Families that utilize family childcare differ in meaningful ways from families who choose center-based options. [These families](#) often work non-traditional hours, speak a language other than English as their primary language, and are low-income. For these families, family childcare may offer [greater scheduling flexibility](#) to accommodate families' non-traditional work hours, as well as a more culturally and linguistically responsive early education and care setting.

Additionally, many families choose family childcare because it is what is available to them, due to a lack of affordable, accessible, and local center-based options. Early education is a significant financial burden for many families: the [Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership](#) estimates that center-based care costs Massachusetts families \$20,000 per year for infant care, and \$15,000 per year for four year olds. Additionally, many families [struggle to find](#)



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[quality early education options in their area](#). Estimates suggest that [53% of Massachusetts residents live in a "childcare desert,"](#) a [census tract](#) in which there are three children under age 5 for each seat available within licensed early education programs. Living in a childcare desert is most common among low-income families. Boston UPK's expansion into family childcare would allow for expansion of quality pre-k into neighborhoods and locations that have [limited resources, or limited space](#) in which to construct new centers.

In addition to expanding access to early childhood education for Boston families, the integration of family childcare providers into Boston UPK will increase the quality of education that children will receive. Students in all Boston UPK classrooms receive high-quality instruction using Boston Public Schools' *Focus on Pre-K* curriculum, which has been [shown to have large, positive impacts](#) on students' social emotional, early reading, vocabulary, and math skills. All classrooms and care settings included in the Boston UPK program are assessed for how well they adhere to the *Focus* curriculum, thus ensuring quality across

both BPS and community-based classrooms. By expanding Boston UPK to include family childcare providers, a greater number of Boston children would receive the high quality, evidence based instruction that the *Focus* curriculum offers.

Finally, integrating family childcare providers into Boston UPK increases providers' access to educator supports, further improving the quality of early education. Boston UPK offers center-based providers frequent opportunities for instructional coaching and professional development. Research has demonstrated that access to such educator supports is [associated with improved quality](#) of early childhood education. [Family childcare providers often lack access](#) to professional development, networking, and support, resulting in feelings of [isolation](#) and burnout. By integrating family childcare providers into Boston UPK, family childcare providers would have access to the supports available to UPK providers that are associated with improved early education quality.

Despite the many benefits to the future expansion of Boston UPK into family childcare, there are a number of potential barriers to successful implementation. One potential barrier is the education level of family childcare providers. Currently, one of Boston UPK's [quality metrics is provider education level](#), requiring all providers to have at least a bachelor's degree. Family childcare providers are a diverse group of individuals, with a wide range of educational backgrounds. One report found that [50% of family childcare providers do not have a college education](#). Requiring family childcare providers to have a bachelor's degree like other Boston UPK providers may severely [limit the number of providers eligible](#) for UPK funding.

A second challenge is the possibility that those who choose family childcare for their children's early education do so because they prefer an informal, home-based environment. Families cite [many reasons](#) for seeking out family childcare

providers, including the small group sizes, mixed age groups that allow siblings to be together, and lower staff turnover. Other families appreciate that family childcare providers are able to offer their children instruction in their native language and engage in [culturally relevant](#) instruction and activities. Boston UPK must work closely with providers and families to ensure that UPK funded family childcare providers continue to meet the unique needs of the families served, while simultaneously providing children with a high quality early education experience supported by the *Focus* curriculum and educator supports.

The expansion of Boston UPK into family childcare is an exciting prospect, with the potential to grow and improve pre-k quality within the city. As Boston UPK moves toward the inclusion of family childcare providers, it is critical that they consider and address upfront the potential barriers to expansion of access and quality within the family childcare realm. One potential strategy to mitigate barriers to implementation is the creation of [equivalent, but not identical](#) quality standards for family childcare providers. Rather than requiring Boston UPK family childcare providers to meet the bachelor's degree requirement, Boston UPK might consider using providers' years of field experience as a standard by which to ensure quality in their childcare providers, alongside the support of their robust professional development and coaching model. Boston UPK could also consider supporting family childcare providers with less than a bachelor's degree in obtaining higher education in early childhood education. As many families seek out family childcare due to a number of factors including scheduling flexibility and cultural and linguistic relevance, it is additionally important that Boston UPK amplify families' voices and needs as they move toward the integration of family childcare for the upcoming school year. To continue the prioritization of families' needs post-implementation, Boston UPK should create a [family engagement coordinator](#) position to serve family childcare providers as they do for current UPK center based providers.