Using Evidence to Evaluate the Barriers to On-Time Kindergarten Registration and Inform District Policy

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**Introduction**

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is the eighth-largest school district in the country, serving approximately 128,000 K-12 students in 213 schools (SDP 2017). 146 of these schools serve kindergarteners. Of Philadelphia’s public school students, nearly 90% of students qualify for free lunch. Most are historically underserved racial minorities; 76% are African American, Latino, or multi/mixed race (SDP, 2017-2018). Within this context, low attendance is a pervasive issue for students in SDP: only 45.5% of students attended 95% of school days or more in 2017-18 (SDP 2017). Kindergarten attendance rates were the lowest of any student group, aside from high-school seniors (SDP 2017).

Although parents are encouraged to register their children as early as January of the year before their child is eligible to attend kindergarten, relatively few do so. In SY 2018-19, approximately 50% of the students who ultimately attended Kindergarten registered “on time” (between January and July of the prior school year). Although registration re-opens in the fall, 23% of the 2018-19 kindergarten class was still unregistered prior to the first day of school, and roughly 12% had not yet registered by the end of the first week of school (SDP 2018, internal data).

Late registration presents resource-allocation challenges for schools and results in a loss of critical learning time for students - and not just at the beginning of the school year. Research suggests that students who miss school early in the year due to late registration are, in fact, the same students who go on to be chronically absent. Data from the SY 2016-17 reveals a statistically significant difference between the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) of students who registered late for kindergarten and those who registered on time. Furthermore, chronically absent students are less likely to read at grade level at the end of kindergarten (Ehrlich et al, 2013; Stewart and Saleet, 2018). Thus, registering late for kindergarten can have negative implications for students well beyond the first days or weeks of school.

Anecdotal evidence highlights some of the reasons parents may delay registering their children for kindergarten—including difficulty obtaining required records or completing required paperwork; work schedules that prohibit personally visiting the schools while they are open to registration; uncertainty about the enrollment process; and lack of understanding about the importance of attendance generally, and particularly in kindergarten (CPRE IES Proposal). These possible explanations are consistent with research highlighting links between parental beliefs and student attendance in the early grades: One study found that children of parents who believed that regular attendance in early grades is important missed 43% less school than children whose parents did not share this belief (Ehrlich et al., 2014).

In order to better understand the particular barriers to on-time registration in Philadelphia, researchers from SDP collaborated with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) to examine the
causes of late kindergarten registration and to provide practitioners with actionable data to inform District-level policy and procedure changes. The following research questions guided the study:

**Research questions:**

1. **What factors do parents and school staff identify as the major barriers to on-time registration?**
2. **What resources or supports are needed to encourage on-time registration?**

**Background**

Studies using large, nationally representative datasets have consistently demonstrated the impact of lost learning time, pointing to strong associations between attendance and academic achievement (Dryfoos, 1990; Finn, 1993; Gottfried 2009; Gottfried, 2011; Lamdin, 1996; Lehr et al., 2004; Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1988), particularly in the earliest grades (Chang & Romero, 2008; Ready, 2010). Furthermore, these associations are magnified among low-socioeconomic-status (SES) students. The association between kindergarten attendance and first-grade achievement was observed to be twice as strong in students from disadvantaged homes (Chang & Romero, 2008). Research also identifies low-SES students as the group least likely to attend kindergarten daily (Chang & Romero, 2008).

The implications of these associations for students progress in literacy are profound. Nationally, chronically absent students are shown to progress far more slowly in literacy in kindergarten and first grade than their regularly attending peers. And, importantly, those with lower kindergarten attendance also tend to have lower literacy skills to begin with (Ready, 2010). Furthermore, SDP data reveals that kindergarten students’ average daily attendance is inversely correlated with their likelihood of being identified as in need of literacy intervention (SDP, 2017).

**Methodology**

In order to gather feedback from a diverse set of stakeholders, SDP’s Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) and CPRE administered surveys, conducted interviews, and held focus groups with parents and school staff. Information gleaned from each data collection activity informed the next, leading to an iterative, highly collaborative data collection process.

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1 This section was adapted from an SDP/CPRE proposal submitted to the Institute for Education Sciences in August of 2017 titled, "Engaging Families With Kindergarten: A Research-Practice Partnership in the School District of Philadelphia."
A more detailed explanation of each research instrument and the participants is provided below.

1. **Pre-Kindergarten Parent Survey**
   The data collection process began with an analysis of SDP’s annual district-wide Pre-Kindergarten Parent Survey, which ORE administered in the spring of 2017. In addition to questions about their child’s pre-kindergarten program, the Pre-K Parent Survey asks parents with children who will be eligible to attend kindergarten a series of questions about their experience with the kindergarten registration process. Of the 1,245 who responded to the survey, 731 (59%) parents responded to the questions about kindergarten registration.

2. **Semi-Structured Interviews**
   Analysis of the Pre-K Parent Survey data informed the next step in the data collection process, a series of semi-structured interviews with parents and school staff at select schools that took place in September 2017. ORE conducted these semi-structured interviews with 62 parents and school staff at 12 SDP schools with moderate on-time registration rates (i.e., about 50% of parents registered prior to the first day of school, though not necessarily “on time.”)

3. **Parent Focus Groups and Interviews**
   Shortly after SDP completed the semi-structured interviews in moderate-registration schools in September, researchers from CPRE conducted focus groups at nine schools with either very low rates of on-time registration (<20%, n=7) or very high rates of on-time registration (>75%, n=2). CPRE researchers conducted a total of 24 focus groups and 17 interviews across the nine schools. Individual interviews were conducted when a parent/guardian arrived and either no others were present, or the focus group was already underway. In total, 139 parents/guardians participated in a focus group or interview.

4. **School Secretary Survey**
   In interviews and focus groups, parents frequently noted that school secretaries played a pivotal role in the registration process. As a result of this information, ORE surveyed school secretaries in December 2017 about their experiences with the kindergarten registration process. In particular, secretaries were asked what they perceived to be the primary barriers for parents in the registration process, and what additional supports secretaries may need themselves around registration. 105 secretaries responded, which represents a 71% response rate.
Findings

Factors that contribute to late kindergarten registration

Families and school secretarial staff claimed that the paperwork required to register a student for kindergarten created delays, causing students to not be registered on-time. School secretaries cited issues related to gathering necessary paperwork more often than any other factor as to why more families did not register their student on-time for kindergarten. Families participating in focus groups also cited the time-consuming and hard-to-navigate process of gathering required paperwork including scheduling doctor’s appointments, and knowing where to find replacement documents such as birth certificates. When asked what the District might do to assist families in the registration process, parent interview respondents named “Working with parents to obtain important documents” as the second most effective way the District could help. Additionally, families and school secretarial staff also said that providing proof of residency is often particularly challenging.

Families and school secretarial staff reported that the window for on-time kindergarten registration is unclear. The majority of parents who were interviewed at schools or who participated in focus groups reported being unaware of the District’s desire to have them register for kindergarten during the previous school year. Parents believed that if they had their child registered and ready for the first day of school that they had registered on-time. School secretaries echoed this sentiment, naming “not knowing about the June 1st registration deadline” as the second biggest reason more families did not register on-time. Parent interview respondents also named “More advertisements in the community and around the school” as the most important action the District could take to improve on-time registration rates.

Families are sometimes considering alternative schooling options for their student and therefore do not register on-time at their neighborhood school. Parent interview participants and focus group participants cited this as a reason they had not registered their child for kindergarten during the previous school year. This included looking into charter schools and waiting for lotteries for entry into those schools to be held. Another parent waited to hear about the availability of potential scholarship money for her student before finally registering her at the neighborhood school.

Families reported that they had recently relocated and therefore could not have registered their student any earlier than they did. Both interview and focus group participants said they had relocated over the summer or had recently moved to a new neighborhood, basically making it impossible for them to have registered on-time. School secretarial staff also cited this as a reason why more families did not register during the on-time registration window. Additionally, some focus group participants mentioned that after moving it was also a challenge to identify their neighborhood school.
Resources and supports to improve on-time registration rate

The school district could make efforts to inform parents about the registration window and encourage them to register before the end of the previous school year. Parents in interviews and focus groups said the school district needs to make more of an effort to make sure that parents are aware of the registration window. Suggestions for how to do this included social media, hanging up signs in neighborhoods, and holding registration events at schools. Many parents who had registered their student on-time said they had learned about registration from their pre-k provider, suggesting that further coordination with early care providers would be another strategy for informing parents about the registration window.

The school district could work to improve the registration process and make it easier for parents to complete on-time. One suggestion from parents was to provide clear guidance about what is needed, when it should be completed, and where parents should go. Relatedly, parents requested information about where to obtain different required forms and associated fees in obtaining them. Parents also made suggestions about how to ease the process at the school, including increasing the hours when they are able to register and helping to train staff to help with difficult housing/custody situations. School secretarial staff echoed that last recommendation as they said it was not always clear how they should handle or how they could assist parents in such situations.

District Response to Findings and Next Steps

Several common themes emerged from the data, including the difficulty of obtaining the required documentation, a lack of clear information about catchment zones, concerns over custody challenges and residency falsification, and a lack of support for staff who manage the registration process. Furthermore, data revealed that the messaging around “on time” registration is inconsistent and poorly understood. In response to these findings, SDP identified Kindergarten Transition Leads at each elementary school to coordinate registration outreach efforts in conjunction with the District. SDP also collaborated with the City of Philadelphia to use immunization records to identify and contact families with eligible Kindergarten students about Kindergarten registration. 20,000 students were identified in this process and received registration information in the mail. SDP’s kindergarten registration website was updated with clearer terminology, printable forms, and additional resources. Finally, SDP is providing additional clarification to School Secretaries about the required documentation and how to approach custody or residency issues. These efforts resulted in the highest rate of on-time registration since 2014, though on-time registration rates are still well below the District’s 80% goal.
References


Gottfried, M. A. (2011). Absent peers in elementary years: The negative classroom effects of unexcused absences on standardized testing outcomes. Teachers College Record, 113(8), 1597-1632.


