

EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE UPK ECONOMIC INTEGRATION CASE STUDY REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Located on the racially and economically diverse Lower East Side of New York City, the Educational Alliance (EA) preschool at the Manny Cantor Center (MCC) has operated since 2014 using a progressive Reggio Emilia model. For the first time in 2018, EA's Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program was economically integrated. 72 UPK students were placed into four classrooms, regardless of their family's point of entry into the program as Head Start-eligible or tuition-paying. This process was grounded in a belief that classroom diversity enhances the experiences of all stakeholders, and that integrated classrooms can ameliorate existing disparities in kindergarten readiness and school choice by providing equal access to resources and supports. Despite near consensus in the research literature on *why* educators should provide economically integrated learning environments, less is known about *how* programs can achieve effective economic integration. EA program leadership was challenged by the extraordinary complexities of combining revenue streams, staff, resources, and outcomes evaluation while maintaining the fidelity of its progressive education model. This report provides a detailed overview of (1) the practices required for integration (2) the experiences of students, parents, staff, and program leadership, (3) lessons learned, and (4) recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and researchers seeking to promote economically integrated early childhood learning environments.

KEY FINDINGS

- Coordinated communication and co-planning involving all stakeholders throughout implementation were key ingredients for success, and represent opportunities for growth.
- Teachers, program leadership, and parents reported positive experiences for children in the integrated program including increased confidence, strengthened relationships, language development, and communication with peers.
- Teachers reported initial challenges in coordinating educational approaches with new co-teachers that were reduced by year end through applied experience and communication.
- Initial skepticism from some tuition-paying parents in perceived program quality at the beginning of the year was largely replaced with enthusiasm at year end.
- Integrating revenue streams was challenging but not impossible, and relied on consistent communication over time with various stakeholder groups, including program and agency leadership, and the National Head Start Association.
- Families reported teachers, program staff, and online information were the most helpful resources in the school choice process as students prepared to move on to kindergarten.
- While the goal for "true integration" of all resources is commendable, economic integration of this type is realistically a multi-year, multi-phase process given staffing, funding, and administrative challenges.

INTRODUCTION

New York City oversees the largest and most diverse public school system in the United States, with nearly 1.1 million students in over 1,700 schools. To date, the New York City Department of Education has undertaken a number of progressive initiatives aimed at enhancing outcomes for all students. Among these are a Universal Pre-Kindergarten program to provide free education for every 4 and 5 year-old, as well as the School Choice initiative introduced in 1991 (since supplemented in 2015) to enhance access to kindergarten in schools traditionally lacking racial and socioeconomic diversity.

Research suggests the composition of a school's student body is more influential on student achievement than any individual student, family or school characteristic ([Borman, & Dowling, 2010](#)). Schools where the student population is socioeconomically and/or racially diverse show enhanced reading and math abilities among students compared to settings with low diversity ([Reid, 2015](#); [Schechter & Bye, 2007](#)). Diversity seems to be particularly impactful in enhancing outcomes for students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds ([Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2009](#)), but benefits students of all backgrounds. These effects are particularly impactful in early child educational settings, where rapid child development occurs across a range of domains.

Within NYC School Choice districts, including District 1 (encompassing the Lower East Side, East Village, and a portion of Chinatown and where many EA families reside), parents are empowered to select a kindergarten for their child without geographic constraints. Despite these policies, de facto segregation has persisted within early child educational contexts in New York City. Parents who are racially diverse and experiencing low SES tend to have less access to school quality information and make decisions for their child's education based on location rather than on education factors. Efforts are underway at the district and K-12 levels to integrate formerly segregated schools focused on enhanced parent education and revisions to school admissions policies ([Kahlenberg, 2019](#)). Research in this context is clear that any efforts to combat school choice disparities will take a coordinated effort among administrators, politicians, and parents. Less is known, however, about the potential impact that pre-K programs may have in enhancing child and family supports to counteract these challenges.

This paper provides a case study of a UPK program on Manhattan's Lower East side that sought to enhance child and family outcomes by a) integrating its program to include both private pay and Head Start-eligible families and b) providing equal access to detailed information on kindergarten choice for all families in its program. Using data collected from parents, staff, and program leadership, this case study provides a preliminary analysis of this integration process and its potential influence on child and family outcomes.

INTEGRATION PROCESS

Prior to 2018, the Manny Cantor Center UPK program at Educational Alliance operated a tuition-based preschool for children ages 0-5 alongside a federally-funded Head Start program for students of the same age. Despite collocation within the Manny Cantor Center, these programs featured separate administrative models, staff, and educational philosophy. To combat this de-facto segregation and provide an Early Child Education setting more aligned with the agency's values, program administration moved forward with an economic integration plan for the 2018-19 school year that assigned students to UPK classrooms at MCC regardless of their entry into the program as Head Start or tuition funded. Students entered into the program via annual application, and a majority of students had previously attended MCC as 3 year-olds. This is consistent with city-wide patterns of UPK entry; though "universal" seats are accessible to all, the preference for children previously enrolled means that most seats are filled with those who were previously at the center in Head Start or in tuition-paying seats. The program embarked on this effort set to achieve the following outcomes:

- Enhance **sense of community** among children, families, and staff by providing equal access to resources and supports and reducing economic, linguistic, and administrative barriers to integrated learning contexts
- Promote **positive child development** by providing a progressive *Ideal Learning* environment for all students in its UPK classrooms
- Strengthen **parent attitudes toward school** and ideal learning approaches
- Enhance **kindergarten school choice** supports for families graduating the program

The impetus for this economic integration was a felt sense by program leadership, staff, and family participants that a separation of early child education programs by income was contrary to the mission and vision of the Educational Alliance. Though Head Start and tuition-based early child programs collaborated prior to the 2018-19 school year, this process represented a step toward fully integrating staff, physical space, funding, and families.

With respect to staff, all current employees in the Early Child Program were given the opportunity to apply for 12 teaching positions in the 4 integrated UPK classrooms for the 2018-19 school year; applications were later opened to the public to recruit more Chinese speaking teachers. Ultimately, 6 internal preschool, 4 internal Head Start, and 3 external teachers were hired.

Though initially considered a potential barrier, the process of combining funding streams did not serve as a critical barrier to economically integrating the program. By adopting a braided funding model, the program was able to incorporate funds from federal Head Start, NYC DOE funding for UPK, and private tuition. The braided funding allowed for additional supports, such as on-site play therapy, social

workers, and psychotherapies that are not often available internally. The largest reported challenge in regards to funding was ensuring resources were allocated appropriately based on program funders' criteria. Integral to this work was a consistent methodology for evenly apportioning resources across programming.

METHOD AND RESULTS

In an effort to understand the progression of this economic integration process, the Educational Alliance Research and Evaluation team conducted interviews and focus groups with teachers, program leadership, as well as an end of year survey of parents' experiences over the course of the 2018-19 school year.

TEACHER FOCUS GROUP

Two focus groups were conducted with a total of seven Educational Alliance UPK teachers in the fall and spring of 2018-19 school year. Themes explored in the focus groups included: overall experience, child development (e.g., language, behavioral), parent feedback/impressions/experiences, school choice, curriculum, assessment, and recommendations for practice moving forward.

In general, teacher feedback regarding economic integration progress was positive. All believed in the mission and purpose of economic integration, as evidenced both by comments in the focus group and their willingness to apply for a teaching position in the 2018-19 program year.

The most positive outcomes of Year 1 integration identified by teachers were classroom quality, student relationships, and language development. One teacher remarked, "the quality of the classroom was really high," reflecting significant efforts to maintain high standards of practice through observations, team meetings, professional development, and regular reporting to administration. In addition, there were many examples of students forming close bonds that transcended socioeconomic status. One teacher commented: "We had kids from different economic backgrounds really click. One student is on one end of the income spectrum, and one on the other, and they're like soulmates.

Having that place to just *be* and not separated by what you can afford is super important."

Integration provided a setting for students of different cultures and backgrounds to communicate. The program made a concerted effort to nurture emerging bilingual learners and families. Teachers encouraged the use of students' home language, in addition to English, to ensure the success of classroom language acquisition.

Languages spoken in the classroom by UPK students and teachers at various points this year included Chinese, Dutch, English, Hebrew, and Spanish. Of the positive influences of this multi-language context one teacher noted: "*Our class doesn't feel like a weird monoculture like it did the past few years when*

there was little or no diversity [in a tuition-funded classroom]. It felt so weird before, teaching in a little bubble in this neighborhood that is so incredibly diverse.” Another teacher identified language usage as a key catalyst for integrating the culture of the classroom:

“Once we dug into the work on languages, we really saw integration. Kids who came from (tuition-based) preschool all came from one class, so that was one group of friends. Languages helped them branch out and make new friends. In the beginning of the year when we weren’t so focused on language, there were small groups of friends who only played with each other.”

Program staff reported integration appeared to increase parent’s and children’s comfort levels in the program, as both groups were able to see the entire building and program as a place for them, rather than feeling like an outsider in particular spaces.

Teachers identified **communication** and **child assessment** as two of the biggest challenges of integration. With respect to communication, teachers voiced a desire to have clear directives about the program’s approach to learning, pedagogy, and assessment. While remarking that program leadership encouraging an “everyone is learning as we go” mindset was effective, substantive questions regarding pedagogy remained unanswered until the school year began. This challenge was particularly significant in light of the volume of Head Start-approved resources, which teachers remarked were helpful but extremely time consuming to review.

Frequent team meetings with administration early in the year were the most helpful resource in addressing these challenges, as were professional development sessions in the summer prior to integration (see sidebar). Each teacher present agreed that once they were able to identify support systems in their area of need, the process became much easier for them. This process of identification varied significantly (i.e., days/weeks to months) by teacher.

SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE: LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

In one UPK classroom, teachers made frequent use of their Chinese and Spanish language skills and encouraged students to ask questions and speak to each other in their language of preference. Teachers used morning meetings as a setting to introduce new concepts and develop routines in Chinese. Other practices included creating visuals (symbolic representation), providing direct translations, and regularly infusing multiple languages into everyday activities. Teachers wanted to make students feel comfortable using their own language, noting it provides students “**permission to be who you are**” and were intentional about using multiple languages throughout the course of the year.

Though some parents expressed fear that speaking other languages might lead to a regression in English skills, teachers reported this process led to a greater level of comfort and community among students, and student desire to learn more words and phrases. Teachers observed the biggest success indicator was seeing students organically use different languages in their play.

SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE: TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Prior to the beginning of the academic year, teachers attended four professional development retreats. Each retreat addressed a priority area for the program:

1. Emergent curriculum and the role of assessment. Teachers in the integrated classroom held potentially divergent teaching philosophies. In order to wed these perspectives, program leadership used practice based examples to facilitate discussions that built a shared paradigm and vocabulary amongst teachers.

2. Supporting social-emotional development and developing trauma informed teaching practices. Encouraged teachers to consider the impact of experience and environments children have outside of school impact their performance at school.

3. Nurturing emerging bilingual learners and families. Worked with unilingual teachers to incorporate teaching materials and student resources in home languages into the classroom.

4. Anti-bias education. Worked with a partner organization to provide training on understanding differences and their value to the classroom, as well as acting against our innate bias.

Another communication-related challenge in the classrooms was the blending of teachers with different training backgrounds and/or educational philosophies teamed for the first time. Teachers commented the tension in pedagogy affected their work and the classroom learning environment significantly in the beginning of the school year, but were largely addressed by the end of the year through team meetings and discussions with program leadership. The program sought to integrate staff, and while this goal aligned with efforts to economically integrate students, there was little preparation for teachers in negotiating differences in philosophy and practice.

Child assessment emerged as a consistent theme in this focus group, with teachers describing this process as time consuming, arduous, and rarely reflective of student developmental trajectories. The program used Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG) as its primary assessment system; TSG requires observation of specific student behavior as reflecting national standards for expectations at each age. Teachers commented the amount of time needed to complete assessments at three time points during the year (in alignment with Head Start compliance standards) made them feel as if time was taken away from facilitating learning for students. This feeling was strongest for teachers whose teaching philosophy most closely aligned with the more holistic Reggio Emilio approach.

Though the environment of compliance presented some challenges, teachers viewed the Head Start requirement of home visits as a positive addition to their approach. Teachers were required to conduct a home visit of each student in their class at least one time over the course of the year.

Teachers acknowledged this was a nice way to meet parents in the beginning of the year, and to observe each child in their home learning environment. Though logistics and planning were

challenging, teachers learned information about each student that would not have been available to them in a classroom context. Teachers suggested clear guidelines from administration on when and how long these visits occur would be helpful in facilitating the home visit process.

PARENT SURVEY

In the first week of June 2019, parents were asked to complete a survey about their and their child’s experience in an integrated classroom over the course of the previous year. Educational Alliance staff approached parents while they were dropping their child off at school and explained the purpose of the survey to them; the English version of the survey was also available through a link emailed to all parents. The survey asked questions about the experiences in the integrated classroom in the past year, factors that influenced parents’ choice of kindergarten for their child, and their child’s developmental milestones.

28 parents completed full surveys, which were available in Chinese, English, and Spanish. Overall, parents reported a strong sense of community on Peterson and colleagues’ *Brief Sense of Community Scale* (2008). Parent feedback was positive in a number of areas; respondents reported the school community met their needs, they felt a strong sense of belongingness and an emotional connection to the community. In open-ended feedback, parents consistently praised the quality of teachers, showed an appreciation of the diversity in the school, and described a belief this diversity enhanced the quality of their experience. One parent commented:

“I have found the program to be diverse and offer many different learning modalities. I love the extra activities and programs available. It offers creativity and plenty of exposure for my son. I also appreciate all the meals and snacks provided daily.”

A major point of focus for the UPK program this school year was kindergarten school choice (see sidebar). The parent survey assessed parents’ sense of preparedness for choosing a school,

SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE:
KINDERGARTEN SCHOOL
CHOICE

In response to existing disparities in District 1 K-12 schools, the UPK program enhanced efforts to support kindergarten school choice for families. This included sponsoring site visits to area schools, workshops and individual discussions surrounding kindergarten choice with parents, and distribution of resources and materials.

The goal of this effort was to provide equal access to resources and information about New York City kindergartens and the school choice process for all parents in the program. Attendance at eight group school tours ranged from 10 to 20 parents, and 22 parents attended the fall *Kindergarten Admissions Workshop*. Additional workshops included *Choosing a Kindergarten for your English Language Learner*, *Children with IEPs Discussion Group*, *Private Kindergarten Admissions*, and *Admissions Drop-In*. Translation was available in each of these sessions. Successful outcomes the program hopes to achieve are for parents to feel more prepared for and satisfied with their school choice.

helpfulness of various resources, and satisfaction with their school choice. Parent feedback regarding MCC UPK's support of the school choice process was generally positive; teachers and program staff were identified as the most helpful sources of information. In open-ended feedback, some parents expressed a desire for more information from the program about choosing a kindergarten. 64% of respondents reported their child will be attending their first or second choice school, and nearly 50% were "Extremely Happy" with the Kindergarten offer received. On average, parents attended 4 school tours. The following were the top five factors parent articulated in selecting a kindergarten: school staff, school reputation, school atmosphere, school location, and information from MCC UPK. The program will continue to assess families' school choices with the goal that every family feels satisfied with their child's kindergarten.

INITIAL RESULTS OF ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

UPK program leadership identified a number of outcomes (earlier outlined on page 3) they hoped to realize in the process of economically integrating classrooms, including (1) building a *strong sense of community* among children, families, and staff which transcends SES and other socially constructed lines of demarcation, (2) *positive child development* across a range of domains, including language, social skills, creativity, and kindergarten readiness, (3) *positive parent attitudes* toward school and ideal learning approaches and, (4) *informed decision-making processes around kindergarten school choice* among all families.

Strong sense of community. Teachers observed that friendships between students from different backgrounds were successfully formed within in the classroom; however, teachers felt that establishing similar connections among parents was an area for potential growth. Teachers advocated for more program structure to introduce and encourage dialogue between parents: "We have children in our class who are best friends but their parents never talk, and that should really change." This sentiment was repeated by at least one parent who suggested having a parent representative or program staff member to bring families of different backgrounds together outside of the classroom.

Positive child development. Caregivers reported feeling their children had been positively challenged during their time in the program and their children's confidence in their abilities had grown as a result. Parents' sense of their children's positive development was reflected in Teaching Strategies Gold assessment results. At the end of the school year, 100% of the pre-K students were meeting or exceeding TSG developmental benchmarks in literacy and social-emotional skills, while 95 to 98% of students were meeting or exceeding the benchmarks in the cognitive, language, math and physical domains.

Positive parent attitudes. Program leadership believed there was a shift in priorities from parents preparing to enter pre-K from the 2018-19 school year to the upcoming 2019-20 school year. In 2018-

19, parents seemed to be primarily concerned with academics while during enrollment for the 2019-20 school year parents emphasized the importance of developing children's social skills, creativity and playtime to program staff. It was hypothesized by program leadership this shift in priorities was due to contact between parents of children currently in UPK sharing their experiences with incoming parents.

Informed decision making processes around kindergarten school choice. Parents reported EA program staff as one of their most important and influential sources of information on choosing a kindergarten for their child. Parent responses when asked how EA could improve the process of choosing a kindergarten, centered mostly on continuing to provide information in different formats. Suggestions included EA parent specific information about schools, opportunities to ask program staff questions one-on-one, and more workshops.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations provided by parents and teachers included:

- Re-introduce monthly family engagement events to further strengthen community and relationships among adults in the program.
- Empower parents to coordinate opportunities to build community.
- Provide more information about kindergarten school choice specifically relevant for EA parents. "For example, specific programs at the school, class sizes, language options etc.," for schools EA parents are eligible or likely to attend.
- Provide access to teachers' notes from previous year to enhance teacher preparation in serving the needs of each student.
- Explore opportunities to align language with the UPK emergent curriculum, which would provide a setting for teachers to create lessons in different languages. Translating all words in the classroom space into Chinese and Spanish can also make parents feel more included.

CONCLUSIONS

Economic integration represents a promising potential avenue for decreasing disparities within the education system. Research on other efforts of school economic integration has suggested integration may benefit those children most at risk of failing to succeed ([Schechter, & Bye, 2007](#); [Schwartz, 2012](#)). Overall, parents and staff members were generally positive about how the economic integration was implemented and felt students benefited from the endeavor. Careful planning and preparation by all members of the program and administrative staff was vital to success. Staff who strongly believed in, and were dedicated to, the mission of integration were essential to overcoming unforeseen barriers.

Given staff commitment, positive parent feedback, and progressive outcomes for children for the 2018-19 program year, EA will continue to expand this integration throughout the organization.

Future cohorts of pre-K students will benefit from reflections on challenges faced in the first year of this work. Plans are underway for the 2019-20 school year to more thoroughly evaluate the impact of the program and expand integration in more classrooms, with younger age groups. Continued evaluation of the work will help us learn (1) how parent attitudes towards *Ideal Learning* environments may shift over the course of the school year, (2) if the program is succeeding in building a community of parents who glean positive benefits from participating and (3) to more fully understand how economic integration impacts child outcomes, particularly in regards to where families choose to send their child to Kindergarten.