

## **Introduction**

Since its inception, Preschool for All has committed to serving Illinois' at-risk children and families first, with the goal of serving all 3- to 5-year-old children whose families choose to participate, and to provide child development and family support to the most at-risk infants and toddlers. Currently, two legislatively mandated priorities dictate which preschool programs are a priority for Preschool for All funding:

- First priority is given to programs primarily serving children who have been identified as *at-risk of academic failure*.
- Second priority is given to programs primarily serving families whose income is *less than four times the federal poverty level*.

Despite this legislative prioritization, there are many families who could benefit from Preschool for All, yet who are unaware of, or unable to access its services. Often, the families who are a priority for Preschool for All services are also the hardest for programs to reach and require an extra, concentrated effort on the part of the program to receive the full benefit of Preschool for All.

In communities with high concentrations of hard to reach families, Preschool for All slots may remain unfilled without proactive, specific measures taken by programs to recruit and engage families. Even in these neighborhoods, some programs may be fully enrolled, but will still not reach the most at-risk children in a community. The mission of Preschool for All is to serve those families first and foremost, and by applying for Early Childhood Block Grant funds, programs are committing to recruit, enroll and serve those children who are most at-risk, rather than enrolling on a first-come, first-served basis, those who qualify but may not necessarily be the most at-risk.

Therefore, it is up to each Preschool for All grantee, even those who achieve full enrollment every year, to understand the areas of highest need in their communities and develop targeted recruitment strategies to reach them and innovative program model components to keep them engaged. Between recruiting students and engaging them comes a very important step: enrollment. The legislative mandate requires funded programs to prioritize at-risk students over non-at-risk students when making enrollment decisions. This means programs must plan for an extended enrollment period as they schedule recruitment and screening activities.

This Toolkit offers ideas to help guide Preschool for All providers with each step in their charge of recruiting, enrolling and serving the hardest to reach families within their communities. Before beginning the first step of this process, recruitment, it is important to understand which families are the most at-risk within your community so that you can begin planning strategies to reach and engage them in early learning programs.

## Part I: How do I know that there are hard to reach families in my community?

### **Identifying Community Need**

There are many reasons why at-risk, hard to reach families may not access Preschool for All services. For some, it may be a logistical issue; families may lack transportation, have other children to care for that prevent them from getting their preschooler to class, or the program's schedule may not meet their needs. Other families will not enroll because they do not understand why early education is important; they are unaware of the benefits of preschool or they believe their child is not ready to begin formal education. Other parents may be apprehensive sending their children to school earlier than absolutely necessary, having had negative educational experiences themselves while growing up. Some families may not have all the facts about Preschool for All. They may think they have to pay for its services or that they will lose their child care subsidy if they enroll their child.

These are just a few examples of the issues, barriers and challenges preventing the most hard to reach families from accessing Preschool for All services. Your community is unique and the families you serve may be experiencing a combination of the issues listed above, or have other obstacles to participating in Preschool for All that are not mentioned. Please see Appendix A for a list of additional circumstances that make children and families hard to reach.

### ***Needs Assessment***

An important component of the Preschool for All application process is submitting a Statement of Need, which describes the socio-economic and demographic factors that may indicate risk within the community. This needs assessment can serve as the starting point for programs as they think about the services needed to accommodate the population they intend to serve. As programs identify the issues facing the members in their community, they can design outreach and service strategies to meet the families where they are and engage them in Preschool for All.

Questions to consider when determining your community's areas of need include:

1. Who are the families I'm trying to serve?
2. What are the characteristics that make families at-risk or hard to reach in my community?
3. Do the families in my community share similar characteristics? Or, are there various subgroups of families who are at risk or hard to reach due to different circumstances?
  - The PFA Request For Proposals suggests applicants document conditions that may indicate at-risk status, which include, but are not limited to levels of poverty, unemployment, educational achievement, and substance abuse.
4. What other services currently exist in the community that target the same population(s)?

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- a. This includes other early childhood education providers, such as Head Start, public school districts, park districts, faith-based institutions, and child care centers.
  - b. It is also important to think about other social service or community agencies that target hard to reach or at-risk populations that are not specifically working with preschool-aged children, such as, but not limited to the court system, homeless shelters, family case managers, libraries and health clinics.
5. How can my program collaborate with existing service providers, both early childhood and other community-based entities, to increase outreach and recruitment? (i.e. How can other organizations help our program connect with hard to reach families?)
- a. Programs are encouraged to collaborate within the community to increase their outreach and recruitment methods and also to streamline services provided to children and families.
  - b. Preschool for All providers can collaborate with local networks of family childcare providers so that the children in family care can benefit from center-based preschool services in addition to receiving care in a location that their families choose. Family child care providers will not lose any payments received through the child care assistance program if their children participate in Preschool for All.
  - c. Work with Head Start providers in your communities to provide parents with a full range of options as they choose the program best for their needs. If your program or the Head Start program keep waiting lists, share that information so that children can be served.
  - d. The Illinois Early Childhood Collaboration website (<http://www.ilearlychildhoodcollab.org/>) provides collaboration models and resources to the early child care and education community to assist their development of local collaborations. Look here for examples of how programs are working together to serve children throughout the state.

It is important to keep in mind when determining your community's areas of need and determining strategies to address them, that it is not enough to fill your program to capacity and serve children on a first-come, first-served basis. The legislative mandate requires funded programs to prioritize at-risk students over non-at-risk students when making enrollment decisions, and it is up to programs to plan for this as they schedule recruitment and screening activities.

These questions are intended to help you think about and understand your community's areas of need. The next step is to determine strategies to address those areas of need. The following chart provides examples of potential strategies that could be implemented depending on the specific needs of a community. The remainder of the toolkit will go into more detail about each type of strategy. Together, these elements of the toolkit will help you to develop a successful plan for engaging hard to reach families within your community.

<b>Issues Preventing Engagement in PFA</b>	<b>Type of Strategy</b>
Logistical issues: transportation, scheduling, other child care needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs offer transportation</li> <li>• Programs develop innovative models that offer families flexibility in scheduling</li> <li>• Programs offer innovative models that offer activities for siblings and caregivers in addition to preschool-aged children receiving Preschool for All</li> </ul>
Philosophical issues: families believe child is not ready for preschool or preschool is not needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible outreach materials that emphasize preschool readiness and the benefits of preschool</li> <li>• Collaboration with other social service systems and K-12 schools to spread the message of early education</li> </ul>
Emotional Issues: parent had negative experience in school, fear of children entering “the system,” does not want the stigma of participating in “at-risk” program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship building activities throughout the community prior to enrollment</li> <li>• Targeted outreach materials emphasizing the future benefits of early learning experiences that are disseminated through coordination with other social service systems which have trusting relationships in place with clients.</li> </ul>

## Part II: Strategies for Engaging Hard to Reach Families

This section of the toolkit will review strategies programs can employ to engage hard to reach families. Of course, each community is unique, and you may want to tailor the ideas offered here to your program and your community’s needs.

### **Outreach Strategies**

A lack of awareness and understanding of Preschool for All may prevent many families from accessing its services. Hard to Reach families and caregivers may not have the social support networks that spread the word and promote involvement in community-based activities like Preschool for All.

The Preschool for All Request for Proposals (RFP) requires that programs propose a plan for specific, proactive recruitment strategies to ensure that potentially at-risk children in the community are aware of the availability of the opportunity for preschool education through the program.

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What are potential outreach strategies?

- Distribute Preschool for All outreach materials developed by the Public Awareness committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council. These handouts describe Preschool for All and its activities and can be distributed to families at community wide events. The handouts are available at the ISBE website: [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net)
- Coordinate the distribution of outreach materials with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Liaison located in each Illinois school district. These employees have responsibility to conduct community outreach, to link homeless preschoolers to all existing preschool programs and also to coordinate with agencies serving low-income children and youth and to disseminate information.
- Outreach to family, friend, and neighbor child care providers within the community to encourage participation in your program. Inform providers that they will not lose child care assistance program payments if the children in their care participate in Preschool for All programs for part of the day.
- Share the Outreach Toolkit. The Preschool for All Outreach toolkit was designed for use by local social service agencies. Community service providers who have long-standing, trusting relationships with clients may help share the message of the importance of early learning and inform parents and caregivers how they can enroll their children in programs. These documents are available at the ISBE website ([isbe.net](http://isbe.net)), are reproducible and can be distributed by individual programs and local social service partners.
  - Example: Are there agencies conducting home visiting for infants and toddlers in your area? Have you worked with them to share information on your program?
  - Example: What nutrition programs exist in your community? Does WIC staff know how to refer parents with young children to local preschool programs? Share the materials with them.
- Develop broad partnerships. Collaboration with other community or social service agencies (other than those who also serve young children in the area), such as religious establishments, case workers, youth centers, libraries, etc. can reach families who are not connected to the early education world in any way. Ask the directors of the organizations about ways you can partner to bring information on the importance of early learning and details about program enrollment to their participants and clients.
  - Example: Does a local church sponsor a food pantry? Talk with the pastor about including outreach materials on early learning programs with the goods families receive.
  - Example: Many families may receive health services and WIC at neighborhood clinics or health centers. Work with the social workers and/or WIC staff to provide positive messages and referral information on early childhood programs. Share the talking points and handouts for social service providers so that they can incorporate them into their client visits.

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- Recruit volunteers and staff members from the community. Programs can initiate networks of parents of currently enrolled students to go into the community and share the message of early education with their peers. Programs can also budget for a paid parent or community member to serve as a liaison and go out into the community to market early childhood education.
  - Example: Do you have parents who are trusted community leaders? Hire them to create an outreach presentation or poster and assist them in bringing the information to parents at their library or church group, or set up a table outside of grocery stores or doctors' office.
  
- Consider recruitment a continual process – engage in more than one annual screening. Many families will not think about preschool until the fall when school begins, only to learn that screening and enrollment took place in the spring and is now closed. Programs can plan for entire seasons of recruitment and screening activities and delay finalizing enrollment list until the program is set to begin. Additionally, special targeted outreach to the areas of the community or the populations within the community that have been historically hardest to reach for preschool recruitment can be implemented. The Preschool for All RFP requires that screening be conducted on a communitywide basis and be developed and implemented with cooperation among programs serving young children in the area. This collaboration can extend to recruitment activities to inform the community of screening and enrollment opportunities.
  - Example: Sponsor a special preschool information day within housing developments where many children and families live in addition to your Kindergarten round-up/preschool screening day.

### Potential costs:

As you develop your program's proposal and plan a budget, be sure to factor in the additional outreach and recruitment strategies it will take to really engage the most hard to reach families within your community. Depending on the recruitment strategies you enact, consider the following items to include in your budget:

- Additional salary for teachers and program administrators for work in recruitment activities outside of program hours and during the summer.
- Wages for parents or community members for recruitment activities in the community
- Cost of outreach materials: paper, printing, etc.
- Cost of recruitment events: food, materials, staff member's time, etc.

## **Transportation Strategies**

The lack of transportation is a major barrier to preschool enrollment for many children. Hard to reach families and caregivers may have difficulty transporting children for many reasons: Conflicting work schedules, other children's school schedules, lack of access to vehicles, caring for other, younger children, or the caregivers' own physical challenges can prevent children's regular attendance.

While transportation costs are allowed in ECBG program budgets, many programs still cite this as a difficult issue to address in their programs. Many programs – especially community-based programs - have difficulty keeping up with the increased costs of gas and vehicle maintenance. Yet, offering transportation to families that have been hard to reach could be an important strategy in engaging them in programs. All school districts have McKinney-Vento Liaisons whose job includes ensuring transportation and other services to enable the education of homeless children and youth. Coordination with preschool programs is part of the Liaison's job. This already existing resource could be very useful on transportation issues in the community, including coordination.

Programs in urban or suburban settings may be able to use a “walking school bus” strategy to provide families with support in getting to programs.

### *The Walking School Bus - What is it?*

In a “walking school bus” model, local residents are hired by programs to provide walking transportation to children. The costs of hiring the staff can be included in a program's Early Childhood Block Grant budget, as well as a 6- or 8-child buggy, if that would be a helpful transportation tool.

Part-time staff, usually residents of the community, are hired to pick up children from home and walk them to an early learning program in a school, community-based center, or home child care setting. They would pick children up at the end of the program day and walk them back home.

Additionally, a home child care program or network of providers whose 3- and 4-year-old children participate in center-based Preschool for All programs could hire part time staff to pick up children and walk them to the center. The walking school bus would return children to their center or child care home at the end of the program day.

### Potential costs:

Programs must consider their own needs and their own communities in determining their transportation needs and the potential costs of meeting those needs, but an example budget follows for the walking school bus model:

- The sample budget assumes a service year of 180 days (typical school year) and estimates that it will take about three hours for a staff person to walk children to and from the preschool program.
- Initial cost of buggy @ \$1,300

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- Walking school bus staff @ \$8.49 (based on \$7.50 hourly + fringe), for three hours a day, for 180 program days
- Estimated three hours a day for walking school bus transportation for six children with a buggy or ten children without, to and from home/program

Model	Staff	three hours a day	Cost per child	First year expense
With Buggy	\$7.50/hr x 180 days	\$4,583 (transports 6 children)	\$764	\$2,064
Without Buggy	\$7.50/hr x 180 days*	\$4,583 (transports 10 children)	\$458	-

*Mini-bus transportation*

Many programs, especially community-based providers or networks of family child care providers, may benefit from a dedicated vehicle to provide transportation to children. Using this strategy, programs and networks could provide transportation from home to the program for children, or, in the case of family child care, from the home child care setting to a cooperating center-based Preschool for All program and back again. Options for providing transportation include the purchase of a mini-bus or contracting with a commercial bus company for transportation.

Many programs have voiced their concern over the need for bus aides to help with transitioning children into and out of the van. Understanding that this is a great need and potential challenge, the cost of a part-time aide is figured into the cost estimates below.

Programs must consider their own needs and their own communities in determining their transportation needs and the potential costs of meeting those needs, but an example budget follows for strategies for vehicular transportation:

Potential costs\*:

- Initial cost of mini-bus @ \$25,000
- Mini-Bus driver @ \$18 an hour, five hours a day, for 180 program days (includes fringe)
- Mini-Bus aide @ \$8.45 an hour (based on \$7.50 hourly + fringe)
- Mileage rate @ \$1.00 per mile for approximately 50 miles per week.
- Daily rate for commercial provider - \$350/day for 180 days

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Model		Cost	Cost per child
Purchased Mini-Bus	Driver at \$18/hr x 5 hours/day x 180 days	\$16,200	
	Bus aide at \$7.50/hr x 5 hours/day x 180 days	\$7,603 (includes fringe)	
	Mileage - \$1/mile x 50 miles/week x 36 weeks/year	\$1,800	
	Total	\$25,603 (\$50,603 for the first year)	\$853 (transports 30 children total - 15 in am and 15 in pm shift)
Commercial Rates	Small bus + driver daily rate	\$350	
	Total	\$63,000	\$1,575 (transports 40 children total – 20 in am and 20 in pm shift)

\*transportation figures represent reasonable potential costs; actual costs may vary from community to community

**Parent Support and Involvement Strategies**

*What is it?*

Parents are their children’s first teachers, and research indicates that parent/caregiver involvement contributes to school success for their children, regardless of the caregiver’s own academic success or level of education. Without staff members responsible for parent engagement and support activities, however, many programs are unable to offer services to families that would contribute to their successful participation in Preschool for All programs.

Especially for programs serving communities that have been difficult to engage in early learning services, offering parent support may make a difference in enrollment and participation of families and children.

Parent support staff are an allowable Early Childhood Block Grant budget expense. Programs wishing to employ a family support worker can include those costs in their budgets. Including family support staff may cause the program budget to exceed the average cost per child benchmark, and in this case programs must make a strong case for the need for including these staff in their ECBG proposal.

Parent education and involvement is already a required component of the Early Childhood Block Grant RFP (see attachment 6). In addition to writing an explanation of

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how the program will fulfill the basics that the Preschool for All Children initiative expects, proposals should include details on the additional offerings the family support worker will undertake, and how these activities will specifically address the needs of the difficult to engage families a program is attempting to reach and enroll.

For examples of parent education and involvement activities, see Appendix C of the RFP.

In some cases, programs may wish to provide programs to engage parents in activities that meet their needs while their preschool-aged children participate in school-based programs. Programs would need to provide activities and/or meeting space for parents during the 2.5 hours of the program day. Younger children could accompany their mothers/caregivers. Some of those costs may be included in an ECBG program budget, but ISBE encourages programs to think creatively about blending funding from other sources to provide parent-focused programs.

In considering what family services may be helpful for engaging families, consider the needs of your community.

- Are there many families that do not speak English? Would English as a Second Language, Citizenship, or classes focused on negotiating the American education system be appropriate?
- Are there low literacy rates in your community? Would basic literacy classes be appropriate? Is there a literacy-based organization that serves your community that could become a service partner? Could your local library become a partner?
- Are there many teen mothers? What adolescent services exist in the community, and how could they be potential service partners?

### Potential costs:

As in determining costs for teaching staff, programs should consider the local market and the scope of duties for staff in estimating a budget for family support workers salaries. Costs for activities should be reasonable (salary, benefits, supplies), and programs should consider what other sources of funding they may be able to access to cover family activity cost or large investments (example: the cost of improving a room so that it becomes a family activity center, or the costs of providing English as Second language classes for adults during preschool time).

**Appendix A**  
**Potential Examples of Hard to Reach Children**

- Children in child welfare system
- Homeless children
- Children in homeless and transitional housing or domestic violence shelters
- Children exposed to violence
- Children who have experienced trauma
- Children with developmental disabilities or delays
- Children with social / emotional or mental health issues
- Children with physical disabilities
- Children of incarcerated parents (or parents re-entering communities from incarceration)
- Children being raised by grandparents
- Children with single or divorced parents
- Children of LGBT families
- Children with parents who are immigrants
- Children whose families speak English as a Second Language
- Children of parents with mental illness or developmental delays
- Children of parents who have substance abuse problems
- Children whose families are experiencing domestic violence