

## ACCESS TO QUALITY

The Denver Preschool Program provides tuition credits to help families access quality preschool.

Research shows that access to quality preschool has positive effects on children’s academic and social-emotional skills and promotes school readiness.<sup>1</sup> However, the cost of preschool in Denver is high.<sup>2</sup> Married couples in Denver pay about 14% of their income for preschool<sup>2</sup> - double what is considered affordable child care<sup>3</sup> - and the cost for single mothers is nearly 50% of their income.<sup>2</sup>

### Denver Preschool Program Tuition Credits

The Denver Preschool Program (DPP) supports Denver families through universal tuition credits to subsidize the cost of preschool. DPP also works to improve preschool quality in Denver and is a leader and advocate for early childhood education.

DPP tuition credits are calculated based upon the family’s percentage of the federal poverty level, the quality rating of the preschool, and the hours the child attends preschool. During the 2019-2020 program year, 5,646 families received tuition credits, with a typical family receiving about \$500 in tuition credits per month.

This brief summarizes results of the evaluation conducted by the Butler Institute for Families. Data sources include a survey completed by a representative sample of DPP families ( $n = 346$ ), which was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as program records from September 2019-August 2020.

### Highlights of Evaluation Results

#### 1) Families served by DPP.

- 30%** live below the federal poverty line
- 64%** of children were identified as Hispanic, Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, or another race/ethnicity besides white<sup>4</sup>

2) **Application process.** Families rated the DPP application process as *somewhat to very easy*, on average, with families in public preschools reporting slightly more difficulty than did those in community preschools. The most challenging part was gathering the required documents, and this year, more families “opted out” of providing their income on the DPP application (resulting in the smallest tuition credit amount).

#### 3) Preschool access

- Almost all DPP families (94%) attended a high-quality preschool.<sup>1</sup>
- Most families (86%) enrolled in their first-choice preschool. Of those who did not, this was most often because of a lack of space.



Nearly **7 out of 10** DPP families experienced one or more of the following:

- Being a single parent
- Income below the federal poverty line
- Difficulty paying the rent or mortgage

<sup>1</sup> Meloy, B., Gardner, M., & Darling-Hammond, L. *Untangling the evidence on preschool effectiveness: Insights for policy makers*. Retrieved from [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Untangling\\_Evidence\\_Preschool\\_Effectiveness\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Untangling_Evidence_Preschool_Effectiveness_REPORT.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Qualistar Colorado. (2014). Child care prices and affordability: A struggle for Colorado families and providers. Retrieved from <https://www.wfco.org/file/ColoradoChildCarePricesandAffordabilityBrief.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General. (2019). States’ payment rates under the Child Care and Development Fund program could limit access to child care providers. (Publication No. OEI-03-15-00170). Retrieved from <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-03-15-00170.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Based on program administrative data

- Families of color tended to perceive the greatest benefit from DPP tuition credits in terms of access to their preschool of choice and/or being able to enroll in preschool for more hours.
- Nearly three-quarters of DPP families (71%) would have used tuition credits to support their child’s 3-year-old preschool year, if they were available.
- As may be expected, the COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic effect on the ability of families to keep their child enrolled in preschool. This year, only 8% remained in attendance for a nine-month school year from September-May – versus about 66% of families in past years.

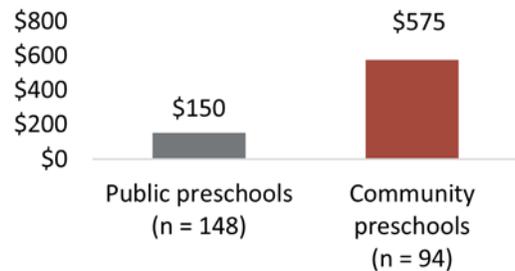
“We really appreciate the tuition credits from DPP. It has allowed us to send our children to pre-K for 5 full days, so they will feel more prepared for kindergarten. It would have been challenging for us to be able to meet our financial need were it not for our DPP credits.

- DPP Family

**4) Support for parents/caregivers and children.** For the vast majority of families, preschool was “very helpful” in helping their child learn how to behave in a classroom (92%), get along with other children (88%), and become more independent (84%). In addition, many DPP families reported that having a child in preschool allows parents/caregivers to work (89%).

**5) Preschool affordability.** After receiving DPP tuition credits, there was a statistically significant decrease in families’ difficulty with paying bills. However, families who utilize community-based preschools pay much more out of pocket than do those enrolled in public preschools (see figure, right).

Median amount paid out of pocket for preschool tuition per month



### Recommendations for Program Improvement

- 1) Expand supports to families who have experienced financial hardships.** This year’s findings indicate that many recipients of DPP’s standard tuition credits have experienced financial hardships, particularly families of color in southwest Denver who are impacted by systemic racism. Therefore, we recommend targeting providers and families of color in southwest Denver for participation in the Gap Scholarship or other initiatives by DPP intended to promote equitable access to preschool.
- 2) Consider ways that DPP tuition credits can support preschool affordability for families who enroll in community-based preschools.** Families who attend community preschools pay much more out of pocket for preschool – even after receiving DPP tuition credits. Therefore, it is recommended to consider revising the tuition credit scale to provide additional tuition support to community preschool families.
- 3) As funding allows, offer tuition credits for children’s 3-year-old preschool year.** Evaluation results in recent years indicate that offering tuition credits for children’s 3-year-old preschool year would help families offset the cost of preschool – and make it possible for some families to send their 3-year-old to preschool when it otherwise would not have been possible.

“My child has had a great time at her preschool. I am seeing her grow academically, and she enjoys to learn new things now more than ever, thanks to this preschool program.”

- DPP Family

# CLOSING THE “GAP”

## The Denver Preschool Program’s Gap Scholarship pilot aims to increase preschool affordability and access

The cost of preschool in Denver is high.<sup>1</sup> Married couples in Denver pay about 14% of their income for preschool<sup>1</sup> - double what is considered affordable child care<sup>2</sup> - and the cost for single mothers is nearly 50% of their income.<sup>1</sup> To promote access to preschool in Denver, this lack of affordability needs to be addressed.

### The Denver Preschool Program’s Gap Scholarship

The Denver Preschool Program (DPP) supports Denver families through universal tuition credits to subsidize the cost of preschool. DPP also works to improve preschool quality in Denver and is a leader and advocate for early childhood education.

In September 2019, DPP launched the Gap Scholarship, a pilot program offering additional tuition credits to DPP’s lowest income families. Eligible families attended full-day or extended-day preschool at one of the 20 preschools participating in the Gap Scholarship.<sup>3</sup> During the 2019-2020 program year, 63 families received Gap Scholarships. The typical scholarship was for \$312 per month, *in addition* to the regular DPP tuition credit families receive.

This brief summarizes results of the Gap Scholarship evaluation conducted by the Butler Institute for Families. Data sources include program records, surveys of families (*n* = 16) and preschool staff (*n* = 8), and interviews with DPP staff, contractors, and preschools.

### Highlights of Evaluation Results

**1) The Gap Scholarship reaches families from traditionally underserved groups.**

**54%** live below the federal poverty line

**76%** of children were identified as Hispanic, Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, or another race/ethnicity besides white<sup>4</sup>

**2) The Gap Scholarship helps families access high-quality preschools.** Nearly all families utilized a high quality preschool (93%),<sup>5</sup> and without the Gap Scholarship, many families report that it would have been much harder ...

- To enroll in their preschool of choice, and



About **9 out of 10** Gap Scholarship families experienced one or more of the following:

- Working a second job
- Being a single parent
- Difficulty affording the rent or mortgage
- Housing instability
- Income below the federal poverty line
- Difficulty affording clothing, medical care, or child care

<sup>1</sup> Qualistar Colorado. (2014). *Child care prices and affordability: A struggle for Colorado families and providers*. Retrieved from <https://www.wfco.org/file/ColoradoChildCarePricesandAffordabilityBrief.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General. (2019). *States’ payment rates under the Child Care and Development Fund program could limit access to child care providers*. (Publication No. OEI-03-15-00170). Retrieved from <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-03-15-00170.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Current eligibility criteria for the Gap Scholarship: families have an income at or below 300% of the federal poverty level, pay more than 7% of their income for preschool, do not receive other public child care subsidies, and are enrolled in preschool full-day or extended day.

<sup>4</sup> Based on program administrative data

<sup>5</sup> Defined as a provider with a Colorado Shines rating of 3 or above

- To send their child for the hours and days they wanted.<sup>6</sup>



DPP, thank you! Thank you! You have helped me incredibly during a transitional year for our family. Our child is receiving an outstanding preschool education we would not have otherwise afforded.

Without the Gap Scholarship, we would have likely pulled her out of [preschool] and her education would have been compromised. Thank you! So much!”

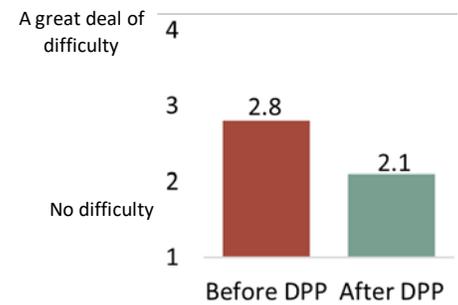
- Gap Scholarship Family

- 3) **The Gap Scholarship has been well-received by families and preschools.** Families say it is convenient to sign up for the Gap Scholarship and preschools report that the logistics of the program are easy.<sup>7</sup>
- 4) **Gap Scholarship families believe DPP tuition credits positively impact their financial well-being.** After receiving DPP tuition credits, there was a statistically significant increase in Gap Scholarship families’ ability to afford child care and clothing.<sup>8</sup> Families also felt less difficulty paying bills<sup>9</sup> (see chart below).

5) **The Gap Scholarship makes a difference for preschools and the families they serve.** Based on survey results:

- One-half of preschools re-purposed existing scholarships and revenue in their program (e.g., to support other families or purchase materials).
- Family enrollment increased for 25% of preschools.
- Many preschools report that the Gap Scholarship allowed at least one student to increase their hours of attendance.

Gap Scholarship families’ difficulty paying bills before and after receiving DPP tuition credits



Opportunities for Program Improvement and Expansion

1) **Ensure the Gap Scholarship reaches families with the greatest need.**

According to interviews and analysis of program records, the Gap Scholarship may be missing families who need it most, such as those who are refugees, live in child care deserts, and/or are not already enrolled in preschool. Thus, we recommend that DPP:

- Collaborate with other programs that serve families with low incomes (e.g., family resource centers) to identify families that most need tuition credits to send their child to preschool.
- Consider whether the current eligibility criteria (e.g., the requirement that families not receive other public child care subsidies) preclude families with the greatest need from participating.

2) **Expand preschool participation in the Gap Scholarship pilot, if funding allows.** According to the survey, some preschools did not sign up for the Gap Scholarship because they did not have enough information. Contacting preschools well in advance of the deadline to sign up, particularly for those that are closed during the summer, could boost preschool – and family – participation in the Gap Scholarship.



<sup>6</sup> According to family surveys

<sup>7</sup> According to family and preschool surveys

<sup>8</sup> Based on family survey results: Clothing  $t(14) = -3.05, p = .01, d = .79$ ; Child care:  $t(13) = -2.80, p = .02, d = .74$

<sup>9</sup> Based on family survey results:  $t(13) = -3.23, p = .01, d = .87$

- 3) **Consider program adjustments that promote scalability.** Processing the Gap Scholarships involves requesting information from preschools and manually calculating each child's tuition credit. We recommend that DPP simplify and automate how tuition credits are calculated, thereby making it possible to scale-up the program.

Before Gap Scholarship came in, I would take a loss and do an internal scholarship [for families]. With the Gap Scholarship coming in, it's eliminated much that I had to cover, which allows me to pay my teachers a decent salary."

- **Gap Scholarship Preschool**

## NUTURING QUALITY

## The Denver Preschool Program offers a variety of resources to enhance preschool quality.

Teaching preschool requires a complex skillset. Preschool teachers must establish environments that meet the diverse and evolving needs of young learners, foster positive relationships with children and families, teach lifelong skills, and evaluate children’s progress, among other responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> Quality improvement resources offer teachers opportunities to continuously grow as professionals and receive valuable support.

### The Denver Preschool Program’s Quality Improvement Resources

The Denver Preschool Program (DPP) works to increase Denver families’ access to high quality preschool through universal tuition credits to subsidize the cost of preschool and by working to improve preschool quality in Denver. DPP is a leader and advocate for early childhood education (ECE).

DPP offers various quality improvement resources, including coaching from experts in the field, training on various ECE-related topics, support with navigating the quality rating process, financial incentives, funding for classroom learning materials, and scholarships for higher education, among other supports.

This brief summarizes results of the evaluation conducted by the Butler Institute for Families for the 2019-2020 school year. Most data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data sources include surveys of preschool providers ( $n = 411$ ), coaching logs, and surveys of preschool staff who participated in DPP coaching.

### Highlights of Evaluation Results



*Recibo ayuda en todo lo que necesito, en mi idioma, en el horario que puedo y a domicilio. Mas no creo que se pueda pedir. El personal que me ayuda es amable, paciente y tienen una actitud de ir más allá de donde yo quiero ir. En ocasiones me visitan porque tienen información que saben que me interesa ¿qué más puedo pedir?”*

[I receive help in everything I need, in my language, at the times that I am available, and at home. I don’t think I could ask for more. The staff that help me are friendly, patient, and have an attitude of going above and beyond where I want to go. On occasion they visit me because they have information that they know interests me. What more could I ask for?]

- DPP Provider

#### 1) Quality Improvement (QI) resources help motivate preschools to enroll in DPP.

For many providers, QI resources were a main reason why they enrolled in DPP. The top three resources providers selected as motivating them to participate in DPP were...

- 68%** Coaching support
- 58%** Funds for professional development/training
- 54%** Assistance paying for materials and equipment

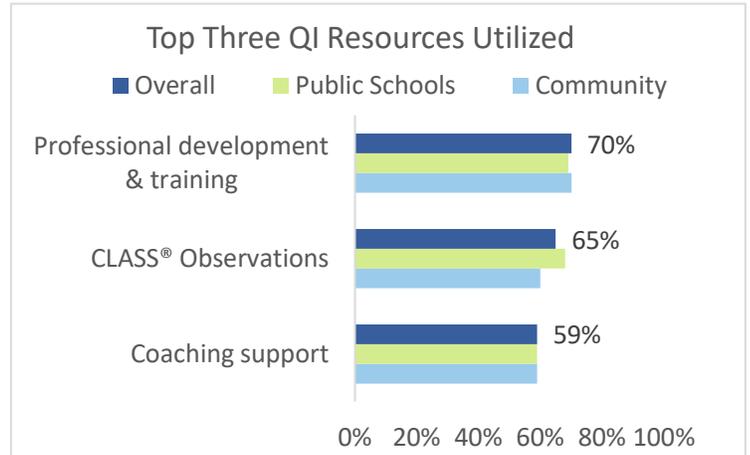
#### 2) DPP QI is well-received by providers.

Most providers were satisfied with how well DPP’s QI resources met their needs (86%), and many found the support they receive from DPP or DPP contractors to be “very useful” (69%).

<sup>1</sup> Downer, J. T., Jamil, F., Maier, M. F., & Pianta, R. C. (2012). Implications of information processing theory for professional development of early educators. In C. Howes, B. Hamre, & R. Pianta (Eds), *Effective early childhood professional development: Improving teacher practice and child outcomes*, (pp. 131-155) Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

**3) Professional development/trainings, CLASS® observations, and coaching support were the most-utilized QI resources.**

Community-based and public school sites reported similar utilization of professional development, CLASS® observations, and coaching (see graph, right). However, community-based providers reported significantly more utilization of resources such as financial assistance with materials/equipment, financial awards based on achievement, support with paying for curriculum or child assessments, and scholarships than did public school providers.



Love the coaching support – it’s the best I’ve ever had of anything available to me in this role. Specific, great ideas, supportive.”

- DPP Provider

**4) Coaching support is valued by preschool educators.**

Along with being among the most highly utilized resources, coaching was one of the supports most frequently requested by program leaders. This suggests a match between providers’ needs and the support they received. In addition, providers were generally satisfied with the coaching they received through DPP (see box, left).

**Opportunities for Program Improvement and Expansion**

- 1) Continue to fund QI resources with input from providers on what is most useful; ensure providers, especially teachers, are aware of QI resources and how they can access those resources.** Providers are motivated to participate in DPP due, in part, to the availability of QI resources. To fully realize the benefits of QI, staff need to be aware of the resources – including how to access them. Providers know what they need, and they should continue to inform what training opportunities are offered.
- 2) Investigate ways to structure professional development to individualize to providers’ needs.** Despite being generally satisfied with QI, providers offered various recommendations for improving QI offerings, many of which focused on individualizing QI to providers’ needs:
  - a. In terms of professional development, many recommended creating a tiered system of trainings that could be differentiated based on providers’ experience or expertise.
  - b. Providers also wanted more individualized coaching with greater opportunity for modeling/ demonstrations from their coach, as well as more frequent coaching sessions/availability.
  - c. For CLASS® observations, many wanted more targeted feedback afterward.
- 3) Recognize the differing needs among community-based providers and public school providers.** Although both community-based and public schools providers engaged with QI resources, community-based providers utilized significantly more business/financial and curricular support than did public school providers. This demonstrates that needs and resources vary among community and public school sites. Community-based providers have to run businesses and often braid and blend various funding streams, and they may have fewer resources available than do public schools. The menu of QI options that DPP provides allows providers to utilize resources most pertinent to their needs.