Kindergarten Registration in the School District of Philadelphia: Selected Results from the 2017-2018 Kindergarten Registration Secretary Survey

Katie Mosher, Research Specialist; Kristyn Stewart, Senior Research Associate

Summary of Key Findings:

- What it means to register "on-time" is not widely understood.
- Obtaining the required documentation is one of the primary barriers to timely registration.
- Parents who register late or very late seem to have more difficulty navigating the registration process.
- Secretaries may benefit from additional training on how to handle missing documents or unusual registration situations (e.g., custody disputes, residency issues, and students with special needs)
- Secretaries report needing additional support during the registration window in order to register parents in a timely fashion.

On-time kindergarten registration is defined as registering on or before the last day of school of the preceding school year. In December 2018, ORE surveyed 148 school secretaries about their opinions on the kindergarten registration. One hundred five secretaries responded, which represents a 71% response rate. Secretaries were asked to identify barriers to on-time registration, to share their own challenges with the registration process, and to suggest strategies or resources that could be useful for increasing on-time registration.

Primary Barriers to On-Time Registration

Secretaries were asked to identify the primary barriers to kindergarten registration for three groups of parents:
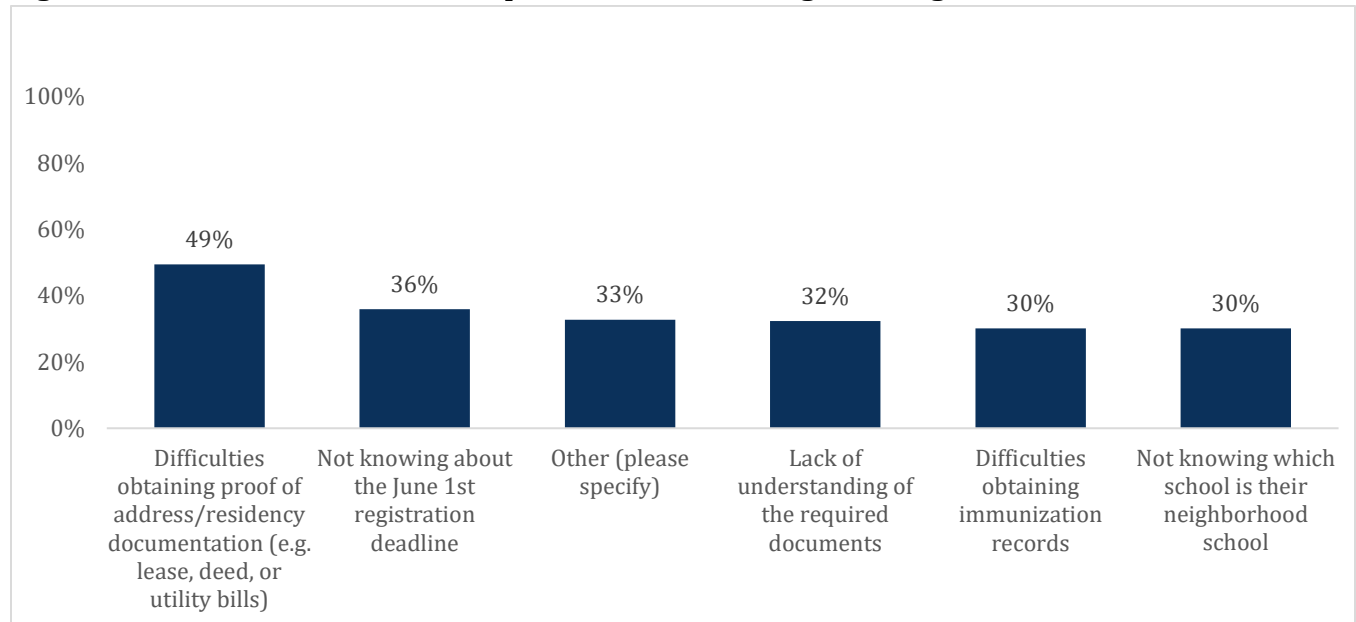
1. Parents who registered their children for Kindergarten **on time** (defined as on or before the last day of school of the preceding school year);
2. Parents who registered their children **late** (defined as over the summer or prior to the first day of Kindergarten); and
3. Parents who registered their children for Kindergarten **very late** (defined as after the first day of Kindergarten.)

Secretaries identified several barriers to timely kindergarten registration that were consistent regardless of when (on time, late, or very late) parents registered their children (Figure 1).

The most frequent issue secretaries reported encountering in the kindergarten registration process was parents having difficulties obtaining proof of address/residency documentation - about half

(49%) of secretaries identified this as a barrier to timely K registration. For example, one secretary explained, "A lot of residency affidavits and several leases looked false and were not signed by a landlord." The second most frequent issue secretaries identified was parents' lack of awareness of the registration deadline. One secretary noted that parents did not know that SDP offered "early registration," so they "waited until the school year started to come and ask." Other secretaries shared that some parents did not know "the dates for early registration" or that "registration was open even though it is posted on a sign on the school lawn."

Figure 1. Secretaries Identified Multiple Barriers to Kindergarten Registration

Note: Secretaries could choose multiple barriers, so responses do not sum to 100.

About 33% of secretaries selected "other" in response to this question and wrote in additional information. Among the most frequent "other" responses were:
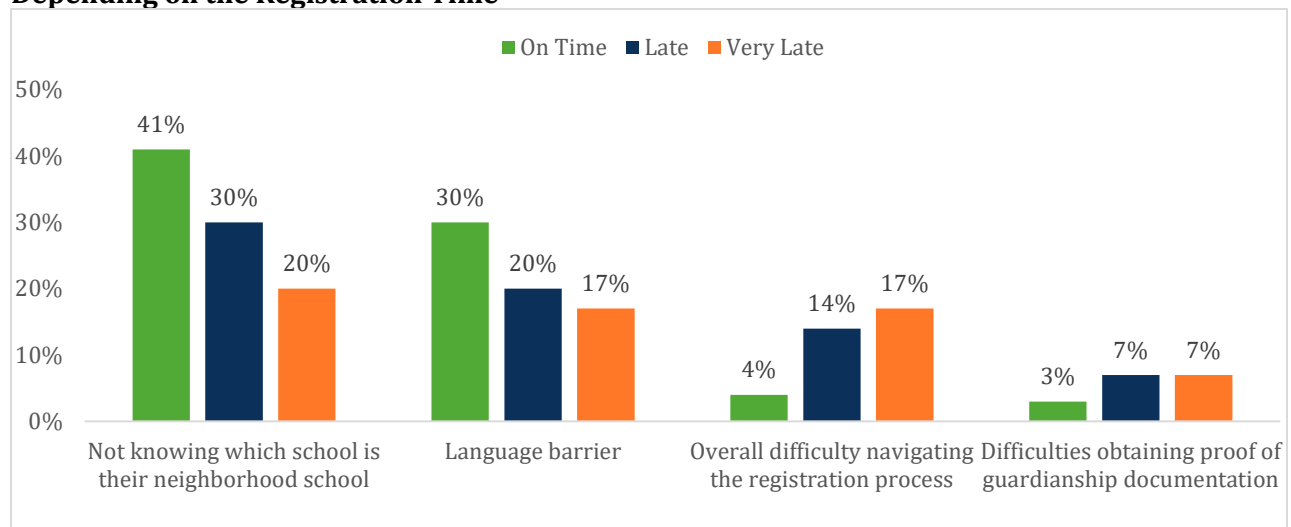
- **Procrastination**: Many secretaries expressed that parents did not understand the importance of on-time registration and noted a general lack of urgency to register prior to the first day of school (n=29).
- **High transience and mobility:** Some comments suggested that highly mobile families (those moving in and out of the neighborhood/catchment or moving into the country) tend to register late (n=17).
- **Lack of clarity about the process:** Some secretaries indicated that many parents did not understand some basic information about registration such as not knowing the registration age, not understanding that seats can fill, and not knowing that children need shots/physicals to register, all of which delay the process (n=9).

Overall, secretaries identified registration times (10%), difficulties obtaining proof of guardianship documentation (6%), and financial difficulties obtaining documents (6%) least often as issues for registration.

Primary Barriers to On-Time Registration by Registration Time

Overall, secretaries' responses were consistent across registration times – that is, secretaries identified the same issues regardless of when parents registered their children for kindergarten. However, there are a few notable differences across registration times. First, secretaries reported that not knowing which school is their neighborhood school was more of an issue for on-time registrants than late or very late registrations (Figure 2). Second, secretaries reported that a language barrier was more of an issue for on-time registrants than parents who registered late or very late. Finally, secretaries noted that parents who registered late or very late were more likely to have difficulty navigating the registration process and obtaining proof of guardianship documentation.

Figure 2. There were Key Differences in the Primary Barriers Identified by Secretaries Depending on the Registration Time

Note: Secretaries could choose multiple barriers, so responses do not sum to 100.

Unique or Challenging Registration Situations

In open-ended comments, 25 secretaries identified additional issues that arose during the kindergarten registration process that they were unsure how to handle, including:

- **Custody:** Some secretaries reported that the family member or friend attempting to register the child for kindergarten did not have custody or the required documentation to prove custody. In some cases, custody challenges were related to parental incarceration, hospitalization, or parents who live out of the state or country (n=9).
- **Parents Unable to Obtain Documents:** Some secretaries were unsure how to support parents who simply could not obtain documentation, particularly birth certificates and immunization records that may have been permanently misplaced or were destroyed due to a disaster (n=6).

- **Residency:** A few secretaries expressed concern about the potential falsification of residency documentation and confusion about who is in charge of approving residency affidavits (n=4).
- **Students with Special Needs:** A few secretaries noted that registering students with special needs (i.e., students with IEPs or new ESOL students) can also be confusing, particularly if a parent does not have a copy of the child's IEP or if the ESOL student has never been tested for language competencies (n=3).

Resources and Supports to Support Timely and Efficient Registration

Some secretaries offered suggestions for additional support or resources that would be useful during the registration process (n=29).
- **Support to reduce interruptions and register students:** Many secretaries described the registration process as competing with their ongoing responsibilities (payroll, ordering, and attendance). Some secretaries said that constant interruptions (doors, phones, teachers, parents) prolong the time it takes to register each child. They suggested having extra personnel available to assist with registration or office tasks to reduce this burden and expedite the process (n=11).
- **Limiting the registration window and/or times:** A few secretaries said that closing the registration window by May would help greatly in ensuring that all of the registration paperwork is processed prior to the end of the school year. One secretary mentioned that currently she is unable to process the June registrants until she returns in August and that it would be helpful to limit registration times to Monday-Thursday and hold Fridays for processing paperwork (n=5).
- **Additional training in SIS:** One secretary suggested that secretaries have the opportunity to "get together [with other secretaries] to discuss our own experiences with the SIS and the registration process so we could hear best practices and be more consistent through the network." Two others would like additional training and to make the SIS registration process "simpler" (n=3).
- **More advertising and clearer outreach information:** Many secretaries suggested using robo-calls, Septa ads, and news and radio placements to better publicize the registration process. Secretaries also suggested providing flyers that can be posted around the community and distributed to local Pre-K and day care sites (n=23). They also suggested including information on what is <u>not</u> acceptable documentation for registration and stress the fact that schools fill their seats quickly to increase the sense of urgency (n=7).

Changes to the SY 18-19 Registration Process in Response to Findings

Several District offices implemented changes to the kindergarten registration process in response to the findings from this survey and other kindergarten registration research, including:
- The Office of Student Placement and Enrollment, in partnership with the Office of Early Childhood Education, created a [kindergarten registration website](). The website contains

kindergarten registration information, including printable forms in multiple languages and Kindergarten Open House event information.

- The Office of Early Childhood Education collaborated with the City of Philadelphia's Public Health department to send kindergarten registration and immunization information to 20,000 kindergarten-eligible families in Philadelphia.
- The Office of Early Childhood Education also clarified messaging around kindergarten registration vs. early registration, including an updated registration website with step-by-step guides and additional resources.
- The Office of Early Childhood Education provided 147 elementary schools with large, colorful, outdoor kindergarten registration banners to be posted annually during the kindergarten registration window.
- The Office of Research and Evaluation refined existing Pre-K survey questions about kindergarten registration and added additional questions to this year's survey to collect more detailed information from parents.