

Using Evidence to Evaluate Barriers to On-Time Kindergarten Registration in Philadelphia

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Although parents are encouraged to register their children for kindergarten as early as January of the year before their child is eligible to attend, relatively few do so. In SY 2018-19, approximately 50% of the students who ultimately attended kindergarten in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) registered “on time.” This brief summarizes the results from parent surveys, parent and staff interviews and focus groups, and a school secretary survey designed to answer one primary question: **What factors do parents and school staff identify as the major barriers to on-time registration?**

What did we find?

Respondents identified five primary barriers to on-time registration.

- 1. Parents and school secretaries reported that the paperwork required to register a student for kindergarten was burdensome and contributed to delays in on-time registration.** School secretaries cited paperwork as a primary factor for late or very late registration. Parents who participated in focus groups also cited the time-consuming and hard-to-navigate process of gathering paperwork, which includes scheduling doctor’s appointments and knowing where to find replacement documents.
- 2. Parents and school secretaries reported that the window for on-time kindergarten registration is unclear.** School secretaries named “not knowing about the June 1st registration deadline” as another primary reason more families did not register on time. Similarly, most parents reported that they were unaware that their child was supposed to be registered for



What is On-Time Registration?

- On-Time Registration:** January to June of the prior school year
- Late Registration:** Over the summer or in the fall but before the first day of school
- Very Late Registration:** After the first day of school

¹ This brief is a summary of Mosher, K. and Fink, R. (2018). “Using Evidence to Evaluate Barriers to On-Time Kindergarten Registration and Inform District Policy.” Presented at APPAM November 2018.

kindergarten during the previous school year. Parents believed that on-time registration meant that their child was registered by or on the first day of school.

3. **Parents that were considering alternative schooling options for their student may not register on time at their neighborhood public school.** Parents cited this as a reason they had not registered their child on time. Some parents explained that they were waiting to hear the results from a charter school lottery before registering their child at their neighborhood public school. Other parents were waiting to hear about the availability of potential scholarship money to attend private schools.
4. **Some parents reported that they had recently relocated and therefore could not have registered their student any earlier than they did.** Parents who told us they had relocated over the summer or had recently moved to a new neighborhood said it was impossible for them to have registered on time. Additionally, some parents mentioned that after moving it was difficult to identify their neighborhood school, since it was not necessarily the school located closest to their home. School secretaries also identified this as a reason why more families did not register during the on-time registration window.
5. **School Secretaries listed several registration scenarios that they were unsure how to handle.** For example, some secretaries were concerned about the legitimacy of residency documents. Secretaries also noted that missing documentation and unclear custody arrangements made their work more difficult and requested additional training and support around these issues.²

How did SDP respond?

In spring 2018, the District's Office of Early Childhood implemented some key changes to the Kindergarten registration process in response to these findings. The program office:

- ✓ Distributed Kindergarten Registration outdoor banners
- ✓ Updated their website with clearer links and more information
- ✓ Coordinated with the City of Philadelphia Public Health Department to identify about 20,000 kindergarten-eligible students to receive a mailer with key information about the registration process

Updated website and banner



² For more information and results from the secretary survey, see [“Kindergarten Registration in the School District of Philadelphia: Selected Results from the 2017-2018 Kindergarten Registration Secretary Survey.”](#)

- ✓ Identified Kindergarten Transition Leads at each elementary school to coordinate registration outreach efforts in conjunction with the District

Why study this?

Late or very late registration presents resource-allocation challenges for schools and can result 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.³ Furthermore, chronically absent students are less likely to read at grade level at the end of kindergarten.⁴

How did we study this?



Pre-Kindergarten Parent Survey: The data collection process began with an analysis of SDP's annual district-wide Pre-Kindergarten Parent Survey, which was administered by ORE in spring 2017. In addition to other questions, 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 parents who responded to the survey, 731 (59%) parents responded to the questions about kindergarten registration.



Semi-Structured Interviews: In September 2017, ORE conducted 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.”)



Parent Focus Groups and Interviews: In October and November 2017, researchers from CPRE conducted 24 focus groups and 17 interviews across nine schools with either very low rates or very high rates of on-time registration. 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.



School Secretary Survey: ORE surveyed school secretaries in December 2017 about their experiences with the kindergarten registration process. 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 to the survey, which represents a 71% response rate.

³ Stewart, K. and Saleet, G. (2018). Why Kindergarten Attendance Matters. Retrieved from <https://www.philasd.org/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2017/11/Kindergarten-Attendance-and-Rdg-Levels-Focus-Brief-October-2017.pdf>

⁴ Ibid; Ehrlich et al. (2013). Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Pre-K%20Attendance%20Research%20Summary.pdf>