# Implementation of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program:
## A Statewide Evaluation

**Ellen Peisner-Feinberg, Ph.D.**
**Margaret Burchinal, Ph.D.**
**Sandra Soliday Hong, Ph.D.**
**Noreen Yazejian, Ph.D.**
**Anna Shelton-Ormond, &**
**Tiffany Foster, M.A.**

**UNC** SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

**UNC** FRANK PORTER GRAHAM CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

## Overview of the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program

Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts (PA PKC) is a state-funded prekindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-old children to help them gain school readiness skills. The goal of PA PKC is to help reduce educational disparities by providing high quality prekindergarten for children who lack opportunities or reside in environments that place them at risk of school failure. The PA PKC program regulations and guidelines define children at risk as those who are living in households below 300 percent of the federal poverty rate, are English Language Learners (ELL), or who are at risk due to community factors, academic difficulties, or economic disadvantage.

PA PKC spaces are offered in school districts, Head Start, Department of Education privately licensed nursery schools, and high quality child care settings. Children attend 180 days per year, with either half-day or full-day options. The program regulations include a number of other guidelines consistent with high quality, including teacher qualifications, curriculum and instruction, screening and assessment, classroom self-assessments, and family engagement.

## Study Purpose

The Implementation Study was designed to examine local variations in the statewide implementation of PA PKC in relation to the program regulations and early learning standards. The study entailed surveys with three groups of families (current PA PKC families, former PA PKC families in kindergarten, comparison families in kindergarten), surveys and interviews with PA PKC administrators, and PA PKC administrative data. This process evaluation focused on issues related to the extent of variability in implementation of PA PKC, effectiveness of family engagement, adequacy of supports for continuous quality improvement, and implementation challenges in supporting children's school readiness.

## Research Questions

The Implementation Study addressed four primary questions:

1. How much local variation exists in the implementation of PA PKC program regulations and standards?

2. As key stakeholders, how effectively are families engaged in and supported by PA PKC? How does PA PKC view their role in supporting family engagement?

3. To what extent is adequate support provided by local PA PKC programs and by OCDEL for continuous quality improvement?

4. To what extent are key factors (geographic region and urbanicity/rurality, program size, percent 3-year-olds, provider type, teacher credentials) associated with greater or lesser implementation challenges? What are recommended suggestions for improvement?

## Results

### *Variability in Implementation*

- Many of the PA PKC program regulations are designed to allow local variability based on community needs. Accordingly, administrators reported substantial variation in the selection of enrollment prioritization factors and in the populations targeted for recruitment, although many acknowledged that some higher-priority populations may be harder to reach. There was greater consistency regarding regulations for enrolling children with disabilities and coordinating services, and for the use of an approved curriculum and assessment in alignment with the early learning standards.

### Family Engagement

- PA PKC regulations include a family involvement plan and supportive activities. Families perceived the program positively in terms of satisfaction ratings, staff supportiveness, and help with kindergarten transition. Administrators were more likely to define and implement family engagement activities related to communication and collaboration between the agency and the families than related to families' voices and roles.

- Transition to kindergarten is a key aspect of children and families' experiences in PA PKC. Just over 60% of PA PKC administrators used the suggested OCDEL Transition Best Practices Rubric and Transition Tool Kit for developing transition plans, although nearly all implemented some types of transition activities.

### Continuous Quality Improvement

- PA PKC administrators generally had positive perceptions about the level of implementation supports provided by OCDEL and about their work environment. There was some variability in the education and certification levels of teaching staff and the frequency of mentoring supports.

- Nearly all administrators reported updating and using most types of data, as indicated in the PA PKC regulations, although they found data systems other than PELICAN or child assessment tools more useful for continuous quality improvement.

### Implementation Challenges

- A substantial proportion of administrators (one-third) reported a high level of implementation challenges. Administrators who reported higher levels of implementation challenges were more likely to enroll higher proportions of 3-year-olds and to be community-based provider types (child care, Head Start, licensed nursery) than school districts.

- One ongoing challenge for many programs underlying various aspects of implementation relates to communication with families in their home language.

- Administrators offered some suggestions for program improvement, but also expressed positive perceptions of the program.

## Recommendations

Based on these results, the following conclusions are offered.

1. In order to ensure that PA PKC is recruiting, enrolling, serving, and engaging families and children in all target populations, provide greater assistance to local programs with strategies for outreach to populations that are challenging to reach and for communication with families and children who speak languages other than English.

2. More opportunities should be provided to families for deeper engagement in order to allow them stronger roles and voices within the program, as well as to further enhance the level of staff support. Specifically, more engagement opportunities around policy and decision-making and adult-focused activities should be offered.

3. The process of using the OCDEL Transition Best Practices Rubric and Transition Tool Kit for developing transition plans should be further examined to determine how to facilitate the use of this tool and whether revisions are needed.

4. Providing further support to local programs and opportunities for sharing successful approaches around transition practices, mentoring and other related practices for obtaining and maintaining highly qualified staff, and data use and reporting may be useful in enhancing continuous quality improvement efforts.

5. Further examination of specific implementation challenges faced by community-based PA PKC programs as opposed to school districts and by those enrolling higher proportions of 3-year-olds is recommended, in order to determine ways to improve both program implementation and children's school readiness outcomes.