

**Early Childhood Transition  
and Kindergarten  
Decision-Making**  
Executive Summary

Think Small + Generation Next

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This study is intended to help Think Small and Generation Next understand how families gather information, weigh factors, and make an Early Care and Education (ECE) and Kindergarten enrollment decisions for their child. Below are five key takeaways that illuminate the findings from 34 parents interviewed twice each: once during April/May of 2018 as they were considering Kindergarten options for their child; and again in September/October 2018, after that child started Kindergarten.

## 1. Access, Agency, and Privilege Subtly Influence the Decision-Making Process

For so many families, their decision-making demonstrated that access, agency, and privilege play a pivotal role in the process. In the context of the report, these concepts were not to be interpreted as negative or with ill-judgment but as strengths to strive towards. While strong attempts and efforts have been made to strengthen the decision-making process for families, increased efforts should be made to empower families to expand their access, exercise their agency, and leverage their privilege.

**Access:** Access to information is a consistent concern for families. During decision-making, families worry about their access to accurate information, and become frustrated if they feel required to make a decision with incomplete information. Improving access to consistent information will require collaborative efforts from organizations, districts, and schools. Resources will need to span the ECE decision-making, kindergarten-decision making, and kindergarten enrollment phases, and give families needed information before they reach a final decision. When families are made aware of what information they need, they will be emboldened to find out what they do not know. This will bolster their confidence to know they are not at a disadvantage in the process while others are gaining selective access that is being kept from them.

**Agency:** Agency is pivotal in the process as it relates to seeking and obtaining missing information and utilizing information to advocate for one's child. Some families do not know how to navigate the complicated school system to gain information, while others can obtain information, but cannot make effective use of it. Families may be hesitant to communicate with newly-assigned teachers about their child's abilities and skillsets, as it is falsely assumed that communication should be reserved for issues or topics of concern. Communicating with their child's teacher should be reframed as an opportunity for families to build a relationship with the teacher and engage in their child's education. To achieve this shift in perspective, efforts should be made to provide families with the permission and skills to positively advocate for their child. Permission, which is divorced from authority but situated in affirmation, can empower families to champion their child's needs. Teachers can help families realize that they, too, hold a piece of the puzzle, and that they should be empowered to share what they know about their child. More should be done to help families see that, while they may not be content or curriculum experts, they are experts of their children, which makes what they have to contribute important. Lastly,

resources should be provided to help families build the necessary skills to advocate for their child.

**Privilege:** In this context, privilege determines how families perceive their options. Not everyone has or is able to recognize the kindergarten options that are available for their family. Not all potential options can be realistically considered by every family because of cost, lack of knowledge, timing, etc. Being able to move into a preferred district is a demonstration privilege, as is the ability to prioritize niche factors which are not universally present. The roots of privilege make it a difficult concept to address. However, organizations should do more to help families recognize the full scope of their options. While access to information is important, it can also be limiting if it does not increase the breadth of school-choice options families can reasonably explore. Organizations committed to the success of students can inform families of public, private, and charter options, the admissions timeline and process for these options, and resources to supplement costs. Having access to the necessary information about alternative options and knowing their requirements will create a pathway for families to exercise agency in their decision-making.

## **2. Families Prioritize Personal Networks as a Key Source of Information**

When it comes to gathering information about the kindergarten decision-making process, families want to review and filter all possible options. Once the options are narrowed, families want direct and personal feedback from others in their personal network (friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc.) whose lives mirror their own. They prefer to learn about a school from friends and families with children in that school, rather than staff who are employed by the district or school. Families want to hear from other moms in the neighborhood, the dad at the music class, the grandparents at the park, and their child's ECE provider. They want to hear from people they relate to, people they trust, and people who share their same values. While a lot can be done to provide fundamental information to families, when it comes to receiving information that will influence their decisions, families strongly prefer that information comes from someone they know and trust.

## **3. Values and Priorities Influence Key Decision-Making Factors**

When weighing their child's kindergarten choice options, families identify key factors (i.e., test scores, location/neighborhood, school culture), and informally assign their factors a weight of importance. The decision-making process is a strategy of comparing factors based on the assigned weight of impact. This underscores the reality that the factors are a proxy for values. Albeit not comprehensive, the factors families weigh most heavily informally shed light on what each family values most. This is helpful in framing the kindergarten decision-making process as both a value-laden decision, and a fact-based decision. While it may appear simple to alter families' focus of specific factors and persuade them to prioritize other factors, understanding that factors are rooted in personal values reveals what a challenging undertaking it would be to do so. Any support provided to families for this decision-making process should emphasize both the necessity of practical activities, such as participating in school tours, examining cost, and

scheduling logistics. It should also elevate the importance of articulating family values and using that to drive the future decision-making.

#### **4. Families Making Decisions Need More Information**

At almost every stage of the kindergarten decision-making process, families felt misinformed and lacking necessary information. To address this, multiple event types should be held to provide families with the information they need to feel confident in their decisions. School-hosted information sessions can be used to inform decision-making families about school policies and procedures, curriculum and academic approaches, and school logistics, such as start and end times of the school day, and the availability and cost of before-and-after school care.

Open house events, held during the summer for newly-enrolled students, should be an opportunity for families to meet and interact with their new teachers, and help students become comfortable with their new schools. Families want to be knowledgeable about the every-day processes that can cause potential distress for their children. This includes asking to use the restroom, the lunchtime routine, and what to do if their child gets separated from the class. These events should also be used to inform families of the logistics of enrollment, including how to acquire a lunch PIN and deposit money in the account, how to secure bus options, how to sign up for before-after school care, and when to expect a school supply list.

Social events for incoming families hosted by the school or parent organizations can also serve informational purposes. These events provide an informal opportunity for children to foster friendships with students in their school or classroom. Additionally, bringing incoming families together to socialize can strengthen the connection they feel to the school and build a sense of community. For families seeking their neighborhood schools, the feeling of community and connection was a priority factor. Lastly, social events can also create a space for families to share information, knowledge, and wisdom. This is essential, given that families prefer information from other families in their community and network.

These three events types help families become informed partners in the transition and enrollment process, and can help to increase their agency to seek out the additional information they need to remain active and engaged in the process.

#### **5. School Tours Provide First-Hand Perspective of School Options**

Touring an ECE site or elementary school provides families an opportunity to gather untraditional data and non-tangible information about a program or school. The tours provide answers to a variety of specific and general questions, and provide abstract information that can be difficult to understand without a personal experience. When it comes to conducting ECE tours, families should remain open-minded and not allow past judgement to sway their opinions. Depending on the age of their child when making this decision, families should consider bringing their child on the tour. Seeing their child demonstrate comfort in a new space will serve to quiet parents' anxiousness and foster a smooth transition process for the child.

Enough cannot be said about the opportunity to experience the elementary school in person and to talk to staff and school leadership. Despite all of the tangible and objective factors that influence families' decision-making, for many the decision was made by an indescribable feeling they received upon touring a school. Families should be encouraged to visit the schools they are considering for their child. Reading about the school culture on a website, in a brochure, or hearing about it from others pales in comparison to experiencing it in-person. Even if families feel confident in their decision about a particular school, they should tour other schools to make a comparative assessment of their choice and build confidence in their decision.

## Limitations of the Study

The goal was to gather data from families, particularly families of color and low income, for which there exists a limited amount of information, to understand their transition practices. However, the 34 individuals interviewed for this study were overwhelmingly white (88%), female (94%), and highly educated (35% with a Masters degree; 6% with a Professional degree). Additionally, the group was also heavily representative of high household-income families (25% earned between \$100K-\$150K; 28% earned above \$150K). In understanding the findings presented above, it is pivotal that one considers the demographic make-up of the respondents. The participants are in no way a reflective sample of the general population. As such, the findings from this report should not serve as the basis for general policies impacting populations who were not represented in this group. The unrepresentative nature of the sample could create harm if extrapolated for systemic decisions. Use of the data include attention to the interaction of participant characteristics and their practice of access, agency, and privilege. Despite the limitations of the study, there exists a high level of confidence in the validity of the report. The practice of two interviews with participants provided data that are rich in detail, and captures the complexities of respondents' experiences and the subtleties of their responses.

## Moving Forward

While the enrollment decision is often branded to families as "school choice," there is doubt surrounding how much control they have. It appears that families are given the ability to narrow the scope of their options, but still feel as though choice is largely out of their hands. However, the full degree of choice is possible, as it typically exhibited by families with access, agency and privilege. For all families to believe in their full control of the process and exercise their choice, access, agency and privilege must be more equitably practiced by all.

Moving forward, a formulaic process that expects all families to follow the same set of prescriptive steps to achieve a decision would not improve families' sense of agency. Families want guidance, but they do not want to be controlled. They do not want to be forced into "best practices," which assume that what has worked for other families will inherently work for them. They want guiding principles that will provide counsel and direction. Principles provide guidance that families can interpret and adapt to their own context without attempting to force compliance to an optimal or singular pathway to decision-making. These principles will allow families to maintain the autonomy to effectively modify their activities and meet the specific needs of their family and values. Without this, processes will remain the same. Those with the

tools will continue to utilize them in their decision-making, and those without them will continue to make the best decision they can.