

# Navigating new waters: How CPS and CBOs Manage Shifting Operations and Funding Streams Following Chicago's UPK Expansion

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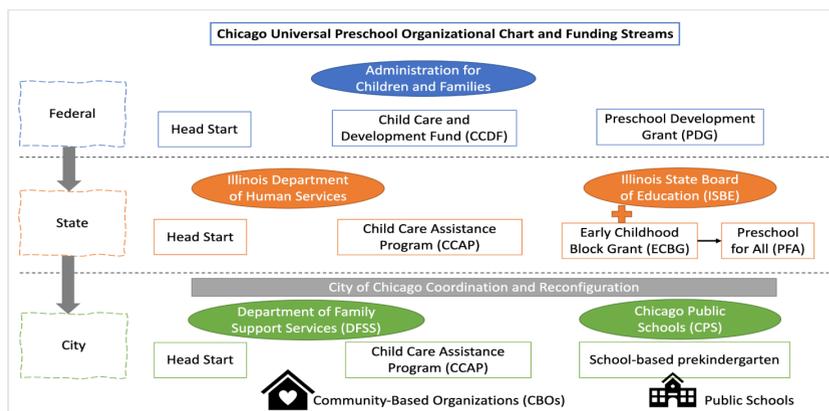
## Abstract

This study examines the impacts of Chicago's Universal Pre-K (UPK) expansion on the operational dynamics of preschools across setting types from the perspective of administrators. Specifically, we explore how Chicago Public Schools (CPS) principals and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) directors experienced the implementation of UPK. Analysis reveals nuanced experiences of UPK's expansion, common challenges, and administrator's savvy in navigating these new waters. This poster highlights two significant challenges - shifting funding streams and fluctuating enrollments - and explores the strategic paths charted by administrators over the past four years to navigate the Chicago Early Learning initiative.

## Background

Chicago's UPK expansion:

- Launched in 2018-2019 school year.
- Led by the office of the Mayor, in partnership with the City of Chicago, the Department of Family Support Services, and CPS.
- Mission to provide a robust early learning system including "free, full-day prekindergarten for 4-year-olds."
- Maintains existing rigorous quality standards.
- Mixed-delivery system via CPS and CBOs.
- Universal access by 2023 with gradual roll out prioritizing economically disadvantaged communities initially.



## Methods

This mixed-methods study investigated preschool administrators' experiences of operational shifts related to the roll-out of UPK between 2021 and 2024, responding to research questions co-developed by research-practice partners.

**Participants (n= 25) :** 10 CPS principals and 15 CBOs directors.

- Offered \$50 gift card for involvement.

**Data collection (October 2022 – February 2024):**

- Demographic survey
- 30-60-minute in-depth, semi-structured interviews exploring administrators' experiences and perspectives of UPK.

**Data analysis:** Interviews were recorded, transcribed, de-identified, and analyzed using a Flexible Coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2021). Collaborative data exploration, reduction, and analysis was conducted through the spring of 2024.

## Key takeaways

- UPK exacerbated existing challenges for administrators and created opportunities for collaboration between CBOs & CPS.
- Blended-age classrooms can accommodate enrollment fluctuations that arise from expected and unexpected factors.
- Administrators recommend streamlined enrollment and administrative processes and flexibility with age cut offs.

## Findings

### Challenges

- New and different funding with varied reporting requirements
- Fluctuating enrollments (due to COVID-19, demographic changes)

Three sticky notes with quotes from participants:

- "Our HeadStart funding was taken away. And having to do with the reconfiguration of the HeadStart for the entire city of Chicago"
- "Like as a principal... I'm pulled in many directions. Just like logistically wise. The buildings are a mile away. I have more families, I have more needs. So, it's definitely stretched"
- "The pandemic hurt and our programs because some staff, teachers retired and didn't return. The pool of teachers itself is very minimal"

### Strategy Responses

- **Administration:** utilize Early Learning Portal application, shift existing / apply for new funding for staff and systems.
- **Recruitment:** year-round efforts, tailor to local community, actively maintain waitlists, collaborate across setting types.
- **Operations:** combine funding streams, develop staff in-house, open/ shift/ blend classrooms specific to funding streams

Three sticky notes with quotes from participants:

- "One of the ways we're able to offer comprehensive services is through the braiding and blending of funds"
- "We actually partner with Chicago when it comes to getting outside services for our kids, especially the ones who have IEPs, we go through Chicago Public School for that, and they help us with IEPs, and helping our parents get the services that their kids need."
- "The system that was designed for parents to go online and apply and pick schools, have actually been a really successful recruitment tool"

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Two sticky notes with quotes from participants:

- "I also think probably is a good thing that CPS did the expansion because of how hard it is to get childcare right now. Um, if we were relying on community-based organizations, there may not be a whole lot of four-year-olds served at this point".
- "Because at the end of the day, we're trying to provide services to the neediest children within the city of Chicago".