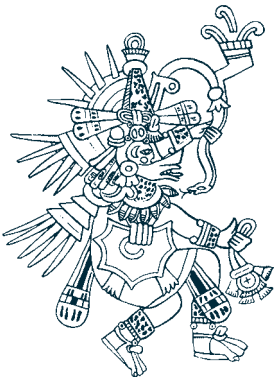




THE GREAT UNEQUALIZER:

How Denver's Pre-K System
Fails the Children of Southwest
Denver and Other Low-Income
Communities of Color



BY PADRES & JÓVENES UNIDOS
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INTRODUCTION

Photography by PJU

In 1860, when Abraham Lincoln was elected president and there were still nearly four million slaves in the U.S.,¹ less than 2% of Black and other non-White youth in the United States were enrolled in K-12 schools. In comparison, 60% of White children attended school.² By 1870, following the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, that rate rose to about 10% for children of color, compared to 54% for Whites. After another 10 years, in 1880, the gap had narrowed somewhat, but still there was only 34% enrollment for children of color, while 62% of White children were in school. The disparate rates of school enrollment

persisted, but slowly shrank, until 1972, when the school enrollment rate for children of color reached 90.1%, compared to 90.0% for their White peers.

Why is this data relevant today? Because the late 19th-century K-12 education system is the closest historical comparison to Denver's current pre-K system. And unless we address these inequities far more aggressively than we ever did within the K-12 education system, it may take us another 100 years for children from low-income communities of color to have equal access to high-quality pre-K opportunities.

Extensive national research has demonstrated that high-quality pre-K education enhances children's physical, cognitive, and social development, and promotes subsequent success in school and throughout their lives.

Extensive national research has demonstrated that high-quality pre-K education enhances children’s physical, cognitive, and social development, and promotes subsequent success in school and throughout their lives.³ As a result, there is now a widespread, bipartisan consensus on the importance

of pre-K for children, especially as a strategy for addressing socioeconomic inequities and the racial achievement gap.⁴ Key local and national policy-makers have even made the expansion of pre-K opportunities for children from low-income families a top policy priority.

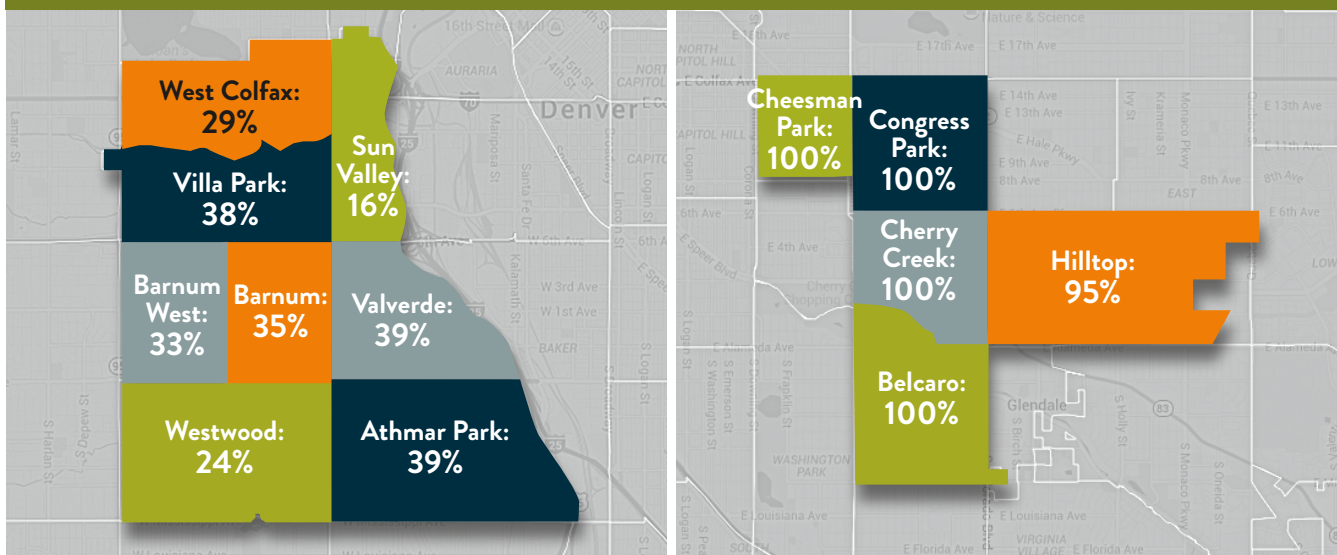
FOR EXAMPLE:

- Mayor Michael Hancock: “The achievement gap starts even before kindergarten. In order to best prepare all of our children to compete and succeed in the 21st century economy, they must be afforded a smart start in life – and that means making preschool accessible for all of Denver’s youngest students.”⁵
- Governor John Hickenlooper: “Ensuring that Denver parents have access to quality affordable preschool for their children is a critical part of improving our public schools, increasing economic opportunity, and reducing burdens on our public safety and criminal justice systems.”⁶
- President Obama: “Research shows that one of the best investments we can make in a child’s life is high-quality early education.”⁷
- U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan: “We know that children from low-income families begin school, on average, 12 to 14 months behind their peers in language development and pre-reading skills. They start school as a five-year-old already behind—and often never catch up. . . . [E]ducation must fulfill its role as the great equalizer. It must be the one force that overcomes differences in race, privilege, and national origin. I believe every child in America deserves an equal start in life—in rural America, in our suburbs, and in our cities. So, let’s invest to bring every child to the same starting line. Help us get our nation’s public schools out of the catch-up business.”⁸

Nevertheless, our current reality is that the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds that attend pre-K varies dramatically, depending on race, socioeconomic status, and geography. For example, in predominantly White, relatively affluent Denver neighborhoods such as Cherry Creek, Belcaro, Cheesman Park, and Platt Park, the pre-K enrollment rates are all 100%.⁹

In contrast, within the predominantly Latino and lower-income Southwest Denver neighborhoods of Valverde, Sun Valley, Westwood, and Barnum, pre-K enrollment rates are between 16% and 39% (see map).¹⁰ As a result, the children of Southwest Denver are, overall, far less prepared for kindergarten and beyond than their peers across the city.

3- AND 4-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN ENROLLED IN PRE-K



Source: Denver Office of Children’s Affairs

“...instead of being one of our leading strategies for eliminating the achievement gap in the K-12 system, Denver’s pre-K system is an active and significant contributor to the achievement gap.”

Despite these stark figures, the attention being placed on this issue locally and nationally, and Denver’s pre-K system being touted as a national

model,” there is currently no viable plan in place to eliminate these inequities. Indeed, within the pre-K community, there is a widespread belief that these widely disparate enrollment rates are primarily due to Latino parents preferring other childcare options, not placing as much value on early childhood

education, or simply not knowing about the pre-K opportunities available to them. We decided to test these assumptions by talking directly to parents within Southwest Denver. We spoke with thousands of residents to find parents of young children who could share their experiences. What we found is that the prevailing views around Latino parents and pre-K are misguided, at best.

Our research demonstrates that pre-K enrollment rates for children from Southwest Denver are low not because of choice, but because of the substantial, and often insurmountable, barriers that have been placed in front of families as

they try to access high-quality pre-K programs. Specifically, Southwest Denver parents encounter major challenges with regard to the availability and affordability of geographically convenient pre-K slots. Even for those families that are able to access pre-K programs, while many are undoubtedly having positive experiences, there are still significant concerns over quality. In particular, parents are experiencing difficulties around the overuse of harsh disciplinary measures, such as suspensions and expulsions, and inadequate support being provided to students whose first language is not English.

Thus, remarkably, we are in a situation that is reminiscent of late 19th-Century America, where many children in low-income communities of color are not even able to receive the education that is considered the norm within more affluent communities. Moreover, instead of being one of our leading strategies for eliminating the achievement gap in the K-12 system, Denver’s pre-K system is an active and significant contributor to the achievement gap. It is reinforcing the advantages enjoyed by the children of more affluent families and the disadvantages suffered by children of color from low-income families. Instead of propelling the children of Southwest Denver (and other low-income communities) toward success, it is setting far too many of them up for a lifetime of subordination. Consequently, while pre-K certainly has the potential to address many systemic inequities, without major systemic reform directed at these deficiencies, Denver’s pre-K system will continue to function as a “great *unequalizer*.”

Funding the Denver Preschool Program

It is noteworthy that Denver’s dominant strategy for addressing some of these pre-K inequities over the last 10 years, the Denver Preschool Program, is funded by sales taxes, which are notoriously regressive (meaning they have a disproportionate effect on low-income families). In other words, the residents that are least able to pay are – perversely – being forced to assume the greatest burden in accessing the system that is failing them.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the Summer and Fall of 2015, Padres & Jóvenes Unidos completed a major research effort to better understand Denver’s pre-K system, particularly within Southwest Denver. We completed a research scan, conducted focus groups of parents, and interviewed a variety of stakeholders, but the centerpiece of our research effort was the survey we conducted of Southwest Denver residents. We were looking for residents in one of two categories: (1) those with recent, personal experience with Southwest Denver pre-K programs; and (2) those with young children that did not, or do not, attend pre-K. Our parent and youth members knocked on over 1,500 doors and spoke with hundreds of other residents at libraries, shopping centers, schools, and other public places to find these residents. Ultimately, we were able to survey 330 residents on their experiences with Denver’s pre-K system. Over 90% of them identified as Latino/a, and the vast majority were Spanish-speaking. We asked them some multiple-choice questions and also asked them to describe their experiences. The key survey results, examples of respondents’ testimonials, and other complementary research findings are presented below.

ISSUE #1: ACCESS

We asked residents who had pre-K-aged children that were not enrolled in pre-K to tell us why this was so. They were given a series of choices (preferred other childcare options, could not afford it, no conveniently located sites, no available slots in local sites,

poor quality of local sites, or other reasons that they could specify), and they were able to select as many of the reasons as were applicable (and thus the percentages do not add up to 100%).

Reasons for Not Enrolling 3- or 4-Year-Old Children in Pre-K	No available slots in local sites	45%
	No conveniently located sites	26%
	Poor quality of local sites	19%
	Could not afford it	18%
	Other	11%
	Preferred other childcare options	10%

Of the 134 respondents to this question, 45% cited “no available slots” as one of the reasons, which was by far the most common response (see above). The second-most-common response was “no conveniently located sites,” which also reflects a lack of basic access. Nearly one in five respondents cited “poor quality of local sites” or “could not afford it,” indicating that affordability and quality are significant concerns. Eleven percent (11%) listed other reasons, citing conflicts with work schedules, lack of access to full-day programs, lack of transportation options, and the inability of pre-K programs to address the special needs of their children.

The smallest category – at only 10% – was the one that many within the pre-K community cite as the primary cause of low enrollment rates: “preferred other childcare options.” There were a handful of people who said they thought their children were too young for pre-K, but only 8 out of the 134 respondents listed “preferred other childcare options” as their only reason for not enrolling their children in pre-K.

8 out of 134

Number of survey respondents who listed “preferred other childcare options” as their only reason for not enrolling their children in pre-K

Navigating the Pre-K Process

Even those parents who were able to enroll their children in pre-K often experienced considerable challenges. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of survey respondents said that finding a space at an affordable, high-quality pre-K program was “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult.”

Thus, contrary to conventional wisdom, our research indicates that systemic barriers related to access, affordability, and quality are by far the most significant causes of low pre-K enrollment rates in Southwest Denver. Indeed, simply being able to locate a high-quality pre-K slot

appears to be the most significant concern of Southwest Denver parents and families, as parents report being on waiting lists for up to two years, not being able to locate programs that serve 3-year-olds, or simply not being able to find a school with an open slot near their house.

Community Voices: ACCESS

“It was very frustrating at Knapp because I was on the waiting list for two years . . .”

“They said that I needed to apply a year before to be able to get a slot.”

“Four of my children attended preschool and one stayed on the waiting list for two years.”

“I have waited [nearly a year] for them to tell me if my kids were accepted.”

“I have two grandchildren. They haven’t been able to go to school because they prefer kids four and up.”

“[I didn’t enroll my child in pre-K] because they are too far and the ones that are close to me cost too much.”

“There weren’t any slots available, which made me move farther away because there weren’t any conveniently located preschool programs.”

“There is not enough space for 3-year-olds.”

Additionally, in September and October of 2015, we surveyed all of the pre-K providers participating in the Denver Preschool Program (DPP) between 6th Avenue and Evans in Southwest Denver. Of the 18 providers that responded to multiple inquiries, only 3 had any open slots for 3-year-olds, and one of those was a one-star program (on Denver Preschool Program’s five-star scale).¹² Not a single one of the 12 Denver Public Schools (DPS) sites

in this community had any capacity for 3-year-olds. For 4-year-olds, only 6 of the 18 programs had any availability, and two of those sites were one-star programs. Among the DPS sites, only two out of 12 had any space for 4-year-olds. Thus, the data from parents and providers is consistent; there are simply not enough high-quality pre-K slots in Southwest Denver to meet the needs of residents.

11%

Percentage of all Southwest Denver Pre-K Sites that Have Open Slots for 3-Year-Olds and Are Not One-Star Programs

(based on 18 responding providers, as of October 2015)

0%

Percentage of Denver Public Schools Pre-K Sites in Southwest that Have Open Slots for 3-Year-Olds

(based on 12 Denver Public Schools schools in target community, as of October 2015)

Nevertheless, some within the pre-K community have suggested to us that access is not a concern in Southwest Denver because the existence of some open slots indicates a lack of demand. However, this ignores the significant transportation barriers of many families, as many residents lack a second car and only have the ability to bring their children to schools within walking distance of their house. Many parents naturally prefer to have their children close to home and not have to drive across town to bring them to school. Moreover, merely having slots available does not mean that parents can access them. There is no centralized database, for example, that can inform parents which pre-K sites have availability. Most parents also have no idea where they could go to even get a listing of pre-K sites in their community. Even if they are able to find such a list, the only way to find an open slot is to do extensive research, which is highly burdensome for any parent, and particularly for those who may not be proficient in English. In short, Denver’s pre-K system is far from user-friendly.

ISSUE #2: AFFORDABILITY

Being able to afford the high cost of pre-K is a significant concern for many low- and moderate-income families in Southwest Denver. That should not be surprising, considering Denver's average annual cost of pre-K in a center, for just one child, is \$11,477.¹³ It would be impossible for many families to be able to afford such programs on their own. There are several sources of funds that can assist Denver parents in covering the cost of pre-K: the DPP, the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP), Head Start, and the Denver Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). However, this funding structure suffers from some major deficiencies.

For example, none of the programs are comprehensive. Each has significant gaps that prevent it from coming close to meeting the financial needs of all the families of 3- and 4-year-olds. DPP only funds 4-year-olds, not 3-year-olds. CPP only funds four half-days per week. Head Start has only a small number of sites. CCAP

requires that parents be working, looking for work, or in school. And outside of the limited Head Start slots for very low-income families, none of the programs cover the full cost of pre-K for full-day students. DPP funds on a sliding scale, based on income and the quality of the pre-K site, but the highest award level for full-day pre-K is only \$576 per month, far below the typical tuition cost (while still providing benefits to even the wealthiest families.)¹⁴ CCAP only provides support to families that are below 225% of the poverty level (which was \$54,562 for a family of four in 2015), and still requires out-of-pocket contributions that many families cannot afford.¹⁵ As a result, many families who would like to enroll their children in pre-K program are simply unable to because of cost. (It is worth noting that DPS has been able to consolidate funding sources to provide a greater level of affordability for pre-K, including free pre-K for the lowest-income families.¹⁶ Unfortunately, there are very few open spaces in these programs.)

MAJOR GAPS IN PRE-K FUNDING ASSISTANCE

DENVER PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

DOES NOT SUPPORT
3-YEAR-OLDS

ONLY PROVIDES
A FRACTION OF
TUITION COSTS

COLORADO PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

ONLY FUNDS FOUR
HALF-DAYS PER
WEEK

DENVER CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (CCAP)

REQUIRES THAT PARENTS
BE WORKING, LOOKING
FOR WORK, OR IN SCHOOL
(i.e. no stay-at-home parents)

ONLY FOR FAMILIES
BELOW 225% OF THE
POVERTY LEVEL

HEAD START

LIMITED SITES
AND OPEN SLOTS

MANY
FAMILIES
ARE UNABLE
TO AFFORD
PRE-K

Not only are there significant gaps in the pre-K funding structure, it is also extraordinarily difficult for parents to navigate. It is simply absurd to expect parents to cobble together funding from several state and local programs, especially low-income parents that may not be proficient in English. This system stands in stark contrast to the public K-12 system, for example, where the burden for locating funding is

placed on the district, not on parents. To their credit, DPS has created a much more straightforward process for parents in which they only have to submit one application to access the various funding streams. But for all of the private and non-profit pre-K providers in the city, there is an urgent need for a more accessible system that does not require sophisticated policy knowledge to be able to pay for pre-K.

Denver Preschool Program and Linking Funding to Quality

DPP's tuition subsidies are determined in significant part by the quality rating of the pre-K program selected by the family; the higher the quality rating of the school, the larger the family's subsidy. That was intended to encourage providers to improve the quality of their programs. However, it can have the perverse effect of harming families with limited options or information. For example, if a family does not have a second car and has to walk their children to school, and there is no highly rated program close to their house, their subsidies would shrink dramatically. While a very low-income family would receive \$576/month to attend a 5-star center, they would receive only \$379 to attend a 2-star center. That can easily make the difference between being able to afford pre-K, and not.

ISSUE #3: QUALITY

The quality rating systems used locally and statewide indicate that Southwest Denver pre-K sites are of comparable quality as those in other parts of the city. However, there are many factors that play a role in determining whether a pre-K program is "high-quality," and two that are essentially ignored within these rating systems,

yet are particularly relevant to the families of Southwest Denver, are the use of harsh school discipline and support for children whose first language is Spanish. Both were cited by survey respondents as significant concerns within many pre-K sites across Southwest Denver.

QUESTION:
How often
are students
suspended,
expelled, or
asked to leave
for disciplinary
reasons?

FREQUENTLY
16%

OCCASIONALLY
25%

**41% OF
RESPONDENTS
SAID THAT THEIR
PRE-K SITES WERE
USING HARSH
DISCIPLINARY
MEASURES**

With regard to school discipline, the recent release of national-level data on pre-K suspensions and expulsions has sparked considerable discussion around the country on the use of disciplinary methods that are developmentally inappropriate for 3- and 4-year-olds.¹⁷ Yet there is precious little local data to understand how prevalent the problem is within Denver. So we decided to go directly to the residents of Southwest Denver to share their experiences.

We asked them how often students are suspended, expelled, or sent home for disciplinary reasons at the pre-K sites they were familiar with. Forty-one percent (41%) reported knowledge of such harsh

consequences being used at least occasionally, with one in six respondents (16%) saying they were used “frequently.” Numerous parents also shared their stories, describing the use of suspensions for such age-appropriate behaviors as not wanting to help clean up toys or distracting other kids (see “Community Voices: Harsh School Discipline” box). One parent even described the routine use of corporal punishment at her local pre-K site. While there are undoubtedly numerous pre-K sites that would rarely if ever use such harsh methods, our findings indicate that a significant number of schools are employing disciplinary practices that are simply improper in a pre-K setting.

Community Voices: HARSH SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

“They suspended my son a lot. I spoke with the counselor but he ignored me and didn’t speak respectfully to me.”

“One of the girls that I would pick up would always cry when I would drop her off. I found out that the teacher would hit the children because she was trying to ‘educate’ them . . . and no one would do anything about it.”

“My child was suspended twice because he would distract other kids. He would always be sent home.”

“In one year they called three times telling me that my 4-year-old had misbehaved and that I had to go pick him up and take him home. . . . I never received any documents where it specified that my child was suspended or what the reasons were. The first time, I did not ask why he was being suspended and I just took him home. He was suspended for one day. The second time they called, I was worried and wanted to know what was happening with my child. The teacher told me it was because my son had not wanted to help clean up toys and had thrown other toys to the ground. That time he was suspended for one day as well. The third time he was suspended for [splashing water on] his classmate. My son was suspended for one day. This influenced my child’s behavior. After those incidents, he no longer wanted to go to school.”

“My experience is that they do not have enough commitment to all children. Some children are very restless and they just tell them sit here or they put them on the side so they do not learn what they need to learn.”

This should not be surprising considering how unregulated these practices are within our pre-K system. For example, DPS allows its pre-K programs to choose their own disciplinary approach, and most

rely on the same codes of conduct that are based off of the district’s K-12 policy.¹⁸ In other words, the same policy that was intended to be applicable to 17-year-olds is being applied to 3- and 4-year-olds.

Community Voices:

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

“We want bilingual staff to be able to connect with our own kids.”

“The teacher told me that it was better for my child to learn one language first, which was English, so that he can learn how to speak because there are some kids who don’t know how to speak either language.”

“It was very difficult to find a school close to our home that had open slots and bilingual staff.”

“I want a class that teaches my daughter Spanish, more than anything.”

“Teachers need to be bilingual to be able to connect with our children and parents.”

“I don’t like that they don’t teach Spanish.”

Our research also indicates that the support provided to Spanish-speaking students is highly uneven. These children are dual language learners, meaning they still need to develop and nurture their native language while they are learning English. Yet many parents struggle to even access pre-K sites that offer Spanish-language instruction with bilingual teachers. Those that do often encounter misguided language instruction methods that fail to prepare students for kindergarten and beyond (see “Community Voice: Dual Language Learners”

box). For example, our research indicates that some pre-K sites are using English-only immersion methods, which is both inadvisable for children’s language development and potentially traumatic to their ethnic and cultural identity.

In short, despite the claims to the contrary, there are significant areas of concern with regard to the quality of pre-K programs that Southwest Denver parents are able to access.

CONCLUSION AND ACTION STEPS

The systemic barriers described above can make it extremely difficult, or even impossible, for many low- and moderate-income families to access a high-quality pre-K education (see “The Pre-K Gauntlet,” next page). That, in short, is why we have neighborhoods in which less than 40% of 3- and 4-year-olds attend pre-K just down the road from neighborhoods where 100% of children attend pre-K. Such disparities would never be tolerated in the K-12 system, yet we have been largely content to allow them in pre-K.

We must face up to the reality that our pre-K system is not presently designed to achieve equity. It is not designed to meet the needs of communities like Southwest Denver. It is not designed in such a way that will eliminate (or even substantially reduce) the achievement gap. Thus, if we truly hope to fulfill the promise of pre-K and put all children in a position to succeed within the K-12 system, we need to design our pre-K system accordingly. Otherwise, Denver’s pre-K system will continue to have the primary function of providing children from affluent families an additional leg up on the children of Southwest Denver and other low-income communities of color.



Imagine a moderate-income Latino family that moves to Barnum, around the intersection of 1st Avenue and S. Knox Ct. The married couple has three kids: a 4-year-old, a 3-year-old, and a newborn baby. They want to enroll the two older kids in full-day pre-K, but of the eight closest pre-K sites, seven have no available slots and the eighth is rated as a 1-star program. There are no other possibilities within walking distance of their house, which is a problem, because they only have one car and the pre-K pick-up and drop-off times are incompatible with their work schedule. So neither the 3-year-old nor the 4-year-old is able to attend pre-K.



But let's say they somehow scrape together enough money to buy a second car. Since there are no open slots at any of the Southwest Denver DPS schools for 3-year-olds and the parents want the two kids to attend the same school, they try to enroll in a local non-profit or private pre-K center. But there is no DPP funding for 3-year-olds, their moderate income is still too high to be eligible for CPP and Head Start, and one of the parents is staying home with the newborn baby, so CCAP isn't an option. For the 3-year-old, they cannot afford the \$1,000 per month for tuition, so she is still unable to attend pre-K. For the 4-year-old, they apply for the DPP and learn they are eligible for a \$451 subsidy at a four-star program, but that still leaves \$549 per month of out-of-pocket cost. With only one income and three kids to support, their budget is already tight, so they still cannot afford to enroll the 4-year-old either.

And we wonder why our pre-K enrollment rates are so low in some communities, and why we have such stark inequities in our education system?

ACTION STEPS

Below are five steps that need to be taken to create equal educational opportunities within Denver's pre-K system, as well as examples of other states or localities that have already addressed some of the deficiencies described above.

1

Guarantee tuition-free access to high-quality, full-day pre-K for every 3- and 4-year-old from a low- and moderate-income family.

Because of the many benefits of pre-K – both to individual children and families, as well as society overall – the strong trend nationally has been to view pre-K as an extension of the K-12 system. But if we are truly going to make a commitment to building a pre-K-12 system, then we have to start structuring pre-K more like K-12. That means that we need to accommodate every family who wants to enroll their child, and like K-12, pre-K should be publicly financed, at least for low- and moderate-income families. For Denver, that will require opening new pre-K sites and opening new pre-K classrooms within existing sites. That will require addressing families' transportation barriers. And that will require that we make a greater financial commitment to the educational opportunities of our residents. Numerous other states and localities around the country are already far beyond Denver in addressing these challenges, including the following:

- **Washington, DC's** pre-K program provides free, publicly funded education for every 3- and 4-year-old.¹⁹
- **New York City** now has free, full-day pre-K for all 4-year-olds, while Oklahoma has had it since 1998.²⁰
- **Seattle** just passed a new \$58 million program intended to eliminate racial and socioeconomic inequities in pre-K for both 3- and 4-year-olds. The program is free for all families earning less than 300% of the federal poverty level, and tuition is on a sliding scale for all other families. Priority is given to low- and moderate-income families and to providers that offer dual language programs, offer before- and after-school care, offer summer care, are located in neighborhoods with low academic achievement, and are located in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of low-income households and English language learners.²¹
- **California** now offers free, full-day pre-K to all 4-year-olds from families making less than 200% of the federal poverty level.²²

2

Prohibit the use of suspensions and expulsions in pre-K.

Public understanding of how developmentally inappropriate suspensions and expulsions are for most disciplinary incidents in grades K-12 has expanded dramatically in recent years.²³ But there are still rare occasions in which older children can legitimately compromise the safety of a school environment and virtually everyone would agree that it is appropriate to remove the child until the threat is resolved. We can imagine no such scenario with regard to 3- and 4-year-olds, and thus believe that suspensions and expulsions should be prohibited in pre-K. However, in Denver there are no limitations on the use of such disciplinary measures, unlike these jurisdictions:

- In New Jersey, state policy prohibits pre-K students from being suspended or expelled.²⁴
- Connecticut recently passed a state law that eliminates expulsions for students in pre-K and grades K-2, and only allows out-of-school suspensions in those grades if “the student’s conduct on school grounds is of a violent or sexual nature that endangers persons.”²⁵
- Washington, DC recently passed a law that (1) prohibits the expulsion of pre-K students; (2) prohibits the out-of-school suspension of pre-K students unless “the student has willfully caused or attempted to cause bodily injury, or threatened serious bodily injury to another person”; and (3) limits such out-of-school suspensions to three days.²⁶
- In Chicago Public Schools, suspensions of students in pre-K and grades K-2 are only permitted if their behavior poses an imminent danger. In those cases, the suspensions must be limited to one day and require administrator approval. During the suspension, the principal must also develop a plan addressing the safety of students/staff and include strategies for preventing future behavior incidents, restoring relationships, and addressing the student’s ongoing social, emotional, and academic needs.²⁷
- The Arkansas Better Chance program, which serves about 25,000 children from low-income families, does not allow them to be permanently removed from the program without approval from state officials, and without a chance to direct more resources to that classroom.²⁸

Furthermore, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services released policy guidance in 2014 that states that suspensions and expulsions for pre-K students “should be used only as a last resort in extraordinary circumstances where there is a determination of a serious safety threat that cannot otherwise be reduced or eliminated by the provision of reasonable modifications Even in such extraordinary cases, the program should assist the child and family in accessing services and an alternative placement through, for example, community-based child care resource and referral agencies.”²⁹

3

Require that pre-K sites adopt a consistent policy for meeting the needs of dual language learners that includes support for, and nurturing of, students’ native languages.

We cannot afford our pre-K system to take an ad hoc approach to supporting the language needs of our children. Our city needs to have a coherent, fully-aligned, research-based strategy across the entire education system, and that starts in pre-K. Complying with this strategy should be a baseline requirement for serving any child whose first language is not English.

4

Fund pre-K appropriately so that every provider and employee is making a living wage.

In spite of the widely recognized importance of pre-K, it continues to be a severely under-funded system, in Denver and across the country. High-quality early childhood education cannot be done on the cheap, and it cannot be implemented by pre-K providers and educators making poverty, or near-poverty, wages.³⁰ It is outrageous that, nationally, those taking care of our children make less, on average, than those taking care of our dogs.³¹ We cannot expect high-quality professional performance from people who are not treated like professionals, and that requires ensuring that every pre-K worker is paid a living wage.

5

Ensure that all pre-K teachers and administrators receive training on classroom management, implicit bias, developmentally appropriate disciplinary methods, dual language instruction, and the use of inclusive, culturally affirming practices.

Along with being paid and treated as professionals, Denver pre-K educators need to address the clear professional development needs that have resulted in the deficiencies described above. Therefore, the city and the Denver Preschool Program should substantially expand their professional development program and make program funding contingent on completion.

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Photography by PJU

ENDNOTES

- 1 PBS, "Slavery and the Making of America," at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/timeline/1860.html>.
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With roots in the struggle for educational justice, Padres & Jóvenes Unidos has evolved into a multi-issue organization led by people of color who work for educational excellence, racial justice for youth, immigrant rights and quality healthcare for all. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos builds power to challenge the root cause of discrimination, racism, and inequity by exposing the economic, social and institutional basis for injustice as well as developing effective strategies to realize meaningful change.

PADRES & JÓVENES UNIDOS
3025 W 37th Ave, Suite 206
Denver, CO 80211
303-458-6545
www.padresunidos.org
info@padresunidos.org



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