

Choice vs Accommodation:

How MMSD Families Decide Whether & Where Their Child Goes to 4K

RATIONALE

Access to high quality early childhood programming makes public 4K an equity leveraging tool as quality care is economically out of reach for many families. In reality, parents often cannot afford or access their preferred type of program and make choices based on their work schedules or proximity to home. From this perspective, early education and care decisions are *accommodations* rather than *choices*—based on *family needs and resources; cultural norms and preferences; and contextual opportunities and constraints* (Coley, Votruba-Drzal, Collins, & Miller, 2014).

This project was designed to understand how families made decisions about enrolling their child in 4K because earlier MEP research had found differential sorting into school, Head Start or child care settings, influencing the composition of classes in their sites. Further, we were interested in why approximately 30% of MMSD families chose NOT to enroll their eligible 4 year in 4K.

METHODOLOGY

A survey on family decision making was designed to help parents recall the issues they considered in 4K enrollment. The 128-item questionnaire was adapted from the Preschool Placement Questionnaire (Grogan, 2012) and asked families about sources for advice about 4K, important program characteristics, their choice making process, and beliefs about early childhood education. In January 2018, the UW Survey Center distributed the survey to 2,227 kindergarten families along with a \$2 pre-incentive and 556 households responded online or via the U.S. mail.

Semi-structured interviews provided more detail about family decision making processes. Drawn from successive stratified random samples of 200, the final interview pool had 51 families.

RESULTS

Our analysis includes descriptive and predictive analyses on the survey and thematic analysis on the interview data.

Figure 1: Race/ethnicity by 4K location (%)

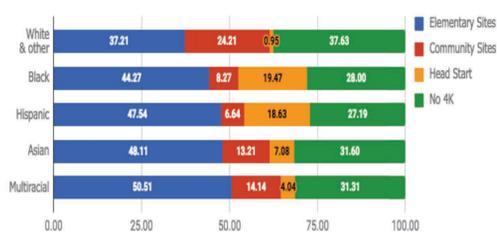
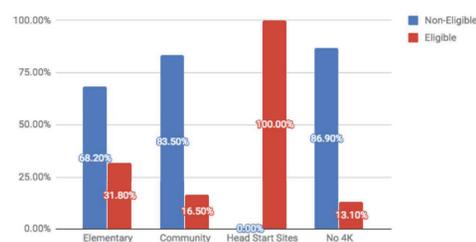


Figure 2: 4K location by free/reduced lunch eligibility (%)



Access/continuity: In their 4K decision making, parents activated social capital developed through child care centers. Parents who enrolled their children in fee-paying settings from birth to three experienced a relatively smooth 4K enrollment and transition.

"Because we were already enrolled there in the 3K program -- we were given a packet of information and invited to attend a parent meeting. But also it was such a small school that we could -- we were able to talk about our options as well directly with the classroom teacher and the director of the preschool"

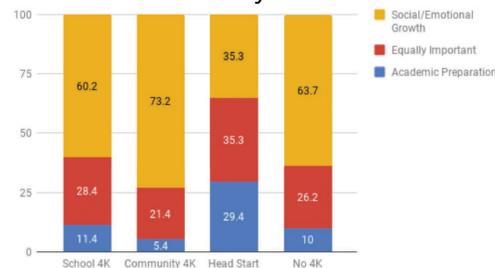
[White, BA or more, Community 4K]

Parent's proactive decisions: Parents with clear blueprints for their children's education and later success were likely to proactively search for and select what they felt were the most beneficial programs for their children. Parents who viewed 4K as an opportunity to build readiness made 4K decisions that were embedded in a broader picture of kindergarten success.

"I feel like [4K] helped him for kindergarten, specifically since he went to 4K in the same place where he goes to kindergarten, which is why I liked that option rather than having him do 4K at the day care center where he was."

[Black, BA/More, FRL, Elementary]

Figure 3: Parents' beliefs on education by 4K location



Practical needs: Parental employment status was a critical consideration in decision making. Families who needed wrap-around care but not transportation tended to choose community or no 4K over school-based programs. Affordability was a factor for parents choosing school-based over other 4K programs.

"We work full time, so we like to have the ability to drop them off before work and be able to keep them in one place until we were done with work. So that was one of the big things." [Multiracial, BA/More, No FRL, Not Enrolled]

"We ended up having to pull her out at the end but that's only because my husband got a different job and his schedule wasn't going to work with the half day that 4K does and there was no way to transport her from 4K to her daycare because the daycare also didn't provide transportation for that school that she went to. I would have had to switch her to a different school and I didn't want to do that so we just had to pull her out altogether of 4K. And then she came back this year for kindergarten."
—Parent of a Kindergartener



Table 1: Estimated relative odds ratio of factors influencing 4K decisions (The reference category: School 4K; OR, odds ratio)

		Community	Head Start	No 4K
		OR	OR	OR
Various Resources	Teachers/staff at 4K sites	2.59*	2.85	1.67*
	Previous child care provider	1.82*	1.58	2.03*
	Friends and family members	0.66	0.27*	0.94
Practical Characteristics	Visits or classroom observations	2.39*	2.67*	2.42*
	Affordability	0.63*	0.69	0.64*
	Transportation	0.45*	1.16	0.64*
	Wrap-Around Care	1.90*	1.27	1.99*
	Schedule	1.10	0.79	1.08

CONCLUSION

Parents negotiated 4K decision making based on their financial resources, employment status, and beliefs about their child's needs and education. The current four day/week half-day program structure does not accommodate working families needs. More affluent families could afford 4K in district affiliated community sites and preschools outside the district program. This makes the experiences of children across quite different and could have an impact on its equity goals.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

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