

## Executive Summary

**Title:** Family Decision Making about 4K Enrollment in MMSD

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**Suggested Citation:**

Graue, M.E., Woo, M., & Lee, J. (2018) Family Decision Making about 4K Enrollment in MMSD. Executive Research Summary for the Madison Education Partnership. Madison, WI.

**Abstract of study**

This mixed-method study was designed to explore the following research questions: *How do families make decisions about where their child will attend 4K? How do these decisions related to family needs, resources, cultural norms, preferences and contextual opportunities?* A total of 556 parents completed a survey sent to all 2017-18 kindergarten families that explored factors they considered during the decision process, their beliefs about young children's learning, and their work status and child care history. In addition, 51 parents participated in semi-structured interviews designed to deepen our understanding of their decision process. Using multinomial logistic regression and interview analysis, we related decisions to enroll children across 4K sites to the parents' resources, beliefs about early childhood education, and practical considerations. We found that parents make 4K choices based on: (a) their social capital and contextual opportunities, (b) their beliefs and values about education and their children's future success, and (c) accommodating schedules imposed by their jobs.

**Major findings:**

Our survey and interview analyses indicate that this decision-making is a complex hybrid of choice and accommodation. Parents wanted their children's basic needs for safety and relationship met in a 4K program and they needed a program that fit their family schedule. Some families prioritized a smooth transition into 4K; this was often supported by caregivers or programs that proactively provided information about 4K program so that no shift was needed. In contrast, others looked to kindergarten and preferred a seamless transition there. Parent beliefs about how children learn clustered around two ends of a continuum – on one end was a focus on social/emotional development and the other academic preparation. While more families appeared to favor the social or progressive end of the continuum, this preference was more prevalent with parents who placed their children in community sites or did not choose a district 4K program. Families with children in Head Start were more oriented to academic preparation.

Parental employment loomed large in our survey comments and interview conversations. The four day half day schedule of 4K was challenging for many working families, constraining choices in a variety of ways. The school-based programs were affordable in that they were free particularly if you did not need wraparound care.

## Implications of findings for MMSD policy or practice and future research:

Our study illustrated how 4K decisions are made based on a combination of economic, cultural, and contextual factors. One clear implication for the district is to highlight how decisions about 4K are complex and often framed in terms of the constraints families must consider. The district's choice of implementation using the Community Approach has provided families with options that fit their needs and schedules. But the choices are not always choice – they are accommodations. The current four-day/half-day program structure is not friendly to working families' schedules and their needs. It is little surprise that the school-based programs serve more children in under-resources families. We have some small amount of evidence that some of mysterious 30% who choose not to place their children in 4K are opting out because employment makes things difficult for a part-time program. In this context, certain families were left with very few choices for their children, which may limit the district from increasing 4K access to high-quality education to close the opportunity gap. Extended programs for five-day/full-day and more accommodations including wrap-around care and transportation would improve the current program choices to better serve all MMSD families.

Another implication comes from our finding on how non-school sites closely facilitated families during the 4K decision and enrollment process. Given their close proximity to the families who were already enrolled, the staff at the non-school sites were able to directly inform families about the 4K program and guide them through their decisions. In general, the parents were satisfied with their experiences and reported that making the 4K decision was not necessarily stressful. Whether there is a tradeoff for their children when they started 5K is important to consider.

4K choices are not random—they have a sorting effect on the composition of 4K classes. We feel that the most important implication is that the district should consider how this sorting affects the educational opportunities of our youngest learners, their families, and their teachers. How does it create learning contexts that make children more or less likely to succeed in kindergarten? How does it stress or support families in their home and work lives? How does it present 4K teachers with different challenges and opportunities in their practice? While few people would argue that 4K is not a great addition to MMSD's educational programming, considering the unintended consequences of programmatic structures that are a matter of choice can be a first step for program improvement.