A Better Start

Strengthening the Rochester City School District's Placement Policies & Practices

The Children's Agenda

Smart Choices. Bold Voices.

www.thechildrensagenda.org

April 2022
Executive Summary

PURPOSE

Rochester's families deserve pre-kindergarten and kindergarten placements that meet their children's needs. This report is a first step to better understand parents' enrollment decision-making and how they experience enrollment policies. The goal is to help the Rochester City School District improve existing policies and processes so families have a better experience with enrollment.

METHOD

The Children's Agenda analyzed school enrollment data, conducted small group interviews and survey data from Rochester parents, and reviewed policies at comparable school districts. A total of 97 Rochester parents were engaged.

FINDINGS

Rochester City School District enrollment has fallen by 35% since 1998. This has included a precipitous decline in kindergarten enrollment since 2013. However, pre-kindergarten enrollment has grown. Parent small group interviews and surveys indicate that:

1. Placement processes are highly complex and create uncertainty and low trust for parents.

2. The lack of alignment between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten placement processes is a missed opportunity to build confidence in the district.

3. The perception of program/school quality trumps all other factors when parents decide where to enroll their child.

4. Families want and need choices and to better understand those choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of enrollment data, parent perspectives, and policies, The Children's Agenda recommends that RCSD placement policies:

1. Ensure children can remain in the same school as they transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten.

2. Treat kindergarten enrollment as an extension of pre-kindergarten, not as a separate system.

3. Build connections between community-based pre-kindergarten programs and nearby district elementary schools.

4. Additionally, we recommend that parents be equipped with accessible and relevant information that allows them to make informed choices that best meet the needs of their children and family.
Table of Contents

Executive Summary..................................................................................................................3
Introduction..............................................................................................................................4
Method.....................................................................................................................................6
Findings

  Enrollment Trends.............................................................................................................8
  Enrollment Policies...........................................................................................................11
  Parent Perspectives on Enrollment Decisions.................................................................14
  Parent Preferences for Enrollment Policies ...................................................................16
  Discussion...........................................................................................................................18
Recommendations..................................................................................................................20
Next Steps.............................................................................................................................22

Authored by
Pete Nabozny
Policy Director
pete@thechildrensagenda.org

Funded by
Rochester’s Child at the Rochester Area Community Foundation
Introduction

Rochester’s families deserve pre-kindergarten and kindergarten placements that meet their children’s needs. Given this need, along with community discussion about how best to structure Rochester’s pre-kindergarten and kindergarten placements, The Children’s Agenda completed an analysis of the Rochester City School District’s (RCSD) early childhood enrollment policies. We analyzed Rochester’s approach to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten enrollment as compared to other large urban school districts, and we explored the perspectives of parents who had recent experience with the district’s placements policies. This report is designed to support efforts to strengthen RCSD’s placement policies.

The Children’s Agenda incorporated school enrollment data, small group interview and survey data from Rochester parents, and a review of comparable school districts in New York State. Doing so allowed us to make balanced recommendations for how RCSD could improve the existing.

In addition to the data analyzed as part of this project, it can be helpful to consider two other sources of information on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in Rochester. First, the Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership (RECAP) has been evaluating and supporting continuous improvement in Rochester’s pre-kindergarten programs for 30 years. With decades of data from the Rochester City School District, community-based pre-kindergarten programs and Head Start programs, RECAP has documented the consistently high quality of Rochester’s pre-kindergarten classrooms. Assessments examine attendance, student development, classroom quality and family engagement. Using a combination of observation, direct assessments and self-report, RECAP has found that Rochester’s pre-kindergarten programs demonstrate:

- Significant student gains in cognitive areas such as language, literacy, communication, math, science and technology, and physical development and health.
- Significant social-emotional gains in students’ assertiveness, peer social skills and task orientation.
- Excellence in emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support.
- Positive family – teacher relationships.

Some insight into attitudes about pre-kindergarten enrollment are found in the recent poll of Monroe County parents conducted by The Children’s Agenda. When parents of infants and toddlers were asked if they would feel comfortable sending their child to pre-school or pre-kindergarten when they are old.

---

1 Children’s Institute, [https://www.childrensinstitute.net/programs-and-services/recap](https://www.childrensinstitute.net/programs-and-services/recap)
enough, 79% of Monroe County parents said they would feel comfortable. However, there were notable differences between parents:

- 55% of Rochester parents said they would feel comfortable, versus 84% of suburban parents.
- 56% of parents of color said they would feel comfortable, versus 85% of white parents.

The small sample size of parents of infants and toddlers means we have to be cautious about interpreting these differences as representative of the larger population of parents. However, they do raise questions about what Rochester parents, and particularly parents of color, think about early childhood education. Those questions will be explored in future polling.

**This report is a first step in better understanding Rochester parents’ enrollment decisions for both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.** Their perspectives are critical to developing policies that are responsive to the needs of families.
Method

For this project, The Children’s Agenda engaged 97 parents through two methods. We administered a short, online survey that was completed by 86 parents. This was distributed on Facebook, through personal outreach, and through several community-based pre-kindergarten partners. Due to the small sample size and convenience sampling method, it is difficult to know how representative the sample is of the entire population of Rochester parents. However, the findings do provide insight into some families’ decision-making processes.

We also conducted three small group interviews with a total of 11 Rochester parents of children enrolled in pre-kindergarten or early elementary school. These parents were recruited through Facebook advertisements, direct outreach by The Children’s Agenda staff, and through flyers distributed at district and community-based pre-kindergarten locations. Their perspectives should not be seen as reflective of the views of Rochester parents on a whole, but are still helpful at understanding some of the factors that inform a family’s decision for their child’s education. Six of the 11 parents who participated in a small group interview sent their children to district-operated pre-kindergarten, while four sent to their child to community-based program for pre-kindergarten and one sent her child to Head Start.

Archival analysis of RCSD enrollment, placement policies, and policies of comparable school districts was also completed.

Survey Respondent Demographics

The survey asked a few demographic questions to get a better perspective on the background of respondents. Compared to overall district demographics, White and Black parents were over-represented in the survey, while Hispanic or Latino parents were under-represented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Respond</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35, although other age groups were represented as well. In addition, 87% of survey respondents identified as female.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Respond</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 to 35</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 to 45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 45</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(blank)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Enrollment Trends

After growing throughout much of the 1990s, RCSD’s total student enrollment began to decline in 1999. At that point, the district had more than 38,000 students. From 1999 to 2020, student enrollment fell by 26%, an average of 436 children per year. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the district’s falling enrollment, with the number of children enrolled in RCSD schools falling by 3,338 students between 2020 and 2022. In total, the district’s enrollment has declined by 35% from its peak in 1998 to 24,971 in 2022.

Enrollment patterns were not consistent across racial and ethnic groups. From 1998 to 2022, the percentage of White students fell by 69%, greater than any other racial or ethnic group. In raw terms, Black student enrollment declined by the greatest amount, as RCSD had over 10,000 fewer Black

---

3 The enrollment data in this section is produced annually by the state education department and can be accessed at - https://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/home.html

4 The Children’s Agenda recognizes that race and ethnicity are distinct from one another, and that there are Hispanic families who self-identify with various racial groups. However, the state Education Department’s enrollment database does not reflect such a distinction, and instead groups “Hispanic” children into its own race category. For the purpose of this portion of the analysis, we had to follow that department’s convention.
students in 2022 than 1998. Enrollment fell across all racial and ethnic groups except Hispanic children. The number of Hispanic children in RCSD increased by 22% over this time period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>American Indian/Alaska Native</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Multiracial</th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>23,554</td>
<td>6,807</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>7,054</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>38,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13,176</td>
<td>8,305</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>2,194</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>24,971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Change</td>
<td></td>
<td>-77</td>
<td>-10,378</td>
<td>1,498</td>
<td>-149</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>-13,374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
<td></td>
<td>-66%</td>
<td>-44%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>-18%</td>
<td>-69%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RCSD’s kindergarten enrollment figures tell a slightly different story. While the district experienced a steady decline in enrollment, kindergarten enrollment stabilized and actually grew from 2000 until 2013. However, beginning in the 2013-14 school year, the number of children enrolled in RCSD kindergarten classes began to decline precipitously, falling by 38% in only 9 years. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to this decline, particularly in 2021, but the trend clearly predated the onset of that crisis.

Kindergarten enrollment has fluctuated but has had a precipitous decline since 2013.
This low and declining kindergarten enrollment suggests that the district’s overall enrollment will continue to shrink into the future. Given the per-student nature of education funding, despite recent increases in Foundation Aid from New York State, RCSD will likely encounter considerable financial strain if student enrollment does not stabilize over the next several years.

Unlike kindergarten-12th grade enrollment, pre-kindergarten has grown within the district over the past several decades. RCSD has aggressively pursued available state funding to grow the district’s pre-kindergarten capacity and can now offer it to every city family who seeks it.

In recent years, RCSD began offering pre-kindergarten to 3 year-old children, which explains the increase from approximately 2,000 enrolled children to roughly 3,300 between 2016 and 2017. In 2020, there were 1,916 children enrolled in 4 year-old pre-kindergarten and 1,331 enrolled in the 3 year-old program. In fact, there were more children enrolled in 4 year-old pre-kindergarten that year than attended kindergarten in district classrooms.

Rochester’s highly regarded pre-kindergarten program has been deliberately structured as a mixed delivery model. Some children go to district schools, others attend pre-kindergarten at community-based organizations (CBO) or through a partnership with Head Start. Preschool Special Education students who need a higher level of support also have the option of enrolling at either a district school or at a community-based setting. In 2020, a majority of children were enrolled in a non-district pre-kindergarten option, either through Head Start, a CBO provider, or a special education placement.  

---

5 Setting data were obtained by a request on behalf of The Children’s Agenda, made by the Alliance for Quality Education to the NY State Education Department.
Enrollment Policies

To inform our analysis and recommendations, The Children’s Agenda investigated Rochester’s pre-kindergarten and kindergarten placement policies in context with approaches found elsewhere in New York State. With that in mind, we compared RCSD’s policies to the three most comparable school districts in New York State: Buffalo, Syracuse and Yonkers.

Rochester City School District

RCSD maintains separate placement processes for pre-kindergarten (3 and 4 year-olds) and kindergarten/early elementary. Families may choose to enroll in pre-kindergarten the year their child turns 3 or 4, and then must enroll again when their child reaches kindergarten age. Students who attend a pre-kindergarten program at a district school are given a slight (though unclear) preference for remaining in that school upon entering kindergarten, but only under certain circumstances, and if space is available.

Pre-Kindergarten

RCSD holds an annual lottery to determine pre-kindergarten placements each year. Families must register for pre-kindergarten by April 30th, and are informed of their placement during the subsequent month. To enroll a child, each family selects their top three program choices from the following two program types:

- School-Based Programs – pre-kindergarten classrooms in 26 district elementary schools
- Community-Based Organizations – pre-kindergarten classrooms located at 27 locations throughout the city.

A number of the CBO pre-kindergartens are also Head Start programs, with different eligibility and enrollment criteria. Families who choose Head Start must apply with one of three CBO’s offering Head
Start in Rochester, although the RCSD Office of Early Childhood will help facilitate a referral to Head Start if a child applies to RCSD first.

Families have the choice of remaining in the same pre-kindergarten program for both years, or can re-enter the lottery for a different 4 year-old pre-kindergarten location. However, as noted above, all families must apply to enter the district’s Managed Choice lottery when entering kindergarten.

Kindergarten
RCSD’s Managed Choice placement process attempts to maintain a balance between geographical closeness to a school location and giving families a degree of choice in deciding the best fit for their child. It provides students with access to certain citywide schools, provides a neighborhood option for some families, attempts to limit students’ geographic range to schools somewhat nearby, and applies a lottery approach to allocating spots for students in high demand schools.

Families can select one city-wide school and three schools within their geographical zone. If a child lives within a half mile of a school, or has a sibling at a school within a zone, they are guaranteed enrollment in that school. Otherwise, they are entered into a lottery to determine placement. Children who are enrolled in a school for pre-kindergarten are given some form of a weighted advantage in the lottery, but enrollment in a school for pre-kindergarten does not guarantee that a child can continue in that school for elementary school.

Aside from that modest (and unclear) preference, there is no other connection between a child’s pre-kindergarten placement and their kindergarten enrollment. Nor is there any link between pre-kindergarten settings (both district and CBO) in particular neighborhoods or city zones and elementary schools in those same areas.

Comparison with Similar Districts
As noted above, The Children’s Agenda compared the enrollment policies of RCSD with those found in Buffalo, Syracuse, and Yonkers. Certain common elements are found in all four districts, notably a guarantee that a child can receive placement in the same school as an older sibling. However, the three vary considerably from one another in terms of neighborhood vs. city-wide schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>City-wide Schools</th>
<th>Zoned Schools</th>
<th>Neighborhood Schools</th>
<th>Guaranteed PK-K at Same School</th>
<th>Lottery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochester</td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse</td>
<td>permitted</td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yonkers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Buffalo
Buffalo operates its public school system on a city-wide basis. All families are encouraged to apply to any school in the district rather than limited to schools within their zone or section of the city. A lottery is conducted if applications to a particular pre-kindergarten or elementary school are greater than the seats available at that school. There are also several schools that, for programmatic reasons, prioritize children within a certain geographical range of the school, although they also allow students from outside that catchment to apply. Students enrolled in a district school for pre-kindergarten automatically move up into kindergarten in that school, but students enrolled in Head Start or CBO pre-kindergarten must apply for kindergarten.

Syracuse
Every address in the Syracuse City School District is associated with a nearby elementary school. The district encourages families to enroll in that neighborhood school by guaranteeing enrollment, but permits families to apply to enroll in other districts schools if capacity allows. Similarly, when a family applies for pre-kindergarten, the default choice is their neighborhood school, but they are offered the option to enroll in a CBO pre-kindergarten or different district school. A child enrolled in either district or CBO pre-kindergarten is automatically enrolled in their home school for kindergarten. Kindergarten enrollment is guaranteed if a child attended that school for pre-kindergarten. Syracuse does not contain lottery-based city schools like RCSD, but does operates three selective elementary schools that require an application and/or interview process.

Yonkers
The Yonkers Public School District is weighted toward promoting enrollment of students in a nearby school, but reserves 20% of all seats for children residing outside the neighborhood catchment, or “attendance zone.” The district aims to accommodate demand for all students within a particular attendance zone, as long as families select that particular school as a first choice. Yonkers also offers several Montessori schools that operate on a lottery basis. As with Buffalo and Syracuse, Yonkers guarantees continued enrollment in a district school if a child attends that school during their pre-kindergarten years. A lottery is conducted if demand for pre-kindergarten seats in a particular school exceeds the capacity of that school.
Parent Perspectives on Enrollment Decisions

Synthesis from the small group interviews and surveys indicate there are patterns in the factors parents consider when enrolling their children in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs. Parents also had distinct preferences on the types of policies they prefer to be in place regarding enrollment. Themes and patterns are shared below.

Pre-Kindergarten Decision-Making

Parent decisions about where to send their children to pre-kindergarten were highly individualized. Families participating in the small group interviews had different work schedules and therefore different needs for wrap-around care and transportation. Several parents preferred a community-based organization for pre-kindergarten because it allows them to maintain continuity with their child’s child care arrangement, while several others preferred a district operated option because they thought their child was ready for a school setting. Parents universally identified pre-kindergarten quality as being very important to them, but had slightly different perceptions of where “quality” could be found.

Broadly speaking, parents who participated in these focus groups were happy with their child’s pre-kindergarten experience and seemed pleased with the range of options available to them. All six of the parents whose children attended district-operated pre-kindergarten wanted their child to attend the same school upon elementary entry. They pointed to the positive experience their child had at that program and school continuity as driving their decision.

As with the small group interviews, survey respondents shared a wide range of perspectives when asked how and why they chose their particular pre-kindergarten or kindergarten setting. Several indicated a prior connection to a particular school or program, or shared that they applied to a program based on a recommendation from a friend or family member.

When asked to prioritize factors from most to least important to them, respondents displayed a strong preference for finding their child a high quality pre-kindergarten and kindergarten setting. The availability of wrap-around care was the second highest pre-kindergarten consideration.
Pre-K Priorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference</th>
<th>Quality of education</th>
<th>Wrap-Around Care</th>
<th>Where it is located</th>
<th>Transportation to and from Pre-K</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most Important</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Most Important</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Most Important</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Important</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kindergarten Decision-Making

Those families who sent their child to a district-operated pre-kindergarten wanted their child to remain in that school for kindergarten. Among those parents, transportation was not identified as a major factor. Parents of enrolled pre-kindergarten students must be able to get their child to school because there is no bus transportation for pre-kindergarten. As a result, the perspective of parents who do not have the means to drive their children to school were not fully reflected in the focus group results, although parents who live within walking distance participated.

Transportation was a critical factor in one parent’s decision to send her child to a charter school. This parent wanted her child to attend a bilingual program, as her daughter was a much stronger Spanish speaker than English. Unfortunately, the bilingual program in her zone was inside a mile and a half from her home, so she was not eligible for bus transportation there. She, therefore, decided to apply for her daughter to attend Eugenio Maria de Hostos charter school.

Most parents expressed a sense of discomfort with the district’s managed choice policy and practices. While parents understood the broad parameters of the policy, they felt frustrated by the lack of certainty of placement and practice inconsistencies.

One parent reported being told her child was third on a waiting list for a particular school after the lottery was conducted. She inquired again several months later, learned her child was now fourth or fifth on the list and was never given an adequate explanation of how one falls further down on a wait list. Her perspective was shared by several other parents who displayed a level of distrust about whether the current managed choice policy is fairly administered by the district.

Two parents lived within a half mile of their child’s school and had identified it as their preferred placement. Those parents did not describe as much anxiety about not knowing their child’s placement option as other focus group participants.
**Kindergarten Priorities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference</th>
<th>School quality</th>
<th>Unique program at school</th>
<th>Close to home</th>
<th>Bus transportation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most Important</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Most Important</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Most Important</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Important</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A substantial portion of parents indicated they applied to charter schools or the Urban-Suburban program, or intend to do so in the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choice</th>
<th>Plan to or Have Applied to Charter School</th>
<th>Plan to or Have Applied to Urban-Suburban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure/Not Applicable</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parent Preferences on Enrollment Policies**

The small group interviews also explored several potential changes to RCSD’s placement policies. Specifically, we discussed:

- **Guaranteeing kindergarten enrollment** to any child who attends that school for pre-kindergarten *(as practiced in Buffalo and Yonkers)*
- **Zoning** every child into a particular school, while allowing them to apply for school elsewhere in the city *(as practiced in Syracuse)*
- **Operating a city-wide lottery** for every school in the district *(as practiced in Buffalo)*

Parents expressed a nuanced perspective on these issues.

One parent indicated that while guaranteeing that her child could attend School 15 because she went there for pre-kindergarten would benefit her, she worried about the equity implications of such a move. She commented that School 15 is difficult to access without a car, so those families who lack reliable transportation would not have selected it for pre-kindergarten.

Other parents in that discussion noted their misgivings about the fact that their ability to drive their child to the school they preferred could in fact be contributing to racial and economic disparities in the district.

Another parent was uncomfortable with a pure neighborhood school model because, while she wanted her child to attend school relatively close to her home, she preferred a school slightly further away from her home than the one she assumed she would be
zoned into. She suggested increasing the number of zones in the city, or zoning families into multiple schools so they still have a degree of choice.

One parent felt strongly that the current three zone structure discriminates against families living in the Northeast and Northwest zones. She wanted her child to have a chance to attend either School 12 or School 23 but was not eligible to apply there as a resident of the northeast zone.

On the survey, respondents were asked to mark on a sliding scale their level of agreement with a series of statements regarding placement policies. The scale ranged from 0 = Not At All, 50 = Somewhat Agree, 100 = Fully Agree.

Respondents had mixed opinions about RCSD placement policies and practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Average Agreement Level (1-100 Scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand how children are assigned to Pre-K programs in Rochester</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How children are assigned to Pre-K programs in Rochester is fair.</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand how children are assigned to schools for Kindergarten in Rochester.</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How children are assigned to schools for Kindergarten in Rochester is fair.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They displayed a stronger level of agreement to various placement policy options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Average Agreement Level (1-100 Scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children who go to a school for Pre-K should be guaranteed to stay at that school for Kindergarten.</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be Pre-K programs in Rochester that are not part of the Rochester City School District.</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every child should have the chance to go to school in their neighborhood.</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every child should have the chance to go to any school in the city no matter where they live.</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families should have the chance to choose one elementary school that anyone in the city can go to and then make their top three choices from the schools in their part of the city.</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that while each of the policy options enjoyed fairly strong support from a majority of respondents, the idea that every child should have the chance to go to any school in the city drew the most favorable reaction of any question in the survey. This was, in part, because it received a lot of highly favorable feedback, but also because very few people were opposed to the concept. Other policy options drew higher levels of opposition, drawing down the average rating.
**Key Findings**

Our review of RCSD enrollment data, analysis of placement policies in comparable districts, conversations with parents, and survey results helped us develop several key findings. We hope these will further a community discussion about how to better align district policies. We want RCSD to be better able to meet parents’ needs and to help stabilize enrollment.

**Finding 1: High Complexity & Low Trust.** Rochester’s existing placement policies are considerably more complex than other communities. RCSD’s Managed Choice policy attempts to balance several competing interests. While admirable in its intent, it appears unduly complex to families and creates uncertainty about their child’s elementary school trajectory. That uncertainty does not build a family’s confidence about enrolling in a district school. The lack of understanding about the process, especially kindergarten enrollment, engenders mistrust from families. Small group interview participants and survey respondents generally did not view the current placement policies favorably and displayed a particular concern about perceived unfairness within the existing system.

**Finding 2: Missed Opportunity to Build Confidence.** The lack of alignment between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten is a missed opportunity to build confidence in RCSD. Small group interview participants whose children were enrolled in district pre-kindergarten programs spoke glowingly of their child’s experience there, and expressed a desire to maintain continuity in that setting as the child reached school age. Small group interview and survey respondents whose children attended CBO pre-kindergarten also appeared very satisfied with their pre-kindergarten experiences. The district’s success in building a high quality pre-kindergarten program across many different settings could be used as a tool to strengthen district elementary school enrollment. Instead, unlike other districts in New York State, RCSD treats pre-kindergarten and kindergarten enrollment as wholly separate systems.

**Finding 3: Perception of Quality Trumps All Else.** While this analysis focused on the structure of RCSD’s pre-kindergarten and kindergarten placement policies and not the quality of a child’s education while enrolled in pre-kindergarten or elementary school, educational quality considerations were clearly the most important factor to parents who participated in this review. Parents want to ensure that their child is receiving a high quality education, and that desire trumped most other considerations. The optimal set of placement policies can only do so much to strengthen RCSD’s enrollment if parents lack confidence that their children can receive a good education at whichever school they end up attending.

**Finding 4: Choice is Important.** Families want and need different options when enrolling their child in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. In particular, there is a strong diversity in perspective on the best place for a three or four year old to engage in early leaning. Some parents prefer a district school and perceive it as getting their child ready for elementary school. Others prefer a community-based option, both because it fits their family’s care and educational needs better and because they may prefer a smaller setting with more young children.
Recommendations

The Children’s Agenda is aware that the district has considered and opted not to reform its current placement policies several times now, most recently in January 2022. However, that discussion primarily focused on whether to reconfigure the district’s three zone structure, and did not consider how to better align pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Based on parent feedback collected during this study, the district should continue to evaluate potential changes to the Managed Choice policy and should engage in a deliberate and thorough effort to better understand the preferences of Rochester’s families. However, given that recent decision, our recommendations are focused on changes that would not fundamentally change the structure of the district’s placement policies.

Rochester’s parents have many educational options. Between charters, Urban-Suburban, moving out of district, homeschooling, or attending a private school, many families have chosen to opt out of district schools. RCSD needs to design placement policies that strengthen confidence in the district and build more certainty and continuity for families and children.

**Recommendation 1: Ensure that children can remain in the same school setting as they transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten.** As noted throughout this report, families reported high levels of satisfaction with their child’s district pre-kindergarten placement. A family grows comfortable with a particular school setting during a child’s one or two years of pre-kindergarten enrollment. RCSD’s pre-kindergarten program is highly regarded, prioritizes parent engagement, and achieves measurably great progress for young children. Assuring families that their child is guaranteed a seat in the same school for elementary may be reassuring for families considering other options like Urban-Suburban, charter schools, private schools, or moving out of the district entirely. Given the city-wide nature of the pre-kindergarten program, this would carve out an exception to the existing zone-based system. However, given the lack of transportation for pre-kindergarten, it is unlikely that this would significantly impact the district’s K-12 transportation budget.

**Recommendation 2: Treat kindergarten enrollment as an extension of pre-kindergarten, not a separate system.** Buffalo, Syracuse, and Yonkers all treat pre-kindergarten as an earlier option of enrolling in their school systems. Buffalo and Yonkers guarantee that a child can remain in the same school as they transition from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten, while Syracuse shares that family’s default kindergarten neighborhood school placement when a child enrolls in pre-kindergarten. Rochester, by contrast, requires families to undergo an entirely new application and placement process when applying for kindergarten. This places additional administrative burdens on families and makes applying for kindergarten more difficult than it needs to be.
RCSD should instead leverage its relationship with pre-kindergarten families to streamline the Kindergarten enrollment process. To the extent legally allowable, the district should not require families to complete forms they submitted in prior years. It should ask families for updates to household details, vaccinations, etc. When paired with the first recommendation, RCSD could create a condition where remaining in a district school is far easier than opting for a different placement setting.

**Recommendation 3: Identify ways to build connections between community-based pre-kindergarten and nearby district elementary schools.**

The analysis in this report, along with The Children’s Agenda’s past work with the district and community-based partners, makes clear that community-based organizations provide a unique pre-kindergarten experience that benefits Rochester’s families. RCSD should strive to find ways to connect families who choose CBO pre-kindergarten or Head Start with an elementary school placement that best meets their needs. One possibility is affiliating certain CBO pre-kindergartens with a nearby elementary school and guaranteeing kindergarten enrollment in that school, much in the same way that a “feeder system” conveys younger students into a known school later.

**Recommendation 4: Equip parents with accessible and relevant information.**

We recommend that parents be equipped with accessible and relevant information that allows them to make informed choices that best meet the needs of their children and family. This may include a comprehensive list of pre-kindergarten programs, distinguishing features of each program, and factors to consider when choosing where to enroll their child.
Next Steps

The Children’s Agenda hopes this report is a starting point for conversations about how to improve the Rochester City School District’s placement policies and practices. We also recognize certain limits on the scope of our review. We hope that the district and other community partners can build upon the findings of this report.

The Rochester City School District has considerably more capacity than The Children’s Agenda to gauge the preferences of city parents, particularly among those families who have enrolled their child in Rochester’s pre-kindergarten program. District staff should expand upon the analysis in this report to explore the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten placement preferences of city parents. That effort will be critical to determining how to improve educational outcomes for city children and strengthen the district’s enrollment.

The Children’s Agenda believes RCSD needs to build upon the existing mixed delivery pre-kindergarten model. Many families prefer CBO pre-kindergarten and many others prefer a district setting. The district should explore ways to strengthen the ties between CBOs and the district, and assess whether a model that guarantees kindergarten enrollment in particular schools to children who attended pre-kindergarten in affiliated CBOs is feasible.

We recommend the district attempt to quantify the transportation costs associated with these policy recommendations. While New York State reimburses RCSD for 90% of its transportation costs, the district’s transportation budget is often a point of community controversy. It would be constructive to understand what impact this recommendation would have on the district’s budget picture.