



# Why isn't Johnny in preschool?

**A group of Chicago parents surveyed thousands of families in their communities to find the answers to this question.**

**Here is our report.**




**POWER-PAC**

Early Learning Committee  
Research and Recommendations  
May 2009

**A COFI PROJECT**

**From October 2006 to October 2008, we talked to over 5,000 parents and caregivers, going door to door in 19 low-and-moderate income, racially diverse Chicago neighborhoods.**





## **POWER-PAC launched the Early Learning Campaign because we believe that high quality early childhood education is part of the path out of poverty.**

Our Early Learning Campaign aims to reduce structural barriers to enrolling low-income children of color in quality early education programs in Chicago. This is critical to breaking what Marian Wright Edelman calls the “Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline” that catches too many of our African-American and Latino young people.

High quality early education includes a range of early care and education programs such as Preschool for All, Head Start, and quality child care. **Even though Illinois is a nationwide leader in creating high quality programs and guaranteeing access for all 3- and 4-year olds, in communities where we live, only a fraction of the children eligible for preschool are enrolled.**

We dug deep to find out why participation is so low—and what can be done to make sure as many children as possible have access to the invaluable experience of quality early learning.

We analyzed more than 5,000 interviews with the support of a professional researcher and presented the findings at several community forums in 2008 and 2009. Forum participants, including parents, advocates and experts on early childhood education, and other community stakeholders shared feedback and expertise, and brainstormed policy solutions. Based on this input, **POWER-PAC’s Early Learning Committee developed Recommendations for Change with key strategies for expanding access to preschool.**

We worked in partnership with a number of organizations including the Chicago Early Learning and Literacy Project, Illinois Action for Children, *Catalyst-Chicago* journal, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Family Focus, the Governor’s Early Learning Council, and with various state and city officials.

**Our interviews found an alarming number of three- and four-year old children are not enrolled in any structured early education program.**

**Across three survey samples, between 40 and 64 percent of preschool-aged children were not enrolled in preschool or Head Start.**

This report is addressed to the individuals and organizations who understand how important high quality early education is for each and every child, with thanks and appreciation for your commitment to our communities.

We hope to increase the understanding of the barriers faced by low-income families, and will continue working to implement practical solutions. We offer the real-life experiences of community members, shared in these pages, as a vital voice in shaping the changes we need that will expand access to quality early learning for all children.

POWER-PAC  
Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew -  
Policy Action Council  
Early Learning Committee

*May 2009*

# Best solution? Streamline the maze



As parents ourselves, we could understand the barriers, and get honest answers to why so many children aren't in preschool.

**More than 5,000 interviews in low-income neighborhoods revealed the alarming fact that almost half of eligible children are not in preschool. We found hidden barriers to access... and policy *solutions* we need.**

## **Parents describe the process of enrolling children in early care and education as a confusing and frustrating maze.**

With so many different programs and funding sources, families often have difficulty understanding their early learning options and figuring out which programs or funding sources they are eligible for. Many programs have complex enrollment procedures, requiring families to provide detailed documentation of income and other information, with different requirements for different programs. Parents expressed interest in a one-stop model where families can go to one place to get all the early learning support that they need from birth through age five.

*"It's confusing! Some programs ask for sources of income and they ask for proof of residence, ID, Social Security number. But other programs don't ask for that. For some, if you make a penny over you are cut off, that's it, you're not accepted. Then, if you're in and you start making more money, they kick you out. If you get laid off, you get kicked out as well."*

SURVEY PARTICIPANT



We gathered parents, experts, and community stakeholders together to come up with solutions—POWER-PAC's Recommendations for Change.





**Ultimately, we believe that the answer is a dramatic overhaul of our nation's early education programs to create one seamless system supporting quality, full-day, year-round universal preschool.**

Recognizing that this level of reform is not likely to happen in the short term, on the next pages we offer our Recommendations for Change—strategies and solutions that will help overcome many of the immediate barriers to preschool participation for low-income families.



*"The only way I think that they could change it is to have one program. . . So the parent isn't running around like a chicken with its head cut off. You don't know which way to go so you get 'frustrated' and you keep them home."*

SURVEY PARTICIPANT

# SURVEY FINDINGS: why aren't more kids in preschool?

## 1 Transportation barriers prevent children from getting to and from preschool

Most preschool programs in Chicago do not offer bus or van service or any transportation. Families—even those within walking distance—are often afraid to walk their children due to safety concerns. Some, especially elderly grandparents, have difficulty walking children to and from school, especially in the winter. And parents who don't live in walking distance, and don't have a car, rely on public transportation, which can be complicated and time-consuming. As one parent said “It takes 45 minutes and 2 buses each way.” Parents also commented that with school-age children they are often juggling getting different children to multiple locations with often overlapping schedules. Transportation challenges were the number one barrier identified.

### *Provide transportation*

1

Pump up funding—including public funds—for van and bus service to get children to and from preschool. Fund creative solutions such as the “walking school bus” program where parents or other volunteers, for a small stipend, accompany children door to door. Ensure that transportation is provided for children with special needs.

## 2 Preschool schedules conflict with parents' work schedules and child care needs

Preschool schedules often don't align with parents' work schedules, requiring complicated or expensive transportation and child care arrangements. For example, one parent said, “My stepdaughter was trying to enroll her son but the timing was out-of-sync with her nursing program. She was working odd shifts and weird times. She needed to pay someone to pick him up.” Another participant said, “I know someone who had to remove her child from the program because she had to be at work at 9:00 a.m. and she didn't have anyone to take her child to school.”

Half-day preschool programs don't provide enough hours of child care to enable parents to work full time. One parent complained that “you have to be a stay-at-home mom”, and another said that she wants to work but cannot because her daughter is in a half-day program. A survey respondent who already has a job wasn't able to enroll her son in preschool: “I need a (full) day program because I work and can't run back and forth to pick up my son. . . . Right now he stays with his aunt.”

### *Adjust preschool schedules*

2

Preschool programs need to accommodate family and work schedules. Families need all-day options, programs where preschoolers attend the same hours as older school children, and half-day programs at various times of the day.

### 3 Many parents are not aware of the importance of preschool

POWER-PAC's research found that many parents are not aware of the importance of early childhood education and feel preschool is not necessary or not important. Many families believe that school does not begin until Kindergarten.

"There are babies having babies and some have not graduated beyond the 8th grade. They have no knowledge that if their child is put in school at an early age it will help them stay in school until high school. Other children in other areas and nations are in school—but our children are left behind."

### 4 Families lack information about preschool options

For some parents, the lack of information about available options was the primary reason for not enrolling their child in preschool. Some said they were not aware of the existence of free preschool programs. Others said that there weren't any preschool programs in their neighborhood or they didn't know where any were. In some cases, parents were aware of programs but overwhelmed by the range of options available and unsure what to do. Others went to a program, didn't qualify and weren't told of other programs for which they are eligible. As one parent explained, "Programs are confusing, parents don't know where to go, how to start."

### 5 Some parents feel their child isn't ready for preschool

Some parents said they had not enrolled their child in early education because the child wasn't ready. Reasons for not being ready included:

- Parents felt their three- or four-year olds were "too young" to go to school;
- Some parents cited the fact that the child was still in diapers as the reason for not enrolling in preschool;
- Some parents said that the child couldn't speak well yet or couldn't speak English and therefore wasn't ready for preschool.

#### ***Boost public awareness***

**Media Campaign:** Put real resources into an aggressive media campaign on the importance of early learning with information on how and where to register children for early learning. Provide clear, targeted information on programs. Include public service announcements, ads on buses/bus stations, bumper stickers and palm cards.

**Home Visiting:** Increase funding for home-visiting programs that bring resources, education, and support to young parents, grandparents, and providers.

**Grassroots Outreach:** Fund new initiatives for parent-to-parent and community-based outreach. Neighbors and peers can help families understand the importance of early learning and connect them to programs.

# SURVEY FINDINGS: why aren't more kids in preschool?

## 6 Families worry about the potential loss of state child care subsidies

Many families were concerned that if they enrolled their children in a classroom-based program they would lose their Illinois Child Care Assistance subsidy. In fact, families can retain their child care subsidies if their child is enrolled in a half-day preschool program. Nonetheless, many cited the potential loss of a subsidy as their reason for not enrolling. This was a particular concern in situations where a grandparent or other relative is the primary child care provider, making the child care subsidy an important source of income for the extended family. As one parent explained, “Sometimes the subsidies might be their only income and they think that [even] if they keep the kids for five hours, [if they] take them to the school, they will lose the subsidies.”

## 7 Parents are concerned about the cost of child care co-payments

Even though Preschool for All and Head Start offer *free* half-day programs, many providers expand that to a full day by offering child care. But child care funding rules require co-payments on a sliding scale. Many parents cited cost as the biggest barrier to enrollment and also a primary reason why children drop out. As income goes up, some working families “top out” of eligibility and are charged the full cost of the program, while others see co-payments go up and they feel they just cannot afford it.

### ***Provide information and reduce co-payments to make programs affordable***

Provide clear and specific information to families receiving subsidies on how to enroll children in preschool. For those who use child care programs, reduce the co-payments for child care for low-income families so that families can afford all day combined preschool and child care programs.





## 8 Documentation requirements lead to confusion and frustration

Most survey participants who had tried to enroll their child in preschool said the enrollment process was hard. Many parents were frustrated by the amount of paperwork required for preschool enrollment, while others were unable to enroll because of documentation issues.

- Some programs require an overwhelming amount of paperwork and numerous forms of documentation, and families have to deal with this repeatedly, with different requirements in different places;
- Some programs require families to provide a Social Security number in order to enroll, even though this requirement is not officially part of the Preschool for All or Head Start programs;
- Parents are often asked intrusive questions about their income, the child's paternity, how many people live in the home and who they are. These questions are unsettling to many families and in some cases put families at risk. For example, one parent said *"I had to put my income down. I refused and I don't know why they asked. . . Why is my retirement income the question?"*

*"The application process and questions that they ask you—income guidelines, the questions in general as far as to put a child in school, you shouldn't have to go through that. I think that you should just be able to enroll your child in school. You shouldn't worry about income."*

Grandparents expressed concerns that they were asked to report on their pension and Social Security earnings, and that this money was viewed as available to pay for their grandchildren's education and factored into eligibility formulas. Issues with literacy make the enrollment process too intimidating for some parents. As one parent explained, *"Because of literacy and language issues, a lot of people have a hard time comprehending the questions on the application."*

### ***Simplify the registration process***

8

Simplify the registration process and paperwork, make it more family-friendly, and do not require Social Security numbers—so families can register quickly and easily.

## 9 There are not enough preschool slots available in some neighborhoods

Many parents cited a lack of available preschool slots as their reason for not enrolling. An investigation by *Catalyst* found that while some neighborhoods are unable to fill their slots, in other neighborhoods—particularly those in Latino communities—there isn't enough space to meet the demand. Some parents said they tried to enroll their child and were put on a waiting list. One parent said *"I signed up to put my baby in a program when he was still in the womb, and he turned three in July. . . but there is no space."* Others were turned off by the lottery for slots or the overcrowding in the classrooms.

### ***Fill empty slots and create new slots***

9

In communities in which there are not enough preschool slots, build new facilities to meet this demand. If there are empty slots in communities, support recruitment efforts to fill these slots.

*“The focus of our work at Illinois Action for Children has changed dramatically due to the issues [POWER-PAC] raised up to us. We are now focusing on families that you have helped us to identify . . . I want you to know that the issues you have raised are being taken seriously by the Early Learning Council and by the advocacy community more broadly.”*

MARIA WHELAN  
ILLINOIS ACTION FOR CHILDREN  
POWER-PAC MEETING, MAY 2008

## POWER-PAC Early Learning Campaign in Action

POWER-PAC’s proposals have already made an impact. At the local level, parents and stakeholders in the Englewood neighborhood began working together this past summer and fall to pilot solutions to some of the barriers, including a community-based outreach and public awareness campaign. Parents and volunteers went door-to-door to promote preschool and the importance of early learning. They blanketed the neighborhood with door hangers, flyers, and gave away promotional materials at a community back-to-school festival. As a result of this outreach, preschool enrollment increased across the neighborhood. Around the city, agencies are working with POWER-PAC to replicate this success.

Statewide, POWER-PAC helped shape legislative recommendations endorsed by the Illinois Early Learning Council in an effort to better reach families with young children who are difficult to engage in quality early care and education programs. As part of the Hard to Reach Workgroup, POWER-PAC leaders contributed to developing a toolkit to help preschool programs identify and address barriers to access. The toolkit’s strategies include transportation, outreach, parent support, and innovative service delivery models. Now, with our allies, we are pushing the legislature to increase per-pupil funding in targeted communities, so we can do more of what works.

POWER-PAC is a cross-community organization of parents, committed to social and racial justice and fighting for children’s rights. Below, an action for our Recess for All! campaign.



## Appendix

POWER-PAC leaders interviewed over 5,000 families with young children in 19 low-and-moderate income communities across the city. The surveys took place over a two-year period from October 2006 to October 2008. The research was guided by COFI staff and overseen by sociologist Kristina Smock, Ph.D.

With the exception of several multi-ethnic communities, the neighborhoods targeted for research are predominantly African American or Latino. Families were surveyed in the following communities:

Austin  
Bridgeport  
Bronzeville / Near South Side  
Cabrin / Near North Side  
East Garfield / Near West Side / West Haven  
Englewood / West Englewood  
Garfield Ridge / Leclaire Courts  
Greater Grand Crossing  
Humboldt Park  
Logan Square  
New City  
North Lawndale  
Rogers Park  
Roseland  
South Lawndale  
Uptown  
Washington Park  
West Garfield  
West Town

The surveys were conducted through several initiatives:

- **Chicago Early Learning and Literacy Project:** POWER-PAC leaders conducted door-to-door outreach conversations with 796 families in Austin and Englewood between October 2006 and March 2007. Half of those interviewed were parents or grandparents and one-quarter were providers of care to 0-5 year olds. Outreach workers provided information on early learning resources and surveyed their neighbors about early learning needs and obstacles to participation.

- **Mini-Census:** Parent leaders under the direction of COFI, in partnership with Illinois Action for Children and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, conducted a door-to-door census of young children in Austin, Logan Square, and Englewood in April-June 2007. The census identified 1,325 families with children 0-5 and within these families a total of 1,925 children ages 0-5, including 788 preschool-aged children ages 3-4. Outreach workers asked for the number and ages of all children in the household, whether children ages 3-4 attend preschool, and if not, why not.
- **Head Start Outreach:** Parent leaders did door-to-door outreach with 3,051 families in Englewood, Austin, Humboldt Park, and West Town between August and September 2007. Of the families we reached, 1,599 had children ages 3-5. Outreach workers asked for the number and ages of all children in the household and whether children ages 3-4 attend preschool.
- **Chicago Housing Authority surveys:** POWER-PAC leaders and COFI staff conducted interviews with 425 Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) residents and relocatees to learn about their early care and education needs. Surveys were conducted between November 2007 and August 2008. All respondents were parents or caregivers of children under age 5, and 43% of respondents (174 households) had preschool-aged children, ages 3 or 4.

The research culminated in two community meetings designed to engage parents and stakeholders in an analysis of potential policy solutions:

- **Englewood forum, April 2008:** The 61 participants included parents, preschool program directors, early childhood advocacy organizations, community organizations, political staffers, and policy administrators.
- **Town Hall meeting, December 2008:** Over 60 adults attended, including 41 parents/grandparents representing eleven Chicago neighborhoods from all four quadrants of the city.

Across three of the survey samples, between 40 and 64 percent of preschool-aged children whose families were interviewed about their preschool participation were not enrolled in preschool or Head Start:

| Interview sample                  | Number of families surveyed | Number of these families who had preschool aged children | Percent of preschool aged children surveyed who were not in preschool or Head Start |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|
| 3 Community Mini-Census           | 1325                        | 788  | 61%   |
| Chicago Housing Authority Surveys | 425                         | 174  | 64%   |
| Head Start Outreach               | 3051                        | 1,599  | 40%   |

These figures are consistent with data from a University of Chicago Chapin Hall Center for Children study showing that 15,000 low-income preschool-aged children in Chicago are not enrolled in preschool. Some of these children may be enrolled in home-based or center-based child care, but POWER-PAC's research indicates that many are being cared for at home or by relatives. While parents and relatives have the potential to provide effective early learning experiences, structured preschool programs with qualified teachers are far more likely to do so. With many of POWER-PAC's survey respondents identifying television and movies as the number one activity that they like to do with their preschool-aged children, it is clear that many of these families would benefit from a structured preschool or Head Start program.

### Survey Results: The Experience of Young Children in Chicago's Neighborhoods

In an effort to better understand the experiences of children from birth to five in Chicago's low-and-moderate income neighborhoods, and to provide a context for their analysis of preschool enrollment trends, POWER-PAC's surveys began with a series of questions about how parents spend their time with their children.

In the survey of 425 Chicago Housing Authority residents and relocatees with children under age 5, outreach workers asked: "What kinds of things do you like to do with the child(ren) during the day?" The most frequent responses were:

- Television and videos (131 responses)
- Reading (114)
- Indoor play—e.g. games, activities, toys, coloring, etc. (100)
- Outdoor play and walks (52)
- Educational activities—e.g. flash cards, ABCs, numbers, etc. (43)

In response to the question, "What do you think are most important resources or supports for families with children ages 0-5 in this area?", the most common answers were:

- Head Start and child care programs (64 responses)
- Community centers (64)
- After school programs and activities (30)
- Parks and playgrounds (30)
- Social services (27)
- Libraries (25)

Many respondents said that the resources for families in their community are inadequate, and several said there are no resources or supports in the community at all. In another POWER-PAC survey, 40% of respondents said they didn't know of any positive resources for children ages 0-5 in the community (Chicago Early Learning and Literacy Project).

The most common answers in response to the question "What do you think are the biggest challenges facing families with children ages 0-5 here?" were:

- Lack of safety (55 responses)
- Drugs and gangs (49)
- Child care—e.g. finding child care or preschool, getting into child care or preschool, child care hours don't match work hours, etc. (46)



- Finances and not being able to provide for their children (43)
- Parenting—e.g. helping kids make good choices, teaching them, making sure they're safe and happy, etc. (37)
- Lack of programs and activities for children and teens (34)
- Lack of jobs, difficulty obtaining and maintaining jobs (32)

### **Research on the Benefits of Quality Early Care and Education**

Quality preschool programs have been shown to have long-lasting effects on the lives of children and the communities in which they live. Research shows that ninety percent of brain growth occurs before a child's fifth birthday. By capitalizing on this time of rapid learning, quality preschool can help lay a foundation for success in school and in life. As a result, participation in high quality early childhood education may be the clearest pathway out of poverty for low income children.

The effects of quality early childhood education include higher reading and math scores, improved IQs, higher high school graduation and college attendance rates, and lower grade retention and dropout rates. Perhaps even more importantly, children who attend quality preschools develop stronger social and emotional skills and increased self-confidence. Over a lifetime, children who participate in quality early childhood education are less likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system or become teen parents. Over time, they tend to have higher incomes, lower crime and incarceration rates, and lower unemployment rates (Barnett 1995; Fight Crime: Invest in Kids 2006 and 2008; Garces et. al. 2002; Gormley et. al. 2008; Levin et. al. 2007).

While high quality preschools can be expensive, research has also shown that the economic benefits to society far outweigh the costs. Every dollar invested in quality preschool saves taxpayers between \$7 and \$16 in reduced crime costs, welfare dependency and economic losses (Reynolds et. al. 2002; Schweinhart et. al. 2004; Heckman and Masterov 2004).

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### ***To the parents***

who were willing to courageously share their stories with us in hopes of making a system that works better for their families. Many continue to be involved in the organizing that will make this change possible.

### ***To our partners, staff and consultants***

We thank all of the COFI staff and consultants who contributed to this report but especially Kristina Smock, Ph.D., researcher and sociologist. We note, though, that this report is not just the work of POWER-PAC and COFI. It is the result of collaboration with advocates, public officials, social service agencies, and community organizations. We want to acknowledge the following organizations for their contributions to this work: *Catalyst-Chicago* journal, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, Chicago Early Learning and Literacy Project, Chicago Public Schools Department of Early Education, Family Focus, the Governor's Illinois Early Learning Council, Illinois Action for Children, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and West Town Leadership United.

### ***To our generous funders***

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### ***In memory and dedication***

Finally, we honor Glenda Tardy and Martha Plummer, two beloved POWER-PAC leaders who launched the Early Learning Campaign, and sadly, have passed away. We dedicate this report to their children and grandchildren who inspired their fight for justice and equity. The memory of these two strong women leaders lives on in our work.



## Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew - Policy Action Council (POWER-PAC)

is a cross-cultural, citywide membership organization of low-income parents. Our mission is to build a strong voice for low-income, immigrant and working families by uniting parents across race and community around issues of importance to families.

Our **Early Learning Campaign** aims to reduce structural barriers to enrolling low-income children of color in quality early education programs. Other innovative organizing includes:



- **Elementary Justice Campaign** to eliminate unnecessarily punitive discipline policies and practices that negatively impact children of color in Chicago's public elementary schools
- **Recess for All!** seeking the return of recess to Chicago Public Schools



### POWER-PAC

Parents Organized to Win, Educate  
and Renew - Policy Action Council

A COFI PROJECT

**Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)**'s mission is to strengthen the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic life—from local institutions and communities to the city and state policy arenas.

Founded in 1995, COFI is driven by a deep commitment to social justice, and grounded in the time-tested principles, strategies, accomplishments, and approaches of community organizing. COFI's model of Family Focused Organizing provides intensive and systematic leadership development, and ongoing organizing expertise.

We organize low-income parents of color (mostly mothers and grandmothers) who, in turn, have built local and citywide organizations that are fighting for change around issues affecting families, and attracting attention nationally to their innovative policy solutions and organizing steps.

COFI helps to build family-supportive communities by developing parents' capacities to lead—to improve their lives, strengthen their families and better their communities.



### COFI

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