

## Denver Preschool Program Evaluation Highlights for 2009-10

The Denver Preschool Program (DPP) was created to encourage the families of Denver's children to enroll in quality preschool programs in the year before kindergarten. Part of the premise behind DPP is that preschool plays an important role in the behavioral and academic development of children and that participating in a high quality preschool experience can have a significant positive effect that could increase the likelihood that children will be successful in kindergarten and beyond.

DPP was created when Denver voters approved the Preschool Matters ballot initiative in November 2006. Under this initiative, the city collects a .12 cent sales tax which is earmarked for DPP. Beginning in January 2007, Denver expected to collect about \$11 million annually. Actual collections totaled \$10.2 million in 2009 and are expected to reach \$10.7 million in 2010. The vast majority of these revenues (95%) are used to: (1) provide a *tuition credit* to offset the cost of preschool for children in their year before kindergarten; and (2) provide *quality improvement grants* to preschools to improve the quality of their programs. This report provides highlights of key program results, challenges, and impacts for DPP's 2009-10 school year.<sup>1</sup>

### DPP Evaluation Results for 2009-10: Children, Parents and Preschools

In less than four years, DPP has grown from a highly contested but successful ballot initiative into an important presence in preschool education in Denver. During this time, DPP staff, board members and operating partners have worked to create an environment favorable to the development of the program. The success of their efforts is shown by the increasing number of families and providers participating in the program. Through June 2010, the following milestones were achieved:

- The program grew by over 16% in the 2010 school year.
- The total number of children approved by DPP and receiving tuition credits grew to 5,921.
- Of the 5,921 DPP children, 3,659 received services at 84 Denver Public Schools (DPS) sites, while 2,210 received services from 155 center-based sites and 16 home-based sites.
- The total number of preschool providers grew from 111 to 164 with services being provided in 566 classrooms at 273 sites.<sup>2</sup>

#### DPP Supports Children, Parents and Preschool Providers

- Data indicate **children** participating in DPP make significant progress in their academic and socio-emotional development during their preschool year.

- Close to 90% of surveyed **parents** report DPP helped their children maintain continuous enrollment in preschool. This represents a significant increase from the two thirds of parents responding in this fashion last year.

- In 2008 72% of DPP **provider** classrooms received either a 3 or 4 star quality rating. After undergoing a re-rating process this year, the percentage of classrooms with a 3 or 4-Star rating increased to 88% with 28% of classrooms earning the highest rating of 4-Stars.

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<sup>1</sup> Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA), a Denver-based policy-consulting firm that is the evaluation contractor for the DPP program, prepared this summary report. APA works closely with Clayton Early Learning Institute in this effort.

<sup>2</sup> A "provider" is a label used to describe the organizations that run preschool programs in either a single building or multiple buildings. Individual building locations are called "sites." For example, Denver Public Schools is considered one provider that in 2009-2010 operated over 80 ECE (preschool) sites.

- DPP is already within a few hundred students of serving 6,500 children that were originally projected to participate in the program when the ballot initiative was proposed in 2006.

In addition to the program’s impressive growth over a relatively short period of time, DPP outcomes over the past three years can be grouped into three areas:

1. *Preschool Children*
2. *Parents*
3. *Preschool Providers.*

In each of these areas, this report provides a synthesis of specific findings and program highlights.

### 1. Preschool Children

Data now show that children participating in preschool with DPP support made significant progress in their academic and socioemotional development during their preschool year, and that the vast majority of DPP children are ready for kindergarten, both academically and socioemotionally.<sup>3</sup> More DPP children than would be expected scored at or above the average on assessments of their vocabulary, literacy and math skills.

Results are particularly striking for the literacy and math assessments, where nearly three-quarters of DPP children scored at the average or above. Based on the way the assessments are scaled, one would only expect about half of children in the general population to score in this range. Spanish-speaking children also made progress in their Spanish literacy and math skills (assessed in Spanish) over the course of their preschool year. The gains observed were beyond what would be expected based on normal development.

Progress was observed in socioemotional development as well. Over the course of the preschool year, teachers reported that DPP children demonstrated significantly more protective factors (i.e., initiative, self-control, and attachment) and fewer behavioral concerns. Experts agree that positive socioemotional development is an important aspect of school readiness as it is associated with children’s ability to get along with others and self-regulate in school as well as to their general approach to learning (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005).

#### **Key Findings for Children**

- The vast majority of participating children in DPP leave the program both academically and socially/emotionally ready for kindergarten.

- Assessments show DPP children made academic progress in vocabulary, literacy and math during their preschool year. Gains were significantly above what is expected based on normal development.

- Children in DPP made significant progress in socioemotional development, with teachers reporting significantly more positive behaviors and fewer behavioral concerns.

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<sup>3</sup> *Denver Preschool Program: Report on Child Outcomes 2009-10 School Year*, Clayton Early Learning Institute (November 2010).

While it is difficult to disentangle the effects of income and primary language on student academic and behavioral growth, early data indicate that children from the lowest income tiers and children whose primary language was not English tended to start the year lower than their counterparts from other groups on academic assessments administered in English. However, there was a consistent pattern of effects demonstrating that these children increased at a more rapid pace over the course of the year. That is, these children are on their way toward “catching up” to their peers from families from higher income tiers and those whose primary language is English.

## 2. Parents

The DPP tuition credit is an amount of money available for children of Denver residents enrolled in qualified preschool programs during the year before kindergarten. The size of the credit is determined by four factors, including the preschool quality rating, family income level and size, the amount of time a child attends preschool, and other support that parents receive to pay for preschool. All children in Denver in the year before kindergarten are eligible for a credit, regardless of their family’s income level.

One measure of DPP’s success is the number of families that choose to participate in the program. Based on data over the past three years, the program has made important gains over a short period. In fact, the number of participating families has increased more than eight fold, from 628 children in 2007-08 to 5,083 children in 2008-09 to 5,921 in 2009-10.

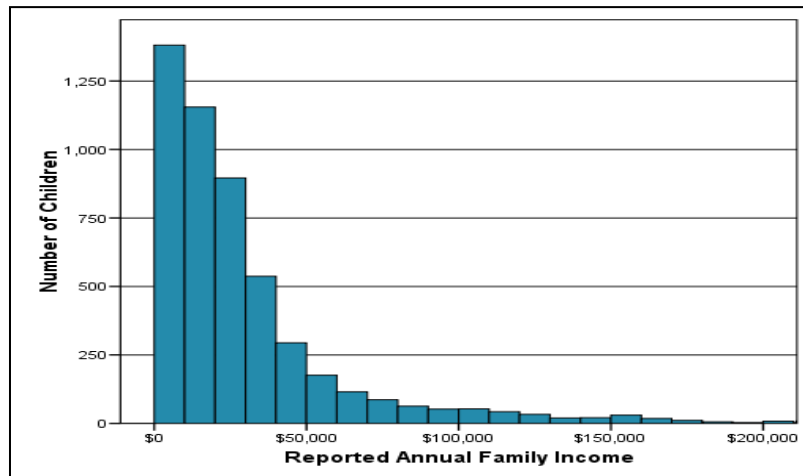
Families that received approval for DPP tuition credits varied across income tiers, by primary language spoken at home and by geographic region of the city. Approximately 29% of the families enrolled in DPP during the 2010 school year reported speaking Spanish at home. Nearly 58% of DPP families reported annual family incomes of less than \$30,000. Only 8% of families reported annual household incomes of \$70,000 or higher. Figure 1 presents the distribution of children served by DPP in 2010 by annual family income.

There are a number of parents who may have enrolled their children in preschool with or without the existence of DPP credits. However, data supports the conclusion that the credits had a positive influence on the enrollment decisions of a significant number of parents. When parents were asked if they would have enrolled their child in preschool if the DPP tuition credit was not available, close to 30% reported that they would not have enrolled their child.

### **Key Findings for Parents**

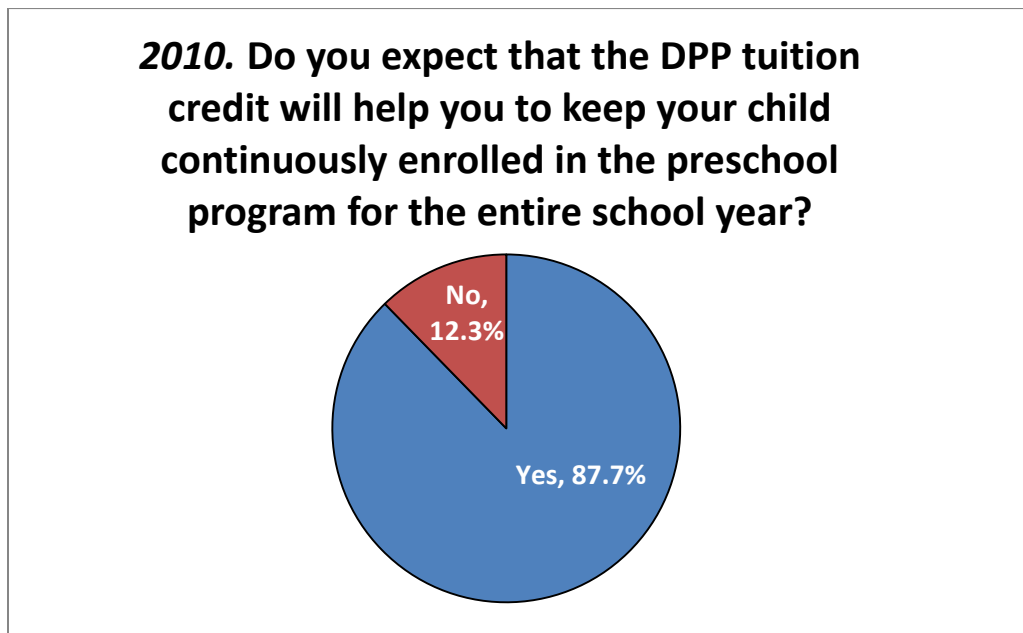
- Since 2007 DPP family participation increased from 628 to 5,921.
- Survey data indicate that 30% of parents reported they would not have enrolled their children in preschool at all were it not for the availability of the DPP preschool tuition credit.
- Close to 90% of parents reported DPP helped their children maintain continuous enrollment in preschool.
- Data indicate that the tuition credit made preschool more affordable and gave many parents the option to increase hours of enrollment.

**Figure 1 – 2010 Distribution of DPP Children by Family Income**



The DPP tuition credits appear to have additional important impacts. For instance, data indicate that, for at least a fifth of parents, the tuition credit made preschool more affordable and thus allowed children to increase their hours of enrollment. Data also show that DPP credits help parents keep their children continuously enrolled in preschool, thus lengthening the exposure of a child to a quality preschool program. From 2009 to 2010, the percent of parents answering ‘yes’ to this question increased from nearly 69% to nearly 88% (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 – Parents Say DPP Helps Keep Their Child Continuously Enrolled in Preschool**



### 3. Preschool Providers

DPP provides different supports to encourage preschool providers to improve the quality of services they offer. This support is distributed directly and indirectly through a consortium of organizations (led by Qualistar Early Learning) to provide: (1) higher DPP *tuition credits* to preschool providers with higher Qualistar ratings to reduce the tuition costs families must pay; (2) *mini-grants* to preschool providers for approved supplies and materials that improve the quality of their classrooms; (3) *professional development and education scholarships* for preschool teachers and staff to improve their knowledge and skills; (4) financial support to the preschool provider to obtain the *quality ratings for preschool classrooms* at no cost; and (5) support to preschool providers to obtain coaching to guide them through the *quality improvement process*.

In order to receive DPP tuition credits on behalf of children, a provider must: (1) be licensed by the state of Colorado; (2) serve children who live in Denver (although the provider can be located outside city limits); and (3) be involved in DPP's quality improvement program or have received accreditation from an approved national organization. With regard to the DPP quality improvement program, the preschool must participate in a multi-part process, which includes an introductory orientation, a quality rating, and development of a quality improvement plan.

All preschools receive an initial assessment by a DPP-approved preschool coach. With regard to quality rating, the coach may decide the program already meets a quality standard because it has been approved by a national agency or because it has been rated by Qualistar Early Learning (Qualistar). Qualistar rates preschool classrooms using a four star system covering five areas: (1) learning environment; (2) family partnership; (3) staff training and education; (4) adult to child ratios; and (5) accreditation through a national accrediting agency. Four stars is the highest possible Qualistar rating.

To help preschool providers implement plans to improve their quality ratings, all participating preschools in Denver are eligible to receive quality improvement support from DPP that can be used for materials and supplies, professional development and coaching.

Through June 2010, the number of Qualistar rated sites participating in DPP grew to 257. An important indicator of DPP's success in 2009-2010 is the number of sites that engaged in the Qualistar process for the first time. A significant number of preschool sites, 27, joined this process to improve the quality of services they offer to families and children. This is similar to the number that entered the process in 2008-2009.

#### **Key Findings for Preschool Providers**

- Almost 90% of preschool providers report that the presence of DPP encouraged them to improve.

- Even as the number of students participating in DPP has expanded, the percentage of students enrolled in 3 and 4-Star quality programs has remained above 85%

- This year 127 classrooms at 74 sites completed the Qualistar re-rating process and 96% either improved or maintained their rating

- 27 preschool sites this year engaged for the first time in the Qualistar quality rating process to help improve the overall quality of their

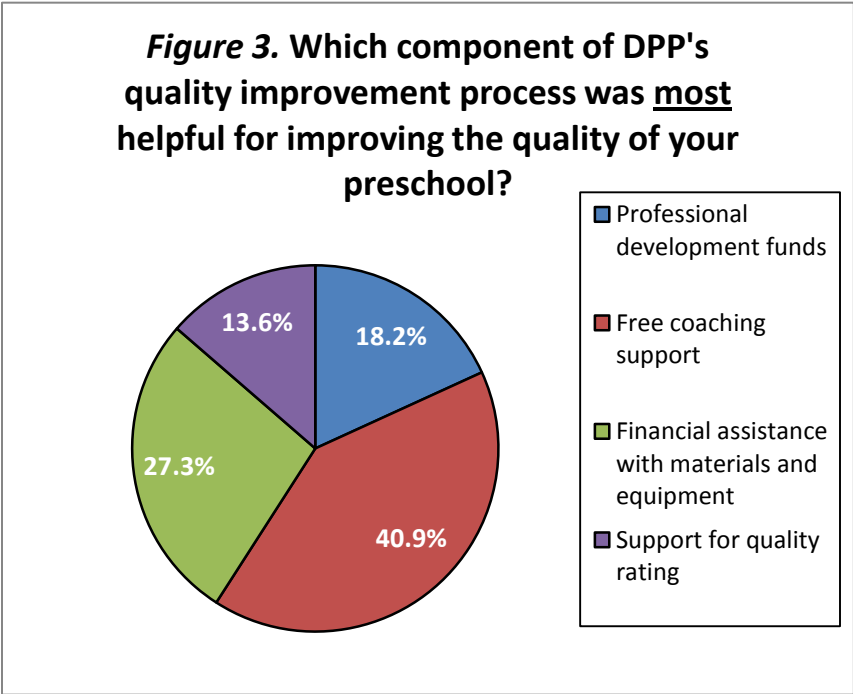
The 2009-2010 year also saw the first classrooms that had been Qualistar rated go through the re-rating process. DPP requires that classrooms go through the re-rating process with Qualistar every two years. This year 127 classrooms at 74 sites completed the re-rating process and 96% either improved or maintained their rating (40% increased their star rating, while 56% stayed the same). After the re-rating, the percentage of classrooms with a 3 or 4-Star rating increased from 72% in 2008 to 88% in 2010. Twenty-eight percent of classrooms earned the highest rating of 4-Stars.

Another important indicator of DPP success is the growing number of students enrolled in high quality preschool programs. In 2008, 575 DPP students were enrolled in a 3 or 4-Star rated program. By 2010, 5,105 students were enrolled in 3 or 4-Star rated programs. Looking at the table below focused on 3 or 4-Star rated programs, it is clear that the percentage of students enrolled in 3 and 4-Star programs has remained above 85% even though the number of students participating in DPP has significantly expanded.

Numbers and Percentages of DPP Students by Star Rating and by School Year						
Star Rating	2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
3-Star	335	53.3%	3,253	64.0%	3,654	61.7%
4-Star	240	38.2%	1,092	21.5%	1,451	24.5%

Interestingly, data indicate that only 29% of parents considered Qualistar ratings as a factor in determining the quality of a preschool. And when parents were asked in a survey if they knew the Qualistar rating of the preschool where their child was enrolled, only slightly more than half reported knowing it. This result suggests there is a need to publicize the basis and use of Qualistar ratings as an indicator of quality preschools.

One of the greatest indicators of DPP’s impact on preschool providers in Denver is that the vast majority, almost 90%, of surveyed preschools report that the presence of DPP encourages their preschool to improve at least somewhat; and



more than a quarter report that DPP encourages them to improve “to a great extent.” Figure 3

indicates the range and the value of benefits which providers receive. As the figure indicates, providers place highest priority on the benefits of DPP coaching support .

### **What's Next for DPP?**

Based on data collected from numerous points of contact between the program and the Denver community, this year's evaluation found that DPP has a very solid base of public support among the program's core constituents. This goodwill among core constituents encourages families from all income tiers to participate in the program, and encourages providers to improve the quality of the services they offer.

Data also indicates that DPP is doing a strong job in improving program efficiency over time. In fact the current evaluation finds that, compared to last year's results:

- Providers give higher ratings for how smoothly the DPP family enrollment process works.
- Providers give higher ratings for how smoothly the DPP tuition payment process works.
- Preschools with no operational concerns about DPP increased more than 12%.
- The percentage of preschools reporting that the effort to manage the tuition credit process was their biggest concern decreased from 28% last year to less than 10% in 2010.
- The DPP-DPS preschool registration process ran significantly more smoothly in 2009-10.
- The number of parents that reported waiting at least three weeks before being notified about the approval of their application decreased almost 16%.

Continued evaluation of the DPP program over time will produce additional insights into the program's overall efficiency and impacts. It will also help inform both the public and program operators about other important issues that remain, including:

- How DPP children perform on academic tests in later grades. Since the DPP program is only in its third year, not enough children have moved deep enough into elementary school to collect data on this question. This data will become available over time.
- How to ensure that more home preschool providers understand the benefit from participating in the program and how the application process works.
- How best to reach parents through the media, meetings, and printed materials on the benefits of high quality preschool programs and the meaning of quality rating systems.
- How to ensure the organization's business management practices remain up to the task of managing the program's explosive growth and changing financial circumstances. As the number of enrolled children increases, changes in tuition credit size might impact the preschool choices parents make, making this an issue that must be continuously monitored.
- How a strong and mutually beneficial relationship with DPS can be maintained.
- How providers that serve culturally and linguistically diverse families can be recruited.