



Connecting All Children to High-Quality Early Care and Education

Promising Strategies From the International Community

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Submitted by American Institutes for Research

Submitted to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Introduction

High-quality early care and education (ECE) provides an important foundation for young children’s success in school and in life. Yet, in the United States, fewer than two out of three children between the ages of 3 and 6 (61%) are enrolled in center-based ECE programs (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics [FIFCFS], 2015). Moreover, children from low-income families are much less likely to receive formal early care and education than their counterparts in more affluent families—72% of families with incomes of at least twice the poverty rate participate in ECE, compared with 45% of families with incomes below the poverty level (FIFCFS, 2015). Participation in ECE in the United States also varies by race/ethnicity; for example, 52% of Hispanic children are enrolled in center-based care compared with 63% of White/non-Hispanic children (FIFCFS, 2015). Federal and state programs attempt to address these discrepancies, but large numbers of children eligible for these programs remain unserved. For instance, in the 2013–14 program year, the federal Head Start program enrolled only 34% of children in poverty (Child Trends Databank, 2015). This report focuses on center-based care, but it is important to note that a significant number of parents may use “family, friend, or neighbor” care or licensed family child care providers. Far less is known about the quality of family child care, as more research is focused on center-based programs. One issue faced by researchers in the field is how to define and measure quality in home-based settings.^{1,2,3}

American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted a scan of efforts to improve access to quality ECE for low-income, minority families in other countries that might inform learning and practice in the U.S. context⁴. Because many other countries have higher participation rates in formal ECE programs than the United States, we expected that such a scan could identify successful strategies that could be applicable in the United States.

In this report we focus on access to and participation in formal ECE systems and government-run or government-approved (licensed) ECE services. National and international research has consistently found that such care is more stable, has higher quality, and better prepares children for subsequent enrollment in school (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, Greenberg, & Loeb, 2016). Government agencies and programs usually encourage mothers seeking child care to enroll their children in formal child care. However, we realize that there is high-quality “informal” care and that many parents have good reasons to use such care (Bryson, Brewer, Sibieta, & Butt, 2012; Melhuish, 2015). Also, there are government programs that seek to support providers of family child care and other informal care options to increase the quality of the care they provide and the training of the staff they employ (California Department of Education Child Development Division, 2009). We acknowledge that our focus on formal center-based child care in this paper restricts the generalizability of our findings, which is an important limitation of this project.

¹ For more information on measuring quality in home-based child care, see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/define_measures.pdf.

² For more information on research reviews of home-based child care, see http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_720.pdf.

³ For more information on measuring quality of non-center-based child care, see http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1010.html.

⁴ Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Although the quality of formal ECE services varies across and within the countries included in this report, quality standards are typically high and quality is comparable with high-quality programs in the United States. Access and utilization are the primary foci for this report. The original research plan for this exploratory study included several topic areas that are not explicitly featured in this report. These include the role of parent engagement, how countries define and improve program quality, the use of informal care (e.g., kin and kith care), and the ECE workforce. Some of these (e.g., workforce and parent engagement issues) are discussed as part of other topics. For others (e.g., informal care and variation in program quality) we did not find relevant comparative international literature or informants who were able to make cross-national comparisons.

This report provides a summary of findings from this initial scan. Those findings are interspersed with observations from a July 2016 gathering of experts from Europe and the United States at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in Princeton, New Jersey. The report concludes with recommendations for policy and program development and for further research activities. Throughout the report, we also include referrals to specific programs and resources that provide additional context for our findings.

Research Questions

The work presented in this document is guided by four broad research questions:

1. How do rates of ECE participation for children of different ages vary across middle- and high-income countries?
2. How do ECE settings vary across middle- and high-income countries, as measured by the Starting Well Index (Watson, 2012), which includes indicators related to quality, access, and availability?⁵
3. Which countries have shown the most significant gains in ECE participation for infants and toddlers (birth to 2 years of age) and preschool-age children (3 years of age to school age)?
4. Among countries with high levels of ECE participation, significant gains in ECE participation, and/or high levels of ECE quality, what conditions, policies, and programs may have contributed to those favorable outcomes?

Our examination of these research questions for this report is exploratory in nature. That is, we did not attempt to systematically compare the outcomes, contexts, policies, and programs in different countries, and we do not imply that any policies and programs we highlight are *responsible* for the favorable ECE outcomes in those countries. Moreover, our research so far

⁵ As part of the original design for the study, we explored country-to-country comparisons of quality. The challenge with such comparisons is that every country measures quality differently and often there are within-country differences in quality standards and indicators across different ECE systems. The quality measure we settled on, the Starting Well Index, is an attempt by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), funded by the [Lien Foundation](#), to summarize many different aspects of child care quality in a single measure. As described in Appendix 2 of Watson (2012), the index scores countries across four categories: Social Context, Availability, Affordability, and Quality, with the latter receiving 45% of the scale's overall weight. Specific quality indicators include student-teacher ratios, health and safety guidelines, linkages between preschool and primary school, parental involvement and education programs, curriculum guidelines, and preschool teacher training and wages.

focused on *positive* outcomes only. We did not study countries with lower ECE participation rates than those in the United States, and our findings are therefore geared primarily to factors that *enable* and *encourage* ECE participation rather than those that *hinder* or *prevent* ECE participation.

Methodology

Focusing primarily on countries in the European Union (EU), we conducted a review of the research literature and existing data on ECE participation and efforts to improve access to quality formal ECE services, as well as a review of ongoing policy and advocacy efforts to strengthen ECE systems.⁶ One of the first steps in this process was a comparison of ECE participation rates for children birth to age 3 and children ages 3–6, respectively.⁷ The results of this comparison, presented next, helped us identify countries that (a) have very high ECE participation rates, (b) in the last decade showed high rates of growth in ECE participation, or (c) scored exceptionally high on the [Starting Well Index](#), which is an index that systematically ranks several dimensions of ECE quality and access across preschool environments in 45 countries (Watson, 2012). Many countries score high on the first and third of these criteria (i.e., they have high participation rates and high levels of ECE quality, as measured with the Starting Well Index), and some score high on the first and second criteria.⁸

By using these three criteria, we expected to find a sample of countries to study that would include some with traditionally high ECE participation and some that significantly increased their ECE participation in recent decades. The latter group had the potential to be of particular interest to U.S. policymakers because the United States has some of the lowest rates of ECE participation among high-income countries and is seeing relatively little growth in those participation rates.

Eventually we settled on a sample of 17 countries, listed in Table 1, for which we conducted a systematic document review (mostly using documents available on government and other public websites).

Based on the initial results of that review, we also conducted structured interviews with five informants from focal countries and Europe-based ECE organizations (e.g., the [International Step by Step Association](#)). We also examined EU policy documents (as most of the countries we identified are part of the EU) and interviewed EU policymakers.

⁶ Our focus on EU countries reflected logistical and language constraints as well as a belief that policy lessons from other large Western economies would be most relevant to U.S.-based policymakers. However, a more comprehensive inventory of ECE strategies, including Asian and Latin American countries as well as Canada and Australia, might uncover additional policy lessons.

⁷ Technically, the “age 3–6” category is “age 3 to compulsory school age,” which is 6 years of age in almost all the countries we studied.

⁸ It is important to note that these country-by-country comparisons are subject to a range of methodological problems that can potentially invalidate some comparisons or some of the conclusions we draw from them. For example, definitions underlying the statistics may vary from country to country and may mask meaningful differences between countries. Also, it is impossible for us (or for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], from which most of the reported statistics come) to verify the accuracy of specific country-level indicators. Most importantly, systems for payment or reimbursement of child care fees vary dramatically across countries, which may cause differences to look larger than they really are (for example, when out-of-pocket fees are high but partially offset by generous tax credits).

Through our interview process, we eventually became involved with the [Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years](#), whose seventh and final conference we attended in February 2016. This conference reinforced many of the findings from our interviews and document review, and helped us identify new informants and partners for this work.

Table 1. The United States and the 17 Focus Countries

Country	2014 Population	2014 GDP Per Capita (Current U.S. Dollars)
United States	318,857,056	\$54,630
Mexico	125,385,833	\$10,326
Germany	80,970,732	\$47,774
France	66,217,509	\$42,726
United Kingdom	64,559,135	\$46,297
Italy	60,789,140	\$35,223
South Korea	50,423,955	\$27,971
Spain	46,476,032	\$29,722
Netherlands	16,865,008	\$52,139
Belgium	11,231,213	\$47,328
Sweden	9,696,110	\$58,899
Denmark	5,638,530	\$60,718
Finland	5,461,512	\$49,843
Norway	5,136,886	\$97,300
Ireland	4,615,693	\$54,339
New Zealand	4,509,700	\$44,342
Lithuania	2,932,367	\$16,490
Latvia	1,993,782	\$15,692

Source: The World Bank, 2016

To guide the informant interviews, we developed a research protocol, which is included in the appendix, as well as the list of interviewees. We followed this protocol as much as was practical and appropriate but deviated from it to accommodate the unique knowledge and contributions of our informants. The resulting interview notes were combined with the information from published documents to create country “profiles,” whose information was then condensed into a number of different themes, which are presented in this report.

The initial purpose of this document was to inform a convening at RWJF in July 2016. At this convening, expert panel members and stakeholders from some of the countries included in this report discussed the themes and policy suggestions featured in this report. Throughout this report we have integrated information presented and discussed at the convening.

How Does ECE Participation and Quality in the United States Compare With That in Other Countries?

Using data from the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Figure 1 shows the 2012 rate of participation⁹ in ECE for children ages 3–5 in the United States and in 36 other high- and middle-income countries. The figure shows that the U.S. participation rate of 66% was near the bottom of this group. In contrast, eight countries had preschool participation rates over 95%, and five countries had rates between 90% and 95%. (Note that we did not have information on variation in the number of hours of participation associated with these participation rates. Thus, it is possible that the cross-country differences in participation rates would be smaller if we examined hours of participation instead.)

As we discuss below, the nearly universal participation in preschool in many of these countries reflects national policies and expectations that all children enroll in such programs. Thus, in these countries, maintaining high rates of preschool participation is less about creating or expanding the supply of ECE services and more about connecting parents who are new to parenting or new to these countries with existing systems. However, as we discuss, many of the countries with the highest ECE participation rates took several decades to establish their ECE infrastructure and it took major legal and financial commitments to make this happen. This need for public and political commitment was reinforced by several of the researchers and policy makers who participated in the RWJF meeting, who remarked on the challenge of maintaining public and financial support for universal ECE during the years of the recent financial crisis, which hit many European countries especially hard.

If we focus on infants and toddlers (those younger than 3 years of age), 2013 ECE participation rates were considerably lower in all the countries we compared, reaching a high of 67% in Denmark. Among these younger children, U.S. ECE participation rates, at 28% in 2011, were in the middle of the distribution, as shown in Figure 2.¹⁰

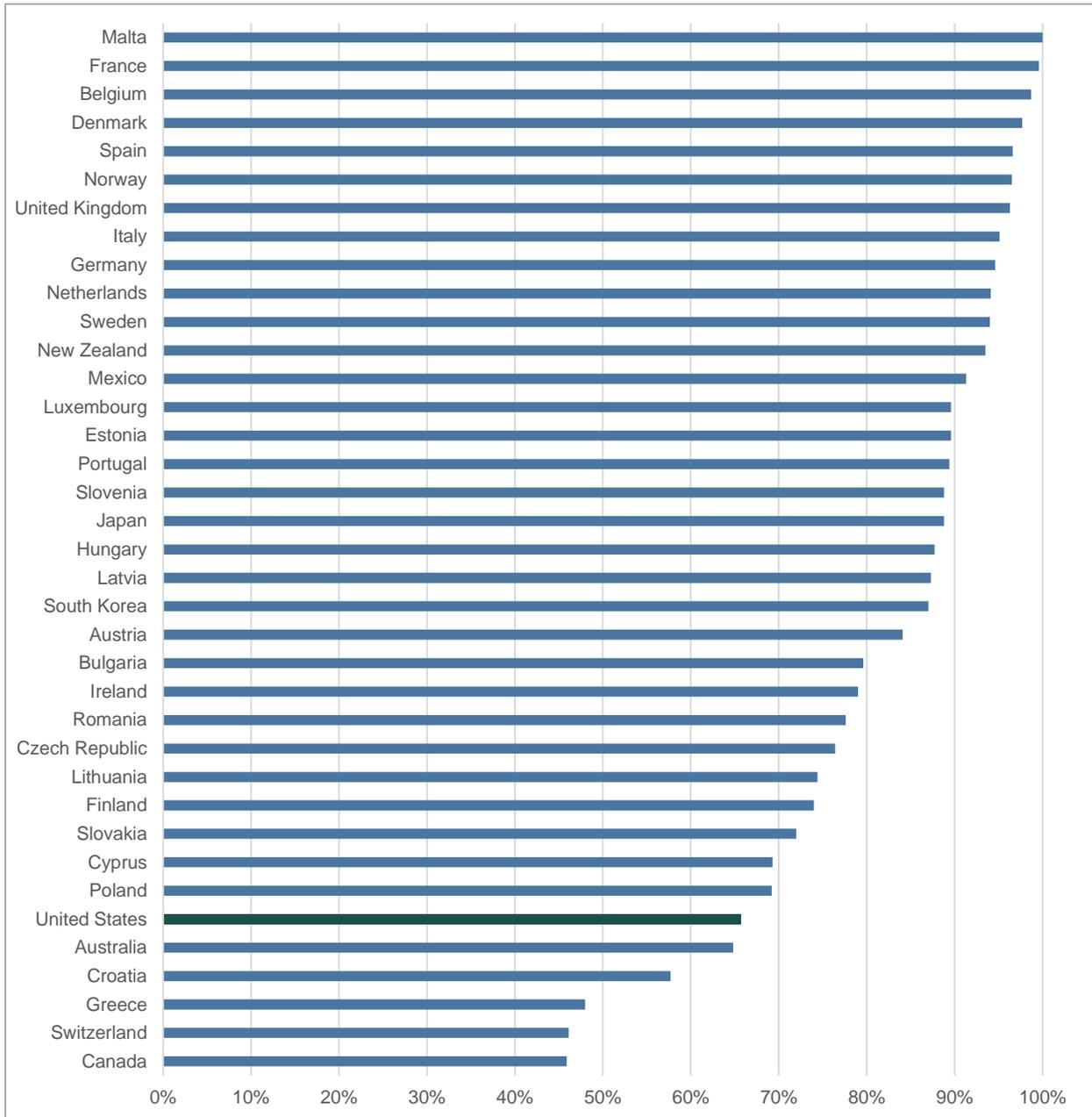
It is interesting to note that some countries with nearly full ECE participation among older children, such as Italy and Germany, have ECE participation rates for infants and toddlers that are similar to or lower than those in the United States. In addition to an emphasis on ensuring the school-readiness of older children, this variation in participation patterns may be partially explained by the relatively generous paid parental leave policies found in many high-income countries. These policies may allow at least one parent to be out of the workforce for a year or longer after a child is born, during which time the parent provides continuous care. This greatly reduces the need for child care during the first year of a child's life in those countries, which is reflected in the corresponding ECE participation rates among infants and toddlers. For example, in Italy, mothers are entitled to 22 weeks of maternity leave at 80% of their salary. Although fathers are only currently awarded one day off at 100% of their salary, each parent is allowed 26 additional weeks at 30% of their salary, totaling 10 months. If a father takes at least 3 months off of work, then this total is extended to 11 months. The United Kingdom has the most generous

⁹ These data include 3- to 5-year-olds enrolled in formal child care or preschool programs. The OECD polls its member states and validates the information internally.

¹⁰ These data include children birth to 2 years of age who use formal programs, and the data do not include unregulated care (e.g., family, friends, and neighbor care).

maternal leave policy of the countries surveyed for this report, entitling mothers to a full year off of work. The first 11 of these 52 weeks are paid at 100% of the mother’s salary, and the last 42 weeks are paid at 22.5%. Fathers are offered 2 weeks of paternity leave at 19% of pay, and each parent may take an additional 13 weeks of unpaid leave.

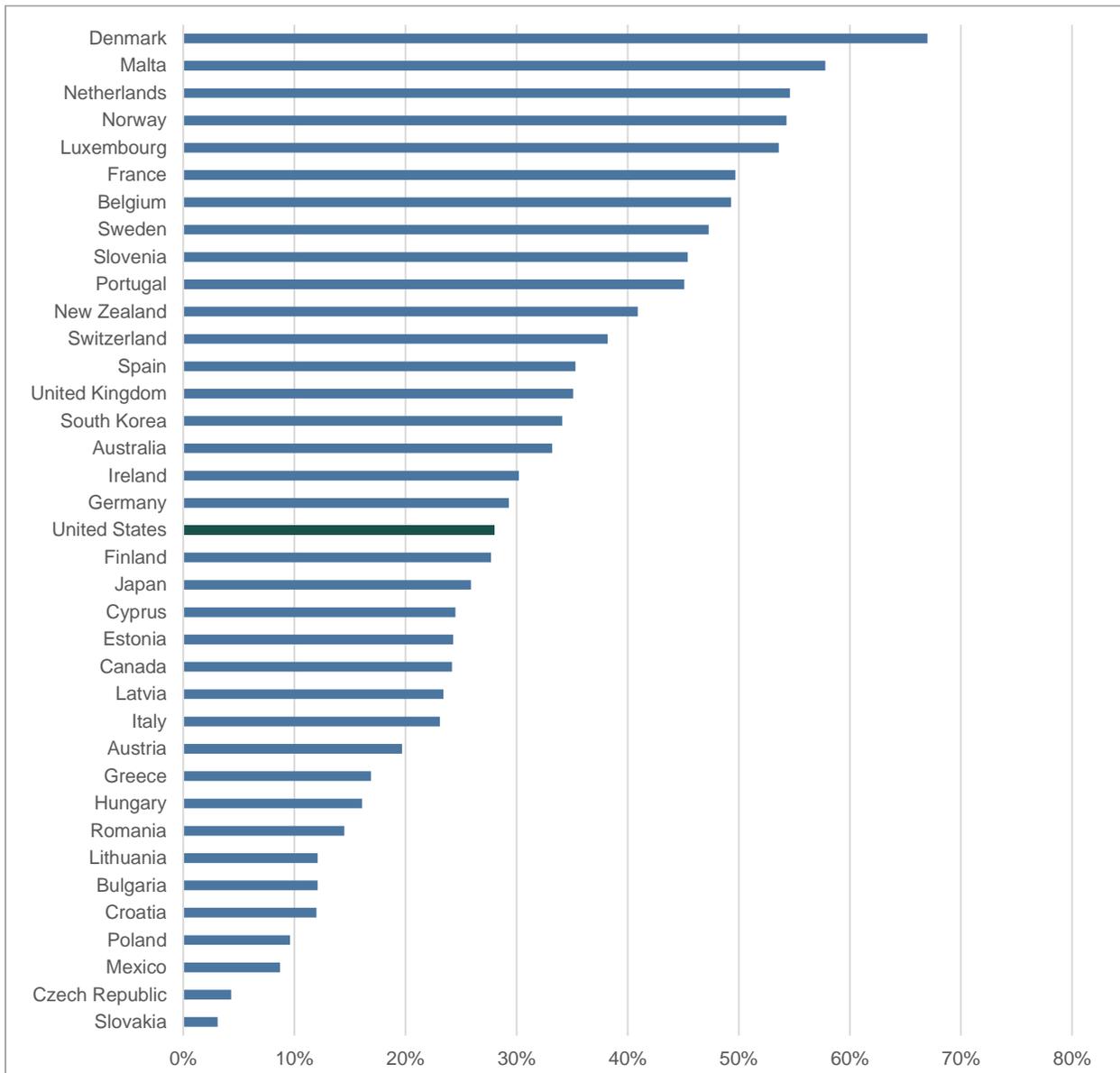
Figure 1. 2012 ECE Participation Rates for 3- to 5-Year-Olds



Note. Data for Mexico reflect ECE participation in 2011.

Source: OECD, 2015

Figure 2. 2013 ECE Participation Rates for 0- to 2-Year-Olds

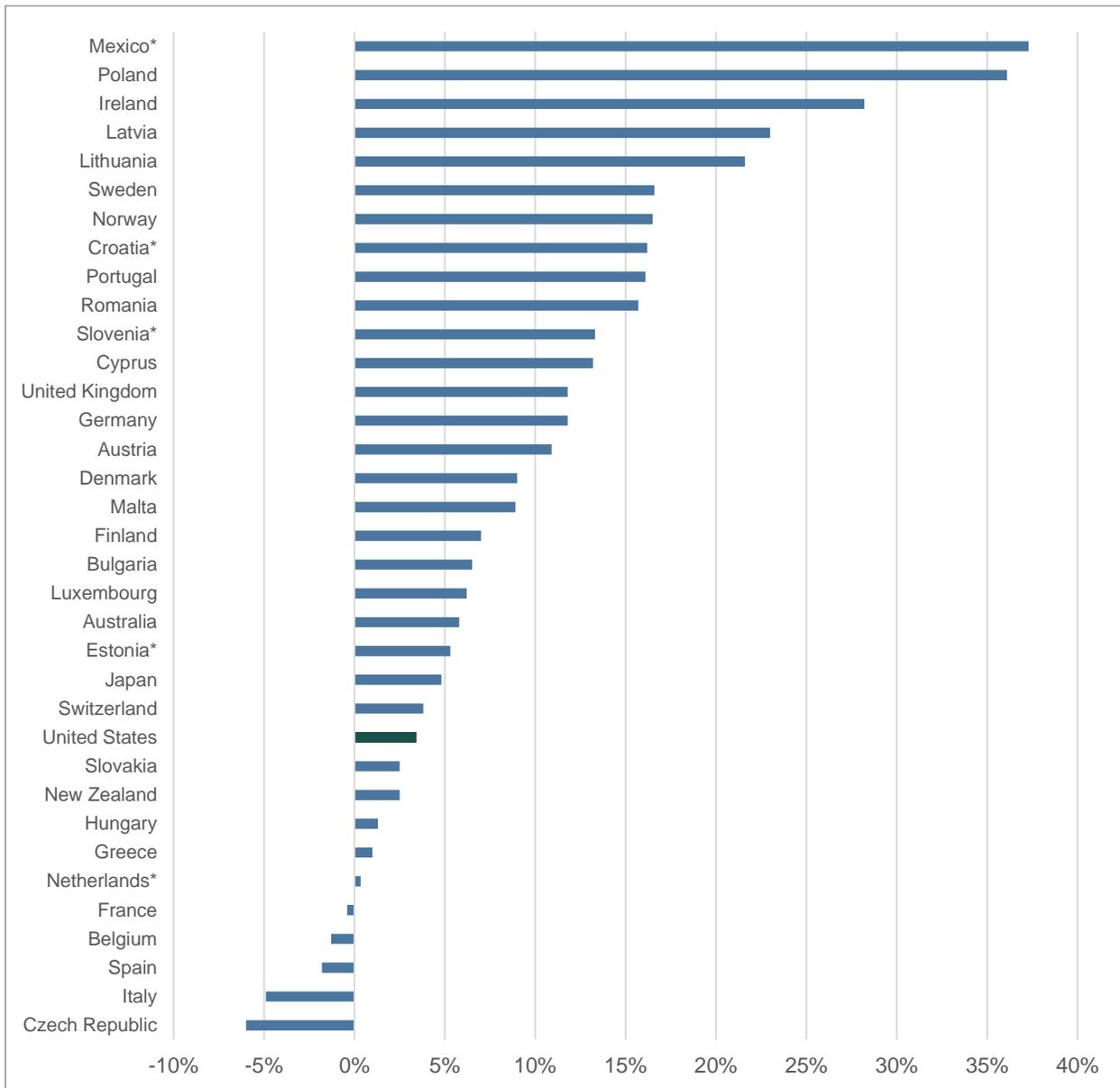


Note. Data for Australia, Mexico, and the United States are from 2011. Data for Japan are from 2010. Data for Canada are from 2008.

Source: OECD, 2015

To better understand what countries have done to increase the proportion of children participating in ECE, we also investigated ECE strategies in countries whose rates of preschool-age enrollment increased the most between 2002 and 2012. As shown in Figure 3, five countries—Mexico, Poland, Ireland, Latvia, and Lithuania—increased their ECE participation rate by more than 20%, whereas five other countries—Sweden, Norway, Croatia, Portugal, and Romania—increased their participation rate by more than 15%. The United States, by comparison, increased preschool enrollment by 3.4% between 2002 and 2012.

Figure 3. Percentage Change in Preschool-Age Participation Rate, 2002–12

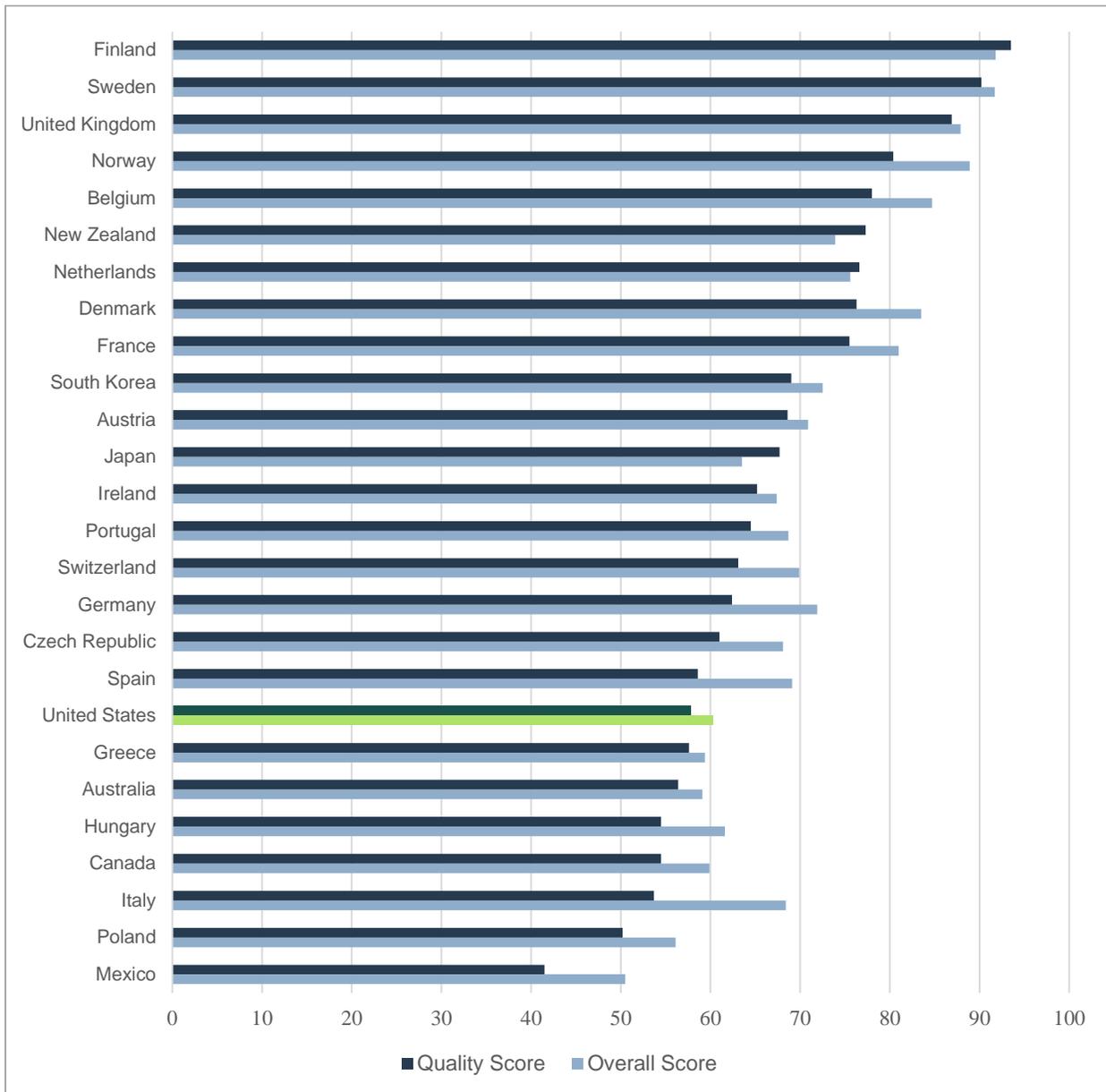


Note. Data for the countries with an asterisk in the figure were not available for the 2002–12 period. Instead, we used data from the following years for these countries: Mexico: 2002–11, Croatia: 2003–12, Slovenia: 2005–12, and Estonia: 2005–12. Netherlands data are available only for 4- and 5-year-olds.

Source: OECD, 2015

Last, Figure 4 compares a similar set of countries according to their ranking on the Starting Well Index, which ranks the quality of the preschool environments for children in 45 countries (Watson, 2012). The figure shows both the overall scale score (in light blue) and the quality score (in dark blue). The United States also is in the bottom of the pack on this index, suggesting that ECE concerns in the United States extend beyond access and participation to the quality of the ECE environment as well.

Figure 4. Quality and Overall Score on the Starting Well Index (0–100)



Source: Watson, 2012

After examining the information in these four figures, we used the following criteria to select focal countries for our review: France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, and Germany (high ECE participation among 3-to 5-year-olds); Denmark and the Netherlands (high ECE participation among 0-to 2-year-olds); Mexico, Ireland, Latvia, and Lithuania (high growth in ECE participation); and Finland, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and South Korea (high overall ECE score).¹¹

¹¹ Many of the countries whose ECE policies we reviewed are not highlighted explicitly in this report. However, we did review all information we collected on each country and would have noted any major deviations from the themes we present.

In reviewing ECE policies and systems in these countries, we identified five themes that seem to contribute to the high levels of ECE participation. These themes are as follows:

1. Legal entitlement to ECE
2. Strong and stable financial support to the ECE system
3. Connecting children to the ECE system early
4. Community connections between ECE systems and the families they serve
5. Targeted ECE to support the integration of immigrants and address inequality in society

We covered each of these themes in separate sessions in the July 2016 meeting at RWJF. As will become apparent below, these themes are not mutually exclusive in the real world. Policies in each of these areas usually reinforce one another in ways that strengthen the ECE system as a whole.

Legal Entitlement to ECE

In many European countries, access to ECE is considered a “child’s right” or a legal entitlement. This is a fundamental difference with the United States, where providing access to high-quality ECE may be considered good public policy but is generally not legally enforceable. When ECE is defined as a legal right for all children, government budget constraints and changes in public priorities are less likely to erode financial support for the ECE system. Moreover, such explicit rights (which are widely communicated) create expectations for parents to make use of them, which makes it easier to maintain high participation rates even if contextual factors (i.e., demographics and the economy) become less favorable.

Countries vary in how and when they guarantee that every child has the right to ECE. Among the countries included in this report, a legal entitlement to ECE begins at birth in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. Germany and Norway provide such a legal entitlement beginning at 1 year of age and Belgium at 2 1/2 years of age. For older children (ages 3–5), legal entitlement to ECE extends to many more countries in our sample, including France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, South Korea, Spain, and the United Kingdom. (Note, however, that a legal entitlement to ECE does not equal a legal entitlement to *free* ECE. Parent fees can be substantial in many of the countries included in our study, especially for younger children.)

These legal entitlements were usually not instituted all at once and are the result of political processes that often spanned decades. The political discussion preceding universal ECE entitlements reflected debates about larger social issues such as female labor force participation, declining birth rates, inequality in educational opportunity across social classes, integration of immigrants, and the universal rights of children (Kamerman, 2006; Javornik, 2014). On the other side, governments and their constituents are concerned about the costs of providing universal access to ECE, especially when higher-income families are initially often the greatest beneficiaries (e.g., Gupta et al., 2008). For example, in **Sweden**, which has long been at the forefront of providing universal child and family services, the legal entitlement to ECE began in 1975 with only 1 year of universal preprimary education. Since then, more children incrementally gained access to ECE, a process that was codified in 2000 by establishing a legal entitlement to full-day

ECE for children age 1 and older. The timing of this guarantee coincides with the end of 1 year of paid parental leave, thereby removing any gaps in services that may influence parents' ability to rejoin the workforce (Naumann, McLean, Koslowski, Tisdall, & Lloyd, 2013). In addition, municipalities are required to find every child a place in ECE within 4 months of their parents' request, allowing for the increased flexibility of rolling admissions throughout the year (Engel, Barnett, Anders, & Taguma, 2015). In 2003, Swedish 4- and 5-year-olds were given the right to 525 free hours of preschool annually, or 15 hours per week for 35 weeks. This right was extended to 3-year-olds in 2010, further expanding the scope of the Swedish ECE system and allowing increasing numbers of children to enroll in ECE (Naumann et al., 2013).

A key benefit of establishing a legal entitlement to ECE is that it reinforces the idea of universality in the ECE system. That is, ECE services are intended for *all* children, not just those who need to remedy a lack of school readiness prior to entering elementary school or those who have two working parents. In countries with the highest ECE participation rates, this universal expectation of ECE participation, especially among 3- to 5-year-olds, also extends to children of parents who are unemployed or not in the workforce. This, in turn, helps to minimize inequality, increase integration of low-income families, and support the socialization and integration of the children in those families. In contrast, in the United States, eligibility for subsidized child care (especially if provided through state welfare systems) is often predicated on parents being employed or seeking employment.

Within the European Union, a great deal of policy guidance and some financial support comes from the European Commission, which cannot legally set ECE policy in member countries but does provide advice, encouragement, and support for countries that commit to increasing ECE participation or quality. At the RWJF meeting, Viktoria Bolla, ECE policy officer at the European Commission, discussed the facilitating role that the EU has played in expanding ECE access and efforts to improve quality across its 28 member states. She emphasized the added value of creating and maintaining a comprehensive quality framework for ECE services across the EU, pointing out that an ECE entitlement is meaningless without adequate quality and vice versa. The EU early childhood education and care (ECEC) quality framework has been used in the past years in several EU countries to support ECEC reforms, and the EU Erasmus+ fund gave the opportunity to ECE staff and leaders to learn from each other across the continent. The trend of increasing access has been continuous in the last decade, but reaching the collective goal of universal access will require significantly more public investment.

Strong Financial Support for the ECE System

A major challenge to establishing and maintaining high ECE participation rates is the cost of participation to parents. Even well-established and well-funded systems can expose parents to expenses that are unaffordable, prompting them to look for less costly (and lower quality) alternatives. Thus, governments seeking to increase and maintain high ECE participation rates and high ECE quality among lower income parents and children must keep the costs of ECE

services manageable and subsidize rates as necessary.¹² To do so, countries use a wide range of mechanisms, including tax credits, supply-side rate subsidies, vouchers, and direct public provision of free ECE services. There is some evidence that the least complex of these systems (e.g., free services provided directly by the government) are the most successful at attracting low-income families, but research comparing these different subsidy methods is limited and subject to many confounds (Shlay et al., 2004; Bettino & Plantenga, 2008).

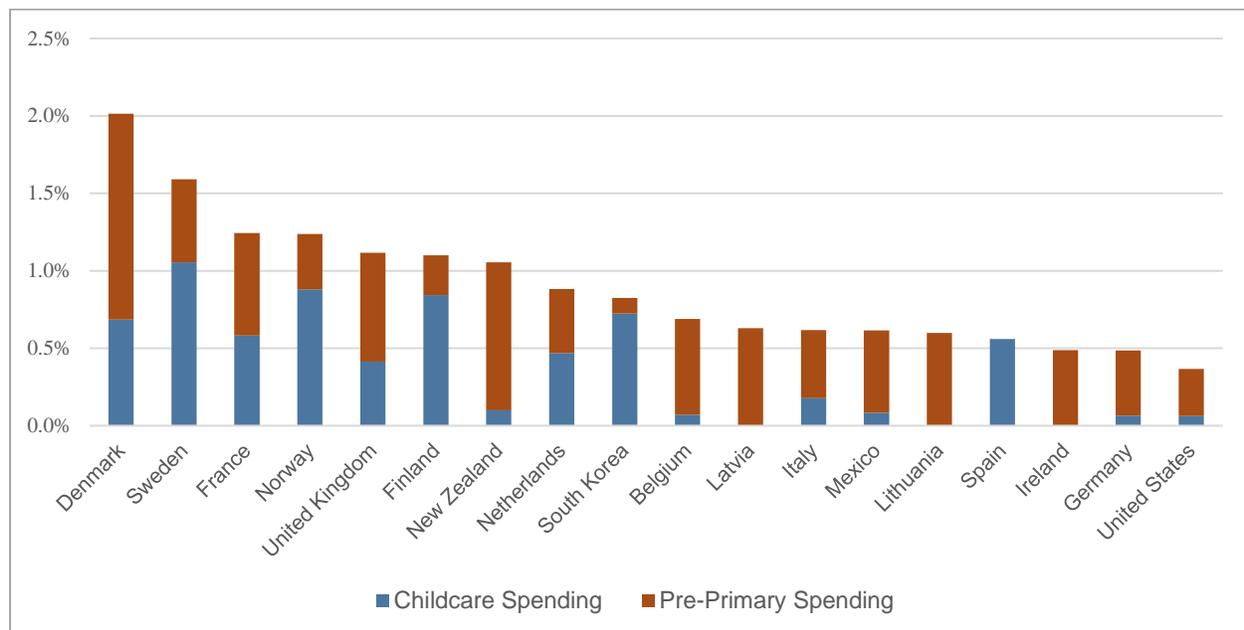
In **Sweden**, most ECE services are publicly provided, but private providers can participate in the government system if they accept the government-imposed maximum fees (Engel et al., 2015). These fees are accompanied by a tiered payment schedule for parents based on total parent income and the number of children in the family (Naumann et al., 2013). On average, parents pay only 3% of their gross income for ECE services for the first child, 2% for the second, and 1% for the third (Engel et al., 2015). Economically disadvantaged groups are given additional support and encouragement to increase their participation in ECE. Sweden has a growing immigrant population, and the first language of 14% of children in ECE is not Swedish. These children are provided with additional support from language specialists and are allowed to attend ECE for free. Finally, children with disabilities have priority access to services and are fully integrated into mainstream classrooms (OECD, 2006).

As evidenced by the substantial increase in enrollment between 2001 and 2012 (Figure 3), **Norway** has made significant (and successful) efforts to expand its ECE program to reach more children and to do so at an affordable cost for all parents. To this end, the country instituted a legal entitlement to education over the age of 1 year in 2009, which was backed up with a tripling of its funding for ECE programs since 2000 (Engel et al., 2015). With this influx of funding, there has been significant expansion of ECE participation, whereas the cost to parents has decreased substantially. In 2004, the country instituted a maximum parental fee for ECE, which, by design, decreased by 35% over the next decade to NOK 2,405, or \$273, per month in 2014 (Engel et al., 2015).

Free or publicly subsidized ECE services are more common in the European Union than the United States. As shown in Figure 5, among the countries featured in this report, the United States spent the least on ECE, at 0.4% of its per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) in 2011. In that same year, Denmark spent the most on ECE, approximately 2% of GDP, and Sweden, France, Norway, the United Kingdom, Finland, and New Zealand all spent between 1% and 2% of their GDP. Thus, on a GDP basis, the United States spends half or less on ECE than almost all comparable high-income countries.

¹² It is important to note here that governments that subsidize child care expenses often have other reasons to do so in addition to increasing ECE participation among lower and middle-income children. For example, many child care policies also cite labor market and financial equity concerns and government intentions to support parenthood and encourage greater fertility.

Figure 5. Public Spending on Child Care and Preprimary Education (Percentage of GDP, 2011)



Source: OECD, 2014

As in the United States, public funding of services for older children (ages 3–5) in the countries studied is typically higher than support for services for infants and toddlers. Among the countries included in this report, only two (Latvia and Lithuania) offer ECE for children from birth to age 3 at no cost to parents. However, in many other countries, the cost of ECE for infants and toddlers also is low, either through general subsidization, tiered payment schedules based on family income, or both. The average cost to parents for child care (ages 0–5) is less than 10% of net family income in eight of the 17 countries in our sample.¹³ Subsidies for ECE services in these countries take a variety of forms, including tax breaks, vouchers, and direct payments to parents or ECE providers (Motiejunaite, Delhaxhe, Balcon, & Borodankova, 2014). Families in the United States, by comparison, pay an average of 23.1% of their net income on child care, exceeded only by Ireland and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2011). In percentage terms, this figure is just below twice the OECD average, at 11.8% of net family income spent on child care. Keeping these costs manageable is a major policy lever for countries seeking to increase ECE participation and maintain high ECE enrollment, especially during economic downturns and for low-income parents.

For preschool age children (3- to 5-year-olds), free, full-time ECE is offered in seven of the 17 countries included in this report.¹⁴ In all of these countries, children are guaranteed a free education from age 3, regardless of need or income. Another six countries in our sample offer free early education either for 1 year (usually the year directly prior to compulsory education) or part time, allowing all children to access some ECE before entering primary education.¹⁵ Among this group, the parental contribution for the remainder of the child’s time varies. In some countries it is tied to family income (a maximum of 2% of total family income in Sweden); in

¹³ These countries are Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, South Korea, Spain, and Sweden.

¹⁴ These countries are Belgium, France, Italy, Latvia, Mexico, South Korea, and Spain.

¹⁵ These countries are Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

others, parents are responsible for a specific proportion of the costs (e.g., up to 45% of the total cost of ECE in the United Kingdom). Although more U.S. children ages 3–5 have access to free preschool (e.g., Head Start or other local/state programs), parents in the United States still pay the most for child care and preschool, covering an average of 60% of total ECE expenses for their children.

During the RWJF meeting, Dr. Jan Peeters of the University of Ghent (Belgium) compared the financial supports and parental contributions across several countries and pointed out that there are trade-offs. Participation rates are greatest in countries such as France and Belgium that have universal free prekindergarten programs. However, compared with the United Kingdom, which has higher parental contributions, group sizes in France and Belgium also are considerably greater.

In addition to keeping overall expenses relatively low, most countries in our sample have supplemental programs that target specific underserved groups. For example, **Denmark, Norway,** and the **United Kingdom** provide targeted subsidies to low-income parents who do not qualify for free services or who need ECE services outside of free “core” hours (typically 9 a.m.–3 p.m.). In addition to similarly supporting low-income parents, **Ireland** also subsidizes the cost of ECE for parents who are pursuing education. Some countries further stimulate enrollment of underserved children by offering additional funding to ECE service providers for enrollment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or children with disabilities. Examples of such extra funding target providers serving children with disabilities in Belgium, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Other countries, such as France, Germany, New Zealand, and Norway, provide extra funding to service providers in areas with high percentages of minority and bilingual children, or to providers in isolated locations (New Zealand). In **Flanders** (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), the government directly subsidizes neighborhood services designed to increase the participation of minority children in ECE and offers low-income and immigrant families an increased family allowance if their children enroll in ECE services. In addition, the government in Flanders offers priority enrollment in government-funded ECE programs to children living in poverty, those from single-parent families, or those whose parents work (more details on Belgium’s enrollment strategies and targeted enrollment in general are provided on page 21).

In **Norway**, the cost of ECE for all Norwegian families significantly decreased in recent years, encouraging the enrollment of families previously excluded due to financial constraints. With ECE participation rates for 3- to 5-year-olds reaching 96.5% in 2012 (OECD, 2015), the country has turned its focus to the relatively small number of children who do not participate in ECE. For the most part, these children come from migrant backgrounds or low-income families. In 2015, targeted subsidies were made available to low-income families to ensure that the cost of ECE does not exceed 6% of the family’s annual net income. In addition, the Norwegian Parliament granted an extension of core free hours for low-income 4- and 5-year-olds. Furthermore, the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion has piloted a program to provide 4 hours of free ECE each day to children in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants. To increase enrollment of migrant children, some municipalities have instituted outreach programs targeted specifically to minority-language children. Children of asylum seekers begin receiving free ECE services for at least 3 hours per day even before their parents obtain legal permits. Finally, the country has implemented regulations to ensure that the special needs of children with disabilities are met. ECE service providers are awarded extra funding if they care for children

with special needs (Engel et al., 2015). Children with disabilities and those in the care of the child welfare system are offered priority enrollment in ECE programs (Royal Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2012).

So far, most of the funding strategies and programs we have discussed have been in the higher-income countries in Europe, especially in Scandinavia. These countries have robust economies that can support large (and growing) investments in ECE relatively easily. However, as shown in Figure 3, some of the largest gains in ECE enrollment in the last 10–15 years took place in less wealthy countries like Mexico, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia. Those expansions took large and sustained investments that, in the case of the newer EU members, were also supported by European Union funds.

For example, in 2003 **Lithuania** joined UNESCO’s “Education for All” movement and convened a National Education Forum to develop goals for 2015. These goals included improving access to ECE for every child, giving priority access to children in rural areas, ensuring high-quality ECE programs and settings, and increasing flexibility among ECE services to better fit the needs of children and families. With a special focus on children from socially excluded families, the country mandated that all children ages 3 and older have universal access to ECE by 2015. As a first step toward this goal, the country introduced a universal free year of preprimary education beginning in 2003. As a result, 93.2% of children entering primary school in 2013 had been previously enrolled in preschool or preprimary education (UNESCO, 2015).

Another major expansion of Lithuania’s ECE system came through the introduction of the “preschooler’s basket” in 2011. Starting that year, all children younger than age 6 began receiving 4 hours of free ECE per day. This funding is provided to private and public preschools, and it contributed to the establishment of dozens of private kindergartens, up from four in 2010 to 61 in 2013. The number of children participating in ECE increased significantly as a result of this program, so much so that the available funding could not keep up and per-child funding has decreased. In addition, although Lithuania vowed to focus on enrollment of children in rural areas, participation rates in these areas were only 28.8% in 2012 as the supply of ECE slots in those regions was insufficient to meet growing demand (UNESCO, 2015).

Connecting Children to the ECE System Earlier

A challenge facing countries with high ECE participation for older children is that there is usually not a seamless connection with similar services for infants and toddlers. The systems serving these younger children tend to be more decentralized and informal, and usually do not have the robust funding, clear educational objectives, and strong quality standards that are found in preschool programs serving 4- and 5-year-olds. Most countries that provide free and universal access to preschool for older children charge fees for the child care provided to younger children, even if it is provided through government-funded systems. This tends to limit access to such child care for low-income families and for children of unemployed parents. As a result, researchers have found that many low-income children are already at a “school-readiness” disadvantage when they first enroll in preschool at age 4. In the last decade, this has prompted considerable investment in the public child care infrastructure in many European countries, with a special focus on economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, cities, and regions.

Several of the countries that already had high ECE participation among older children have instituted policy changes and created programs to integrate ECE policy from birth to the start of elementary school, improve the quality of their day care systems, and increase the rate at which children ages 0–3 participate in formal day care. These efforts often specifically target low-income families and those with weaker connections to the established ECE system, such as recent immigrants.

A key challenge for these efforts is to effectively integrate disparate delivery systems. In most countries, child care for infants and toddlers is mostly provided by local governments and private providers, whereas preschool for older children is integrated within the formal national education system. This causes challenges with the targeting of services, the transition of students, and the development and enforcement of professional standards. In its *Starting Strong* policy guidance, OECD recommends that, to provide the most effective early childhood experience, countries should “formulate and work with coordinated policy frameworks at centralized and decentralized levels” and “nominate a lead ministry that works in co-operation with other departments and sectors” (OECD, 2006, p. 47). They argue that a systematic and integrated governance system supports effective policy development that provides for the holistic development of young children, from birth until they enter school.

Among the countries included in our sample, the United Kingdom and Italy stand out for their recent efforts at integrating ECE across children’s age groups. In 1998, the **United Kingdom** created the Sure Start program, which was modeled on the Head Start

program in the United States, but this program was distinctly more universal in its targeting. (The program targeted all age-eligible children in specific geographic areas rather than applying individual family eligibility criteria.) Over time, all national early childhood education and care services in the United Kingdom were integrated under the Sure Start unit, which enabled the UK government to promote and support an integrated ECE system, as reflected in the Childcare Bill of 2005.

A 10-year strategic plan (“Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children”) accompanied and guided this legislation. It sought to bring all child care and ECE services under a single regulatory and policy framework (HM Treasury, 2004). The execution of this strategic plan has remained a priority for the UK government even though the initial Sure Start program has ended and many program responsibilities have been decentralized to locally operated Sure Start Children’s Centres.

As these centers have consolidated services for parents and children, many of them have become exemplars for the successful integration of government services, providing maternal health services, well-baby services, social services, and high-quality child care across the birth-to-age 6 range all in one location. Moreover, the devolution of Sure Start has given local programs substantial autonomy to determine the combination of services they provide and the forms in

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Promote Common Understanding Among Providers Working With Families and Children

There is high interest to integrate services in some European countries—there should be cross-sector foundational common knowledge across these professions about child development. There is growing discussion about this [in Europe]. —*Dr. Mihaela Ionescu, International Step by Step Association*

which they provide them. Most centers also include a strong parental voice in the management of the center and its component programs. (This ranges from having formal parent councils or parent constituents on governing boards to more informal PTA-type arrangements.) Ongoing evaluations of Sure Start generally found the program and its children's centers to be popular and broadly beneficial to the communities they serve (Glass, 1999; Melhuish, Belsky, & Barnes, 2010).

During the RWJF meeting, there was additional discussion of the Sure Start model and the broad enhancement of the UK ECE system in recent years more generally. In the U.S. policy context, the United Kingdom offers important policy lessons because it does not have the deep and extensive tradition of government provision of educational and social services that is prevalent in many continental European countries. Drs. Chris Pascal and Tony Bertram, who have studied the changes in the UK ECE environment, attributed the changes to a realization that the United Kingdom was falling behind its European peers in terms of children's school readiness and that a stronger and better integrated ECE system could reduce inequality in society. Implemented by a strong Labour Party government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these reforms have so far withstood political changes, a major economic crisis, devolution to local authorities, and considerable budget cuts. However, some of the children's centers have closed recently due to funding shortfalls, and there is concern that some of the gains that were made in the early 2000s are now beginning to erode.

The original prototype for prenatal-to-elementary school integration of services can still be found in **Sweden**, whose Family Centers are possibly the strongest and most universal examples of a multidisciplinary program approach, which recognizes the strong link between the successful development of children and the well-being and positive living conditions of their parents. Overall, the model integrates the provision of prenatal and maternal health care, child health care, preschool, and other social welfare services in the convenience of one building. Most of the services provided at these centers are free of charge and thus can reach families from a wide range of socioeconomic conditions. Another positive outcome resulting from this single center-based model is that the centers become spaces where parents meet and have an opportunity to form social networks. This is considered particularly important for recent immigrants.

Italy's ECE system has long been considered exemplary in its reach and institutional strength; its enrollment rate in ECE services for 3- to 5-year-olds has been very high for a long time and currently stands at 95.1%. Italy was one of the first countries to make preschool universal and free, instituting a national right to these services as early as 1971 (Lally, 2001). However, as shown in Figure 2, enrollment rates among younger children traditionally have been much lower, which partially reflects the country's relatively generous parental leave policies and partially reflects cultural traditions that valued mothers staying home with their children during the first 2 years of life (Del Boca, Locatelli, & Juri, 2004).

From the beginning, the ECE system in Italy has had a strong focus on positive child development, child socialization, and child well-being. This policy focus was guided by a distinct pedagogical philosophy that was first developed in the town of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy and that has since been adopted in all other regions in Italy and by programs in many other countries in the world, including the United States (e.g., Knauf, 2000; Scheinfeld, High, & Scheinfeld, 2008). More so than in other countries, this Italian approach to ECE

explicitly recognizes that the developmental benefits of high-quality child care extend beyond keeping the children of employed parents occupied and safe and beyond getting children academically ready for their entry into elementary school. From an early stage, the Italian government has recognized the potential of high-quality ECE to help reduce the social and economic inequality between different regions (the “North” versus the “South”). In support of this, the Italian government has invested heavily in building ECE capacity in the southern half of the country.

Until the early 2000s, all these efforts were focused primarily on 3- to 5-year-old children. At that point, researchers and policymakers began to express concern about the relative isolation and lack of socialization and stimulation of many infants and toddlers (Ghedini, 2001). Changes in family structure and living arrangements, reductions in fertility, and an increase in families with single mothers caused more children to spend their first 3 years in relative social isolation with their mothers, without siblings or regular contact with grandparents and other caregivers. These children were then found to enter preschool at a developmental disadvantage relative to children whose mothers were employed and who had been in day care from an earlier age.

Recognizing the long-term negative consequences of this disadvantage, the government refocused its ECE efforts on younger children and significantly increased funding for its public *asilo nido* system, which aims to provide universal developmentally appropriate care for 0- to 3-year-olds, regardless of their parents’ employment status. This system is built on the same “Reggio”-inspired developmental principles as the preschools for older children and is closely integrated with those preschools. However, parents do owe fees for these services until their children are 3 years old. These fees are based on parent income and also take into account other family characteristics, such as the number of children in care, single-parent status, housing expenses, and disability status (Cercarone & Colavito, 2011). The government’s investments in the *asili nido* have significantly increased ECE enrollment among 0- to 3-year-olds in Italy, although capacity constraints and parent fees have prevented the system from being truly universal. (For example, Del Boca & Pasqua [2010] warn that, even in regions and cities that receive extra funds to develop their *asilo nido* infrastructure, enrollment remains highest among the children of more well-off parents.)

During the RWJF meeting, we interviewed Dr. Susanna Mantovani, who is a nationally recognized ECE expert in Italy and who described the political underpinnings of Italy’s newly refocused ECE system. She described how Italy has a long tradition of providing universal ECE for children ages 3–6 and how the new legislation will require the regions (municipalities) to develop plans to create an integrated ECE system (based on the existing system for older children) to serve children from birth through 6 years old. The challenges that this ambitious integration project had to overcome included resistance among teachers of 3- to 6-year-olds about losing their academic focus and becoming “child care providers,” and resistance among parents about ECE becoming too “school-like” and academic for their younger children. Expectations are that the integration will happen in a stepwise fashion, with an initial focus on bringing high-quality ECE to 2- and 3-year-olds and later expanding it to younger children.

Despite the financial and capacity constraints hampering greater integration of ECE services across different age groups and developmental stages, growing evidence shows the benefits of such integration, both for the individual children moving through the system and for the quality

and sustainability of the ECE system itself. These benefits are particularly evident for children who grow up in low-income and socially isolated families.

Community Connections Between ECE Systems and the Families They Serve

When governments and agencies seek to increase ECE participation among disadvantaged families, they often find that doing so is particularly challenging among socially isolated families, immigrants, and parents who are part of ethnic and language minorities. Different cultural norms, lack of information and connections, and mistrust of government agencies can cause parents to keep their children at home or to use informal and untrained caregivers even when higher quality government-funded alternatives are available (Matthews & Ewen, 2006). To address these challenges, many European countries and local agencies are working to improve the connections between ECE agencies and providers and the communities they serve. These efforts include targeted initiatives to make the ECE workforce more representative of the communities it serves and to support parental engagement in the operation and management of local ECE systems.

The importance of building and maintaining strong community relationships was underscored by a 2007 study of participation in Sure Start programs in the **United Kingdom**, which documented the benefits of investing time and effort in building effective communication networks between program staff and local parents (Avis, Bullman, & Leighton, 2007). Several countries we studied (e.g., Belgium, New Zealand, Norway, and Sweden) explicitly mandate that service providers develop plans to increase and support parental engagement.

In **the Netherlands**, parental engagement is formalized and supported through BOink (the “Belangenvereniging van ouders in de kinderopvang en peuterspeelzalen”), a national parents’ union that represents and advocates for parents at the local and national levels and ensures that the interests and concerns of different groups of parents are heard. Several stakeholders credit BOink with helping to keep child care affordable in tough economic times and with pushing providers to extend their service hours to accommodate more flexible work schedules for parents.

Although active parent and community engagement can help ECE systems and providers connect with underserved groups, an even more direct way to connect with the community is to actively hire community members to join the staff of ECE agencies and providers. Researchers in **the Netherlands** found that programs that recruited and trained staff from minority backgrounds were more effective in engaging ethnic and language-minority children and parents (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2013). Researchers participating in the Second Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years took this staffing issue another step further, recommending that hiring for diversity also should include hiring staff from low-income backgrounds who would be better able to understand the life circumstances and related challenges of low-income parents and their children. The more parents recognize these staff as “one of us,” the more likely they are to use and value the recommendations, support, and services that are provided to them.

A specific example of this approach, focused directly on outreach to and support of minority and vulnerable families, is the use of family supporters (“gezinsondersteuners”) by the “Kind & Gezin” (Child and Family) Department in Flanders (**Belgium**). Kind & Gezin is a Flemish

governmental agency with responsibility for young children and families. Its main responsibility is to implement government policy for young children and families with young children, in particular in the fields of preventive care, child care services, family support, diversity, and children's rights. Its family supporters are paid staff members recruited from local communities who provide support and advice to new parents or parents who recently immigrated to Belgium. A significant part of their work is to connect those parents to other Kind & Gezin services, including referrals to ECE, health care services, and social workers. Thus, in addition to helping connect ECE providers to local communities, these family supporters also embody the integrated nature of the services provided by this agency. Moreover, since 2014, Flanders has had legislation on preventive family support, which stresses collaboration between prenatal care, infant consultation offices, maternal health care, parent support, and other services.

During the RWJF meeting, we engaged in a discussion of workforce issues with Liana Ghent and Mihaela Ionescu of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA). They underscored the association's focus on supporting and empowering the ECE workforce, which in Europe, as in the United States, often feels undervalued and underpaid. Providers and government agencies must find a balance between demanding high staff qualifications and encouraging community representation. This requires ongoing mentoring and training of staff, which can be reinforced with apprenticeship models for which candidates are recruited locally. Such models help enhance diversity and community representation in the ECE workforce.

Some progress has been made in regard to workforce issues. For example, as a result of recent studies on the ECE workforce and professional development, **Belgium** passed a new law in 2014 that stated that every child care professional has the right to receive pedagogical mentoring. However, ECE stakeholders find it challenging to increase government investment in ongoing professional development for ECE providers, even in European countries with robust ECE systems and high participation rates. In addition to Liana Ghent and Mihaela Ionescu, other speakers at the meeting confirmed that increasing the quality and compensation levels of ECE provider staff remains as much of a challenge in European ECE systems as it is in the United States.

Targeted ECE to Support the Integration of Immigrants and Address Inequality in Society

So far, most of the examples presented in this report have focused on policies and services that are universal; that is, they apply to all parents and children in a country or a particular geographic community. Such universality has important advantages. Most importantly, as we discussed at the beginning of this report, it creates and reinforces the expectation that every child has access to high-quality ECE. Also, it avoids the political challenge of explicitly favoring one group over another. It minimizes the bureaucratic challenge of identifying, targeting, recruiting, and keeping track of a particular subgroup of parents and children. Nevertheless, many countries we studied identify specific groups of disadvantaged or socially disconnected families for participation in ECE in an effort to break the cycle of disadvantage and dependence and to facilitate the integration of immigrants and language-minority families into society.

In most of the cases we identified and discussed with our informants, the provision of ECE services to specially targeted populations did not involve ECE services that were specially designed or operated for these targeted children. Instead, they were usually existing ECE services that were either provided at no cost or to which the targeted children were given preferential access.

A good example of this approach is the “Tinkelbel” procedure, which was established in the city of Ghent (**Belgium**) to ensure the equitable enrollment of children from vulnerable groups in public child care centers. Today, in large Flemish cities such as Ghent, all parents wishing to enroll their child in child care must contact a central office, which assigns a place to children according to specific social criteria. In so doing, the Tinkelbel procedure has replaced the usual assignment procedures, such as “first come, first served” or “priority to working families,” which favored higher educated, two-income families. Tinkelbel takes into account specific priority criteria that favor single mothers, parents who speak a language other than Dutch or French, parents with low incomes, and parents in crisis situations. As a result, the procedure ensures that the population of the municipal child care centers is a reflection of the actual population of the cities in which it is used. In situations where there is excess demand for high-quality, convenient, or low-cost child care, procedures such as these ensure that “universal” services do not reinforce existing inequality and that the segregation of children by socioeconomic background is minimized.

Sometimes, the targeting of services involves adding special services to existing ECE facilities to facilitate the integration and success of immigrants and other groups. For example, in **Germany**, the federal government provides dedicated grants to the states (Länder) to supplement ECE providers with additional supports to improve the language skills of immigrant children (Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). As indicated, **Sweden** offers similar services to its immigrant population and waives all parent fees for the 14% of ECE participants who qualify for special language assistance because they do not speak Swedish at home (OECD, 2006). Countries such as Italy, the United Kingdom, and Ireland provide special outreach to parents who are Roma (or who self-identify as gypsies or travelers). Integrating Roma children into the regular education system is a major priority in all of these countries and requires significant outreach and continued support.

During the meeting, Dr. Jan Peeters raised the challenge of continuity in these targeted services. The process of actively integrating low-income and immigrant children into the existing high-

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Integrate Refugee Children Into Existing Services

In **Belgium**, the policy is not to create separate programs for refugee children, but to integrate them into regular services. Refugees have full access to all services. Although agencies sometimes must provide services within refugee camps, they avoid this wherever possible. – *Dr. Jan Peeters, Centre for Innovation in the Early Years*

The International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is a membership-based organization that advocates for equitable early childhood services for all children and for the professionals who take care of and educate these children. ISSA started working on providing services for children in refugee camps—yet they consider these as an emergency response, rather than a long term solution. – *Liana Ghent, ISSA*

quality ECE system often breaks down once the children transition into elementary school, which often tends to still be segregated by income and immigrant background. Similarly, special supports delivered to low-income families as part of children's ECE experience disappear or are interrupted at the start of elementary school. This reduces the long-term benefit of these policies and services.

Conclusions

In summary, our initial scan of policies and program models that seem to be associated with high rates of ECE engagement among low-income families in a variety of European countries has identified the following factors as being particularly important:

1. Engaging parents and communities as partners in the ECE system
2. Making ECE part of a continuous birth-to-school system
3. Ensuring adequate and stable funding (making ECE a budget priority)
4. Providing preferential access for high-priority groups to high-quality ECE within the context of universal provision of services

In the United States, most of these strategies are being employed in some shape or form. For example, commitment to family engagement in ECE is strong in many state- and federally funded programs. The Head Start Performance Standards include a range of standards related to supporting parents and families and engaging them as partners in their children's development. The Office of Head Start offers tools and resources to promote family engagement by staff (e.g., the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework) and Head Start staff have access to a variety of resources and training to support them in this area.

Integration of infant/toddler and preschool-age systems also is moving forward in a variety of forms in the United States. Many states have developed birth to five learning standards as well as standards aligned with the K–12 system. Through statewide Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs), many states are reinforcing these standards throughout their ECE systems. Other related efforts, such as current initiatives in North Carolina and Pennsylvania, include the development of integrated data systems that link data across early childhood services and/or with the K–12 system. At the same time, efforts to develop birth-to-school ECE systems in U.S. states and communities face unique institutional challenges, such as disconnected and unstable funding streams, categorical program eligibility requirements, and severe shortages of available slots in high-quality subsidized ECE programs. Moreover, the lack of universal access to high-quality ECE may cause many parents to not even consider such programs, especially for their younger children.

At the state level, efforts to ensure adequate and stable funding for early childhood services continue. Major ECE funding and program enhancements have occurred in a number of states in recent years, including California, Michigan, Oregon, and Washington (Ounce of Prevention, 2015); however, there remains significant variation across states in political and financial support for early childhood services. In an environment of scarce government resources, more attention is being focused on new and creative strategies, such as Pay for Success (PFS). In this financial model, private or philanthropic funding is initially used to expand ECE or related services. If the funded programs achieve outcomes that make them cost effective, government can then pay off

the investors and take over the service. If a PFS-funded program does not achieve its expected outcomes, the investors lose their investment and the program is abandoned. Currently, there is a growing number of PFS initiatives across the United States, most of which are focused on issues such as homelessness, substance abuse, child welfare, and recidivism of released prisoners. The state of Utah and the city of Chicago are the first to initiate PFS projects to expand ECE options in their communities.

The provision of *universal* high-quality ECE in the United States—a hallmark of many countries in Europe—is complicated by the tension between state and federal policy in this area. Unlike most European countries, which have national systems, governance and funding of ECE is managed at the state and local levels in the United States. Although this precludes the inherent stability of a federally funded system, it does allow for innovative and generous initiatives at the state and local levels. For example, a number of large and growing cities have found the resources to fund and implement universal preschool programs, such as those in New York City, Boston, and San Francisco.

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Leverage Local Efforts to Promote Systemwide Change

In the United Kingdom, the government identified “trailblazers,” which received expanded funding from the government to promote high-quality services, through communication, training, and dissemination efforts. These centers were diverse in context and geography and became drivers for change. After evaluation of their work, centers expanded significantly across the country. *“You have to embed it in the culture so that the local community embraces and fights for it.” – Dr. Chris Pascal, Centre for Research in Early Childhood, United Kingdom*

Lessons From a U.S. Perspective—Implementing Pre-K for All in New York City

In January of 2014, Mayor de Blasio’s administration released its ambitious plan to implement universal pre-kindergarten—to provide every four-year-old in New York City access to free, full-day, high-quality pre-K by September 2015. At that time, only 19,000 four-year-olds were enrolled in full-day pre-K. Today, over 70,000 four-year-olds are enrolled across the city. As part of our meeting at RWJF, we invited our European guests to visit New York City’s Pre-K for All program and compare its design and features with the universal ECE programs in their countries.

The city’s Universal Pre-Kindergarten Planning and Implementation Task Force was formed as Mayor de Blasio took office to start designing a sustainable, high-quality full-day pre-K model for New York City. The task force, largely composed of early childhood experts, collaborated with the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) to identify and replicate the core features of high-quality pre-K models that produce positive learning outcomes. With funding secured in April of 2014, the City began quickly preparing for the 2014–2015 school year. To implement the expansion within such an ambitious timeframe required extensive interagency coordination. NYCDOE served as the lead agency for the initiative in collaboration with the Deputy Mayor for Strategic Policy Initiatives.

The expansion focused on simultaneously increasing access and building quality. From the beginning, NYCDOE used a rigorous application process to decide which providers became Pre-K for All programs. In addition, in the first year, NYCDOE increased the number of program-facing support staff, including instructional coordinators, social workers, and operation analysts. Teachers attended additional training in the summer as well as during the school year. In the following year, the NYCDOE released the Pre-K for All Program Quality Standards (PQS), which are a comprehensive set of shared expectations for high-quality pre-K programs. They describe the key practices of family engagement, rigorous and developmentally appropriate instruction, professional collaborations, and leadership that support children in gaining the knowledge and skills outlined in the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core (PKFCC). Aligned to the NYCDOE’s vision for school improvement across the pre-K to 12 continuum and the Framework for Great Schools, the Pre-K for All Quality Standards established a shared set of expectations for all pre-K programs.

Pre-K for All programs operate in multiple setting types—district schools, Pre-K Centers,¹⁶ community-based providers (“New York City Early Education Centers,” or NYCEECs), and charter schools. The NYCDOE provides extensive support, oversight, and training to programs to ensure that the City’s four-year-olds receive a high-quality education and families are engaged as partners from the beginning. Pre-K students receive a full day of instruction—6 hours and 20 minutes, with 180 days of education. The NYCDOE’s model supports all pre-K programs with differentiated support at both the classroom and program level that focuses on implementing research-based instructional and family engagement practices, including free and targeted professional learning for lead teachers, assistant teachers, and paraprofessionals; on-site support for leaders and teachers; and guidance from instructional coordinators and social workers.

To build a single, high-quality system, the NYCDOE’s expansion efforts included working with district schools to convert half-day to full-day seats; releasing 14 requests for proposals (RFPs), over the course of two years, to identify community-based organizations, known as New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEECs), to partner with to provide high-quality pre-K; and introducing NYCDOE-run Pre-K Centers in 17 high-demand districts to exclusively serve pre-K students. These changes built on the existing mixed-delivery model for pre-K that offers NYC families diverse, high-quality options to meet their needs.

At the same time, the City launched an unprecedented grassroots campaign to recruit and enroll families, establishing an Outreach Team of dedicated pre-K enrollment specialists to call families and canvas local communities. The NYCDOE worked across City agencies to create a database of every family with a four-year-old in New York City, and hired a team of specialists—speaking multiple languages—to blanket the City with a broad outreach campaign, connect with community groups to run neighborhood sign-up events, and contact families one on one to guide them through the process of applying. These efforts resulted in a pre-K population that is demographically representative of the kindergarten population in New York City (a goal that is similar to the objective achieved by the Tinkelbel program in Ghent that we referenced earlier).

¹⁶ Pre-K Centers are pre-K programs operated by the NYCDOE that exclusively serve pre-K students. Each Pre-K Center offers free, full-day, high-quality pre-K, and is held to the same high-quality standards as all Pre-K for All programs.

Another key component of the initiative's success was its ability to recruit and retain highly qualified pre-K teachers in all settings. Pre-K lead teachers in NYCEECs must have a bachelor's degree, and must be either certified or on a study plan for full certification. All district schools and Pre-K Center teachers must be certified upon hire. The Pre-K for All teacher recruitment campaign, known as Teach NYC Pre-K, actively partnered with universities to target early childhood educators, hosted panels and hiring fairs to get the word out, and invested in recruitment tools to support NYCEECs in their hiring. Some universities (e.g., CUNY, NYU) created special programs in which students received certification tuition support.

To attract and retain top talent, the NYCDOE also worked to increase pay for pre-K teachers across the unified system. In 2014, the NYCDOE enacted changes that allowed interested NYCEECs to increase annual pay for lead teachers by opting into higher salary levels for certified teachers. As a result of these changes, if a program opts to participate, a lead teacher at that NYCEEC who has a bachelor's degree and initial certification would be funded at \$44,000 by Pre-K for All, and a lead teacher with a master's degree and initial certification would be funded at \$50,000 by Pre-K for All. In addition, full-day NYCEECs have the opportunity to opt in to the Pre-K for All Lead Teacher Incentive Program, to provide their lead teachers with additional compensation for choosing employment as a lead teacher at a NYCEEC or choosing to remain at a NYCEEC.

The NYCDOE consistently measures quality through pre-K program assessments. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale—Revised (ECERS-R) are nationally recognized tools for measuring quality connected with student outcomes and are aligned to many of the Pre-K Program Quality Standards. NYCDOE reports that initial assessment data put NYC's programs on par with nationally recognized pre-K programs that are at the same point in their expansion. Additionally, independent research shows high family satisfaction with NYC Pre-K for All programs. Overall, 92 percent of families surveyed rated their program as excellent or good, and 83 percent of families said their child learned "a lot" in pre-K (Westat, 2016).

The Pre-K for All initiative is the signature education initiative of Mayor de Blasio's administration. Because of this, our U.K. visitors expressed concern that the program would disappear or lose funding once de Blasio's term in office ends (as was the case to some extent with Sure Start, which lost fiscal support in the U.K. with the end of the Labour administration in 2010). The Pre-K for All team has built a strong constituency for its initiative by meeting demand and ensuring high-quality options citywide. The team has also worked hard to bring opinion leaders (e.g., press, elected officials) along as the initiative has taken shape to solidify community buy-in. Other U.S. cities are pursuing similar pre-K initiatives, sparking a national dialogue about increasing access to high-quality early education for all children. Leading this effort, New York City recently hosted a forum for policymakers from 12 municipal governments across the country to share lessons learned from the City's Pre-K for All expansion and create a nationwide network of pre-K leaders to foster collaboration.

Although the lessons from Europe, with its well-financed, established ECE systems, may seem difficult to replicate in the United States, the work occurring in places such as New York City suggests that a combination of political will, a strong tax base, and a well-managed program rollout

can quickly scale up a selective and fragmented ECE program infrastructure into a universal or near-universal preschool program. It has not yet been established whether those programs can then be successfully expanded to serve younger ages, whether they can be sustained during economic downturns, or whether they will produce sustained benefits for children over time. However, international experience strongly suggests that promoting and developing universal ECE programs is the best way to reach vulnerable families with these programs.

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Appendix. Interview Protocol

Interviewer _____ Interviewee _____

Date/Time _____

Introduction

My name is _____, and I work for American Institutes for Research (AIR). We've been contracted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a foundation focused on helping communities provide children with the best foundation for a healthy, productive life.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is interested in learning from other countries about their early care and education (ECE) systems, with a focus on strategies that have been used to improve access to ECE for low-income, vulnerable children and their families. The goal of this exploratory study is to determine if these strategies could be applicable to the ECE system in the United States.

As part of this work, we are interviewing key stakeholders such as yourself. We are interested in learning more about your work in the early childhood field to gain a better understanding of challenges facing [insert region, country] related to access to high-quality ECE and how they have been addressed.

I want to reassure you that your *responses to this interview will be used only for the purpose of this project*. Though your name will be shared with the foundation, if there is information that you do not want shared directly in any reporting, please let me know. This interview is completely voluntary and you may skip any question you do not want to answer or end the conversation at any time, if needed, without penalty.

This interview should take no longer than 1 hour.

Do you have any questions about the study?

I plan to audiorecord this session, solely for our note-taking purposes. Only research staff will use the audiorecording, and we'll destroy it when the project is done. Is that okay with you?

Background and Role

1. I'd like to start by asking you to tell me a bit about yourself. Could you describe your current role at [insert]?

ECE Landscape

2. In this project, we are interested in the entire early care and education system; that is, programs serving older children—those 4 years old to school age—and services for very young children, infants, and toddlers. Throughout this interview, I will be asking questions about both systems.
 - a. Based on our research, we have learned that [insert country/region] has a [insert one to two sentences describing the preschool-age ECE system]. Would you say this is accurate? Can you talk more about the general structure of the system?
 - b. We also have read that [insert country/region] has a [insert one to two sentences describing the infant/toddler system]. Would you say this is accurate? Can you talk more about the general structure of the system?
3. Can you describe the governance system for the ECE system in [insert region/country]? [Note: By governance system, we are referring to the agency that provides funding, monitoring, and supports to ECE programs.] Probe: Centralized at the federal level? Decentralized to the regional level?
 - a. What does the governance system look like for services to infants and toddlers?
4. In our review of available resources, we have learned that the ECE system is funded through [insert one to two sentences about the funding structure]. Is this accurate?
 - a. Have there been any significant changes to how the ECE system has been funded in the recent past? Significant increases or decreases in the level of funding? What does the funding system look like for services to infants and toddlers?
5. To what extent does [country/region] provide subsidies to low-income families to enable them to access ECE services for their children? Does that vary for infants and toddlers versus older children?
6. What is the role of family child care [reference country-specific term for family child care] in [country/region]? To what extent is family child care used? Is it utilized by specific populations of children and families? If so, which ones?
7. How do the [country/region's] parental leave policies impact the availability of ECE services, if at all?
8. Can you describe any recent significant legislation or policy reforms that have made an impact on the ECE system? In particular, have there been any legislation or reforms that have been designed to improve access to ECE services?

9. In your opinion, what is the public support for ECE? Does it differ for infant and toddler services versus preschool-age children?

Access to ECE

10. We reviewed available data and learned that the percentage of 4-year-old children enrolled in some type of ECE program in [country] has increased from about X to X. Do you have any thoughts as to what factors contributed to this increase?
- a. Note: Insert additional questions based on data available for the country, including children birth to age 3.
11. [*Note: Reference to any earlier discussion of policy changes impacting access in Question #X*] We are specifically interested in efforts to improve access to ECE for low-income, at-risk children and families in [insert country/region]. From your perspective, are there groups of underserved children in regard to ECE? Can you describe these populations?
12. What challenges does [insert country/region] face in connecting these populations to ECE?
13. What efforts, if any, have been used in the past, or currently, to improve access to ECE for these populations?
14. Are efforts to enroll young children in ECE services universal or targeted to specific groups? Can you describe these efforts?
15. To what extent are efforts to connect low-income, minority families to ECE conducted at a systematic level, meaning through nationwide policies?
16. Are there efforts that happen at a regional or local level to engage specific populations of children and families to increase participation in ECE?
17. Can you provide any specific or concrete examples of programs that have worked to engage specific populations of “hard-to-reach” families? Low-income, minority families? [*Note: If any of these examples appears worthy of a follow-up interview, ask for key contact information for an individual who can speak to these programs.*]

Quality

18. We also are interested in efforts to improve the quality of ECE. Broadly speaking, how does [country/region] define and measure quality of early learning and education programs?
19. Are there nationwide efforts intended to improve the quality of ECE services? If so, please describe.
20. Are there local or regional efforts to improve the quality of ECE services? If so, please describe.

21. Are there training, technical assistance, or other organizations that are dedicated to supporting the ECE field in regard to workforce development or other quality improvement efforts?
22. We are interested in how other countries support children’s social and emotional development through their ECE services, meaning how ECE programs help children understand and manage their feelings, express themselves, develop empathy, and establish and maintain relationships with others.
 - a. To what extent is children’s social/emotional development a focus in the ECE system?
 - b. Is this a topic of any ongoing discussion among key stakeholders in the ECE system?
 - c. To what extent are mental health services integrated with ECE programs? For example, if a child in a classroom is exhibiting behavior problems, how does a teacher respond? If a child exhibits more serious mental health issues, such as depression, what supports, if any, are available?
23. How do ECE providers partner with families? How would you characterize family engagement in ECE programs in [country/region]? (Probe: Are staff trained to partner with families? Are families included in decisions regarding their child? Are parents welcome to drop in and/or volunteer at the program?)

Conclusion

24. What is the next challenge or set of challenges that [country/region] is trying to address now in regard to its ECE system? First, for services for children 4 years of age to compulsory school age?
25. Are there any other “lessons learned” that you have not mentioned that you think would be important for the United States to consider in its work to improve access to high-quality ECE for low-income, minority families?
26. Is there any question I should have asked you, but did not?
27. Are there other individuals you think would be good for us to speak with?

Phone interviewees (with subsequent discussions while at the Transatlantic Forum):

- Ankie Vanderckhole, Centre for Innovation in the Early Years (Belgium)
- Liana Ghent, International Step by Step Association (the Netherlands)
- Ciairin de Buis, Start Strong (Ireland)
- Viktoria Bolla, European Commission

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