

**PRESCHOOL  
RESEARCH  
PROJECT**  
2018 FINAL REPORT



IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) has been engaged in culturally specific and culturally responsive early learning programming over the last 25 years. In response to an ongoing voice from the community expressing a need for a culturally specific preschool meeting the multicultural needs of the increasingly diverse immigrant and refugee families living in Portland, IRCO proposed a community-driven study to assess the needs and priorities of immigrant and refugee families, and define if a gap existed in accessing early learning in a preschool environment that was responsive to their cultural and linguistic diversity.

IRCO was awarded a grant by Social Venture Partners (SVP) to study this need and to gather information about best practices in local and national model programs serving immigrant and refugee children and families. SVP funding as well as the expertise and efforts of several partners/volunteers supported IRCO to produce one of the first local assessments that demonstrates the need for preschool services tailored to the needs of the growing number of local immigrant and refugee families. Focus groups asked nine immigrant and refugee communities about their barriers, needs and community priorities. Communities told us that they faced many barriers such as navigating available resources because of cultural and

language barriers; lack of affordable preschool opportunities and teachers who speak their languages and understand their cultures; learning environments that do not teach their children about their country of origin; and unfamiliar systems and educational expectations in the U.S.

Immigrant and refugee families engaging through these groups clearly voiced a need for a culturally specific preschool that is staffed and organized by communities representing the families they serve and that honors and incorporates their communities' languages, life experiences, religious beliefs, and their cultural and traditional values.

*Immigrant and Refugee Community Priorities include:*

- representation from each community within the preschool classrooms;
- opportunities to learn and practice many languages in addition to English;
- cultural sharing of stories, traditions, meals, and celebrations;
- education on expectations for kindergarten;
- bilingual bicultural staff who have the capacity to understand/support families so they could be actively engaged in preparing their children to succeed;
- dual-generation programming so that adult family members could also participate in learning;
- opportunities for training to work and volunteer in the preschool;
- flexible schedules including half and full day classes and transportation assistance;
- no use of income-based restrictions.

Recommendations for developing this preschool were derived from the information collected from model programs serving immigrant and refugee families in the Portland area and nationally (including via a survey and interviews), as well as the needs and priorities voiced by communities who participated in the focus groups.

*Key Recommendations include the following:*

- Develop targeted outreach to engage isolated immigrant and refugee families including parents with disabilities.

- Include families in the development of bilingual curriculum for each community that incorporates their cultural stories, traditions, and religious values.
- Develop introductory teaching methods for engaging parents from oral tradition communities.
- Staff each of the classrooms or preschool groups with representatives from communities served.
- Build support through diverse funding sources and learn from other culturally specific and responsive preschools.
- Start small and proceed slowly to allow for adjustments as the program grows.
- Develop metrics of success and engage community members to regularly evaluate program.
- Determine the best location for a preschool that best meets the developmental, educational, employment, and transportation needs of families and children including at an IRCO facility or co-located at local elementary schools.



## INTRODUCTION



In 2017, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) and Social Venture Partners Portland (SVP) partnered to determine how to best support the needs of immigrant preschool children and their families in a way that fosters understanding, compassion and communication between Oregon's established communities and its newest arrivals. This joint work reflected both organizations' missions and strategic focus on early learning and universal preschool.

### *About IRCO*

IRCO's mission is to promote the integration of refugees, immigrants and the community at large into a self-sufficient, healthy and inclusive multi-ethnic society. IRCO supports immigrants, refugees and mainstream community members to become self-sufficient. It strives in its programming, outreach and education to foster understanding, compassion and communication between Oregon's established communities and newest arrivals. IRCO is committed to early learning and in helping children to be ready for kindergarten, increasing their potential to excel in third grade reading/math and to graduate from high school. IRCO developed the first culturally specific early learning programming for Asian Pacific Islanders in 1992, and has expanded this programming to numerous immigrant and refugee families (e.g., African, Slavic, Middle Eastern) living in the tri-county area surrounding Portland

(predominantly Multnomah County but more recently Washington and Clackamas counties) including Parent Child Development Services, Healthy Families, Kindergarten Transition, and Parenting Education. Despite this rich programming, IRCO noted that young immigrant and refugee children continue to lack access to culturally specific preschools. In response to a community voice advocating for these services, IRCO joined Oregon's Preschool Promise Initiative and partnered with Mt. Hood Community College in 2016 to pilot a school-based culturally specific Burmese Classroom in Portland.

### *About Social Venture Partners Portland*

SVP engages in venture philanthropy to help solve community problems. They partner across sectors and industries to support sustainable, community-driven solutions, and connect people and organizations striving to change the world together. SVP's current ten-year goal is to ensure that all children in the Portland metropolitan area are ready for kindergarten, prepared with the foundation for learning and life success. SVP is focused on kids who are called "at risk", but are full of promise. They invest in human, social and financial capital in organizations and collaborations to build capacity and catalyze system innovation. SVP's capacity-building investments support social sector leadership with the vision and desire to leverage SVP's resources to (1) strengthen operational capacity, efficiencies and sustainability; (2) make significantly broader or deeper impact on early childhood outcomes; and (3) systematically coordinate within the early childhood sector

Based upon these intersecting organizational goals and directions, SVP approved and funded an IRCO proposal to produce a study that would help determine the needs for culturally responsive and culturally specific preschools targeting immigrant and refugee children and their families, the dimensions of the service gap for these families, research other best practices (nationally and locally), and recommend a service model that could fill in the research-determined gap. This was the first local assessment by IRCO on the need for preschool services for the increasing numbers of immigrant and refugee preschool children. **All data gathered through this process and included in this report has been shared in aggregate and organizations have been de-identified, per the "collection and use of data" privacy statement provided to all organizations who provided information.**



## METHODOLOGY

As a first step in our collaborative research project, we undertook both a web-based environmental scan and a research literature review to collect information about best practices and most effective models for preschool education with a special focus on immigrant and refugee populations who reflect the populations served by IRCO. Findings from the preliminary research were then used to inform the questions and development of protocols for data collection through interviews, written inquiries (see protocols and questions in Appendix) and focus groups.

Focus group questions were reviewed by the direct service staff (who represent the communities) for cultural appropriateness and all recommendations were incorporated into the protocol prior to conducting the focus groups. IRCO research and evaluation staff conducted focus groups with nine communities served by previous IRCO programs. Focus groups typically lasted 40-60 minutes and were held at several IRCO locations (Africa House, Asian Family Center and IRCO Main). Direct service staff (e.g. parent educators, community health workers, community education workers, etc.) recruited family members, sometimes transported them to the focus group location and then acted as interpreters during the focus groups. Focus group were audio recorded only if everyone in the group gave permission. Transcriptions from audio recordings and notes (from groups who would not permit audio recording) of all focus groups were coded for themes and analyzed for the final report.

Three SVP investigative partners conducted interviews with twelve exemplary preschool programs, both national and local, to uncover best practices in early childhood education specific to immigrant and refugee children. A summary of findings from the interviews and surveys highlights the best practices and cites examples that were provided in the course of the interview process. Interviews and written responses to questions about best practices from twelve program sources were collected and analyzed by the SVP partners.

## REVIEW OF BEST PRACTICES



### *Section I: Research Literature*

Given the evidence that kindergarten readiness and early childhood achievement lead to later success in school<sup>1 2</sup> and evidence that some newcomer children risk being underprepared for transitioning to kindergarten,<sup>3</sup> it is vital for immigrant and refugee children to have access to culturally specific and responsive early childhood education opportunities that improve long-term educational success. Developing culturally specific and responsive early childhood education requires an understanding of life experiences of immigrants and refugees pre- and post-arrival in the U.S.

Community based organizations (CBOs) bring rich knowledge and experience of the communities/cultures they serve and often employ. An Urban Institute study<sup>4</sup> found that potential collaborations between an Illinois State preschool initiative and CBOs would provide better access to preschool and dual-generation opportunities for family adult members from immigrant and refugee communities. In other cities and countries, CBOs have contributed cultural wisdom for early childhood education programming resulting in successful and culturally responsive collaborations with government funded programs (e.g. Early Head Start or Minnesota State Family Friends and Neighbors).<sup>5 6</sup> Such collaborations have increased access

and seen dramatic increases in participation of newcomer communities. These collaborations commonly offered dual generation programming like English as a second language (ESL) for employment, flexible childcare services (to accommodate work schedules), staff jobs for community members, and social services that served the entire family.

For some immigrant and refugee communities religious and cultural beliefs impact their views of education for their children and the role of parents/family members in the education of their children. Successful early childhood education efforts with immigrant and refugee communities have integrated life experiences; religious beliefs, cultural and traditional values (including language); staff representative of the communities being served and historical context considerations in culturally specific and responsive programs.

Since literacy development reflects an important developmental domain in a recommended preschool curriculum, research in bilingual literacy programs reveals important insights for refugees and immigrants. In high quality bilingual literacy programs the concept of additive bilingualism is characterized as beneficial in maintaining one's first or home language while acquiring a second or additional languages<sup>7 8</sup> as opposed to deductive bilingual education where one language is lost due to the devaluing of the culture it represents. A preschool bilingual literacy and dual-generation program with Pakistani-origin families<sup>9</sup> demonstrated that not only could a bilingual approach significantly increase children's (and parents/family members) literacy in both languages, involving family members (i.e. dual-generation) improved their confidence in their English skills and increased their ability to contribute in the skill building of their children. Moreover self-efficacy and identification as learners was increased for parents and children in another study with multiple immigrant communities (Latino, South Asian, and Chinese). Program staff in several bilingual literacy programs<sup>10</sup> increased their own comfort level of working in languages other than English and learned how literacy was related to religious and cultural practices contributing to the cultural responsiveness of the program overall.

Additional considerations for culturally specific and responsive programming comes from the research to explore the validity of developmental screening tools such as the Ages and

Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) with newcomers.<sup>11</sup> Researchers found that assessments were impacted by various factors such as:

- access to learning materials in refugee camps,
- religious beliefs about the importance of young children to read and hold specific texts before other reading materials,
- the prominence of oral over written learning, valuing communal interdependence in contrast to independence (common in Western cultures), and
- traditional relationships between children and adults.



## *Section II: Landscape: Early Childhood Education in the Portland Metro Area and Beyond*

A short summary of programs and findings from the web-based environmental scan are included in this section. The complete environmental scan report from our SVP partners is available upon request.

### **Subsidized Preschool Programs**

Preschool is subsidized in the Portland Metropolitan Area (the focus area of this study and the home of the majority of Oregon’s immigrant and refugee families) by a variety of federal and state programs. To qualify for state or federal funding, programs must hold a quality rating of 3 (working toward a 4), 4, or 5 under the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).

Head Start and Oregon Prekindergarten: Federal subsidies through Head Start are available for programs serving families below 100% poverty. In Multnomah County, Mt. Hood Community College, Portland Public Schools and Albina operate Head Start and Early Head Start programs which are free for low income children. Each serves some refugee and immigrant children but not in proportion to community size and need. In addition, Oregon operates a state-funded program, Oregon Pre-Kindergarten (OPK), to complement and work side-by-side with the federal Head Start program.<sup>12</sup> In the Portland Metropolitan area OPK-funded projects



are in Portland, Clackamas, Milwaukie, and Hillsboro, all areas where refugee and immigrant families reside but only the Hillsboro and Albina Head Start program websites specifically provide information in Spanish.

Preschool Promise: The state of Oregon passed a bill in 2015 that created funding for a two-year investment in early childhood education to determine if more robust funding could provide better learning outcomes for children. In the Metro area, Preschool Promise funding has been allocated to a collaborative “hub” comprised of the NW Regional Early Learning Hub, Early Learning Multnomah, Clackamas Early Learning Hub, and Early Learning Washington.<sup>13</sup>

In Multnomah County, there is a significant waiting list for the subsidized Head Start and OPK programs. According to recent data, of the 13,000 children in Multnomah County age 3-5, 9,000 are in poverty, considered a person of color, or do not have English as their first language. There are 2,200 participating in Head Start, 200 participating in Preschool Promise, some in other state/city programs and some in private programs. However, there is a significant gap, and therefore, a waiting list and many refugee and immigrant families are not even aware this list exists nor do they have the knowledge on where to apply.



### **Eco-mapping Preschool Access & Quality**

As part of the Preschool Success Project, a joint project of SVP and Early Learning Multnomah, eco-mapping has been accomplished to show where preschool centers are located and where the seats are needed. For example, which neighborhoods are high poverty and have high numbers of daycare/preschool seats? Which neighborhoods are high poverty and have low numbers of daycare/preschool seats? This project mapped these factors at the neighborhood level, but the data collection was not done to the rigor necessary for broad publication. There is a rigorous data collection process underway at the state level, conducted by OSU. This data will include geo-mapping all the way down to the city block. A launch of this website was planned for August or September 2017.

### **Further exploration: Preschool Access & Quality**

Initial searches for preschools serving immigrant and refugee families returned a limited number of possibilities. We identified 11 programs nationally and 10 programs locally which could serve as models of early childhood education programs serving immigrant and refugee children. We attempted to contact all of these programs, and conducted interviews with 3 national and 9 local programs. We collected information about whether programs offered culturally responsive, culturally specific and multicultural approaches through surveys and interviews.

## FINDINGS



### *Section I: Focus Groups*

We conducted nine focus groups (one per each of nine broadly defined cultural communities) with 90 total participants from the following communities: Nepali Bhutanese, Burmese, Congolese and Somali, Iraqi, Latino, Pacific Islanders (Chuukese and Tongan), Slavic, Somali (alone) and Vietnamese. An important point to remember is that although we worked with staff from communities listed above, participants were not homogenous (i.e. some of these broadly defined groups included participants from different ethnic and linguistic groups). Some important limitations of the focus group data to note were that contributions from the Somali and Latino communities required special handling. First, the Somali presence in the joint Congolese and Somali focus group was very small (only 3 adults) and the group voiced a desire to attend a Somali specific focus group so they would feel more comfortable voicing opinions. At their request, we conducted a second group where only Somali community were invited. For the sake of this report when referencing Somali contributions, we will focus on discussions from the second Somali specific focus group.

Second, unfortunately poor attendance in the Latino focus group (only 2 participants) made the findings from that focus group ungeneralizable and representative of only those



present. Findings from the Latino focus group will not be included in the mentions of findings across groups but referenced sparingly with notations.

Another important point to remember is that although we worked with staff from communities listed above, participants who attended the focus groups were never as clearly defined as the list implied. For instance in the Burmese focus group we quickly learned that six different groups with three different languages were represented (which kept our one Burmese multilingual staff very busy). Similarly the Slavic focus group included families from multiple Russian-speaking countries.

Within each group there was a level of heterogeneity as participants brought a diversity of opinions reflecting differences in life experiences, traditions, ceremonies, religion, and languages prior to arrival in the U.S., while at the same time echoing very similar barriers and challenges for all newcomers.

### Excitement and Challenges for Newcomers

Focus group participants expressed high praise for the services currently provided by their respective IRCO staff (parent educators, CHWs or advocates) in developmental assessments, parent education, help with school enrollment for children, providing interpretation and translation, accompanying family to parent-teacher meetings and generally acting as cultural brokers when newcomer families interacted with U.S. systems (i.e. health, education, justice , etc.) representatives. Focus group participants were very excited about the prospect of a new preschool that was run by IRCO, a CBO they knew and trusted. The most often-asked questions were “when will the preschool start?” and “can we sign up now?” Families would later express their desires for a culturally specific preschool and explain the tremendous barriers to their access of existing preschool options.

### Language Access Barriers

Families spoke at length about numerous barriers experienced since arriving in the U.S. Across all groups, language barriers were mentioned most often and affected all aspects of life for their families. Even learning about available resources and supports was limited for non-

English speaking newcomers who talked of being excluded by the inability to access the most basic information often only printed in English.

### Affordable and flexible-hours for childcare

Finding affordable childcare was also described as almost impossible especially childcare with hours that would accommodate working or education schedules. If available, childcare was often offered for short time intervals that did not align with the school day for other children and made scheduling medical appointments around school pick up times a real hardship as described below:

*“So if you can provide something like a childcare or a preschool where our kids can go and learn something, and we can go to work. That way it will be very helpful to the parents who are working parents. ... So that is a very big issue with our community, most of our community people. They don't go to work because of their child. There is nobody to take care of their child. Our parents are old and they don't know how to take care of them. So it is a very big challenge.” (Bhutanese focus group)*

*“Like whenever I have appointments for him or for me, I need to go to school and pick him up before the end of the school time, because there is no way to meet him there. Because if I am at an appointment, and his time over at the school, when he come back there is no one at home. So many times I need to take him early from the school, just because my appointment.” (Iraqi focus group)*

*“... because they're working. ... For her it would be perfect because she haven't had to worry about childcare, right? It's going to be free?” (Latino parents)*

*“It's hard for me because my son, he just come to daycare. But when I came to the daycare center and ask about part time program, and they don't have it. Actually, it's not don't have it, but they divide their schedules, and it's very hard for me because I have a class from 9 to 1. But if I send to their daycare part time it just from 7:30 to 12:30, so I have to pay the late fee for from 12:30 to 1 p.m. So it's not flexible way.” (Vietnamese focus group)*

### Exclusion due to income-based guidelines

Many family members across communities described being excluded from early childhood opportunities due to income-based guidelines as though they were being penalized for the necessity of having both parents working. Quotations below illustrate concerns about potentially being excluded by an IRCO preschool because of income-based enrollments:

*Interpreter: "She asking if couples have been working full time and they are having over income, if there are other kids also is able to go to schools, or not? ...like, when with the mom and dad earn more money?"*

*(Asking) "If there are from IRCO (funding to) support ... so there is no fee in system."  
(Bhutanese focus group)*

*"You know, it's hard because even if you made a little bit more than the qualification, you still living paycheck by paycheck, you know, not much of--so I think it will help you if--it's kind of hard, you know, it hit you." (Pacific Islanders focus group)*

*"That has been my issue, but then the income is what places are looking at." (Congoese & Somali focus group)*

*"One would be like transportation issues, and the other one would be like basic income, so not qualified income. But again, to send to the private preschool, they can't afford that. So that's one area (of concern)." (Burmese focus group)*

*"I have couple of them be like they have two kids, is depend by income. Like I try to refer them to preschool, but their income are a little bit high or something, or mom doesn't work. Like for example, the Head Start, they require that both parent have to be fulltime job. So that means they not qualify for any school. So our job, we usually we try to find, we refer them to any preschool that they qualify. But some of my family, they cannot. The children already at the age of preschool, but they not qualify because the income, or they stay-at-home mom, or some of my student, they have in [early intervention], and when they in early intervention already, they cannot qualify." (Vietnamese focus group)*



## Transportation

Transportation presented another barrier that influenced parental decisions about involving children in childcare or preschool opportunities. Newcomer parents and children must learn basic information (from materials often only available in English) about using public transportation in a new country. Also the current anti-immigrant atmosphere of the U.S. presented a constant safety concern for parents and other community members. Excessive travel times on public transportation or lack of accessibility by public transportation created headaches for parents with children in multiple schools in various locations around Portland.

## Learning about U.S. education system

Though rich in traditional ways of passing down cultural wisdom and knowledge through oral traditions many immigrant and refugee parents were not familiar with formal education practices or expectations of the U.S. education systems.

*“Yeah, not with the little one right now, she doesn't know what to expect. But with the biggest one, she noticed that they have different way to teach here in the U.S. and Mexico. That she knows that they didn't even teach the math.” (Latino parents)*

*“It very hard for parent to know, because the way we were raised in our country, and taught in our country, is different from the school system here. And that also creates a barrier, you know, and misunderstanding between parents and school. Same thing with her children in school, like she wants them to write, to do the way how they were raised, and how they think they can support them. But here, he says nobody cares as long as I write down. It's just simple things, but it's affecting, you know, like culture piece. And there's more things that are different in American school than in countries where we came from.” (Slavic focus group)*

*“... particularly difficult for people who are from a different background, getting into the system and understanding how things work.” (Somali focus group)*

Kindergarten readiness continues to be a challenge for immigrant and refugee families who worry about not being able to adequately prepare or support their young children entering schools in the U.S. even for the simplest of undertakings like asking “to go to the bathroom or ask for water” (Bhutanese focus group). Parents often talked about difficulty understanding the English printed materials sent home for their signatures or homework assignments.

*“I am so worried about my kid, or my son or daughter. Like when they enter the school, it's hard for them to make friends. And then because the language barriers, I'm very afraid like this affected his personality, like he afraid he isolated or he can't communicate with other kids. So I really have my worries about this part.” (Iraqi focus group)*

*“She worried about when her son come back to home and need help with homework, it's already hard for her to understand English, so how she can help him in his homework? How can she understand what they asking him at school? So this is her concern.” (Iraqi focus group)*

### Isolation

Some parents felt isolated by traditional outreach efforts that excluded refugee and immigrant parents with disabilities. This is how parents from the Bhutanese community described their dilemma and desire for parent education about the U.S. school system:

*“We are both disabled parents. I have hard of hearing. My wife is mute, she cannot speak and she cannot hear. And we have 2 kids. When we came here, we don't know anything here, where to take our kids for school, who to refer. So it would be helpful, who can help our kids to enroll in the school, and help us to teach, like parent education. Like a system here, how to take care of our kids, how to raise them, you know?”*

### Fear of disconnect for youth from home culture

In addition to barriers caused by minimal access to translated or bilingual materials and resources in their home languages, parents often talked about the loss of home language by youth as their English fluency increased at school. All groups talked about the importance of keeping the home languages alive while strengthening English fluency for student success. When asked to describe language challenges, families told us that home language loss in younger generations had wide-ranging impacts on generational communication and on community/cultural cohesion. Community members poignantly described below the loss of tradition and history because of the impacts on communication between youth learning English in school and becoming unable to learn from elders (grandparents) who carried cultural knowledge and traditions in their home languages.

*“...for her family, it's very important to keep the native language because she's not afraid the kids will not learn English, they will catch English really fast. And our community*

*program now, the kids, they learn English and they forget their own language. And in churches where I'm assuming with grandparents it will be a problem to communicate, which I notice in my family the same problem. Kids learn English really fast, and then there is a problem in community to communicate.” (Slavic focus group)*

*“I want to add something about bilingual, it’s a cultural aspect. Having a book that is English and Swahili would help for children to be in their culture. We don’t want to have a lost generation.” (Congolese & Somali focus group)*

*“My kids, they go to a school, they come back and they speak English with grandma, who doesn't know anything. So there is a communication challenge between grandparents and grandchildren. So that would be a great help to the community, if they can teach, make our children bilingual in our own language and English. So we would be good for kid if there is a system where they can learn both things. And also it is really important to express or share our stories, and what are our festivals and challenges. If we tell them what are our festivals, why we celebrate at the time and moment, we can teach them. We have our festivals, if we teach them what are the importance, they can't forget our culture, also.”  
(Bhutanese focus group)*



## Separation anxiety

Anxiety caused by separation from the primary caretaker was discussed as concerning for families of children who had not found an affordable and culturally responsive preschool opportunity before starting kindergarten.

*“When my son was in preschool, it took me about 2 weeks to finally get him to go on his own to class. And it was a hassle to get him, and he wouldn't even go on the bus. So finally one day I take him to school and I kicked him out of the [laughs] car, “Get out of my car.” Ever since then he was good, but it took me about 2 weeks to get there, I was on the urge of giving up, but I push him through.” (Pacific Islanders focus group)*

*“[Anonymous] thinks that the earlier kids get used to for a couple hours, or a few hours, being separated from mom. That the easier for them it will be to adapt to school. Because I have a personal experience with some parents that their kids did not qualify for Head Start, and they been home with mom all the time. And this year they start the kindergarten, and there's a big trauma and big stress for mom and for child. One time I had, it was for the whole year, child did not want to go to school. I don't know, maybe something at school happen. But as earlier is better, they adapt easier.” (Slavic focus group)*

## Bullying

Families from both the Slavic and Latino communities raised concerns about bullying in schools and not having access to translated resources and materials from which to learn about how to best support their children.

*“Oh, and the bullying, you know there are a lot of bullying in schools and everywhere, right? [ . . . ] She is saying that the issue that she's having with [son] right now is that he is wearing glasses, so they're making fun of him, that he seems weird and this and that. So she says that he's just 4 years old and experiencing the bullying.” (Latino parents)*

*“My son, .... he had complications when he went to school, he wasn't very active. And just because he didn't know some things were actually going on in class, he got bullied because he wears [specific assistive devices].” (Slavic focus group)*

## Community Priorities for a New Immigrant and Refugee Serving Preschool

Often for newcomers, perceptions about the roles of parent/family and teacher in formal education have been shaped by the school system (or lack of formalized schooling) in sending countries prior to-arrival in the U.S. Not understanding the U.S. system of education or expectations of parents and children has fueled many misconceptions by the mainstream surrounding the value of education to immigrant and refugee communities. The families in our focus groups clearly recognized the benefits of early childhood education as discussed by this parent:

*“So we will have a lifelong journey in the U.S., we will not move to anywhere else, so I prefer to send the kid, like what everybody say, 8 to 3, so that they can learn a lot of things. And we don't understand English, so we don't have things so we are not always any good in the school, so our kids are able to learn better than us. That is what my real intention for (them)... So the main thing is if they are educate, they have a good education, that shouldn't happen in the future in their own family. That's what we are happening now, so we don't want to happen, we are doing our best.” (Burmese focus group)*

Families wanted to understand expectations in the U.S. school system and to learn how to prepare to support their children' academic success while having their own cultures valued and represented alongside academic objectives.

*“Yeah, we want to keep in the school that our cultures and the stuff that we have, so it's great for us if we have a chance to keep in the school, yeah. Like books. And the flags, state flag, and identify, oh, the Kachin kids are here, or the Zomi kids are here, or the Karen kids are here. Then can proud of the kids that, you know? The Burmese groups, yeah.” (Burmese focus group)*

### Sharing cultures and traditions

Focus group participants were asked to consider what they wanted from a preschool that served their community (i.e. community priorities). Some priorities were universal across the different communities such as free or non-income based admission, transportation provisions and flexible childcare services. While other priorities were culturally specific and consistent with community or religious practices. Even as culturally-specific priorities were discussed, the opportunity to interact with and learn about many different cultures, languages, traditions and ceremonies to produce a diverse learning environment for children, was celebrated.



*“We want to see diversity ... many cultures together.” (Congolese & Somali focus group)*

*“So (parent) wants to include trilingual, not bilingual, but multilingual. Like he wants to have more than two languages” (Bhutanese focus group)*

*“So mostly like what percentage of the group that you have like the day of the celebration that at least one of the different groups share with other people, [ . . . ] oh, I am Kachin, or I am Zomi, I am Karen from Burma, that we celebrate today for the nationally, or we celebrate for the holiday. Then we can share with other people.” (Burmese focus group)*

*“Yeah, even if they have celebration at the school, and even let other communities know what they celebrate about, why they celebrate this. Sound good for them, yes.” (Iraqi focus group)*



### **Bilingual education**

Many communities expressed the importance of providing bilingual activities and materials for adults and children to preserve the home languages while learning English. Community members requested that IRCO or the proposed preschool provide home language classes for youth who seemed to lose home languages once they started learning English. Family members also wanted the content of the bilingual reading materials and activities to celebrate traditional stories and ceremonies from their own cultures as described below:

*“And also it is really important to express or share our stories, and what are our festivals and challenges. If we tell them what is our festivals, why we celebrate at the time and moment, we can teach them. We have our festivals, if we teach them what are the importance, they can't forget our culture, also.” (Bhutanese focus group)*

*“We want our children to know our culture and I think the stories should be from many different cultures... Like a book about heroes from each culture...” (Congolese & Somali focus group)*

*“... want staff to be aware of religious regulations and restrictions, something that promotes Somali culture-food and holidays, incorporate Ramadan,[but also] learn about Christmas, Halloween.” (Somali focus group)*

### Meals

Preschool meals were considered as a means to share traditions cross-culturally, but Islamic parents wanted to stress the religious importance of providing choices at mealtime “Halal food, for some Muslims” (Congolese & Somali focus group). Families also expressed the desire to prepare cultural meals at the school to share with other communities.

### Dual generation programming

Although some community members preferred a preschool model that allowed for dropping off children for preschool and childcare services that supported adult work or school times while preparing their children for kindergarten, other community members wanted to be able to volunteer and eventually work at the preschool. Many communities wanted to be able to participate in adult learning opportunities (dual-generation programming) at the preschool especially while their children were engaged in learning and socialization activities.

*“Yeah, yeah, that would be great because they think that different way, and the way they do thing is different way. So now you talk about being in more cultures and more involved in the school, that would be great. They didn't thought about that before we start meeting. That would be great, like how the kids know where you teaching the school, how the school run. And then if you volunteer, then if they are interested and then become staff.” (Burmese focus group)*

*“At least you speak English, you have to speak English someone else, that is one of the way to learn from the school, just going to the school and volunteer the time.” (Burmese focus group)*

*“Mostly I mentioned that if the school is not just, go there, don't bother me. [...] and then you can volunteer one or two hours [...] and speak your own language just for their volunteer and speak with someone else. And let them speak your language and they can learn from different language.”(Bhutanese focus group)*

For families from oral cultures or who had not participated in formal education, additional methods for adult learning and transmitting information were recommended, thereby removing the bias for written cultures and creating a more inclusive environment for the many communities served by IRCO.

*“We have parents who can't read or write so we have to think about those groups as well. It's easy to learn in English even for someone who has not been to school. Sometimes they don't practice, but when they see the image they realize they have to practice.” (Somali focus group)*



### Uniforms

Uniforms for preschool children, popular among the Bhutanese, Tongan and Burmese communities, were discussed in the context of reflecting “school back home” and important for easily identifying students. Additionally community members talked about the value of uniforms from the performance perspective, as in putting on a uniform signaling that children were ready to assume the role of serious students.

## Curriculum preferences and representation

In terms of a preschool curriculum, families expressed the need to include art, music, multiple languages as well as physical activities. Families wanted safe indoor and outdoor play spaces as well as integrating the natural world into learning topics. Families talked about wanting trained teachers and/or classroom assistants from each of the cultures represented in the school population described as *(someone who) “looks like the student.”* (Bhutanese focus group) and

*“It would be wise if you have somebody who looks like the parents.”*

*“When they go to preschool they want someone who is from the same community to help them.”* (Congolese & Somali focus group)

*“But it’s just, I think the child would just like feel safer, I guess. Not safer, but more comfortable with a Russian teacher.”* (Slavic focus group)

*“The reason why they say is that like, let’s say the main teacher in the school or in the class should be like American, not Burmese-speaking or whatever... And the helpers in the schools, or the case worker in the schools should be like the one that understand our culture. But the main teachers in the class should be American ...”* (Burmese focus group)



Preschool education was understood by families who participated in our focus groups as a path to later academic success. Somali families stressed the importance for teaching staff to recognize religious regulations and restrictions. Suggestions about staff from their own communities were especially important to the Slavic and Somali communities as they believed that community representative staff were more likely to guide children's moral development as well as academic learning.

## *Section II: Interviews and Surveys*

### *Exemplary Programs Serving Immigrant & Refugee Children*

In this section, interviews were conducted with 12 exemplary preschool programs (not all were culturally responsive but did serve immigrant & refugee families) both national and local, to uncover best practices in early childhood education specific to immigrant and refugee children. This report highlights the best practices identified and cites examples that were provided in the course of the interview process.

## **Best Practices**

### **Ensure leadership and teachers are representative of the community served**

Most organizations stress the importance of both a leadership team *and* a teaching team that are representative of the community served. For example, one program is intentional about focusing on leadership development among its parent population. The school actively recruits immigrant and low-income parents to join the board, and offers stipends and scholarships for board service to acknowledge their value and perspective. According to the director, their model of decision-making centers on the perspective of parents. This philosophy gives parents the primary voice in the planning and direction of the school, and necessitates a leadership team that includes parents. In addition, the school regularly holds listening sessions with parents to gather input and perspectives about what sort of programming will work culturally. The school also invited two teachers who were immigrants to join the school leadership team. Not only has it been a good professional development experience for the two teachers, but it helps the school make decisions with the inclusion of voices that represent the families served.



Two programs mention the importance of having immigrant teachers who do not simply share the same native language of the school families, but also have the shared life experience of being an immigrant or refugee. According to one teacher, it matters to families that she and the two teaching assistants are also refugees. She says, “We all started out with one bag at the airport. We all passed through IRCO. We have more compassion. We were all in their shoes. We feel you. The parents know this, and know they can ask us any question. We can say, ‘You can do it! You have this opportunity!’”

Another program believes one of its greatest assets is to provide a native speaker for each classroom. “But not JUST a native speaker—a person also representing that culture,” according to the head teacher.

A fourth program makes a commitment in its hiring practices to hire from the community it serves. As their director says, “One of our core values is to hire from the communities we serve. Shared value in the program is a key hiring point.”

The director of another program says, “The teachers you hire need to be incredibly passionate and big picture, and even better, if you can, hire people who represent your classroom. If you can have a teacher from the home country [in a classroom that serves children from that country], do. It’s important to hire people of color, people who look like their students.”

### Offer numerous channels for parental engagement

Intentional strategies to involve parents are common among ten of twelve programs interviewed. These interviewees recognize parental ownership in their child’s education as an essential component of their programs. Most organizations shared that there is a symbiotic benefit to parental engagement; it improves the organization’s ability to learn about community priorities and needs through family engagement and commitment to the school, while gaining a better understanding of culture and language that informs programming. Simultaneously, it engages parents by supporting a sense of ownership over their children’s education, of leadership by including their voices at decision tables, and of new career opportunities/education in the case of parents who become assistants or teachers or leaders on a career pathway. Note that several programs hire parents to become employees in the preschools through purposefully designed programs.

One program offers parent volunteerism, family nights, and an open invitation to parents to stop in anytime during the day. Parents have a sense of ownership and see it as “my thing” because of their level of involvement. Another program provides channels for parents to share their stories through the use of three-generation curriculum that involves the whole family in service learning projects. In addition to parent participation in the classroom, there is a focus on parent education, especially women empowerment. Special holistic educational and empowerment classes are offered to women weekly, including GED preparation, computer skills, nutrition, and parenting. Seven of the staff members are former participants of the adult education program.

There is a heavy emphasis on parent participation and inclusion in programs at another preschool, where teachers emphasize parent participation by encouraging parents to share

family culture. For example, a father from one country shared a piece of his culture through storytelling and music. Yet another program relies on Parents as Teacher curriculum, as well as other parenting curriculum, to offer ongoing education and training to parents. Parents and grandparents attend playgroups and volunteer to teach culturally specific arts and crafts, music and movement while building stronger relationships with other parents, children, and the broader community in traditional ways.

Many groups offer an “open door” policy for parents, encouraging them to visit the preschool at any time. Two preschools urge parents to stop in to visit the classroom or sign up for special activities. At one, parent volunteer hours are tallied, and the program receives additional funds for these. Home visits help to facilitate discussions around parent involvement and attendance, as well as the concept of “building bridges” with a family so that the school and family are seen as a team with a common mission of building on strengths.

Another program involves parents through projects, such as an annual family tree project that encourages families to share traditions. The trees are displayed in the classroom all year, which aids in a stronger sense of identity for families. This program also wants fathers to see themselves as caregivers and makes a special effort to engage fathers. One way they’ve done this is by offering programming on the weekends (especially classroom experiences) so that working fathers can more easily experience the school day with their children. Similarly, a different program offers a father-child playgroup to help fathers grow into their role.

Seven of the twelve organizations offer home visits as part of the preschool program—in some cases, despite the fact that they are not required by Head Start or other governing programs. One preschool conducts introductory home visits when families are welcomed into the preschool community to help build relationships with the staff in a comfortable setting.

### **Intentionally design programming to honor home languages and cultures**

Programming that honors the home language and culture is a common thread among the programs interviewed. Many of the interviewees cite a research link between cultural responsiveness and student/parent engagement. Even if English is the primary language being taught in the preschool curriculum, students are still encouraged to speak in their home



language as they are learning. They can converse with other students who share their home language. They can also rely on translation assistance from an adult native speaker. Freedom to speak in their native language in the classroom is another way of honoring the students and their families.

One program intentionally chooses culturally meaningful pieces for the school environment, from a floor mat made of culturally specific materials, to specific musical instruments, to manipulatives made only from certain natural materials. The driving question this program asks when purchasing materials is: “What would a child be playing with in our culture?”



Another program has created a parent committee to plan cultural celebrations that have ties to the families, with tremendous response from the school community. Buy-in and energy are notably increased, according to their director.

One school creates celebrations that are embedded in the cultures of the families it serves. For example, rather than celebrating Halloween or Thanksgiving or other common “American” holidays, the school invites parents to help create unique, meaningful celebrations on a monthly basis. Parents can share information, folklore, and stories about their culture. The

school provides a child/family kitchen because cooking is so often a part of “who you are and where you come from,” according to the director.

Another program sees promotion and honoring of the home language as foundational to their work. It shifts the parental perspective from seeing the home language as a barrier to seeing it as an asset. The program uses the popular education methodology for its parent workshops. Popular education is rooted in honoring the life experiences of the families and creating a more just society. The underlying approach is that parents have value and their stories matter.

### Seek out diverse funding sources

Funding is—and likely always will be—a top concern for preschool programs. Funding stability and sustainability are the primary issues. Diverse funding sources, especially a strong private funding base, are highly desired. It’s often difficult to swiftly respond to fluctuating demographics and needs due to the relatively sluggish pace of legislation. Though early childhood programs want to work together to be good partners and collaborate, funding scarcity interferes at times because these organizations may be competing for funds from the same relatively limited pool. However, it does not extinguish collaboration altogether.

One school mentioned that it’s currently “trendy” to fund culturally specific programming, which results in missed funding opportunities for organizations that offer services through a multicultural framework such as theirs. The school noted that this seems to be especially true in regard to funding for crucial capacity-building activities. Undeniably, there is an undercurrent of competition for funding (“we lost a contract to that group last year so we had to close that program...”) but a greater spirit of collaboration.

Another program also had to recently end programs due to funding problems, and wants to create more sustainable programs and stable funding streams.

There is onerous red tape associated with Head Start and other federal funding programs. Several groups discouraged affiliation with these sorts of programs, due to the heavy paperwork and level of requirements that must be met.

## Build strong partnerships with other community-based organizations

Whether it is for shared programming or referred services, a strong relationship with other partners is key. Many organizations believe there is significant value in partnerships that enrich the lives of their preschool families. From health care to food assistance to education, partners can offer wrap-around services and support. Several program directors also desire strong relationships and better integration with the public-school system, for continuity for families as their children move through the system.

One program notes that it has discovered that fun, school-connected activities are an important way to showcase wrap-around services to parents. For example, when they attempted to hold a standalone health fair, attendance was paltry. But when they invited health care agencies to the school carnival, over 350 people received services or referrals.

Similarly, families in another preschool are included in monthly family nights at their public elementary school host site. These nights provide dinner and activities, alongside services such as vision screening, developmental and behavioral screening, and dental visits.

A different preschool partners with cultural, political, and activist community groups, with the benefit that the partnerships help their school families feel connected to a bigger movement in the community. The program makes an effort to connect families with a network of culturally-responsive community services, including financial literacy programs, education programs, healthcare, mental health, and more. “We see our role as being a hub for community connections,” their director indicates.

One school has partnerships with colleges and universities that enable deep conversations around early childhood education. They mention the importance of these relationships in “feeding each other with learning,” which allows for continual improvement.

Several programs intentionally focus on mental health services through partnerships. For example, one has a psychologist from a local university lead a monthly mental health group for parents, and offers a facilitated “warm hand-off” to agencies that focus on mental health services.

Referrals for trauma-informed care are particularly necessary for the refugee population, many interviewees note. One program shares that most adult female refugees in their served population have experienced significant trauma, and the resulting “shame” is a huge burden. This program director facilitates an introduction to a supporting social services worker for follow-up. Another program provides trauma-informed care directly, but also refers children and their families to other community agencies for support.

### Foster mutual respect and trust between the program and families

Trusting, solid relationships between the program staff and families are the core of every successful program. Being recognized as a trustworthy, safe partner is paramount to most factors of the program. Each preschool works hard to earn the respect of its families, and several indicate it is the bedrock of their program.

In light of the current political climate, most organizations interviewed have changed policies or practices to further earn the trust of the families they serve. For example, one preschool previously asked for parents to sign in when attending parent/family events at school. Following the 2016 presidential election, the school now simply counts heads (not names) in order to help families feel safer attending events.



Another program references the role that relationships play in their program and their ability to offer comprehensive care to families. According to their director, it leads to healthier and safer families “when we are able to spend quality time with families, sit down, have long conversations, get to know their lives, get to know their children, understand their struggles and their ups. For some of them it means having somebody to talk to, for others it’s someone to call when they have questions about their child’s behavior or development, or going with them to a new place—such as getting a food box, going to the doctor, accessing any sort of new resource—having someone along they are comfortable with and have a strong relationship with can be really valuable.”

One program says building relationships and staying connected is key. Following the election, they noticed many families became fearful of leaving the house. But, because the preschool leaders had a good relationship with them, attendance did not suffer. Families were willing to come and engage with the school because of the strong trust that had been built.

Another program has developed an experimental program. The leadership notes that some families did not want to officially enroll in formal playgroup programs, in part due to immigration status. As a solution, this program offers training for parent volunteers who are interested in leading informal group gatherings. These gatherings provide an avenue for involvement in groups—without fear of repercussions.

Another school notes that a strong personal connection with the served community—the family as a whole—is worth developing to gain trust. “There’s no space between me and the program and the clients,” states their director.

Yet another school held special sessions for students and families after certain political directives were made. The sessions were intended for students to give voice to their concerns, and for staff to explain the constitutional protections in place to help ease student and family worries.

## Additional Wisdom & Considerations

### Grow slowly and thoughtfully

Several programs warn of the dangers of doing too much, too soon. One shares that in addition to philosophy, history, rationale, and logistics, there are numerous nitty gritty details to be worked out. For example, they learned that Head Start required metal silverware for their program, but the elementary school only had plastic utensils, so they had to figure out how to purchase and wash metal silverware. This is one example of the sheer number of decisions that need to be made. The head committee met every two weeks for the first several years to ensure adequate attention to the details. Now, five years in, the committee only meets quarterly.

Another program expresses disappointment at starting small – they wanted to be double the size they were in the first year of the program—but call it a blessing in disguise. Had they been as large as they had hoped, it would have been a “rough year.” There were many details to dissect and many parties to involve in the process.

### Develop key measures of outcomes

All programs interviewed have protocols in place to measure outcomes. While several programs rely on casual markers for outcomes, most are codified to some extent. Specific measures include periodic informative assessments to track progress throughout the year, kindergarten readiness assessments, follow-up data from schools where children attend kindergarten after the completion of the program, and parental engagement levels/hours.

### Consider before and after childcare for working families

To accommodate working families, several programs offer before and after care. It is a necessary component of the program for families where both parents are working one (or often, several) jobs. In cases where before and after care cannot be offered directly by the preschool, organizations rely on partnerships. For example, one program refers families to a nearby daycare run by a religious non-profit.

### Cultural responsiveness is difficult to achieve when serving multiple cultural groups

Most organizations acknowledge that cultural responsiveness is difficult to achieve when working with multi-cultural groups. Where do you begin? Do you serve 20 students from one cultural group? Or do you mix and offer class for 20 students with many different home languages?

The advice from one program is as follows: “For IRCO, I would approach it from a multicultural education framework rather than a culturally specific framework. The other alternative would be IRCO looking at parallel programs. Some of their programs are already rooted in that way. Such as: common elements that are delivered in culturally responsive ways. The staff would need to reflect the group it is serving.” The program leader suggested that that the multicultural framework offers the ability to reflect the culture of each student in the teaching and learning, but cautioned, “It involves a lot of reflection by staff and intentional professional development.”



Another preschool acknowledges the difficulty of achieving this, but also reiterates that a high-quality and well-trained teaching staff can overcome many challenges. Their director says, “Our teachers are so good at gesture, visuals, representation. So even if there’s only one non-English-speaking student, the nonverbal cues are helping reinforcing language. If the child is primarily speaking a third language, it is a challenge. But they’re primed for language acquisition in general due to age, so this is a challenge but they pick it up. It adds a layer of challenge but those children will end up trilingual and gifted in adaptations. Long-term, these kids will be great.”

### Locations and transportation needs

Where will programs be housed that serve the majority of IRCO’s preschool families? How will families get to preschool programs if they are not in their immediate community? A detailed look into mapping and gaps in service will play a valuable role in determining site locations and transportation needs. Considerations include creating a preschool at an existing or new IRCO location or preschools at elementary school sites.

### Program costs and funding

IRCO will be competing for resources in a limited pool of funding for early childhood education. From where will funding come to support IRCO’s program(s)? How will IRCO differentiate itself from existing programs in the Metro area? Should IRCO decide to pursue Head Start funding, is the organization prepared to face ramifications including potentially impeding or limiting opportunities for parents to serve as assistants or teachers (due to federal certification and licensing requirements).



## RECOMMENDATIONS



By comparison the list of best practices highlighted in the research literature and revealed in program interviews was very similar and corresponded well to the priorities discussed in the focus groups. Table 1 is a comparative look at the major topics. Where the first two lists/columns differ (in blue) there are critical components for developing a preschool program and for evaluating its success in delivering culturally specific and responsive programming across the many immigrant and refugee communities served by IRCO. The orange cells highlight community priorities that are new information and specific to the IRCO communities who shared their dreams for a new preschool that serves immigrants and refugees.

*Table 1. Recommendations*

Research literature	Program Interviews	Community Priorities
Staff representative of communities served	Teachers and leadership representative of communities served	Staff representative of communities served
Dual generation programming (e.g. increasing self-efficacy for adults and children as learners)	Volunteering, family nights, 3-generation curriculum, GED preparation, ESL, Parent & Child activities	Dual-generation programming so families can volunteer, train to be staff, learn English, share cultural stories, traditions, and values.

Bilingual programming	Honoring home language and bilingual activities	Bilingual programming and translated materials
Collaborations to enhance services provided (like childcare or through shared funding)	Collaborations to enhance services provided (like childcare or through shared funding)	Flexible childcare to accommodate work hours for adults
Provide resources and social services for entire family		Provide transportation and connections to available resources for family
Culturally responsive programming informed by life experiences & religious practices of newcomers		Culturally responsive programming informed by life experiences, traditions, ceremonies & religious practices of newcomers (e.g. Halal choices for meals)
	Develop metrics of success	
	Diverse funding sources	
	Consider partnership opportunities with other CBOs	
		Adult classes about U.S. education system (so they can support children’s success)
		No Income-based restrictions for enrollment
		Outreach to disabled parents
		Introductory teaching methods for engaging parents from oral tradition communities
		Cross-cultural sharing of traditions, celebrations, meals and languages

The recommendations in the above table can be categorized by the following areas of need and impact:

**Organizational level recommendations for preschool program startup and sustainability**

- Partnering with other CBOs and educational institutions can bring experience and resources to the table.

- Diversify funding sources and learn from experience of other culturally specific and responsive preschools.
- Collaborate where necessary with other CBOs, organizations, and agencies to deliver wrap around social services for entire families.
- Develop metrics of success and regularly evaluate preschool program. Develop a yearly process that includes community members for conducting evaluation, analyzing evaluation results and informing/improving the preschool program.
- Start small and proceed slowly to allow for adjustments as the program grows.

### Culturally responsive and culturally specific programming and curriculum

- Develop targeted outreach about preschool to isolated immigrant and refugee families (such as parents with disabilities).
- Provide bilingual materials in languages of all communities served.
- Engage families in the development of bilingual curriculum for each community that incorporates cultural stories, traditions, and religious values.
- Offer dual-generation programming for adults and children. Engage adults in bilingual classes and a variety of activities that educate families about the U.S. education system and the roles of families in that system. Prepare families for supporting their children after they graduate to kindergarten (i.e., literacy, numeracy, and social expectations for kindergarten). Co-develop materials with families to support parents and children with learning at home (could incorporate materials currently used by parent educators during home visits). Invite elders to lead intergenerational cultural story time with children from each community
- Develop introductory teaching methods for engaging parents from oral tradition communities.
- Staff each of the classrooms or preschool groups with community representatives.

### Immigrant and Refugee Community Priorities

- Provide childcare with flexible schedules to support work hours for parents.
- Provide half and full day schedules for preschool.

- Provide transportation or transportation allowances.
- Do NOT enforce income-based restrictions for IRCO families since this can be exclusionary.
- Provide home language classes or activities so that children continue to practice their home languages while learning English.
- Provide multiple language learning opportunities if requested
- Provide opportunities for training of family members who like to volunteer and/or become teaching staff.
- Provide culturally appropriate meals and opportunities for cultural sharing of important celebrations, dress, and meals across all communities.



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