



CAMBRIDGE

Office of Early Childhood

Cambridge Universal Preschool Program Recommendations

OCTOBER 2022





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This report is the culmination of intensive work by stakeholders across the city of Cambridge, including the Office of Early Childhood staff and colleagues in a wide range of city and school departments and community organizations.



OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEAM:

- Isis Arnesen** - Education Coach
- ***Liz Barlock** - School Readiness Manager
- Paula Bowie** - Family Child Care Coach/Mentor
- Emily Callejas** - Professional Development Specialist
- Christina Denis** - Director Mentor
- Lisa Grant, Ed.D.** - Executive Director
- Dawn Grassi** - Administrative Assistant
- Kaori Hattori de Panepinto** - Director Mentor
- Katharyn Hok** - Education Coach
- ***Nicole Johnson** - UPK Project Manager
- Allen Kesten** - Scholarship Specialist
- Danielle Pazos** - Program Quality Manager
- ***Megan Postal** - Home Visiting Consultant
- Marilyn Pratt** - Education Coach
- Rita Rzezuski** - Education Coach (CDA)
- Linda Schumacher** - Family Child Care Coach/Mentor

**These team members played a special role as leaders and facilitators of the UPK Task Force work.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: ADVISORY COMMITTEE

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

- **Katy Donovan** - Executive Director - Campus Child Care
- ***Michelle Farnum** - Assistant Director, Children, Youth, and Family Services, DHSP
- **David Gibbs** - Executive Director, CAAS Head Start
- **Michelle Godfrey** - Director, Center for Families, DHSP
- **Dr. Stephanie Jones** - Gerald S. Lesser Professor of Child Development and Education, Harvard University
- **Jessie Leonard** - Head Start Director, CAAS Head Start
- ***Dr. Michelle Madera** - Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education, Cambridge Public Schools
- **Dr. Barbara Mullen** - Assistant Superintendent of Student Services, Cambridge Public Schools
- **Laura Perille** - CEO, Nurtury
- ***Ellen Semonoff** - Assistant City Manager, Department of Human Services Programs
- **Claire Spinner** - Chief Financial Officer, Cambridge Public Schools
- ***Dr. Carolyn Turk** - Deputy Superintendent, Cambridge Public Schools
- **Meghan White** - Division Head, Childcare and Family Support Services, DHSP

**These committee members constitute the UPK Leadership Team.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: KEY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS



JOINT CITY COUNCIL/ SCHOOL COMMITTEE AD HOC COMMITTEE

- **Sumbul Siddiqui** - Mayor
- **Alanna Mallon** - Vice Mayor
- **Dennis Carlone** - City Councilor
- **Michelle Farnum** - Assistant Director, Children Youth and Families, DHSP
- **Dr. Lisa Grant** - Executive Director, Office of Early Childhood
- **Dr. Michelle Madera** - Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education, Cambridge Public Schools
- **Marc McGovern** - City Councilor
- **Ellen Semonoff** - Assistant City Manager for Department of Human Services Programs
- **Dr. Carolyn Turk** - Deputy Superintendent, Cambridge Public Schools
- **David Weinstein** - School Committee
- **Ayesha Wilson** - School Committee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: TASK FORCES

TASK FORCES

Each task force was charged with evaluating a specific component of the larger universal preschool system, arriving at consensus, and subsequently drafting a set of recommendations that will guide the work of the Office of Early Childhood as program requirements are designed. Those three task forces include: Workforce Development, Program Quality, and Family Hub.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:

This task force focused on elements of the larger UPK system related to educator qualifications, compensation, benefits, professional development, career pathways, and coaching.

Nancy Alech - Community Representative

Emily Callejas - Professional Development Specialist, Office of Early Childhood

Chris Colbath Hess - Professional Learning & Educator Development Manager, Cambridge Public Schools

Phil DeGuglielmo - Department of Human Services, Personnel Administrator

Lori Harrington - Staff Coordinator, CAAS Head Start

Nathalie Louissaint - Lead Teacher, Department of Human Services Programs

Caitlin Malloy - Center Director, Newtowne School

Susan Mintz - Director, Office of Workforce Development

Anne Marie Picanco - Assistant Director of Human Services, Cambridge Public Schools

Erika Thulin Dawes - Professor, Chair of Language and Literacy Department, Lesley University

Margaret Woisin - Department of Human Services, Preschool Manager

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PROGRAM QUALITY:

This task force focused on elements of the larger UPK system related to curriculum, assessment, program evaluation, classroom size and ratios, and program supports.

Danielle Pazos - Program Quality Manager, Office of Early Childhood

Katharyn Hok - Education Coach, Office of Early Childhood

Isis Arnesen - Education Coach, Office of Early Childhood

Heather Frances - Lead Teacher, Special Start - Cambridge Public Schools

Danielle Fitzpatrick - Lead Teacher, Special Start - Cambridge Public Schools

Maria Marroquin - Lead Teacher, Early Elementary - Cambridge Public Schools

Michelle Harris - Preschool Director, DHSP/City of Cambridge

Chris Espinola - Education Director, CAAS Head Start

Lizzie Feigenbaum - Director, Early Childhood Services, Riverside Community Care

FAMILY HUB:

This task force focused on elements of the larger UPK system related to application and enrollment, prioritization, school assignment, case management, and resource and referral.

Allen Kesten - Scholarship Specialist, Office of Early Childhood

Christine Williams - Marketing & Communications Specialist, Office of Early Childhood

Jen Cabezas - Center for Families-Parent Education & Home Visiting Coordinator

Jill Schreider - Baby U Family Services Coordinator

Nancy Tauber - Executive Director, Family Policy Council/City of Cambridge

Chandra Green - Department of Human Services-Enrollment Coordinator

Kathy Sampson - Student Registration Center, Cambridge Public Schools

Debbie Bonilla - Family Engagement Specialist, Cambridge Public Schools

Heather Frances - Lead Teacher, Special Start - Cambridge Public Schools

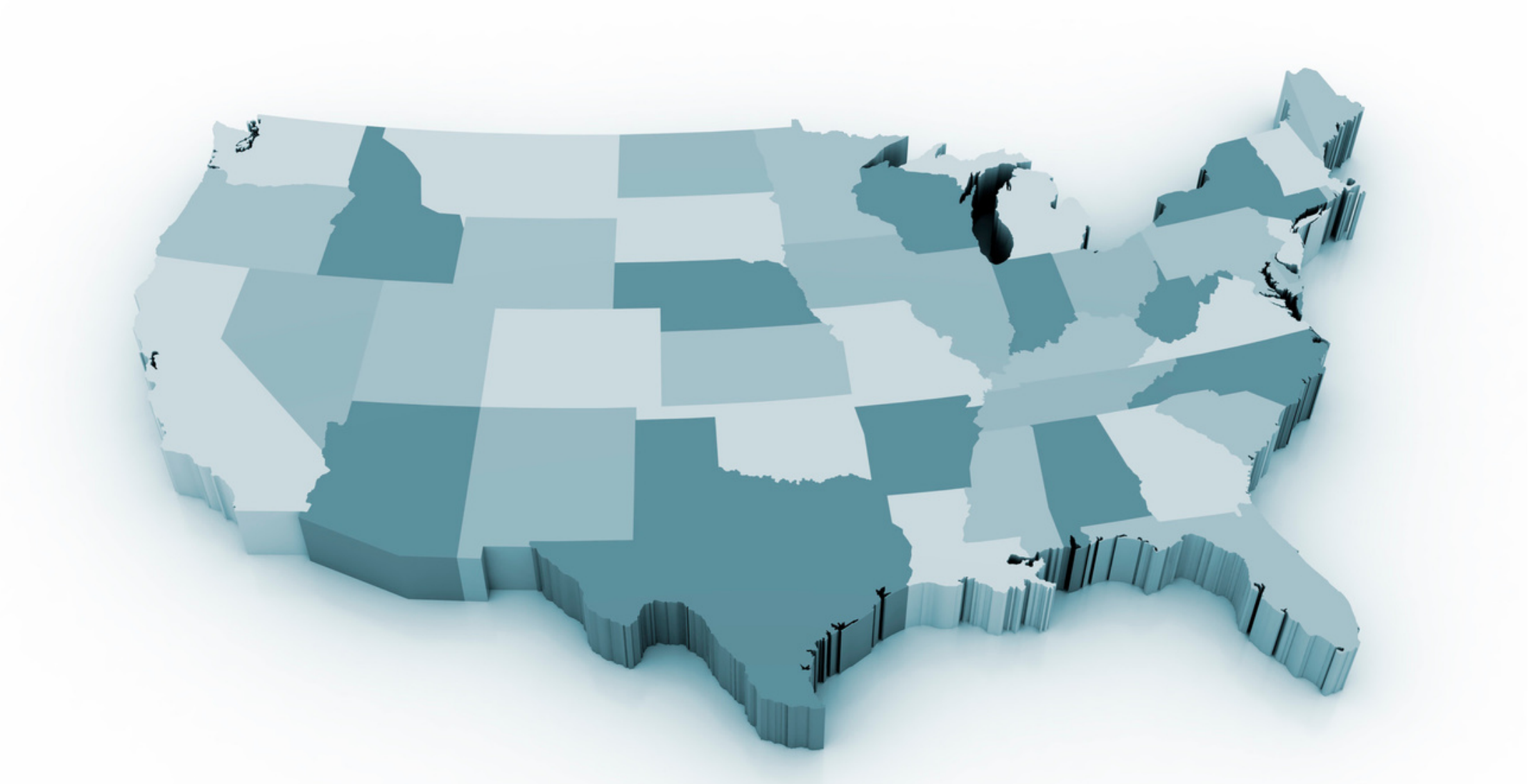
Danielle Fitzpatrick - Lead Teacher, Special Start - Cambridge Public Schools

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INFORMATION GATHERING: UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Thank you to our early childhood colleagues in the following cities for engaging us in dialogue, sharing lessons learned, celebrating strengths, and advising on the opportunities for growth as we work to design a universal preschool system that is responsive to our community context:

- **New York City**
- **Philadelphia**
- **Washington, D.C.**
- **Chicago**
- **Boston**
- **Seattle**
- **Denver**
- **San Antonio**



BACKGROUND

The mission of the Cambridge Office of Early Childhood is to connect the city's early childhood ecosystem, align early childhood services and information, and advocate for and advance the needs of all young children, their families, and the early childhood workforce. As such, the office is leading the design, development, and implementation of a universal preschool program on behalf of the Cambridge community. The universal preschool program will be a publicly funded, mixed-delivery preschool program that will include school-based, city, and community programs; accessible through a single application process at low or no cost to families.

Our vision is that every child and family in Cambridge has access to high quality early care and education experiences. As a result, all children enter school ready to thrive academically, physically, socially, and emotionally, and continue to do so through third grade and beyond. It is a vision that is shared by a variety of stakeholders in the city, school department, and the broader community. As such, the process of intentionally designing a universal preschool system that is responsive to our community context and meets the needs of Cambridge children and families requires intentional and active engagement with a wide range of leaders, educators, community organizations, and families.



Although an initial framework for universal preschool was developed during the strategic planning process for the Office of Early Childhood in 2021 (including rebranding the Birth to 3rd Grade Partnership and establishing a governance structure for the office and for UPK specifically), in the summer of 2022 this work accelerated. Three distinct task forces were formed; each aligning with a strategic goal identified in the office's strategic plan. These task forces brought together key colleagues from across the city, school department, and community based organizations to engage in active dialogue that would subsequently shape the vision for each component of the UPK work. It was those conversations that led to the creation of the set of recommendations that have shaped this document.

BACKGROUND

Several overarching themes were identified across task forces. These themes will be embedded in our policies and practices as the work of designing and implementing a comprehensive universal preschool program unfolds. Those themes include:

- Policies and processes will be put into place to ensure that as many eligible children have access to high quality early childhood education programs.
- A system that prioritizes each child's individual needs, as well as each family's needs, values, and preferences for their child; with children and families' needs (as a whole) taking precedence in each and every policy decision.
- Research and data will be incorporated into each and every policy decision.
- A commitment to equity will be interwoven into every element of the universal preschool design.
- Inclusive practices will be central to the universal preschool design.



UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations outlined in this report aim to provide the Cambridge Office of Early Childhood with guidance and direction to ensure a successful launch of the universal preschool program. These recommendations are a starting point for the Office of Early Childhood as we prepare for the launch of a universal preschool program in the 2024-2025 school year. This work will necessitate continual stakeholder engagement, review, and evaluation to ensure all of Cambridge’s children are valued, healthy, and thriving.

By establishing a universal preschool program, Cambridge will scale the availability of preschool to ensure every 3 and 4 year old can access at least 6 hours of programming per school day on a school year basis, while providing additional support for children with specific risk factors. The magnitude of this vision, and the importance of ensuring not just that all families can enroll their children in preschool programs, but that those programs are high quality, requires the city to work urgently toward achieving the goal of building an early care and education system that is accessible, affordable, and valuable for children and families over the next several years. Through universal preschool, Cambridge also has an unprecedented opportunity to leverage the Office of Early Childhood to improve the quality and availability of early childhood programs and services for all young children, including infants and toddlers.



UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

We recognize the implementation of universal preschool and these recommendations will come with many challenges that we will need to collaboratively address. These challenges include workforce shortages and a lack of existing alignment in funding and regulations. However, these recommendations articulate how investments in our universal preschool will put us on the right track to address these challenges and build capacity over time not only for preschool programs, but for all early childhood and family strengthening programs. While the universal preschool program will launch in September 2024, fully implementing these recommendations and addressing challenges in the entire 0 to 5 system must be a process of continual and urgent innovation, engagement, and adaptation.

With the establishment of the universal preschool program, the Office of Early Childhood will define the components of a quality preschool program, including determining quality standards, requiring accountability, and addressing the needs of the whole child. Providers may participate and receive funding given they are licensed (or license-exempt), agree and adhere to all program requirements, participate in the evaluation process, and comply with other requirements as they are developed by the office. These recommendations outline the overarching framework needed to launch this program.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

The work of each of the three UPK task forces was to leverage their knowledge and expertise to establish a set of recommendations specific to the three major components of the universal preschool system: Workforce Development, Program Quality, and Family Hub. There are some general structural recommendations however, that inform the entire universal preschool system as a whole.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

These initial recommendations include:

- A formal name for Cambridge's universal preschool system is established and adopted, and used universally for all programs within the system, regardless of context or location.
- The universal preschool system is a mixed-delivery system, with capacity to serve the entire eligible population spread across Cambridge Public Schools, Department of Human Services Program preschools, Head Start, and community based programs.
- All children who are 4 years old prior to September 1 of each school year are eligible to enroll in the universal preschool program each year and are guaranteed placement at one of the aforementioned programs.
- All children who are 3 years old prior to September 1 of each school year and who are eligible to receive special education services OR live in households below a defined income threshold OR are English language learners OR have other defined risk factors are guaranteed placement at one of the aforementioned programs (with a limited number of placements available to 3 year olds who do not meet these eligibility requirements, but are enrolled in order to meet specific program requirements).
- All children are entitled to a 6 hour per day/school-year placement, with additional hours available depending on need and program (at no cost to families who meet certain eligibility requirements and on a sliding scale for those families who do not).
- Funding is provided to community based programs on a per classroom basis (with the per classroom fee being determined by the maximum group size as determined by the program).
- Additional funding would be available to programs based on the number of children enrolled in full-day/full-year programming and who meet defined income thresholds.
- Per classroom funding would be braided with other funding supports including federal Head Start funds, state contracted slots and voucher funds, and other state preschool focused early childhood funding, as appropriate.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A strong, educated, and well supported workforce is a key component of program quality and a necessity in the development of a successful universal preschool program. The workforce is defined as early childhood educators, program administrators, health, mental health, and special education staff. Ensuring we have the workforce defined above will require major investments in recruiting, developing, and retaining an effective, knowledgeable, and diverse workforce. While these recommendations center on the universal preschool workforce specifically, the aforementioned workforce needs are characteristic of all programs serving children birth to age 5. As the Office of Early Childhood works to implement these recommendations, strategies to strengthen the workforce as a whole and avoid any unintended consequences on the rest of the early childhood landscape will be paramount.

These initial recommendations include:

General

- Each universal preschool classroom must have at least one educator serving in a “lead teacher” capacity.
- Early childhood educators serving in a “lead teacher” capacity will have earned a minimum of a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or child development, or hold a current PK-3 teacher certification from DESE.
- Early childhood educators serving in an “assistant teacher” capacity will have earned a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent certification from EEC.
- Those serving in an administrative capacity in a program with universal preschool classrooms must have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or child development, or a directly related field, or hold a current administrators certification from DESE, with specialized knowledge and/or training in early childhood education.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT (CONT.)

Recruitment

- Create workforce qualification pathways that include a simplified process for current and aspiring early childhood educators to attain credentials and qualifications; providing a window of time in which to meet qualification requirements.
- Implement a system-wide salary scale that provides wages that are comparable across program settings and contexts, and that is aligned based on qualifications.
- Implement system-wide requirements ensuring benefits that are comparable across program settings and contexts.
- Ensure early childhood workforce is diverse and reflects the community we serve by honoring and incorporating speaking additional languages and cultural context as meaningful assets.
- Recruit and incentivize different populations (e.g., high school students, teachers from other countries, parents) to enter the early childhood workforce and reduce the barriers that prevent them from entering.

Retention

- Align available supports for teachers across programs and contexts.
- Ensure mentoring and/or coaching opportunities are universally and systematically available across the system.
- Host free and accessible professional development opportunities that allow for shared learning opportunities across the system.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

Development

- Connect members of the workforce to an early childhood career development professional as a resource.
- Clearly articulate required competencies needed by the workforce and align the system of professional learning to ensure the attainment of these competencies through identified partners, including higher education pathways.
- Increase access to professional development needed to attain these competencies and credentials through training, increased options for work-based learning, and stackable, credit-bearing experiences that align with degree pathways.
- Provide targeted support for members of the workforce who have faced historic and systemic barriers to ensure Cambridge's early childhood workforce is linguistically, racially, and culturally diverse.



UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

PROGRAM QUALITY

Cambridge's universal preschool program design ensures that children are not just eligible to attend preschool for a minimum of 6 hours per day during the school year, but that their family's preschool program of choice is **high quality**. To ensure the program is fulfilling its charge, the Office of Early Childhood will create universal preschool program quality standards that define our system and provide a basis in which to evaluate participating providers. Only early childhood providers who meet these standards will be eligible for universal preschool program funding. This includes setting program standards, evaluating curriculum, assessment tools, and screeners, and establishing overarching program measures. Establishing standards related to program quality requires considering and incorporating standards from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Head Start Performance Standards, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation standards.

These initial recommendations include:

- A maximum classroom size of 18 children.
- A maximum teacher:child ratio of 1:8.
- Adoption of one of a menu of research-based curricula that are rooted in play.
- Incorporation of an established, research-based approach to social-emotional learning.
- Annual external evaluations to measure classroom/program status and growth across the system.
- Commitment to anti-bias and anti-racist practices including the adoption of a no suspension/no expulsion policy.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

Initial recommendations (cont.)

- Documented family engagement strategies that are culturally responsive, equity-driven, and honor a child's caregiver/parent as their first and most important relationship.
- Adopting an agreed upon assessment approach to measuring child outcomes across the system and its variety of program contexts.
- Commitment to continuous self-study and quality improvement through NAEYC Accreditation or the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System.



UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

FAMILY HUB

Families' and caregiver's values, hopes, and dreams for their child are central to designing and implementing a successful universal preschool system. In addition, to ensure that each child has a meaningful and educational early childhood experience with the best possible outcomes, ensuring a child attends a preschool program that best meets their needs is paramount. With that, it is critical that the Office of Early Childhood clearly communicates information about the program options available to children and families, what each of those program options include (and do not include), and provide all of the information necessary in the decision making process prior to engaging in the universal preschool application process. Because of the varied nature of program types and program criteria that define individual program options within the mixed-delivery system, an aligned approach that provides a simple and seamless process for families as they navigate this very important transition in their child's life is key.

These initial recommendations include:

- A single, two-step application process for universal preschool that is managed by the Office of Early Childhood and supports subsequent enrollment at all universal preschool program sites including Cambridge Public Schools, DHSP preschools, and selected community based programs. The first step includes sharing child and family information, communicating preferences, and collecting documentation. After program assignment, the second step includes enrollment at the assigned program. Enrollment is completed by the program directly.
- A human-centered approach is given to the program assignment process, with the Office of Early Childhood working closely with the district, city, and programs to make placement decisions; honoring requested program make-up and other program requirements.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K RECOMMENDATIONS

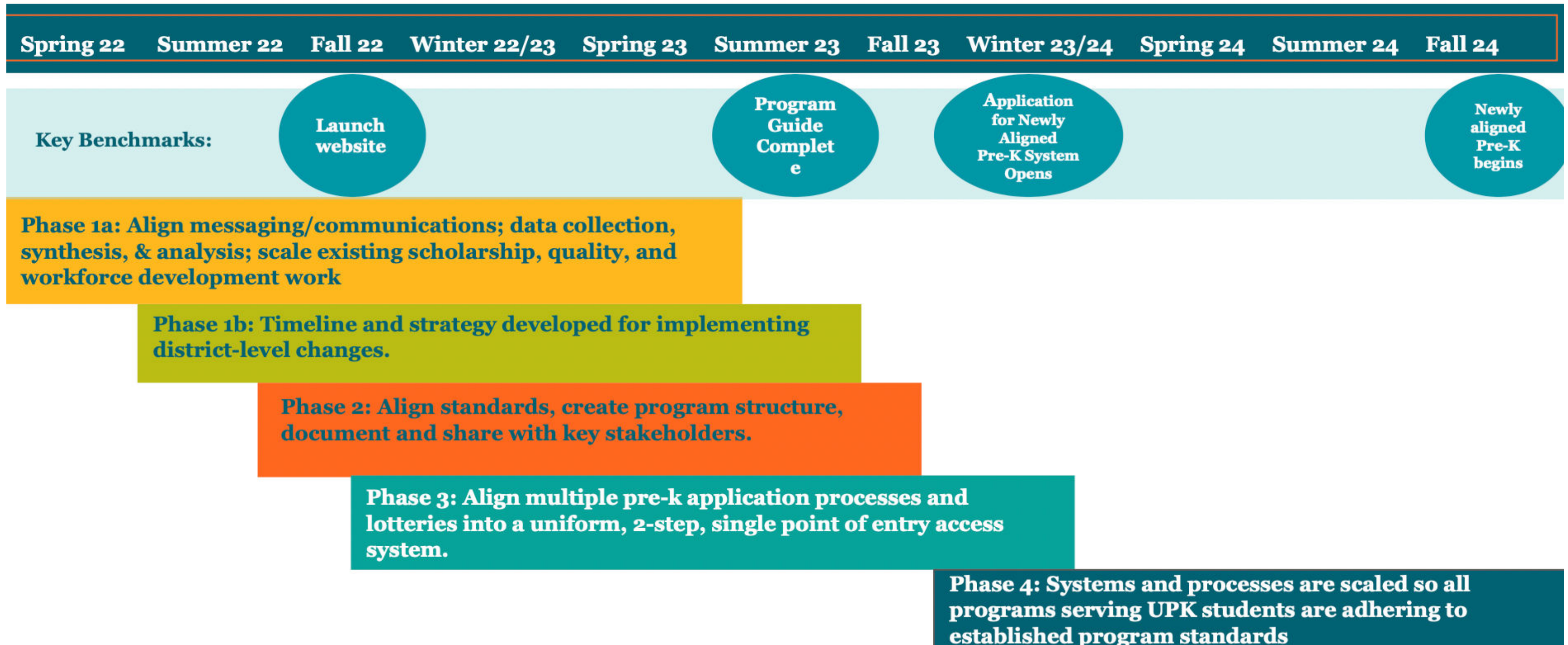
Initial recommendations (cont.)

- Developing an application process that is easy to navigate, is mobile accessible, translated into multiple languages, and available in paper form.
- The Office of Early Childhood will work closely with Cambridge Public Schools Student Registration Center, leveraging existing technologies to manage the application process and ensure seamless integration with subsequent Kindergarten lottery/application processes.
- Establishing procedures for case management for those children and families who need additional support outside of navigating the universal preschool application process.
- An application scoring system that prioritizes English language learners, children receiving special education services, children with limited resources and other risk factors, and the desire to remain in one's current program.
- A placement process that considered geography, demographics, program preference, program affiliation, transportation needs, length of school day needs, eligibility for other funding sources.



TIMELINE

Cambridge Universal Pre-K Planning Timeline



TIMELINE

Phase 1a is well underway and on time/target as the Office of Early Childhood has completed its rebranding including the launch of a brand-new website and has launched its evaluation work through the implementation of a family survey and program capacity survey. Programmatically, the current scholarship program (a precursor to UPK) is serving more children than it has since the inception of the Birth to 3rd Grade Partnership and a partnership with the Office of Workforce and Community Learning Center has begun its inaugural Early Childhood Career Pathways Program.

Phase 1b is also underway, with the motion to evaluate the formal separation of Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten, as well as to change the age of children enrolled in district universal preschool classrooms to 4 years of age by September 1, was made at a September School Committee meeting.

With consensus to adopt the overarching recommendations outlined in this document, **Phase 2 and 3** will begin immediately with the formation of a program guide that defines each component of the universal preschool program in greater detail, and the build-out of the current registration system to accommodate a central preschool application. Staff capacity will also be expanded to account for the increased scope and scale of this work.

In order to support the intentional work outlined in the phases described above, data will continue to be gathered in the form of surveys, convenings, focus groups, and interviews with specific constituent groups over the next several months. These groups include families, directors, family child care providers, principals, and educators.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K GLOSSARY

APPENDIX I: GLOSSARY

Below are some of the definitions, terms, and common phrases used within this report and the broader field of early childhood education.

DEFINITIONS

- **Universal Preschool or Universal Pre-K (UPK)** - Universal Preschool is a policy framework that gives all families with preschool-aged children the opportunity to voluntarily enroll their child in a publicly-funded pre-kindergarten care and education program in a given state or community.
- **Program Quality/Program Standards** - Guidelines for curriculum, assessment, program evaluation, student to teacher ratios and program supports.
- **Child Assessment** - Standardized tools to monitor program a child’s ongoing growth and development
- **Program Assessment** - Standardized tools to monitor program quality and/or quality improvement over time
- **Information Platform** - centralized location (web-based) where families, partner programs and other community partners can access information and communicate with the Office of Early Childhood.
- **Aligned programming** - agreed upon standards for policy and operations between multiple programs within the universal preschool system.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K GLOSSARY

ACRONYMS

COEC - Office of Early Childhood (formerly Birth to Third Grade Partnership)

DHSP - Department of Human Service Programs

CPSD/CPS - Cambridge Public Schools

DESE - Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

NAEYC - National Association for the Education of Young Children

EEC - Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM SETTINGS

Preschool - A school or program that provides educational services to children approximately 3 - 5 years of age. Preschools may run on a part-day or full-day basis, and typically operate during the school year, with additional programming sometimes available during the summer.

Infant/Toddler programs - A school or program that provides early care and education services to children approximately birth to age 3. Infant/Toddler programs typically run for a full-day, year-round, and are often a part of a larger program that also serves preschool aged children.

DHSP Preschools - City sponsored early childhood programs that are primarily housed in school district buildings, and serve preschool aged children.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K GLOSSARY

Junior Kindergarten (JK) - Cambridge Public Schools' current program children who are 4 years of age by March 31st of the enrolling school year. Junior Kindergarten may occur in classrooms exclusively serving JK students, or may be combined with Kindergarten classrooms.

Head Start - Head Start is a federally-funded, comprehensive developmental preschool program that provides a variety of wrap-around services to low-income preschool-aged children and their families. In our community, Head Start serves approximately 275 children and their families each year. Head Start supports the learning and development of children ages three to five in classrooms located throughout Somerville and Cambridge.