

CAMBRIDGE OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD N E W S L E T T E R

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CAMBRIDGE Office of Early Childhood

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.

The Cambridge Office of Early Childhood is a collaboration supported by the **City of Cambridge** and **Cambridge Public Schools**.





A LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

DR. CHERYL OHLSON

Dear Cambridge Early Childhood Community,

Welcome to the 2026–2027 school year! I hope you are all well and have found some time over the summer to rest, relax, and recharge. Now that we are several weeks into the school year, I hope the transition has been smooth for you and for the children, families, and professionals you work with.

This year, we will continue the changes we introduced last year, including using the Newsletter as a platform for early childhood providers across Cambridge to share ideas, experiences, and expertise. We hope it will serve as a “learning hub”—a place to deepen understanding of important topics, exchange ideas, and learn from one another.

Throughout the year, we may reach out to invite you to contribute content related to a particular topic. We hope you will consider sharing your knowledge and experience! And even if we don’t reach out directly, please let us know if there is something you would like to share. There is so much valuable experience and expertise within our Cambridge early childhood community, and we are excited to provide a space for you to share your ideas.

As we did last year, we will also continue to prioritize depth over breadth in the Newsletter. Last year, OEC staff, in partnership with stakeholders from across the City, spent many months developing the OEC Quality Benchmarks. The Benchmarks reflect the national research consensus on key characteristics of high-quality early childhood programming. They provide an accessible way to understand these characteristics and establish a shared language that supports professional learning and continuous quality improvement.

The Benchmarks draw on research-based best practices and locally and nationally recognized resources, including NAEYC, Teachstone CLASS, Massachusetts EEC, and others. They describe characteristics of high-quality early childhood programs that help create preschool environments where children can thrive—not only during the preschool years, but throughout their educational journey.

The Benchmarks focus primarily on process aspects of program quality, such as interactions, teacher sensitivity, and instructional support, rather than structural aspects, such as class size, adult-to-child ratios, and facilities. While structural elements provide an important foundation, research shows that process elements—the experiences children have in their daily interactions and learning environments—most directly support their social-emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development.

In this issue, we will introduce the Quality Benchmarks. In each subsequent issue, we will take a deeper look at one Benchmark, exploring the research and considering how it can inform practice. We’ve also included a wonderful piece from our colleagues at the DHSP preschools about strategies that they use to highlight learning for families. This article also shows the many ways that the DHSP preschools incorporate math and literacy learning into playful activities throughout the day!

As always, we appreciate your feedback, partnership, and expertise as we work together to support the young children, families, and educators of Cambridge. **We look forward to learning with and from you throughout the year!**

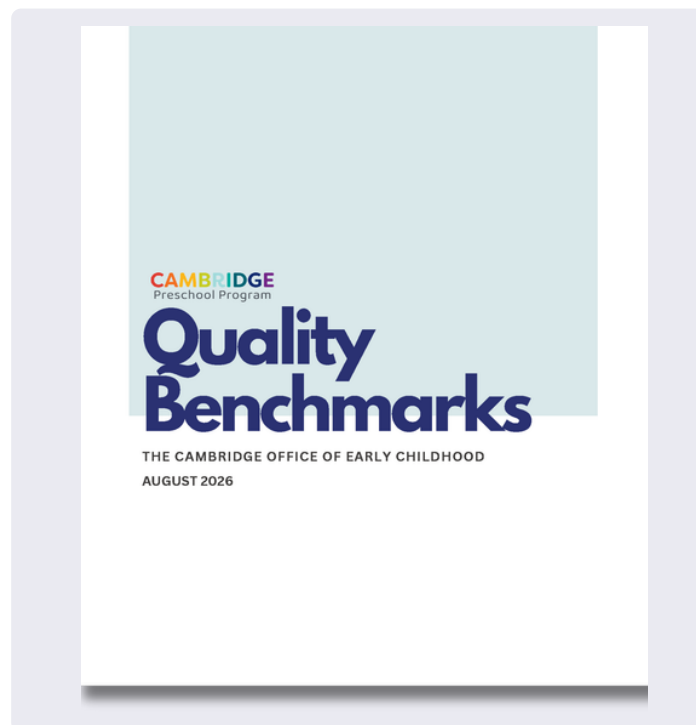
Cheryl Ohlson
Dr. Cheryl Ohlson

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE QUALITY BENCHMARKS

Early childhood professionals have long understood that the experiences that children have during their earliest years of life have a tremendous impact on their long-term development, and that these early experiences help to establish their learning trajectory for years to come. As such, we know that the quality of early childhood environments – home environments, childcare environments, preschool, etc. – is critical. High-quality childcare and preschool environments have a significant positive impact on children’s developmental outcomes, but lower-quality environments do not produce such positive benefits.

For several years now, the early childhood field has grappled with ways to define and measure the key features of quality, and how to do so in a way that promotes quality improvements. Much progress has been made in this regard, with the (now paused) QRIS system, NAEYC standards and accreditation system, state systems, and tools such as ECERs, CLASS, and others. **In the absence of an active QRIS system, the Cambridge Office of Early Childhood has joined this national conversation about defining and measuring early childhood program quality through the development of the OEC Quality Benchmarks.**

The Quality Benchmarks were developed last school year through a process that leveraged widely accepted and respected resources in the field and an extensive stakeholder engagement process. Each Benchmark includes a set of standards as well as descriptors or “look-fors” that are designed to make it clear to the reader what the standard looks like in practice. These Benchmarks reflect the national research consensus and are intended not only to clearly describe the quality expectations for all Cambridge Preschool Program (CPP) providers, but more broadly, to create a shared language for the educators and early childhood professionals of the City to use to facilitate and



promote professional learning and continuous quality improvement.

We hope that the Benchmarks will help to create a shared language within the early childhood community in the City that can be used to drive continuous improvement efforts by sparking dialogue, promoting reflection, and fostering continuous improvement efforts.

Through observations that are structured around the Benchmarks, data analysis, and reflective conversations, the Benchmarks can be used as a practical roadmap to enhance classroom and program practice by:

- **Identifying and celebrating programmatic strengths** – The Benchmarks reflect widely accepted characteristics of program quality and can be used to support self-reflection in a way that allows programs to recognize and celebrate their strengths and accomplishments.
- **Identifying programmatic growth areas** – Through classroom observations and reflective dialogue with staff, programs can use the Benchmarks to identify specific

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE QUALITY BENCHMARKS

growth areas and use the Descriptors to set goals for improvement that can be included in their Continuous Quality Improvement plans.

- **Set goals/targets, collect data, and measure progress** – Once a program has identified growth areas, they can use the Benchmark Standards and Descriptors to drive quality improvement by collecting data on the extent to which the Descriptor practices are implemented in the classroom, setting implementation targets, and working towards those targets while continually monitoring progress. **For example, if a program wants to work on the Standard “*Educators intentionally build strong relationships with children,*” they might:**
 - **Select specific descriptors** within that standard that they want to focus on (such as “*using children’s names when speaking with them*” and “*engage in back-and-forth conversation*”).
 - **Measure the extent** to which those practices are being implemented in the classroom. These measurements can be used as baseline data.
 - **Create specific goals/targets** and plans for intentionally increasing the use of these practices in the classroom. Program leaders can ensure that educators have the support they need (coaching, PD, classroom observations, and reflective conversations, etc.) to meet these goals/targets.
 - **Measure implementation** along the way and celebrate progress.

Next, you will find summaries of the five Quality Benchmark Areas. You can find the complete Benchmark document [here](#).

BENCHMARK - ADULT-CHILD INTERACTIONS

Young children experience their world through relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development—social, emotional, physical, intellectual, behavioral, and moral. The experiences that a child has in their earliest years shape their development, and educators play an important role in creating those experiences both in the classroom and through families by their use of positive communication and supportive partnership. A well-trained and intentional educator tailors their interactions to fit the needs of the child, using responsive language, engaging all children in classroom activities, fostering independence, and creating a language-rich environment. They communicate using warm, welcoming behaviors that promote conversations that deepen understanding, recognize children’s interests and needs, and know when to join play or allow for self-exploration. Educators foster a sense of belonging and support learning by providing consistency and being aware of and responsive to children’s needs.

BENCHMARK - PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Children need a physical setting—both inside and outdoors—where they can safely and freely play, explore, and learn. A high-quality learning and care environment includes engaging with developmentally appropriate materials and is arranged to promote independence, inquiry, and exploration based on the children’s different stages of development. Environmental practices refer to aspects of the space, materials, equipment, routines, and activities that educators and families/caregivers can intentionally tailor to support each child’s learning across developmental domains.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE QUALITY BENCHMARKS

BENCHMARK - RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

A high-quality curriculum supports children's learning in a program, from arrival to departure and beyond. It is based on research, is developmentally appropriate, play-based, and designed to promote whole-child growth while incorporating ongoing assessment to inform educators' planned and facilitated learning experiences. Children are viewed as strong, capable, and competent. A thoughtful and inclusive learning environment encourages active exploration, experimentation, and participation, ensuring all children, regardless of ability, have meaningful experiences. Educators use close observation and assessments to create nurturing, caring, and responsive relationships and environments that meet children's developmental needs while fostering growth over time.

BENCHMARK - FAMILY/CAREGIVER ENGAGEMENT

Family Engagement that connects families, children, and practitioners at all levels is systemic, intentional, and reflective. Effective family engagement involves connecting with families, interacting with them as equal partners, and establishing strong two-way communication channels with them. Creating a culture of family engagement involves a primary and continuous focus on engagement rather than a series of isolated or arbitrary efforts. A strong culture of family engagement respects families and grows and evolves with the needs of children, parents, families/caregivers, and practitioners. Strong family engagement practices can also improve child-educator relationships and help educators discover ways to build welcoming, safe, and trusting environments for all children.

BENCHMARK - PROFESSIONALISM

Clearly defining expectations for professionalism is an essential component for delivering high-quality education for infants and young children. Professionalism allows for multiple approaches and traditions and takes into account the varied contexts within which early educators and care providers work. The Professionalism Benchmark establishes the importance of outlining components of professionalism that, when met, will enhance not only program environments but also the experience of being an educator within those environments.

HIGHLIGHTING LEARNING WITH FAMILIES

Margaret Woisin, Senior Preschool Manager
Michelle Meyer, Preschool Manager

We asked all the educators in the preschool classrooms of the Department of Human Service Programs to choose two ways to highlight learning for families between the months of January and June last year. This was part of an effort to help families to better understand how their children are learning through our play-based curriculum.

Many families may not fully understand the value of play and how children learn through play. When families have questions about the value of play, this is a simple resource that you could share with them:

10 Things Every Parent Should Know About Play | NAEYC

Our approach to curriculum planning is to plan themes related to the interests of the children. We link all the activities that we plan to our assessment tool, COR Advantage (HighScope). Although we may emphasize some learning domains more than others depending on the topic, we consider it best practice to always have math and literacy activities planned each week. Here are a few suggestions we provided to our educators for highlighting learning in these domains:

LITERACY

- **Create a classroom book and share it with families.** You could show families the book when they are dropping off or picking up their children.
- **Choose one of the COR Advantage literacy items and send photos to all families of an activity related to this item.** For example, you could take photos of journaling to show how children are engaged in writing.



- **Complete an author study and highlight activities related to this study in an online publication or on a bulletin board.** If you choose to create a bulletin board, make sure all families are shown the bulletin board.
- **Share a poem or song you are teaching the children to help them learn rhyming words.** Have a chart of the poem or the song in the classroom to encourage the children to share it with their families. It could also be included in a newsletter.



- **Find opportunities to either write down or record what children say throughout the day.** Share what you have written or recorded with families.

HIGHLIGHTING LEARNING WITH FAMILIES

MATHEMATICS

We use engaging themes to teach basic skills in mathematics such as counting, sorting, and creating patterns:

- **Create a chart with the children and show the chart to families.** A tip for making it easy to create charts is to have the names and photos of the children laminated on small shapes or strips of paper (please see below). You can then reuse the names to create multiple charts. You can also share a photo of the chart with families, with an explanation of what the children learned. When children create a chart, they are engaged in data analysis.



- **Create a classroom book with the children related to a math concept.** There are a lot of creative ways to do this, from counting objects in the classroom to looking for shapes in the neighborhood. If you are focusing on a theme such as All About Me, you could share the data that you collect in a classroom book.



- **Create a bulletin board with multiple examples of how children are learning math through everyday activities in preschool.** For example, you could explain how children are learning measurement through a baking activity. If you create a bulletin board, make sure you include all the children and that you add explanations of what the children are doing.
- **Help families learn more about how young children learn math by sharing a few articles:**
 - [5 Ways to Build Math into Your Child's Day | NAEYC](#)
 - [10 Things to Know About Math | NAEYC](#)

News & Updates

Cambridge Preschool Program Family Information Session Webinar Tuesday, September 22, 2026 Zoom (Virtual), 7 - 8 p.m.

Cambridge Families! Attend this virtual meeting to learn more about CPP eligibility, program options, and the application and matching process.

Link --> <https://cpsd-us.zoom.us/j/95061933194>

For more information about the Cambridge Preschool Program, visit www.earlychildhoodcambridge.org/cpp.



CAMBRIDGE
Preschool Program

Cambridge Preschool Program Enrollment Fair

The Cambridge Office of Early Childhood is excited to host our 2nd Annual Cambridge Preschool Program (CPP) Enrollment Fair in preparation for the 2027-2028 application period, which will be open from **October 1 to November 13**!

Saturday, September 26, 2026
10:00 am - 12:00 pm
King Open School - Community Complex
830 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02141

Join us for children's activities, ice cream, and to:

- Explore the fantastic selection of preschool choices available through CPP
- Have your questions answered about individual programs
- Decide which programs you would like to visit during the provider open houses this Fall
- Learn more about the CPP!

Please Scan The QR Code To Fill Out A Short Pre-Attendance Survey!

Metered and permit parking will be available on surrounding streets.

For more information on CPP, visit www.earlychildhoodcambridge.org/cpp

The CPP Enrollment Fair is on September 26 10 am – 12 pm King Open School – Community Complex 830 Cambridge Street

Attend this free event to explore preschool choices available through CPP, meet preschool providers, and ask questions. Fun activities, children's entertainment, and ice cream will also be available at the event!

Enrollment Fair [Flyer & Translations](#)



CAMBRIDGE
Preschool Program
www.earlychildhoodcambridge.org/cpp

Access to Free, High-Quality Preschool

for all Cambridge 4-year-olds and prioritized 3-year-olds.

When To Apply?
The fall 2026 application window for enrollment in the 2027-2028 school year will be open from **October 1 to November 13, 2026**. Applications received after November 13th will be considered on a rolling basis.

A child is eligible if they live in Cambridge and are:

- 4 years old by August 31, 2027, or
- 3 years old* by August 31, 2027

*Please note there will be limited seats for 3-year-olds and there may be additional eligibility requirements.

Programs to Choose From:

- Cambridge Public Schools (CPS)
- City of Cambridge's Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP)
- Select community-based preschool & family childcare providers

What families should know about CPP:

- All Cambridge 4-year-olds qualify.
- Some Cambridge 3-year-olds qualify based on family income.
- The school-day*, school-year* portion of the preschool program is free.
- Full-day* preschool programs may have a cost.
- Families apply through a single, centralized online application.

Need More Information?
請參閱 Plus D'Informations
Plus d'information + 更多資訊
More information 更多資訊

Please scan the QR code for more CPP information!

Contact the Cambridge Preschool Program (CPP) at cpp@partnered.cpsd.us

*School Day - 6.5 hours *School Year - September to June
*Full Day - Beyond 6.5 hours

OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CAMBRIDGE OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES

UPDATED 2026

The Cambridge Preschool Program (CPP) Application for the 2027-2028 school year opens on October 1!

The Fall application window for the 2027-2028 school year will be open from **October 1 to November 13, 2026**.

Please encourage families to use the [CPP SEARCH TOOL](#) before applying.

[CPP Application Flyer & Translations](#)

Cambridge Office of Early Childhood

ABOUT US

The Cambridge Office of Early Childhood (OEC) is a collaborative office whose work and team are shared jointly by the City of Cambridge and Cambridge Public Schools.

Our Mission

The mission of the Cambridge Office of Early Childhood (OEC) 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.

Our Vision

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.

Our Commitment To Equity

All children have the right to equitable early childhood experiences that enable them to achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Thus, all early childhood educators and family support staff have a professional obligation to advance equity. They can do this best when they are effectively supported by the settings in which they work and when they and their wider communities embrace diversity and full inclusion as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable opportunities for children and their families. (Adapted from NAEYC's Position Statement on Advancing Equity)

CAMBRIDGE
Office of Early Childhood

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