

# new Americans

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## Child Care Decision-making of Refugee and Immigrant Parents of English Language Learners



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Final Report

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new  
Americans



## Child Care Decision-making of Refugee and Immigrant Parents of English Language Learners

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Furthermore, the findings from our study reflect the experiences and opinions of the research participants only and any policy recommendations we include in this report are those of the staff at the Cutler Institute and at Oldham Innovative Research who conducted this study. While the Advisory Committee helped us to conceptualize and carry out this study, and individual members provided us with comments on our recommendations, the final conclusions do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the individuals who served on that Committee.

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# new. Americans | Introduction

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or is afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

– UN Refugee Agency, 2010

The immigrant and refugee communities in the United States continue to increase. Denver, Colorado and Portland, Maine are two U.S. cities that reflect the changing demographics across the country. As these cities evolve and adjust to serve new populations, it becomes necessary to rethink deep-rooted culturally constructed patterns and traditions that do not take into account the beliefs and practices of these new cultures. One such tradition is child care. Because of the important link between preschool experiences and later school success, understanding refugee and immigrant families' beliefs and decisions about child care is extremely important. From a policy perspective, understanding these beliefs can guide professional development training for child care providers serving these linguistically and culturally diverse families. It can also inform public policies and practices with regard to child care resource, referral, and assistance. Despite the significant benefits quality early childhood education programs offer to immigrant and refugee children, the rates of enrollment for these populations are significantly lower than the rates for comparable children of U.S.-born parents. In order to better understand and address the needs of these new American families, providers and state policymakers need more in-depth knowledge about the perceptions of these families and the factors that influence their choice of care.

Aided by a diverse Advisory Committee, an in-depth, exploratory study was conducted in Denver, CO and Portland, ME with four New American communities; Mexican immigrants in Denver, and Cambodian, Somali, and Sudanese refugees in Portland. The contrasting beliefs, experiences, and decisions, not only among the immigrant and refugee populations themselves, but also within the political and historical contexts of the communities in which they live, offer an opportunity to enrich the research field on child care decision-making.

The distinction between refugees and immigrants can be important due to the difference in services provided. In the U.S., refugees are authorized to work upon arrival, and are eligible for federal benefits to help them begin their lives again. Refugees are eligible to apply for permanent resident status after one year of physical presence in the United States. Immigrants do not receive these services. Refugee families also bring unique challenges related to the trauma they have suffered in their native country. They have suffered multiple losses often including the ability to return to their country, the death of family members, and a sense of safety, in addition to the loss of status, sense of identity, support system and, in many cases, the ability to communicate easily that all immigrants may endure (Tribe & Keefe, 2009).

... there was as much variation *within* each of the cultural groups as there was *between* different cultural groups.

Conducting research in this area is a complex undertaking. Understanding the factors influencing refugee and immigrant parents' decisions about the care of their children requires sorting through the issues faced by any parent balancing work and family, as well as those concerns that may be unique to refugee and immigrant populations. All of these factors are further affected by the interplay of the refugee and immigrant cultures and mainstream American culture. In an effort to learn directly from refugee and immigrant parents as well as child care providers, K-2 teachers and refugee/immigrant service providers, the exploratory study described here attempts to identify these factors and begin to understand how they influence the choices parents make in arranging for the care of their children.

### **Study Locations**

For both states involved in the study, we targeted our efforts in areas with large populations of immigrant and/or refugee families; in turn, this is where child care providers and K-2 teachers are most likely to have exposure to these families. To obtain information from our target populations, focus groups were conducted with refugee and immigrant parents, interviews were conducted with child care providers, K-2 teachers, and service providers who interact with immigrant and refugee parents, and a survey was conducted of child care providers and K-2 teachers. It is important to note that this study is focused on a relatively small number of refugee and immigrant parents. We found there was as much variation *within* each of the cultural groups as there was *between* different cultural groups. Findings should be considered in this light.

### **Maine**

The total number of refugees admitted to the United States in 2009 increased 24 percent from 2008, from 60,107 to 74,602. This is following a 25 percent increase between 2007 and 2008 (Martin, 2010). In Maine, Androscoggin and Cumberland Counties have the largest percentage of refugee families. Most live in Auburn, Lewiston, Portland, and South Portland. Somali and Sudanese families represent two of the larger refugee populations in Maine, but Cambodian families have been established in the area for a longer period of time. The primary languages spoken by these populations are Somali, Arabic, and Khmer, respectively. The surveys were sent out to child care providers and K-2 teachers in all four towns; the focus groups were held with families located in Portland.

Research demonstrates that preschool attendance significantly raises English-language proficiency. It also increases reading and math scores for these children as much as it does for other, comparable children

—Magnuson, et al, 2006

## Colorado

Mexican immigrants make up 39% of all immigrants in the United States. There were 11.4 million Mexican-born residents in the United States in 2008; Colorado is one of ten states with the largest populations of Mexican-born residents with 250,329 in 2008 (Terrazas, 2010). For this study, we focused our efforts on five counties with the highest percentage of recent Mexican immigrants: Denver, Eagle, Garfield, Adams and Arapahoe. The surveys were sent out to child care providers and K-2 teachers in the above counties.<sup>1</sup> The focus groups took place in Denver.

The current conceptual model of child care decision making in use by the Administration for Children and Families was a helpful framework for this study (Weber, 2008). This model highlights key factors that may influence parents' decisions about child care, including such practical considerations as cost of care, transportation, and hours of operation, as well as parental values and beliefs (Weber, 2011).

## Brief Review of Literature

Recent research has examined the early care and education (ECE) enrollment rates for immigrant and refugee children, as well as the benefits these children may gain from attending quality ECE programs. Children from immigrant families, especially if they are low income, are less likely to be enrolled in formal child care arrangements (Delgado, 2009; Matthews & Jang, 2007; Brandon, 2004). Yet, it is well established that high quality ECE programs can help children gain the skills they need to be ready for school (Bardige, 2005; Karoly, et al, 2005; Smart Start Evaluation Team, 2003). Research demonstrates that preschool attendance significantly raises English-language proficiency. It also increases reading and math scores for these children as much as it does for other, comparable children (Magnuson, et al, 2006). High quality ECE programs provide a way to track children's development and emotional well being and connect them, if needed, with early intervention services. This may be of particular benefit to children of refugee families who may have experienced violence or trauma in their native country (Fantino and Colak, 2001). Finally, ECE programs can link immigrant and refugee parents to employment, health, and other social services, as well as help with parenting, English acquisition, and literacy skills (Capps, et al, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> The child care provider surveys were initially sent out to providers in Denver, Eagle and Garfield counties. To increase the pool of providers, we then sent surveys to providers in Adams and Arapahoe. The elementary teacher surveys were sent to Denver, Eagle and Garfield counties.

...this study attempts to understand refugee and immigrant families' beliefs about and experiences with child care, and how these factors impact their decision-making processes.

Although research has demonstrated the positive impact early care and education has on immigrant and refugee populations, little research exists to examine the child care decision making processes of the parents in these same populations. *Are the lower enrollment rates of English Language Learners (ELL) in ECE programs a reflection of child care preferences or the result of other constraints to accessing child care?* A recent study of Latino parents' child care usage suggests that, at least for the Latino population, low enrollment patterns may not reflect choice so much as external characteristics, such as multiple children in the family, the lack of quality child care programs in low income neighborhoods, the need for coverage when children are sick, and the availability of extended family. These factors relate to lower rates of enrollment for any population, but are simply more predominant among Latino families: "...Latinos do not have an innate aversion to child care or early education for their children, but rather limited access to affordable care" (Delgado, 2009). Indeed, among those parents who do not have care, Delgado found that Latinos express a significantly greater desire for such care, provided it is accessible and affordable, than do non-Latino whites. Delgado notes that a limitation of her research is that it does not address whether Latino parents' decisions about use of relative care also may be related to a desire for more culturally competent care.

Using a participatory, mixed-methods approach by incorporating a community-embedded advisory group to guide the interviews, focus groups, and surveys, this study attempts to understand refugee and immigrant families' beliefs about and experiences with child care, and how these factors impact their decision-making processes.

## **Methodology**

### *Focus groups with parents of young children*

Focus groups were conducted in Portland, Maine and Denver, Colorado with refugee and immigrant parents of young children ages 0-6. We contracted with local organizations that have long-standing relationships with the immigrant and refugee communities. In Denver, we contracted with the Latin American Research and Services Agency (LARASA). In Portland, we contracted with the Multilingual and Multicultural Center of the Portland Public Schools. These organizations provided cultural brokers that had long-standing relationships with, or were members of, the communities in the focus groups. The cultural brokers established an appropriate setting and time, invited families and, in some cases, brought the families to the setting for the focus group. They also helped parents fill out forms to gather basic demographic information about their families. In Portland, the cultural broker provided simultaneous

translation during the focus group sessions while the researchers facilitated in English. In Denver, the cultural broker facilitated the focus groups directly in Spanish. Finally, the cultural brokers reviewed the transcripts from the focus groups assuring accuracy of translation and meaningful interpretation of findings. In both cities, focus groups were asked questions relating to the following:

- their beliefs about raising children,
- beliefs about child care,
- factors influencing decisions about child care,
- the ease of signing up for child care, and
- perceptions of the quality of child care.

In Portland, Maine, a total of six focus groups were held with three cultural groups: two with Cambodian parents, two with Somali parents, and two with Sudanese parents. For each group, we attempted to conduct one focus group with parents who were using child care and one with parents who were not.

Similarly, in Denver, Colorado, a total of six focus groups were held with Mexican immigrants; three groups with parents who were using child care and three with parents who were not using child care.

*Interviews with early care providers and K-2 teachers*

In each location, we attempted to schedule interviews with the following groups:

- child care center director and/or teacher,
- Head Start director and/or teacher,
- child care resource and referral,
- public preschool program director and/or teacher,
- family child care provider, and
- elementary teacher.

**Table 1**

	Maine	Colorado
Child Care Director	3	1
Head Start Director	2	4
Child Care R&R Director	1	1
Public Preschool Director	1	2
Public Preschool Teacher	2	0
Family Child Care Provider	1	1
Kindergarten Teacher	2	0
Training Manager	0	1
Child Care Referral Specialist	0	1

We completed 23 interviews as indicated in Table 1. Interview questions focused on the school readiness of immigrants/refugees, the ability to involve parents in school, the beliefs about integration of immigrants/refugees, and the beliefs about English language acquisition among immigrant/refugees.

### *Interviews with service providers interacting with immigrant and refugee parents*

In each location, we attempted to schedule interviews with immigrant/refugee services, social service providers and state agency/system key players. We completed 19 interviews. Because in some cases identifying the position of the interviewee would allow for identification of the individual, we will report only broad categories. In Maine we held seven interviews with refugee services staff, TANF/ASPIRE staff and state-level ESL and preschool program staff. In Colorado we held 12 interviews with state level preschool, child care, human services and language acquisition staff; legal services staff; and immigrant service provider staff. Interview questions focused on the type of child care being used by parents/clients, influences on clients choosing child care, barriers to choice of child care, and information offered by agencies on child care/child care choices.

Interview questions focused on the type of child care being used by parents/clients, influences on clients choosing child care, barriers to choice of child care, and information offered by agencies on child care/child care choices.

### *Child care provider surveys*

We designed a survey to be administered to early care and education providers. Because of concerns about length, we divided the survey into two sections, one longer survey (the Main Survey) and a brief survey asking questions specifically about training on immigrant and refugee issues in child care. The longer survey was sent by mail and email to a list of providers supplied by local child care resource and referral agencies. The survey asked questions relating to the following:

- experience serving immigrant/refugee families,
- challenges expected and experienced,
- accommodations made for families,
- communication with families,
- level of parent involvement,
- concerns about and opportunities to serve immigrant/refugee families, and
- expanding child care choices for immigrant/refugee families.

The brief survey, with questions pertaining to training and beliefs about English language acquisition, was administered over a three-month period to all providers that attended regularly scheduled training sessions. The brief survey was only administered in Maine as we were unable to obtain permission to administer the survey at training sites in Colorado. Because the brief survey was handed out at training sessions, the responses are more representative of providers who are likely to seek out and attend training.



Surveys were sent with a cover letter twice, with a month between the mailings. To increase the response rate in Colorado, the Colorado Division of Child Care agreed to have the cover letter printed on their letterhead and signed by the director of the division. As incentive, we also offered a drawing for one of five \$100 gift cards. Of the 144 surveys sent out in Maine, 95 were returned for a response rate of 65.9%. Of the 312 surveys sent out in Colorado, 94 were returned for a response rate of 30.1%.

### *K-2 teacher surveys*

A survey was designed for kindergarten, first and second grade teachers to obtain their perceptions about the impact of attendance in early care and education programs on the school readiness of children from these populations. The survey was sent by mail to a list of teachers retrieved from elementary school websites. The survey asked teachers about the following:

- experience with teaching immigrant/refugee children,
- efficacy of ELL instruction currently provided,
- knowledge about the cultures of families,
- interactions with and accommodations for immigrant/refugee families,
- influence of preschool on school performance,
- expected and encountered challenges with teaching ELL students,
- knowledge of English language acquisition, and
- related training received.

The survey was sent out twice with a month between mailings: one before the winter holidays and one after. As incentive, we offered a drawing for one of ten \$50 gift cards. Of the 426 surveys sent out in Maine, 137 were returned for a 32.1% response rate. Of the 233 surveys sent out in Colorado, only 42 were returned for an 18.0% response rate. (See below for a fuller discussion of the potential reasons for this low response rate.) In light of this low response rate, we only report relevant *qualitative* data (answers to open-ended questions) from the survey of teachers in Colorado.

A survey was designed for kindergarten, first and second grade teachers to obtain their perceptions about the impact of attendance in early care and education programs on the school readiness of children from these populations.

### *Methodological Limitations*

We address methodological limitations in four areas: focus group recruitment, focus group findings, representativeness of focus group findings, and survey response rate.

#### **Focus Group Recruitment in Maine** ---

We worked with cultural brokers to recruit participants for the focus groups. We explained the purpose of the study and our desire for particular study participants. Our initial concept was to have one focus group within each cultural group for parents who had children ages 0-6 in child care and another for parents whose children were not in care. However, during the focus group sessions, it was apparent that there were a multitude of child care arrangements in each grouping and not a clear “in care” or “not in care” grouping. Thus, we adjusted the focus group questions to match the participants.

It is also important to note that the cultural groups in Maine are relatively small. Thus, many of the focus group participants knew each other and most knew the cultural broker, who also served as the translator during the session. Many focus groups are essentially a “conversation among strangers” to elicit a diversity of opinions. In these focus groups, the dynamic was very different and this dynamic may have affected the amount and substance of information gathered.

#### **Focus Group Recruitment in Colorado** ---

In Colorado, due to the assistance of cultural brokers familiar with research and child care we were able to achieve a distinction between groups: parents in half of the groups had children in child care and parents in the other groups did not.

Many focus groups are essentially a “conversation among strangers” to elicit a diversity of opinions. In these focus groups, the dynamic was very different and this dynamic may have affected the amount and substance of information gathered.



... parents in the in-care groups [In Maine] may not be typical of refugee parents in general both in the cultural competence of the child care settings they use and in their own level of sophistication about child development and school readiness.

### Focus Group Findings in Maine

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Aside from the lack of clear distinctions between focus groups within each cultural group, it was also apparent that a child being “in care” or “not in care” was not always the result of a *preference* for one type of care or the other on the parents’ part. For some parents, having children at home was a clear choice rising from a belief that their child was better off being cared for by the parent, a member of the extended family or by someone from their own community until the child was old enough to enter kindergarten. However, the children of other focus group participants were not in care because they hadn’t reached the age at which their parents felt they were ready for a child care program. When they reached the age of three or four, the parents said that they planned to enroll them. Still others in the “not in care” groups said that they would like to enroll their children but felt that child care was too expensive. Having the children stay with their grandmother was cheaper and they didn’t know that Head Start was free. Thus, views of child care did not differ as much as we expected between the in-care and out-of-care groups.

In addition, because refugee populations in Portland are so small, and so dependent on the few interpreters available to learn about child care options, families are often told about only one or two child care programs. These programs tend to be fairly sophisticated in the level of care and support, including parent education, which they provide. Thus, parents in the in-care groups may not be typical of refugee parents in general both in the cultural competence of the child care settings they use and in their own level of sophistication about child development and school readiness.

This information should be taken into account when considering the findings.

### Representativeness of the Focus Group Findings in Maine and Colorado

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Caution should be taken not to ascribe our findings from the parent focus groups to any larger population. They reflect only the opinions of those parents who participated in the focus groups. It is particularly important to keep this in mind when studying linguistically and culturally diverse populations to avoid attributing behaviors, opinions and preferences to whole cultures of individuals. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, we found as much variation within each of the cultural groups in our study population as we did between parents from different cultural groups.

We heard from child care providers and state employees that the negative climate towards Mexican immigrants in Colorado may have kept people from filling out the survey.

### Survey Response Rate in Colorado

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The response rate for the Colorado child care survey, and especially the teacher survey, was particularly low. Multiple methodological strategies were employed, including two mailings of the survey, using an envelope and letterhead from the Colorado Office of Child Care for the second mailing to increase the likelihood that the mailing would be opened and read, and two emails with a link to complete the survey online. A multitude of factors may have contributed to the low response rate.

The topic of the survey in Colorado, Mexican immigrant child care decisions and use, may have been a deterrent. We heard from child care providers and state employees that the negative climate towards Mexican immigrants in Colorado may have kept people from filling out the survey. Because of the fear of being identified without legal papers, coupled with the poor economic climate, we also heard reports that the number of immigrants in child care was declining. Thus, some child care providers receiving the survey may have felt the topic wasn't relevant to them.

We had an even more challenging time getting K-2 teachers in Colorado to respond to the survey intended for them. Significant budget cuts were happening within the school system at the time of the survey. That, coupled with the fact that we were not well-known in the Colorado school districts, and the extremely limited time of teachers may have resulted in a low response rate. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, quantitative data from the teacher survey in Colorado is not reported here.

Lastly, as mentioned, we were not able to obtain permission to administer the short survey on training needs at training sites in Colorado and therefore we are only able to report the results of that survey for respondents in Maine.

The following sections outline the individual results from the Maine and Colorado case studies. In order to respect the differences between and among immigrant and refugee communities, the information is presented by community with no attempt to generalize findings between populations. As policies and practices differ regionally and from state to state, the participant responses are embedded in that context, and while they offer illustrative lessons, cannot be generalized to other locations.

# new Americans | Case Study in Maine



## Somali, Sudanese and Cambodian Refugee Parents' Perspectives

The refugee population in Portland, Maine is diverse. The 1,800 students attending Portland Public Schools come from homes where over 60 different languages are spoken, from Acholi and Arabic to Khmer and Vietnamese (Portland Public Schools, 2010). This diversity provides unique challenges beyond the typical language barriers for both parents and child care providers; at any one time, a substantial number of providers are caring for children in their classrooms who speak a wide variety of languages. Almost one third (29%) of child care providers surveyed reported having 3-8 languages spoken by students in their classroom, and, by extension, the families they serve. Perspectives below were gathered at focus groups of Cambodian, Somali and Sudanese parents.

*What do refugee parents believe about raising their children?*

*How do they compare themselves to native born American parents?*

*What cultural beliefs may influence parent's decisions about child care?*

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As noted above, with all findings from the study there was as much variation within each of the cultural groups as there was between different cultural groups. However, one commonality found during the focus groups was that parents across the cultural groups noted that many American parents lack the support of extended family living close by—a support they said is common among families in their own cultures. They also expressed regret that in the United States there seems to be less family time and that child rearing seems much more structured.

Back home when we have kids we have elders stay at home. They don't go to work. They take care of our kids for free. We have grandparents who are home. We have moms who are home. They just sit outside under a tree and take care the whole day, and the baby has privilege to run everywhere and play. Here you need to go and leave him—just like a prisoner. –Sudanese refugee parent

At the same time, Sudanese parents expressed admiration for what they saw as the ability of American parents to keep their children close by and well-behaved in public. They wanted help in learning how to handle their children in this culture. They explained that in the rural areas of their native country, children have more freedom to wander and they could depend on others to watch their children wherever they might roam; parents didn't worry about their safety. In contrast, parents felt

it was much harder to raise children here and they felt more alone in shouldering that responsibility. Some expressed fear for their children's safety in their new neighborhoods and several felt that their neighbors were too quick to report them to the police if they allowed their children to play outside alone.

At home [in their native country], the kids just play. They can play outside there. Everybody knows each other's children—"this is so-and-so's child"—so let them play. Nobody will bother your child. There will be no police. But here you are always being followed. If a child is out, why is this child outside here? Then the police will come to you or probably people from child protection will come. "Why did you leave your child out?" So there is no freedom. There, anyone else in the community will save your child. The kids will eat together and then they play until evening when the child will come home. Here you are like in prison because if anything happens wrong, it's hard. –Sudanese parent

These differences in child rearing practices between native born Americans and refugee parents seemed to have influenced some parents' decisions about child care. Although they might have preferred to have their children at home, this lack of freedom to explore led some parents to feel that their children "might as well be in a child care program." Otherwise, they would just "stay in the house and watch TV all day."

In our own country we live in a group of relatives so if she has a child who is, say, ten years old and I have a baby related to her, the ten-year-old would be responsible for this child. You have somebody to take care of your child. You are near; you are not going to be far away. She just holds the child when you're working...if something happens you are right there and you know somebody you can count on is there. Also your aunts are there, your mothers, your mothers-in-law. As soon as you have a baby, they are right there for you. You don't have to look for a daycare or look for someone to take care. –Sudanese parent

In contrast, refugee parents from Cambodia felt that American children were given too *much* freedom and were expected to be independent much too early. In their opinion, the bond between Cambodian parents and their children seemed stronger than that between American parents and their children.

Americans tend to let the children be free more than Cambodians. American parents give more freedom to children to select what kind of food to eat, where to go to play...Cambodian parents discipline them to stay home and eat whatever the family cooks. –Cambodian parent

I ...just feel bad for the kids—some parents they don't feel very deeply for the child, they just put them away when they are born until they 18, 19. We Cambodian people, Asian people very love their child. They just sleep in one bed altogether in the whole family and for us it seems like in America [there are] a lot of options to take care of your child. We want to deeply care until they are old enough that they can go by their own. We try to make scheduling between me and my wife to stay home. –Cambodian parent

Sudanese and Somali parents also noted significant differences between cultures in how children are disciplined. Accepted disciplinary practices in their native countries, such as spanking, are not considered appropriate in this country. As a result, parents worried that if they continued those practices, they would get in trouble with the police. Parents expressed a strong desire to receive training in disciplinary practices that are acceptable in this country.

*What is important to parents in raising their children and what do they hope their children will learn before they enter kindergarten?*

---

Parents consistently focused on socio-emotional skills and other critical components of school readiness. They had very specific ideas about what they want their children to learn prior to kindergarten, including:

- To show respect for adults and to learn how to say “thank you” when someone does something for you, to say “hello” and “good morning.”
- To learn good hygiene: how to use the bathroom, wash hands after using the bathroom and before eating.
- To learn good behaviors, their religion, their health, and to listen to their parents.
- To learn how to share, how to play with other kids.
- To learn how to hold a pen.
- How to write, how to color, how to do games, puzzles.

Before your child enters kindergarten you need to teach your child respect—we need to teach them before they get to school because we don't want to be shamed and get complaining your child did this ... the mother should try her best to teach her child the respect and behavior. –Sudanese parent

It makes me happy to see my kids do things he doesn't do at home to challenge himself. It makes me exciting and he tells me what that means and where he went and how many friends he has, so he's very active. When you see your child active it makes you happy. –Somali parent

He learn sharing; he learn different cultural; he learn English language...so definitely he is good now. He knows a lot of things... At the same time, my son he's losing a lot of culture or religion from my country. When he went for Head Start or kindergarten, he's losing some and he learns some. So is very, very tough challenge. –Somali parent

(It is important) that they learn the language and when they go to school, when they start kindergarten they already know what they can do and they can speak with other children there... that is the important thing. In daycare they teach them letters or alphabet and they know that and the rules too. They know how to speak if the other child speaking and they know what they do when they go (to school). It's better then. That's what I think. –Sudanese parent

I kept (my son) at home before he entered kindergarten and when he entered kindergarten, it was big problem for him. He fights and he bites other kids and that was so hard for him to adjust. Compared to my younger son right now because he is in daycare right now, now he plays very well with other kids. You know because he gets used to the kids and also to the discipline, also to the rules and now he is doing ok. And when he will enter kindergarten, he will be fine because he already knows what he can do. –Sudanese parent

### *Positive Aspects of Child Care*

To learn more about refugee parents' views about child care, questions differed for those who had children in care and those who did not. Those parents in the "in-care" focus groups were asked to identify the most important reason they placed their child in care, what they look for in a child care program, and what makes them comfortable or uncomfortable about a child care setting. Parents in the "not in care" focus groups were asked what they thought about child care in this country, whether there were any circumstances under which they would place their child in a child care program, and what they would look for in a child care setting if they did decide to look for care.

Among refugee parents in Maine, the answers revealed an array of complex, sometimes contradictory attitudes toward child care, views about what enrollment in a care setting might do for their child along with fears and misunderstandings about child care.

The following benefits of enrollment in care were mentioned by parents:

- **Child care provides more opportunities to learn.** Parents noted that child care gives children the opportunity to learn academic skills (e.g. letters, sounds, holding a pen, etc.) and social skills (e.g. sharing, listening, not interrupting). Parents also noted that child care offers more activities, materials, toys, and books than the child would have at home.

My son had home care and when he turned three we sent him to daycare center. Now he learns a lot. Before he learned my language. He stayed home with a babysitter. Now he's speaking English; he has a lot of activity. –Somali parent

- **Child care allows children to socialize and learn about American culture and American schools.** Parents felt that child care provides a good opportunity for their children to socialize with other children. They wanted their child to learn about American culture (including learning English) and thought those settings were a place to break down racial barriers. They also noted that child care introduces children to rules and schedules similar to those encountered in elementary school.

Before he stayed in my home; he don't go outside...he was sad. But now he goes everywhere they take the daycare. He talks; he knows things he didn't know before; he's a whole new boy now really; he's very active. Before he was in babysitting with other two kids and now he's in a whole group like 20 kids so it's very good and I hope he's doing that until kindergarten and he's starting kindergarten work and it's good English not ESL, that's what I'm hoping. –Somali parent

- **Child care provides a safe, well-regulated setting.** Parents felt comfortable that their children who are enrolled in child care settings benefited from the governmental regulation of these programs and, according to these parents, the associated rules and oversight to ensure their child is safe. Parents also valued the training teachers receive. Specifically, they felt good knowing that if their child became ill, there was someone in the child care setting who would know what to do. Lastly, parents found it easier to know what was going on in a child care center than in an informal setting (family, friends or neighbors).



Many of the refugee parents' concerns about child care mirrored concerns raised by parents in general in making these choices for their children

- **Child care can connect parents to other services.** Parents noted that having their children in care meant that their children would be assessed and would receive any services they need. They also mentioned that being a part of a child care setting connected parents to additional services (especially when the child care provider is a multi-service agency).

### *Concerns about Child Care*

Generally, those parents who were less educated, spoke limited or no English, and had recently arrived in the United States had more concerns and fears about child care than did those who had more education, spoke English, and had been here longer. Many of the refugee parents' concerns about child care mirrored concerns raised by parents in general in making these choices for their children (Weber, 2011).

These included:

- a mismatch between work hours and the hours of operation of child care;
- the high cost of care and the availability of cheaper alternatives such as extended family;
- a desire to have their child in a less-structured, more family-like setting where they can get more attention;
- a desire to keep young children with parents or extended family members;
- health and safety concerns with child care, including concerns about changing diapers often enough, inattentive caregivers, and increased exposure to illness; and
- a desire to insulate children from negative peer influence and learning bad behaviors.

In contrast, parents also shared many concerns about child care that seemed to be tied to their cultural beliefs and struggles with language barriers, many of which relate back to the findings about child rearing practices and the development of school readiness skills discussed earlier. These concerns about child care should be considered in the

Because the child spends most of the time at daycare I would like them to teach him religion and where he is from and introduce the culture because where he goes to school most of the students are Christian and he is Muslim. One day he came home and said, "I need to change my name and also need to change my religion." Because he doesn't have time to learn his religion and when he gets home I don't have the time to teach him. I would like the daycare to tell the children about religion, "you are Muslim." –Sudanese parent



context of a refugee population living in a state which is 95.3% Caucasian, non-Hispanic, and one in which very few child care programs are run by and/or staffed by individuals from refugee communities.

**Fear of children losing their culture and language.** Many parents, particularly in the Sudanese and Somali parent focus groups, were concerned that if their children enrolled in a child care program they would be less likely to hold on to their native language. They believed that their children would learn English no matter where they were cared for during their preschool years, but that they would be much more likely to become proficient in *both* languages if they stayed home, or were cared for by someone from their community, before entering kindergarten. It was particularly important to parents that their children be able to converse with relatives who didn't speak English, either here or when they visit their native countries.

I want my children to learn both languages but when the children start school and daycare they are going to lose it along the way. They can't stop it. My children, one of them complains that Cambodian is too hard to speak. Even though you speak it every day at home they're not going to remember what you tell them. They remember what they speak with their friends in English. –Cambodian parent

The kids are taken to Head Start. They pick up the English first and the mother who's at home does not speak English so there would be lack of communication. And the kids basically will pick up the language and they will make fun of mom who doesn't speak English. Basically, the antipathy starts right there. –Somali parent

Parents also worried that enrollment in child care would make it harder for their child to retain and learn about their own culture and adhere to religious practices. Specifically, Somali and Sudanese parents expressed great concern over violating religious dietary restrictions at child care programs. However, the child care providers interviewed in the programs which served these populations were attuned to these dietary restrictions and had put measures in place to address them.

When I see pork I say maybe my baby's not safe. ...some babies at child care they use formula that comes from pork- that's against our religion. –Somali parent

**Discrimination.** For some parents, concerns over whether their child might be discriminated against, particularly when they are too young to stand up for themselves, fueled fears about child care. Several parents reported incidents in which their children felt hurt by remarks made by other children about their race. Some Cambodian parents worried that at age three or four, their child might be unfairly accused of something and not be old enough to explain what happened. They also worried that because of their own language barriers, they wouldn't be able to intervene to defend their child. These parents felt more confident that by age six, their children could relate what happened and stand up for themselves against any accusations. This was one reason given for keeping children home until they reached school-age.

When my daughter gets home she tells me what is going on in daycare and she will say that the kids tell her, "You have brown skin" and "You look different." She used to go to camp and they told her the same thing. This year she refused to go to camp. She said, "Oh, they will tell me I am different and I have brown skin." –Sudanese parent

**Concerns about disciplinary practices.** Concerns and misconceptions about disciplinary practices seemed to emerge in part from misunderstandings due to language barriers, including a lack of materials translated into parents' languages explaining these policies. For example, a number of parents were unsure what a "time out" meant. Some parents said it meant that their child would have to stand up for a long time. One parent believed that children were locked up during a "time out." Another parent said she would not place her child in a child care program because she was afraid that if her child misbehaved, "his food rations would be cut back." Parents want to have information about disciplinary practices in child care centers more clearly explained and translated into their native languages. For example, they would like a definition of the term "time out" and an adequate explanation of the policies related to this practice.

As discussed previously, Sudanese and Somali parents expressed concern that disciplinary practices that are acceptable in their own culture, such as spanking, are not considered appropriate in the United States. They worried that if they enrolled their children in child care and the children told their teachers that they were being spanked at home, the providers would report the parents to the police. Parents wished that providers would teach them alternative disciplinary methods, rather than

too quickly judging a method that parents experienced in their own upbringing and do not see as wrong. These feelings also reflect a deep distrust of the police by some parents, in part based on negative experiences with law enforcement and the government in their native countries.

Several Somali and Sudanese parents worried that if they enrolled their children in child care, their children would learn that the disciplinary practices used at home were not acceptable in the United States, and would use that knowledge to question their parents' authority. Some based that fear on previous experiences with their teenage children; when parents asked their teenagers to do something that they did not want to do, their children would tell them, "In this country we have rights. All I have to do is call the police."

...something that I notice at daycare center is the provider tries to find out if the child goes to child care in dirty clothes or, you know, with a scratch or anything they will think maybe parents are not treating the child good. And it could be the parent—some of us come from rural areas—they don't know how to dress up the kids and the provider will take it in a different way. They will say, "Oh the parents are abusing the child," instead of giving information to the parents and teaching the parent. –Somali parent

*What access do parents have to information about child care where they live?*

*Do parents know about the availability of assistance with child care costs?*

*Do these factors affect or constrain their child care choices?*

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Parents and service providers were asked about the information sources refugee parents use to learn about child care programs as well as their experiences applying for child care assistance.

**Limited access to information about child care programs.** While parents from any culture can lack access to information about child care, parents from refugee communities face additional challenges in making informed child care decisions because of language barriers and social isolation. This is particularly true for families who were using informal care, some of whom seemed genuinely bewildered by the whole notion of child care "options" or "choices." In their native countries, when preschool programs are available, they tend to be a part of a single system of publicly funded programs and parents don't view it as a question of "choosing" between available programs. Parents also seemed to lack information about affordability of care such as the fact that for eligible families, Head Start is free.

While many parents expressed concern that enrolling children in a program would risk loss of their language and culture, this father wanted his children to be in a preschool with a wider range of children, including children from American culture, and believed that such integration would help his children assimilate, benefit race relations and promote tolerance.

One Cambodian refugee parent, when asked if she had anything else to add at the end of the focus group session, asked, “I want to know how they take care of all children in this country? What is this child care system?”

Those parents who had looked for child care were asked how they heard about available programs. Most parents received their information through word of mouth in their community or through a refugee services agency. Once they enrolled one child, they typically continued to use that program when their other children became old enough to attend. These findings were corroborated by the child care providers, representatives of refugee services agencies, and the local child care resource and referral representative.

Typically, families who depend on community interpreters for child care information are told about only one or two programs, partly because of issues of affordability which limit their choice of care. Indeed, one Sudanese father expressed regret that children from his culture tended to be concentrated in a very small number of public preschools in Portland. While many parents expressed concern that enrolling children in a program would risk loss of their language and culture, this father wanted his children to be in a preschool with a wider range of children, including children from American culture, and believed that such integration would help his children assimilate, benefit race relations and promote tolerance.

The child care resource and referral agency did not seem to be a major source of information for the parents in our focus groups. The local R&R agency reported that they lack adequate funding to cover the cost of bilingual staff. Moreover, because the refugee population in Portland is so linguistically diverse, it is much more difficult to employ staff who speak all of the necessary languages. The agency also reported that they lack funding to support the use of a language service to communicate with parents.

Other sources for information about child care mentioned by parents and service providers were the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment (ASPIRE) office and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. The TANF/ASPIRE program does not have written information about child care available in multiple languages. Instead, interpreters are used to inform parents. The limited number of TANF/ASPIRE staff interviewed did not express concern about the lack of information about child care options for this population saying that in their experience parents already knew about the “one or two programs” the population typically uses. This reinforced the assertion that refugee children

In Maine, service providers reported that refugee parents' choices in child care settings were limited by cost and waiting lists for the child care subsidy program.

were clustered in only a limited number of programs. The TANF/ASPIRE staff also said that most families are able to rely on friends and family to care for their children.

**Experience Applying for Child Care Assistance.** In Maine, service providers reported that refugee parents' choices in child care settings were limited by cost and waiting lists for the child care subsidy program. The application *process* for child care assistance, however, did not seem to be an issue for parents; TANF offices and refugee services organizations have interpreters available to help parents fill out the application forms, which are only in English. TANF/ASPIRE has a contract with Catholic Charities of Maine to provide two ASPIRE workers to serve English language limited parents. In addition, a Somali interpreter comes in one day a week. Otherwise, the agency uses a language line, a service where interpreters in a variety of languages are available over the phone.

Some service providers felt the eligibility rules for child care assistance were too rigid. In particular, they cited rules about household income; when many extended family members live in the same household, it becomes difficult to determine household income. Some parents

were aware that child care subsidies could be used within their own community to pay for child care. However, according to those we interviewed in our field study, refugee parents have encountered significant barriers to becoming licensed providers, including strict housing code requirements and fire regulations.



### Child Care Providers' and Teachers' Perspectives

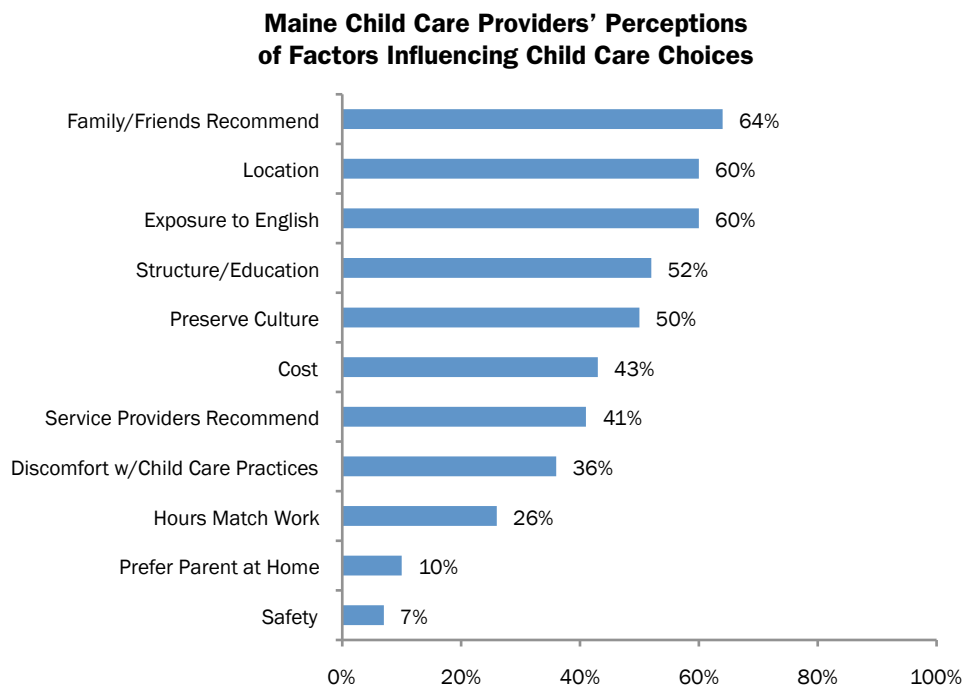
In addition to hearing from refugee parents, the views of child care providers and K-2 teachers provided insight into their perceptions of how these parents make child care decisions and the implications of those decisions as well as the providers' perceptions of the challenges, real and anticipated, of serving this population of families. It should be noted here that for the most part, providers who participated in the study were not members of the study populations.

*Are child care providers aware of the factors identified by parents as influencing their child care choices?*

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Figure 1 represents providers' responses to the survey question: **Do parents ever express the following preferences or concerns regarding what they think about when they choose care for their children?** (Providers could check all that applied.)

**Figure 1**





Refugee & Immigrant Services (through Catholic Charities in Maine) resettled 860 refugee families in 2009. Portland Public Schools have over 1,800 students from homes where over 60 different languages are spoken, representing about 25% of Portland Public Schools' total enrollment

Source: Portland Public School Multicultural and Multilingual Center

The highest proportion of providers (64%) cited recommendations from family or friends as an important factor expressed by parents as influencing their decisions about child care. A smaller number of providers also responded that location, exposure to English, structure, educational opportunities and programs that allowed them to preserve their culture were common desires expressed by refugee parents. In interviews, child care and other service providers offered a number of additional observations about the factors they felt influenced parents' decisions about child care:

- There is a strong preference for infants and toddlers to be cared for by family.
- The more school aged children a family has, the more likely they will enroll younger children in child care because they see how important it is for children to learn English before they enter kindergarten.
- Cost is the major factor; parents cannot afford child care and choose instead to arrange for relatives to care for their children.
- Sometimes parents who receive child care subsidies prefer to use friends to care for their child because they prefer to keep the child care payments in their communities.
- Many parents work in jobs that have non-traditional hours and child care isn't available to cover those hours.
- The more education parents have, the better they speak English, and the longer they have been in this country, the more likely they are to enroll their child in a child care program.
- Parents prefer to enroll their children in a public center over a family child care home run by an American provider because they feel they are better able to learn about what goes on during the day in a public center.

These observations and survey findings suggest a disconnect between what child care providers and service providers believed were the most important factors in the child care decision making of refugee parents, and what refugee parents reported as the most important factors. While most child care providers and service providers were aware of the practical factors, such as cost, transportation and hours, only half were aware of concerns such as the desire to preserve one's culture and less than half were aware of a discomfort with certain practices used in child care.

This disconnect may be due in part to language barriers: it may be easier for parents to ask providers about issues like cost of care, but harder to communicate about these other, more nuanced, factors. When asked what factors refugee parents look for in child care programs, one child care director responded, "They ask very few questions. It's more that they need the spot." Interviewees also noted, as will be discussed later,

that in the cultures studied, child care providers are viewed as “the teacher,” an authority figure who should not be questioned. It is possible that in addition to language barriers, parents may feel uncomfortable raising concerns or asking questions about such factors as disciplinary practices because they happen in the classroom under the supervision of “the teacher.”

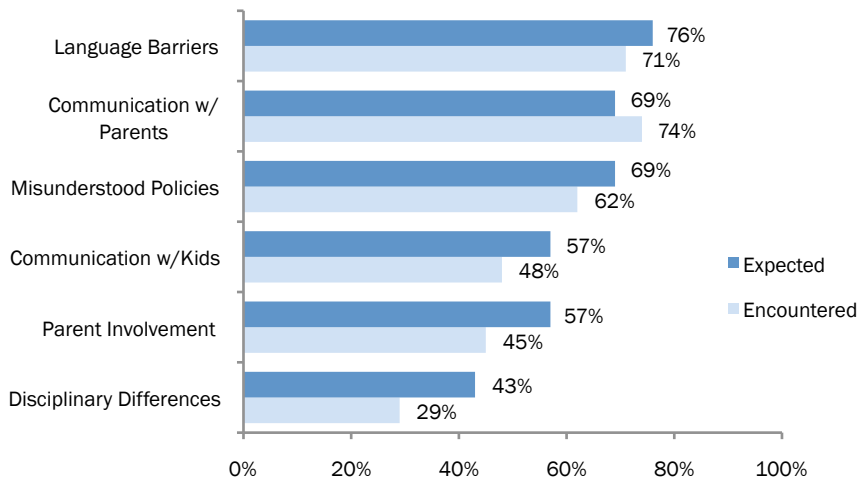
*What challenges in serving these families did providers anticipate and what challenges were actually encountered by providers?*

...communication with parents was the only expected challenge (69%) that was actually encountered with greater frequency (74%); all others were less than providers expected.

In our child care provider survey, we listed a series of potential challenges, drawn from our findings in the qualitative phase of our research, and asked respondents to tell us which challenges they anticipated before serving this population and which ones they actually experienced. This examination was relevant to our study of child care decision making because the degree to which providers experience these challenges is related to the comfort level parents feel with a child care setting. As seen in Figure 2, communication with parents was the only expected challenge (69%) that was actually encountered with greater frequency (74%); all others were less of a problem than providers expected. Language barriers were anticipated as a challenge by more than three quarters of respondents (76%) and were encountered by a vast majority of providers (71%). Communication with children was actually encountered as an issue by less than half of providers (48%).

**Figure 2**

**Child Care Providers Expected and Encountered Challenges Serving Refugee Families**





*What experiences have providers had with encouraging parent involvement in their child care programs?*

... providers also noted that parent involvement is higher when they offer some other service in addition to taking care of the children such as classes on parenting skills, English or nutrition.

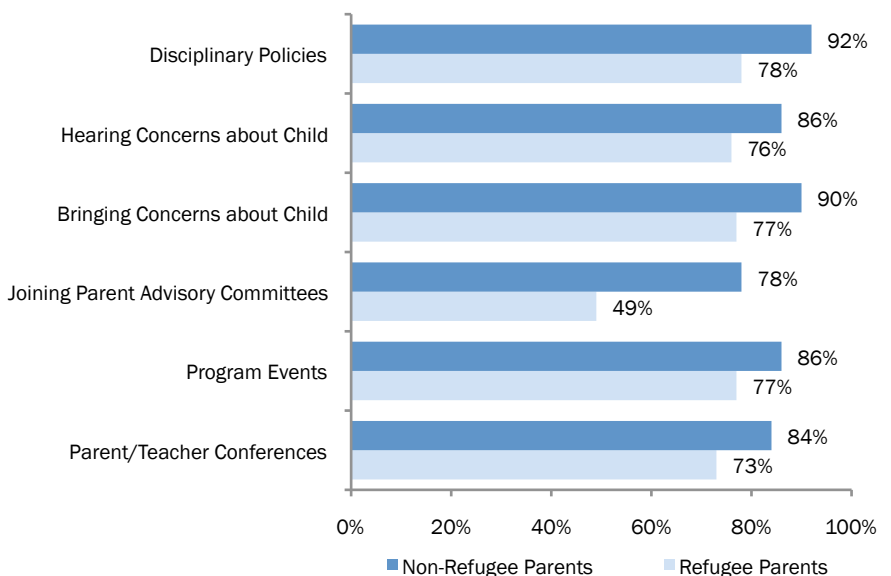
The issues providers face specifically in encouraging parental involvement were a focus of our study because they are so closely related to the level of comfort parents feel with a child care setting and, in turn, whether the program is one they would recommend to their friends.

Several child care providers reported that in their experience, refugee parents are excited to have their children learn new things and are very interested in academics. They also observed that it is much easier to attract parents to events and have them comfortably participate if there are a number of children enrolled in the program from the same cultural group. Child care providers also noted that parent involvement is higher when they offer some other service in addition to taking care of the children such as classes on parenting skills, English or nutrition.

Because of the variety of ways a parent can become involved with their child’s program or school, we asked child care providers and K-2 teachers how they would rate the comfort level of both non-refugee and refugee parents participating in the specific activities included in Figures 3 and 4 below. Respondents selected from a five-point scale; results below include the percentage of those selecting “comfortable,” “mostly comfortable” and “very comfortable.” Both groups report a consistently high comfort level among non-refugee parents and a lower comfort level among refugee parents. Both child care providers and K-2 teachers

**Figure 3**

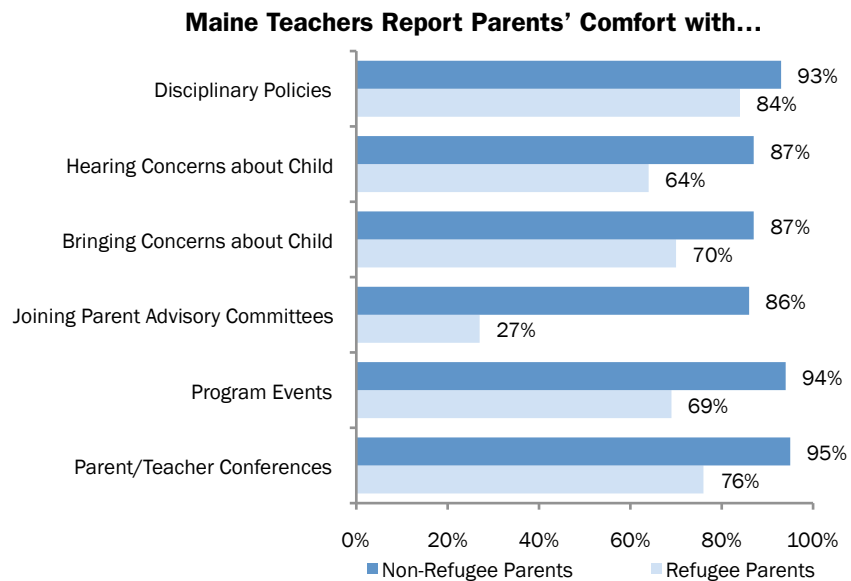
**Maine Child Care Providers Report Parents’ Comfort with...**



Both child care providers and K-2 teachers observe that refugee parents are least comfortable with joining parent advisory committees.

observe that refugee parents are least comfortable with joining parent advisory committees. Child care administrators who operate multiple programs report more success involving refugee parents at local sites than at the program level on larger advisory boards; joining these larger bodies may be more intimidating.

**Figure 4**



### *Barriers to Meaningful Parent Involvement*

Interviews with child care providers revealed a number of challenges to parent involvement for parents of young English Language Learners. Some child care providers believed that attendance at parent/teacher conferences and other events was not that different for refugee parents than for typical American parents—some are too busy and are less involved; others attend every session. However, other child care providers reported that many refugee families view their child’s caregiver as “the teacher” or authority figure and less as a partner in their child’s education. As a result, parents may be hesitant to raise concerns or question practices in the classroom, such as at parent/teacher conferences. One child care provider reported giving parents a questionnaire at the beginning of the year to ask parents about their children—their likes and dislikes, food preferences, etc. This practice not only provides them with useful information but sends a message that the child care provider values the parents’ perspective on the child. This could be a challenge, however, for those parents with low literacy levels and would need to be completed with the help of a translator.

Parent involvement is a huge, tough problem. I would love to figure it out.  
—Child Care Administrator

Making visits to each child's home has made a big difference.  
–Maine Elementary School Teacher

Several child care providers reported holding open houses for parents but have found that attendance by refugee parents has not been as high as they would like. They cited the cost of multiple interpreters for a variety of languages as a major barrier to increasing attendance. One provider suggested that a closer relationship to the communities these parents are from would be beneficial so that someone could attend open houses to interpret for parents. Time was also an issue mentioned by a number of child care providers. In some of the cultures studied, time is viewed as more fluid and less precise so late arrivals have meant that events do not get started as scheduled.

*What are the perceptions of those who interact with refugee families and children about the implications of child care decision-making on the school readiness of refugee children when they enter kindergarten?*

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According to the K-2 teachers, refugee families have experiences and a history that play a role in their learning. As one teacher noted, “These kids come to us from war-torn countries and some of them are suffering emotionally because they are separated from their families.” Another said, “Many ELL children who we meet need to feel safe, and have their basic needs for food, shelter and clothing met before [they] are able to access learning and that can take a long time to develop.”

K-2 teachers also noted that opportunities to develop basic school readiness skills are limited for these populations of children. However, while focused on immigrant as opposed to refugee children, recent research suggests that although children of first and second generation immigrants lag behind their peers in cognitive and language skills, they excel in socio-emotional skills and behavior. In addition, first generation immigrant children showed more advanced socio-emotional and cognitive skill development than did second generation immigrant children (DeFyeter & Winsler 2009). The authors emphasize the importance of understanding and building upon these strengths in refugee and immigrant families in order to promote school readiness.

**K-2 teachers participating in our study noted,**

Their vocabulary is low—their exposure to different things outside the home is lacking. They don't have people to practice their English with. The classroom is where they practice their English—and it is hard to get them to stop talking during class time!

Language barriers, access to books and toys are challenges for children. Kids do a lot of authentic speaking while playing. Spatial relations can be practiced with Legos but not if it's the first time a kid has seen a Lego. Some kids have never even seen a baby doll. Ordinary things like, "sit next to \_\_\_" are an issue.

There is a lack of scissors, pencils, and crayons in some homes. The children haven't had exposure and a chance to play with these things. Their parents don't understand the need to have these things. So I have to do "hand-over-hand" practice with the child. It would be great if they got this exposure in preschool.

### What is the impact of quality early care and education programs on the school readiness of refugee children?

We were interested in the perceptions of K-2 teachers about whether they saw differences in the school readiness of refugee children who had attended an early care and education program and those who did not. According to K-2 teachers surveyed in Maine, enrollment in a preschool does seem to make a difference in preparing children for later school success.

- **More than three quarters (78%) of K-2 teachers reported increased school readiness for ELL students who have attended a preschool or pre-kindergarten program** (such as Head Start, child care, a family child care home, or preschool).
- 73% of K-2 teachers reported their belief that participation in a preschool is a major factor in the speed of learning English among English Language Learners
- Specific skills noted by K-2 teachers as a result of attending a program included (1) familiarity with the classroom setting and routine, (2) the ability to speak some English and have better conversational skills; (3) greater exposure to interacting and socializing with other children; and (4) enhanced ability to participate in classroom activities.
- Equally importantly, the **majority of teachers surveyed (61%) believe that the benefits of attending preschool, such as those listed above, last beyond kindergarten.**

In contrast, teachers commented that refugee children who enter kindergarten after being cared for in their homes tend to be unfamiliar with environments outside the home; they are "shy," "overwhelmed" or "lost"; starting behind others, both socially and academically; less verbal and with fewer English skills; less exposed to print or books; and in need of more support in all areas of learning.

More than three quarters (78%) of K-2 teachers reported increased school readiness for ELL students who have attended a preschool or pre-kindergarten program

**K-2 teachers participating in our study noted,**

From their social skills—it is obvious if they have been home for five years. They don't know how to wait turns, raise hands, share. Also, the conflict resolution skills are not there. Because in the home, there are not as many demands on the adult and they can attend to the child more.

The reading readiness is very different (in children that haven't attended preschool). They have very little exposure to books and they take longer to understand all concepts including 'word to letter' and 'left to right'. Sometimes they don't understand that certain things are not a choice. I will ask them to sit down and write a story and they say 'no'—as if it were a choice. They are not used to the school format.

Children who have been in preschool have more background knowledge and more vocabulary. They have more familiarity with school utensils.

Formal childcare does make a difference in kids. There is huge diversity of English levels. Child care program kids are better socially (sharing, sitting) and know more letters. Kids without (child care) have to start from scratch.

Equally importantly, the majority of teachers surveyed (61%) believe that the benefits of attending preschool, such as those listed above, last beyond kindergarten.



# new Americans | Case Study in Colorado



## Mexican Immigrant Parents' Perspectives

In the fall of 2010, almost one third (32%) of Colorado's public school students identified as Hispanic (CO Dept of Education, 2011). Although not all of these students were new immigrants, the number of English Language Learners enrolled in Denver County schools was 35%; statewide, 14% of students were ELL (KidsCount, 2010). Almost one quarter (24%) of child care providers surveyed in Colorado reported that two languages were spoken in their classroom, with another 16% saying that between three and eight different languages were spoken. Perspectives below were gathered at focus groups of Mexican immigrant parents in Denver.

*What do Mexican immigrant parents believe about raising their children?  
How do they compare their beliefs to those of native born American parents?  
What cultural beliefs may influence parents' decisions about child care?*

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Mexican immigrant parents noted that in their culture, responsibility for child care falls primarily on the mother. There is a preference for children to stay at home until they reach an age at which the parents determine they are ready for school. Many also emphasized that it was important for parents to care for and teach their children in the same way they were brought up by their parents.

...my husband and I, from the time we got married we talked about educating [the children] and he said, "I'm going to work and I'm the one who's going to provide and you dedicate yourself to taking care of the children. You look to the home—that it lacks for nothing. If I'm going to be away most of the time, they'll learn a little from me and you will teach them the same way that we were taught." We teach them and we do not leave them for someone else to teach.

My husband and I decided that I wasn't going to work so that I could take care of our children, because we've seen cases where women take care of children and we've watched how that they don't pay the kind of attention that a mother does. Mothers have the responsibility to provide their education and take care of them and always be with them.

Be with them, teach them the values the lady is saying, but also be with them, I think it's the most beautiful age because, they're only babies, we see them walk, grow, try to grab things. Teach them a little what is...before taking them to school, teach them the colors, numbers, even if they don't understand, but talk to them about the things they're going to learn at school.

In Mexico, our families, we are accustomed for the parents to be...especially the mother, with the children, their first three years because they say that is where they establish the foundation for life and it's important to be with them, to educate them, guide them, to teach them what is right and what is wrong.

Parents also noted that American families seem to focus more heavily on “work, work, work.” They had mixed feelings about the structure of American children’s life. Some expressed admiration for the emphasis American parents seem to place on educating their children outside of school by enrolling them in classes and taking them to museums and other educational destinations. They commented that American parents seem to have less time to spend with their children but that they are more likely than Mexican immigrant parents to use that time to provide educational experiences for their children. Many possible reasons were given for this practice. Some parents felt that there was a greater emphasis on education in American culture, but others said it was just easier for American families to do these activities because on average, American families work fewer hours and earned higher salaries than do Mexican immigrant families. Other parents pointed to the expectations in their culture that mothers devote substantial time to housecleaning and providing home-cooked meals that require time to prepare and that these expectations limit the time they have to do these activities with their children.

...I say the housework never ends. A lot of Mexicans think that our household responsibility is just to keep the house clean, have the food ready on time and just stay at home. And I say that's not everything. We have some freedom, the women as well as the children, so that they can learn and do things in their lives. Because if we continue this way, we're going to stay the same and everything is going to stay the same.

What also happens is the academic level of the parents, because sometimes the mother we try to get her to be active with her kids but the father never had the ...necessity to read about the support they need to give... And the Americans from childhood had the culture ... to read and to go to the library. Because everywhere in every community there are libraries and they're free. What I mean is there are possibilities available... our culture is ...like it's just learning.

Americans are very concerned with intellectual development. My son takes classes in swimming and I've learned how they worry about their children learning things they will benefit from like swimming, sports, classes in music.



Parents described the style of parenting in their culture as much more protective than the parenting style of American parents. Several parents observed that Latino parents seem to have more difficulty letting go of their children at 18 and that Latino children often don't leave home until they are married. Several mothers worried that what they saw as a tendency toward over-protectiveness was undermining their children's independence.

And if [the children don't get married] they don't leave at all. Because sometimes they want to leave home earlier, to leave home and become independent, but we don't let them. No, no, no... until they get married, whether it's 15, 16 or 30 years of age that they get married.

The Americans raise them to be more independent. You can see that the children can get around, they're more open in how they talk, in how they play, and we raise them with more fear.

I don't like that children are always depending on you when they have the ability to do certain things. Things that one doesn't think that children are going to be able to do just because of their age and you think they need your help. But as mothers, we say "No, daughter, I'll do it for you," or "No, wait a bit and I'll do it for you." In my opinion, the boys and girls should do things that they want to do, and they can learn with a little discipline and responsibility.

Sometimes I think it's bad that children are too closely tied to the mother, because my first-born daughter is like, if I walk, she walks and if I don't walk, she stands there waiting for me; and the boy, the second born, is more independent. He runs and grabs things, whenever he wants, and she doesn't.

While parents expressed admiration for the independence of American children, they also felt that typically American parents aren't as involved with their children as Mexican immigrant parents are.

I don't have a lot of contact with Americans and how they raise their children, but we Hispanics are generally overprotective of our children. The Anglos are freer, such as now in the cold weather they just give them a coat or sweater, and we put a lot more clothes on our kids. Then that's when the kids feel, I think, that maybe the parents don't care.

Us Mexicans, we are always following [our children] around if, for example, their face is dirty.



One thing I've noticed..., that [American parents] are not there for their children at school. I have attended graduations, and the children are alone, American children, alone without their parents being with them on such an important day. I just see that [American children] are more lonely. We have to work, but a day when the child is going to dance at school, or any event, we even ask for the day off, or as they say, we play "hooky" or we trade the day off, but we try to be there as much as possible. But...also their jobs are different from ours, a lot of times they have more pressure at work, and they're thinking about work all the time.

Last year when my little girl was in kindergarten, there also was a little girl who, during the whole year it was very seldom that I saw her hair done, or saw her clean. Her little nails were long and full of dirt. And also on her graduation day, she was by herself. And always, as I take my little girl, she is always walking alone. And I think she is too young to walk to school alone.

If you can't go [to a school event] you send your sister, or any relative, a friend, a neighbor to accompany your child, and [American children], I've seen that they're alone, alone.

Several parents noted that in Mexico they have extended family to rely on to watch their children if they go outside and that in this country they are much more reluctant to allow their children to roam. With this lack of freedom and concerns over safety, they felt that their children were better off attending a child care program because otherwise they would be confined indoors.

...They need that, to be with other children. In this country we cannot let the children go out on the street, because any crazy person can pass by. So more than anything, to take them to a safe place, where they can be with other children.

Before in Mexico, I was afraid to put my kids in child care when they were little. I had to take care of his cousins, which was easier, because they protected each other outside playing, but not here. You're at home in your apartment, enclosed with the kids and the kids don't have anything to do. Here I think it's important that children get out [enroll in a child care program] when they're three years old.

The reason I send them is that I prefer they're at school than at home watching TV.

Another mother, however, spoke of feeling *more* secure here. It is likely that her comment has to do with the area where she is from in Mexico compared to where she now lives in the U.S.

...in our country, everything that we're living there, is pure violence. Sometimes here we feel that we're not in our country, but we feel more secure here than we would in our country. Because there is so much violence that you say to yourself, "I'd better stay here."

*What is important to parents in raising their children and what do they hope their children will learn before they enter kindergarten?*

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Parents focused primarily on socio-emotional skills, critical components of school readiness, and had very specific ideas about what they want their children to learn prior to kindergarten, including:

- The basic concepts of numbers and colors and getting along too.
- Knowing how to share, how to pay attention.
- That they feel love toward themselves, respect toward other people.
- Teaching them right from wrong.
- To socialize with other children.
- To learn to be in other places, not just with their mother.
- To respect others.
- To feel trust and confidence.
- That they learn and that learning gives them pleasure.
- The values that were instilled in us we should instill in them, like how to behave at a place, how to respect others and be respected by others.
- Get used to a classroom. To the fact that they ask them to do something, and they have to stay doing it.
- To start forming the idea that they need to go to school, that they need school in their daily life.
- That they are bilingual. That they can read and write [Spanish] so it doesn't get lost.
- To defend themselves.

Parents felt that child care provides a good opportunity for their children to socialize with other children and to become bilingual.

### *Positive Aspects of Child Care*

To learn more about Mexican immigrant parents' views about child care, questions differed for those who had children in care and those who did not. Those parents in the "in-care" focus groups were asked to identify the most important reason why they placed their child in care, what they look for in a child care program, and what makes them comfortable or uncomfortable about a child care setting. Parents in the "not in care" focus groups were asked what they thought about child care in this country, whether there were any circumstances under which they would place their child in a child care program, and what they would look for in a child care setting if they did decide to look for care. The following benefits of enrollment in child care were mentioned by parents:

**Child care provides more opportunities to learn.** Parents noted that child care allows children the opportunity to learn academic skills (e.g. letters, sounds, holding a pen, etc.) and social skills (e.g. sharing, listening, not interrupting). Children also get used to eating different foods they wouldn't eat at home.

It is very good [child care program] because my children, when they came here they struggled a lot with English, because they came straight to elementary school, but the little one, he understands everything already and it won't be as hard for him as it is for them.

**Child care allows children to socialize, learn English, and know what to expect when they go to kindergarten.** Parents felt that child care provides a good opportunity for their children to socialize with other children and to become bilingual. They also noted that child care introduces children to rules and schedules similar to those encountered in elementary school.

**Child care gives children the chance to become more independent and to learn how to do things for themselves.** Parents expressed concern that in Mexican immigrant culture, parents may do too much for children and that could be undermining their independence. Several parents spoke of the role child care played in fostering independence and helping their children to learn basic life skills.

I wanted to put my child in a center because I wanted for her to explore and see other things, because it's not just two hours punch time...I would take her even if it had nothing to do with a job.

**Child care can connect parents to other services.** Parents acknowledged that having their child in a child care setting meant that their child would be assessed and would receive any services they need. They also mentioned that being a part of a child care setting connected them to additional services, including parenting education (especially when the child care provider is a multi-service agency).

### *Concerns about Child Care*

Some of the concerns about child care noted by Mexican immigrant parents might be expressed by any parent. These included:

**Cost of care.** This was one of the two most frequently mentioned concerns about child care cited by parents. Parents spoke of having to choose between the ideal child care setting and what they felt they could afford.

I think what we want is one thing and the reality is another.

Logically, you're going to take into account the attitude of your child, to tell you if it is a good place or not. You don't look at price at the beginning, just that your child is happy. But if I don't have the money to pay...

Other parents expressed similar concerns about affordability.



Imagine with three children. And then half my salary was to pay the baby-sitter and half for me and then the ride and all. I was left with like \$100.

... how am I going to pay for each child with what I make, so I usually take them to be taken care of by their aunt, my mother, my cousin, because it's cheaper, because otherwise you end up paying \$55 for each child.

I think for a lot of people it's a matter of necessity because the majority of Hispanics came here to work and to send something back to Mexico. We both have to work, not just the father, so it's important that neighbors care for children. Because if you're working and you keep from getting pregnant, you're working full-time.

What sometimes limits us is finding a place where the children are going to learn something. But we can't have a place that costs too much. And the truth is that we are at a level that we can't get into one place because we make too much, but at the same time we don't make enough to use other places.

**Trust and the warmth of interactions between children and providers.** In addition to cost, trust and the warmth of interactions between child care providers and children was the most common aspect of care that parents cited as most important to them.

I feel comfortable because I know the teacher. I know how she treats the children, how she talks to them, and I am calm.

...the trust and confidence you have in the person who's going to take care of them, the security.

It would be with a person that I know, including her morals, a person I could trust.

I just don't have much confidence in many child care centers, and that's what I would base my opinion on. I just don't trust them. Because someone who is a stranger... it's not like I was going to be supervising.

**Center hours that do not match work schedules.** Some parents expressed frustration that they were unable to find child care that matched their work schedules so they had to place their children in care situations which they did not think were safe.

When I was working, since I don't drive they have to take me very early, and my only option is to leave them with the neighbor because by bus I made two hours to where I used to work. Even though I knew she didn't take good care of him what option did I have, if I had to leave at six in the morning? When I got back one time, she was locked in her house and my kids were outside, across the street, alone. They were 5 and 6 and they were playing alone at my house.

I had to take her to houses and I knew she wasn't taken care of properly, because she would cry, she would cry a lot but what could I do?

**Loss of the freedom of an unstructured childhood.** Several parents expressed a strong desire to be with their children and give their children a childhood free of schedules before kindergarten. They felt that enrolling their children in a child care program would deny their children that experience.

... my goal is for my son to live his childhood without obligation to get up at 8:00. I want him to have my affection and to have all his mother's love before he gets into kindergarten.

It's very important that I don't have to work and take him there [child care program] then. No, let him enjoy his childhood.

**Safety and the level of attention provided in child care.** Safety issues and the amount of attention paid to the children were also concerns.

It's that they can fall, or have some sort of accident, maybe on the stairs, or for example, the door to the street, or the other door leading out to the parking lot. I always see that the door is open and it always makes me a little nervous, someone might come in and they [the teachers] are with the children and who knows what happens."

You could be waiting up there [gesturing to a balcony in a child care center] and no one would see you, and you would wait for your chance...and there was that teacher who used to hit the children, and one of the mothers complained and they got rid of that teacher.

I had my little girl at another school and I felt like over there she was from 8:00 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon, most of the time sleeping and I think she is learning a bit more, in fact she already sings in English and everything, and I got her out of the program to bring her here.

**Children not being old enough to convey how they feel about a child care program.** Parents emphasized the importance of listening to their children to determine if there are issues at the child care program they attend. When asked at what age parents would feel comfortable leaving their child, several parents cited the ability of a child to be old enough to articulate what they were feeling about the program as an important factor influencing their decision.

I believe, more than anything, the well-being of the children. We come to pick them up and they're happy, and we bring them, and they go inside right away, I mean, they already know what to do. And in a place where the kid doesn't feel good, that kid doesn't want to stay.

You can tell if this sort of thing is happening, because the child doesn't want to go to school. And sometimes you're struggling with the children because they don't want to go, they can feel they are being rejected, and eventually they'll tell you, "Mommy, they did this or that to me."

*...they can't talk. And the older ones can now express themselves well...they tell you what they're feeling.*

**Perceptions of quality based on type of child care setting.** Many parents drew distinctions between Head Start/preschool and a child care center.

Other concerns expressed, however, seemed more tied to language and cultural considerations and should be considered in the context of a complex set of circumstances in Colorado. Colorado is a state in which the Mexican culture has existed for over four hundred years but it is also a state that has become increasingly divided on issues related to illegal immigration, particularly from Mexico. Those hostile to immigration have enacted new laws at the state level that have caused fear among some Mexican immigrant families.

I don't see it [Head Start] as taking care of children. I see it as a school where you learn. It's one thing to take your child to learn and another to take him to be taken care of because you work. So you don't do it [enroll in Head Start] because they take care of them but because they teach them, maybe better than you can.



For me child care means always going and leaving your children where all they need to do is take care of them, not teach them exactly. It's not just a question that they are taught academically to take care of children. In a Head Start, the child is learning.

...you work and you try to take your child in spite of everything. it's better to know some family member who takes care of them or a child can go into a program to stay there but if you don't work, you see it more like a place for your child to be cared for and not like a school.

**Children being separated from their culture and religion and not being taught the same values as are taught in the Mexican culture.** Some parents expressed a preference for care by family or friends because they believed there weren't any Hispanic children at the child care programs in their community. They also felt it was important to be with their children during the years before kindergarten to teach them the same values their parents had taught them.

I would take them to a friend or family member because the day care centers are full of American children, no Hispanics.

It turns out the woman belonged to a different church than me and we had some problems because of this, and you can see that even this sort of thing can be a problem. I mean what is a child going to know about religion, but you have to be careful even about something like that.

In many ways, the parents in the focus groups seemed to struggle with the desire to maintain the positive aspects of their own culture but also to adopt aspects of the American culture that they seemed to admire.

What I try to understand in this concept is that sometimes, unfortunately, in our culture we have the tendency to teach them what our parents and grandparents taught us, so this concept that I want to teach my children is not to be the same as them. That culture was very beautiful but some of the teachings were very different.

I believe that we want to raise them in our culture. But we should know that there are a lot of things we don't know about our culture.

...the majority of Hispanics in our country don't learn things like in the United States. There is nothing more than take care of the baby until they go to school, which is when they start learning, nothing more. Here it's a baby in the womb and it begins to learn things.

**Children being cared for by providers who do not speak Spanish.** Many parents said they would not want to send their children to a provider who didn't speak Spanish, both for the comfort of their child and because of their own desire to be able to talk to the provider about their child's progress.

It [having them speak Spanish] would make it easier to communicate with the teachers.

The teachers, as well as the workers, speak Spanish and you can tell how well they get along with the children.

Since my oldest daughter came here, I like it better in the way the teachers treat them because in fact they spoke very little Spanish. They would always speak to her in English, and here, the teachers are bilingual.

**Legal status and documentation issues as a barrier.** Parents were divided on whether legal status issues made Mexican immigrant parents reluctant to enroll their children in child care programs. While some said they did not think that was a factor, others acknowledged that some parents are fearful and faced difficulty acquiring the documentation some child care programs required.

I think for people who are here illegally, they might be afraid [to enroll in a child care program].

Here we're afraid sometimes or at least I am afraid that the police will capture me, or that they will capture my husband, and then what will I do?

They [people in the community] scare them, so they don't go. "Because if you go, they're going to turn you in to Immigration."

I was one of them [afraid to enroll child because of legal status], because I used to think...well, they're urban legends that say: no, you can't go, they will not accept him because you don't have papers, some people would tell me. But she said: yes, yes, you can go and take him, take him, so then, that's how you get it out of your mind and the worst thing they can say is "no."

... service providers reported that the application process for the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) has created significant obstacles for parents because of documentation requirements that have raised fears related to legal status.

... once a parent has successfully navigated the application process without encountering any problems, word gets out and others are less afraid to come forward.

However, service providers reported that the application process for the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) has created significant obstacles for parents because of documentation requirements that have raised fears related to legal status. Since child care assistance under CCCAP is for the child, proof of the citizenship of the parents is not required. However, the program does require a birth certificate for the child. Recent legislation at the state level prohibits non-profits from using public funding to provide any services to illegal immigrants such as helping them obtain the required documents and the Department of Vital Statistics has become stricter in what documentation parents must produce to obtain a birth certificate for their child. All of this has made it challenging for child care programs and service agencies to manage their funding and avoid violating this law while still providing help to parents. Several parents confirmed that gathering the paperwork necessary to apply acted as a barrier.

CCCAP also requires documentation of the income and employment of parents which is difficult for parents who are here illegally. Parents must produce three months of wage stubs, proof of residency, a photo ID, and employer verification of hours (funding is only for care provided while a parent is working or in school). Employers are reluctant to supply any documentation that might make them liable and employees are reluctant to request that information thinking it might jeopardize their jobs. New documentation for self-employed parents has also made applying more difficult for Mexican immigrant parents. They need to bring in their business ledgers and tax returns to prove they pay taxes.

These requirements have caused difficulties for parents not only because of the challenges in obtaining the necessary papers, but also because interpretation of these requirements has varied from county to county creating widespread confusion and misinformation. Child care providers reported that because of these changes, the political climate in Colorado and the economic downturn, they are seeing fewer Mexican immigrant children in their child care programs. However, some service providers noted that because of the heavy reliance on word of mouth in the Mexican immigrant community, they have found that once a parent has successfully navigated the application process without encountering any problems, word gets out and others are less afraid to come forward.

Lastly, service providers expressed concern about the implications for CCCAP assistance when several families live together in the same household to save money—a common occurrence in the immigrant population. This skews the income level that is considered for eligibility.

*What access do parents have to information about child care where they live?*

*Do parents know about the availability of assistance with child care costs?*

*Do these factors affect or constrain their child care choices?*

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**Limited access to information on child care options.** The availability of information about child care options is an important aspect of child care decision making. Parents and service providers were asked about the information sources Mexican immigrant parents use to learn about child care programs, as well as their experiences applying for child care assistance. While parents from any culture can lack access to information about child care, parents from immigrant communities may face additional challenges in making informed child care decisions because of language barriers and social isolation.

Those parents who had looked for child care in this country were asked how they heard about available programs. The vast majority of parents responded that they heard about the program through a relative or friend. Very few reported hearing about a program through an agency or organization serving immigrant families. Once they enrolled one child, many reported continuing to use that program when their other children became old enough to attend. One parent reported being referred to a program by a child care director after inquiring about a center and discovering that it was too expensive. Another reported walking into a “government building,” inquiring about child care programs and being given a list of programs near her home. However, these sources of information were the exception. The overwhelming majority reported relying on word of mouth in their communities. These findings were corroborated by the child care and service providers interviewed in the field study.

The child care resource and referral (R&R) agency did not seem to be a major source of information for the parents in our focus groups. The child care R&R in Colorado reported that only about 5% to 10% of the calls they receive are from Spanish speaking parents. The R&R does have some staff who speak Spanish although they cite underfunding as a barrier to hiring more bilingual staff. The R&Rs have placed some ads on Spanish radio stations. They have also made available written materials in Spanish and have a Spanish version of their consumer information available on their web site. In their database of available child care programs, providers indicate what languages are spoken by the staff. Staff at the R&R cite fears about legal status and a political climate hostile toward immigrants as reasons why parents do not come forward and seek help but instead rely on word of mouth in their own communities.

The child care resource and referral (R&R) agency did not seem to be a major source of information for the parents in our focus groups.

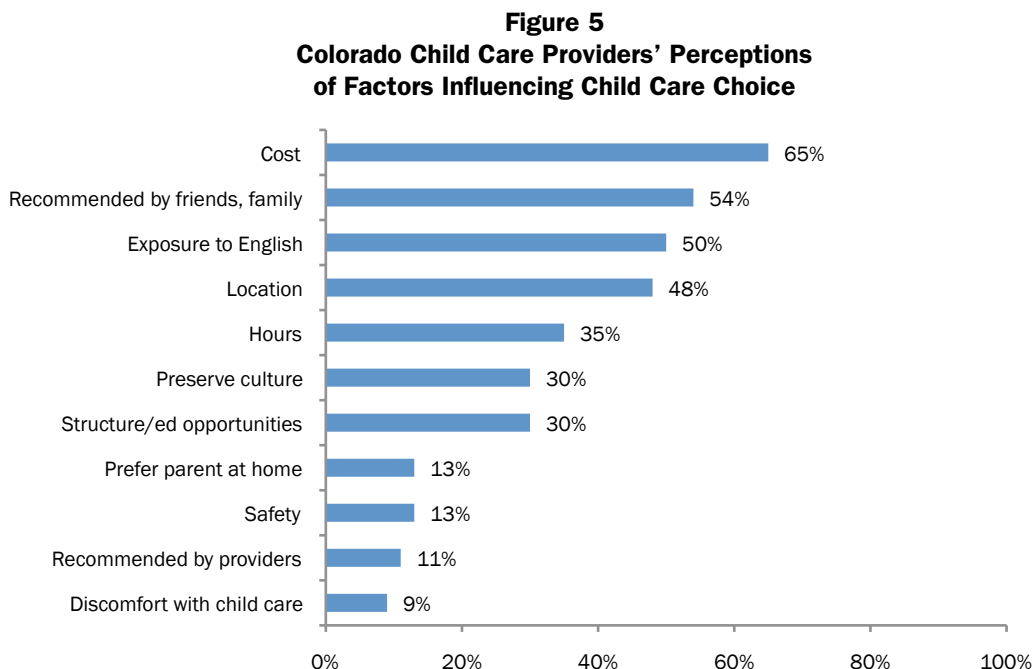
### Child Care Providers' and Teachers' Perspectives

In addition to hearing from Mexican immigrant parents, the views of child care providers and K-2 teachers provided insight into their understanding and impressions of how these parents make child care decisions, as well as their experiences and challenges in serving this population. As explained earlier, we are only reporting qualitative data from interviews with teachers and the responses to open-ended survey questions due to a low response rate on our teacher survey in Colorado. Quantitative data from the survey of child care providers in Colorado are included here.

*Are child care providers aware of the factors parents identified as influencing their child care choices?*

Figure 5 below represents providers' responses to the question:

**Do parents ever express the following preferences or concerns regarding what they think about when they choose care for their children?** (Providers could check all that applied.)



The child care and service providers interviewed in the field study identified the following factors affecting child care use and decision making for the Mexican immigrant population.

Because of cost, families either don't enroll children at all or they wait until the child is four so they only have to pay for one year before the child enters kindergarten.

### *Cost and the need for coverage of non-traditional hours*

- Cost is a major factor; parents cannot afford child care and choose instead to arrange for relatives to care for their children. Because of cost, families either don't enroll children at all or they wait until the child is four so they only have to pay for one year before the child enters kindergarten.
- Many parents work in construction and/or as day laborers with unpredictable incomes—when work is scarce they fall behind in their child care payments and can incur large fees which cause hardship and make parents reluctant to enroll their children.
- More parents work part-time and take multiple part-time jobs, with non-traditional and often unpredictable hours, to make ends meet.

### *Trust issues and a preference for informal child care arrangements to preserve culture*

- There is a strong preference for infants and toddlers to be cared for by family.
- The degree of trust parents have in a provider is a significant factor in child care decision-making for this population. Parents tend not to have these trust issues when their child is old enough to go to school but do when their child is a preschooler or younger.
- Location is a key factor because mothers have a strong preference for keeping their children close to home.
- Parents choose informal care, mostly with family members, to preserve their culture and feel a sense of trust.
- Lack of teachers certified in Early Care and Education (which requires proficiency in English) who also speak Spanish has decreased the availability of bilingual staff at child care centers or has meant that only teacher aides are bilingual, making communication more difficult and child care less comfortable for parents.
- Parents would like to see their culture preserved in the child care setting, but they also want their children to assimilate and they see the value of their children becoming bilingual.

### *Access to care and legal status issues*

- Waiting lists and barriers to child care assistance, such as requiring a birth certificate or getting proof of income from employers, create difficulties because of legal status issues. (See above for more on this topic).

- Recent raids and deportations in Colorado by the Immigration and Naturalization Service have created a chilling effect on families seeking enrollment and services. They have also made parents reluctant to be physically separated from their children.
- Transportation problems have increased because as the economy has weakened, more fathers are traveling greater distances for work, leaving mothers isolated at home with no car.

For the most part, these factors cited by the child care providers and service providers interviewed in Colorado mirrored what parents raised as factors in their child care decision making in the focus groups. The only exceptions were that parents emphasized a desire to preserve their culture as a factor more and, conversely, child care and service providers identified legal status and documentation issues more than parents did.

*What challenges in serving these families did providers and teachers anticipate and what challenges were actually encountered?*

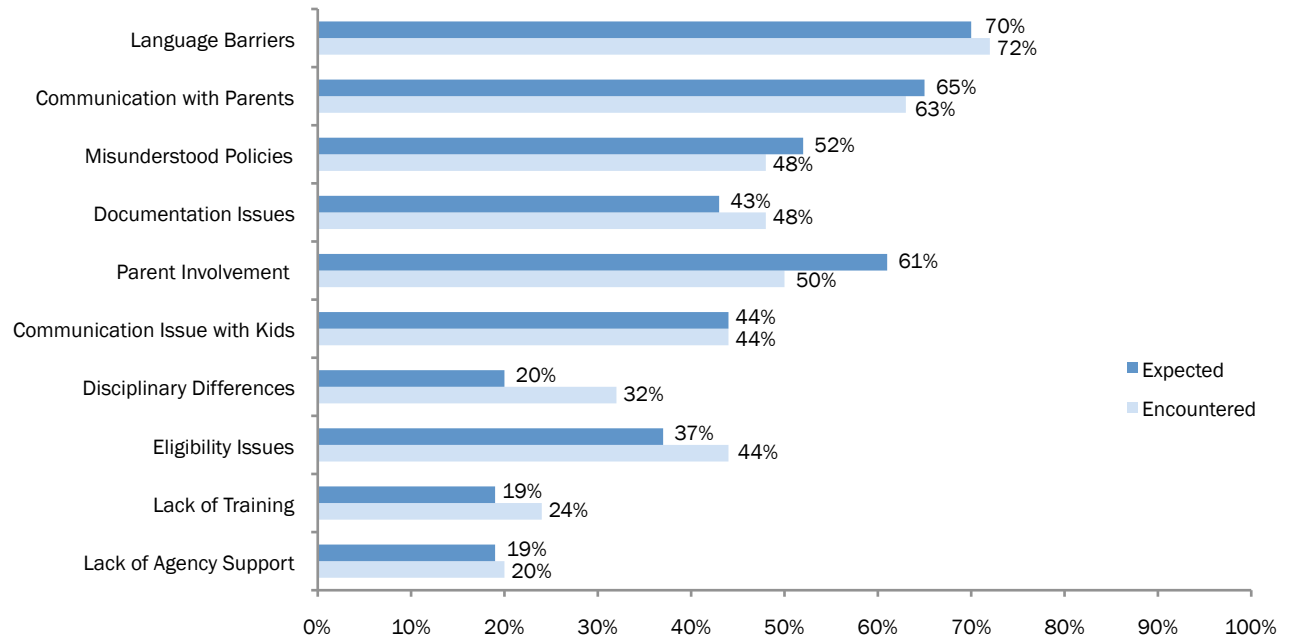
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Documentation issues were experienced by almost half of providers (48%) but had been anticipated by fewer (43%).

In our child care provider survey, we listed a series of potential challenges, drawn from our findings in the qualitative phase of our research, and asked respondents to tell us which challenges they anticipated before serving this population and which ones they actually experienced. This examination was relevant to our study of child care decision making because the degree to which providers experience these challenges is related to the comfort level parents feel with a child care setting. As seen in Figure 6, language barriers were anticipated as a challenge by 70% of providers and were encountered by slightly more (72%). Documentation issues were experienced by almost half of providers (48%) but had been anticipated by fewer (43%). Eligibility issues were another area where more providers encountered problems (44%) than had expected (37%).



**Figure 6**  
**Colorado Child Care Providers' Expected and Encountered Challenges Serving Immigrant Children**



To address these challenges and better serve this population, providers made a variety of accommodations. In addition to bilingual staff, these included materials printed in the child's native language (56%), events to encourage parent involvement (50%), and learning communication customs (44%).

*What experiences do child care providers have in encouraging parental involvement among Mexican immigrant families and making these parents feel comfortable in child care settings?*

The issues providers face specifically in encouraging parental involvement were a focus of our study because they are so closely related to the level of comfort parents feel with a child care setting and, in turn, whether the program is one they would recommend to their friends.

Several providers reported that in their experience, Mexican immigrant parents are more likely to attend parent/teacher conferences, classes and family events than are non-immigrant families.

Mexican immigrants are very enthusiastic about coming to events. The only thing that interferes sometimes is work. –Child care provider

These providers attributed this higher attendance to the importance Mexican immigrant culture attaches to family.

Mexican immigrant families are very family-focused and very focused on their kids.

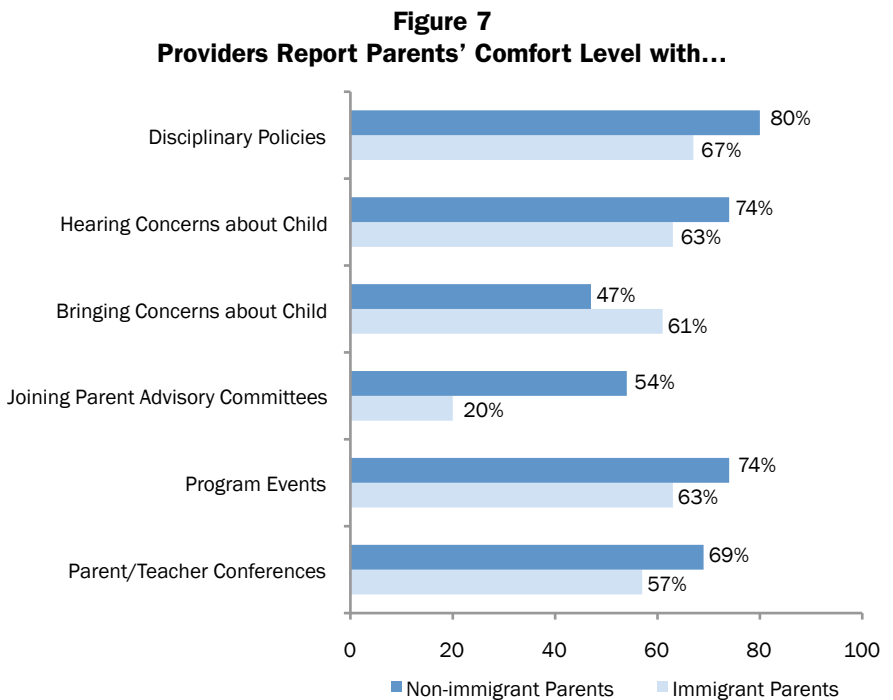
When they come to events, everyone is all dressed up. They go home after work and change.

–Child care provider

According to child care providers another reason may be that Mexican immigrant parents are more likely to rely on their child care program as the sole source of information about parenting, programs and services. Less information is “coming at them” because of language barriers so they may be more apt to respond to an invitation to meet with teachers or take a class than non-immigrant parents.

Half (50%) of child care providers surveyed report holding parent involvement events. Providers surveyed were asked how they would rate the comfort level of non-immigrant and immigrant parents with participating in a variety of activities at their school. Respondents selected from a five-point scale; results in Figure 7 below include the percentage of those selecting “comfortable,” “mostly comfortable” and “very comfortable.” Providers rate non-immigrant parents as more comfortable than immigrant parents with disciplinary policies, hearing concerns about their child, joining parent advisory committees, attending program events and attending parent-teacher conferences. Providers rate immigrant parents as more comfortable than non-immigrant parents with bringing concerns about their child to the provider. Of note is the very low comfort level providers report for immigrant parents joining parent advisory committees (20%).

Providers surveyed were asked how they would rate the comfort level of non-immigrant and immigrant parents with participating in a variety of activities at their school.



### *Barriers to Meaningful Parent Involvement*

Child care providers and teachers noted that a high quality education is very important to Mexican immigrant parents. However, although they reported that Mexican immigrant parents are more likely to tell teachers about any concerns they have about their child than non-immigrant parents are, they may be less comfortable asking questions about the care their child is receiving because they see teachers as authority figures.

The hours parents work and transportation issues also get in the way of parents attending events. In addition, according to one program administrator, Mexican immigrant parents and non-immigrant parents tend to ask for different start times for events so it's hard to accommodate both populations.

One teacher reported that her school has a parent committee but that in meetings the immigrant parents tend to be intimidated by the non-immigrant parents. They've addressed this by matching parents who are immigrants with non-immigrant parents so that the immigrant parents feel more welcome and a part of the group.

Several providers cited the high cost of interpretation services for large group meetings as a barrier to participation by parents. They see the need for more professional simultaneous translators but cannot afford the cost.



Meet basic needs  
of the families (i.e.  
food, shelter, health)  
to allow a focus on  
school.

## Future Research Directions and Suggested Strategies

### Suggestions from Study Participants

Study participants made suggestions and shared a number of strategies which will be useful to policy makers and child care providers alike. As opposed to developing our own policy recommendations, we felt an obligation to share the suggestions of the parents and providers directly. Some of these are suggestions for policy reforms to make child care more accessible and affordable and others are successful strategies providers have used in their own programs to create a more welcoming child care setting for these families.

*For policymakers.....*

### Expand access to quality, culturally appropriate child care

- Increase access to quality, affordable preschool programs.
- Provide opportunities for members of the refugee and immigrant communities to become licensed by addressing licensing and documentation barriers and providing appropriate, culturally sensitive training in the first languages of participants.
- Don't segregate refugee and immigrant children in only a few programs—everyone should have access to child care so there is more of a mix of children.
- Meet basic needs of the families (i.e. food, shelter, health) to allow a focus on school.
- More quality child care programs that can accommodate non-traditional hours.
- Address the shortage of providers with certification in early care and education whose first language is other than English with loan forgiveness programs and other measures.
- Provide more funding for child care providers to hire interpreters and use language services to communicate with parents.
- More bilingual staff for R & Rs to conduct more outreach in the community, assist parents in learning about what quality child care is and how to find it, how to interview providers and how to apply for child care assistance and pay for child care. Have materials translated. Provide staff assistance because some parents are illiterate in their native language.

Ease fears about legal status by providing outreach in the community to demystify eligibility and documentation requirements and inform parents about confidentiality.

### **Address legal status and documentation issues in Colorado**

- Make the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) more accessible by providing more funding to shorten waiting lists, make interpretation of program policies more consistent and ease documentation requirements. This would help to increase access to child care, including adding hours to Head Start for these families.
- Ease fears about legal status by providing outreach in the community to demystify eligibility and documentation requirements and inform parents about confidentiality.
- Allow children to attend a child care program without producing a birth certificate.

### **Expand training opportunities for child care providers in the following topics:**

- Cultural diversity and communication
- How to be an effective translator and how to work with translators
- Diversity—how to incorporate multiple cultures into a single classroom
- How children learn a second language for non-English speaking staff; support services and materials regarding culture, customs and beliefs
- Understanding immigrant and refugee views of education and educators
- Beliefs and customs in different cultures, including guidance on nonverbal communication
- How to choose and read stories to a group of children that speak a different language than the one being read
- How to more effectively teach non-English speaking children

*For child care providers...*

**Make the transition to child care easier for ELL children.**

- Have a community member present for the first few days when children are enrolled.
- Have providers learn a few key words in the child's native language.
- Conduct home visits at the beginning of the year.
- Offer classroom visits before the start of the year.

**Validate and preserve culture, religion and language.**

- Teach about cultures and religions so children don't lose their identity.
- Pay more attention to dietary restrictions.
- Bring parents into the classroom to attend or participate in cultural events such as potlucks, performances and world holiday festivals.
- Ask parents to volunteer to talk, sing, dance and/or cook something from their culture.
- Incorporate celebrations from around the world. Invite parents to come in and share special things about their culture.
- Validate the cultures of families and talk to parents and children about the good you see in their cultures.
- Have materials, children's books, etc. in child's first language and encourage parents to read to children in their first language at home.
- Have bilingual staff in all parts of the program, including the front office.

Protect children from insensitive remarks by other children—teach children to respect differences.

**Promote cultural sensitivity and tolerance.**

- Teach parenting skills and hygiene practices in a culturally sensitive way.
- Teach parents alternative methods of discipline instead of reporting them.
- Protect children from insensitive remarks by other children—teach children to respect differences.
- Talk openly about skin color, differences, traditions, and respecting and appreciating differences.
- Hire a cultural liaison so it's clear in the community that the needs of families are being met.
- Have members of staff from a child's cultural community act as a bridge for learning and respecting norms.

If we built relationships with different communities and they could be here during open houses to interpret and represent [that would help improve attendance and communication.]

—Director, Child Care Center

### **Improve parent/teacher communication.**

- Explain events such as “Star of the Week” to parents at a conference so they fully understand and the child doesn’t feel left out.
- Hold student performances and student-led conferences where the children present their work to their families so parents are drawn in and the interaction is meaningful.
- Translate and clearly explain the disciplinary practices of the program.
- Be sensitive to parents’ needs and have more informal discussions with them to help them feel more comfortable. Parents may not know how to schedule formal meetings to discuss their concerns so try to have informal conversations with parents while they are dropping off or picking up their children.
- Make sure parents know that teachers value their involvement with their child’s education.

### **Encourage parental involvement through outreach, meetings and events.**

- Take advantage of reliance on word of mouth and get one or two key people in the community involved in reaching out to families to encourage enrollment.
- Survey parents on what they want programs to offer. The provider who made this suggestion said answers included classes on nutrition, CPR, infant massage and aerobics. She reported having 330 parents attend their aerobics class in five months. She felt that this helped them build trust with parents.
- Hold a potluck dinner at the beginning of school and have additional nights during the year when children exhibit their work to their parents.
- Build relationships with different communities so they can be present during open houses to interpret in order to improve attendance and communication.
- Call parents and make sure they are able to come to events; offer transportation.
- Hold some events during the day to accommodate those working second and third shift.
- Try to accommodate families in which both parents work by holding events and meeting on Saturday or Sunday or after 6 PM on weekdays.
- Work on increasing the involvement of fathers through workshops and training geared to their needs.
- Match immigrant or refugee parent with non-immigrant or refugee parent or involved parent with uninvolved parent to make parents feel more comfortable.



Take advantage of reliance on word of mouth and get one or two key people in the community involved in reaching out to families to encourage enrollment.

- Hold monthly parent meetings covering a variety of topics.
- Hold numerous information nights for immigrant and refugee parents to learn about the curriculum their children are receiving.
- Offer cultural parties, end-of-year programs in native languages.

**Promote school readiness.**

- Encourage enrollment in quality preschool for ELL children.
- Build on social emotional skills.
- Teach social skills, norms, rules prior to school.
- Build background knowledge to enhance comprehension of learning.
- Support parents to learn English or participate in adult education classes.
- Foster an understanding of school expectations.
- Encourage classroom visits before starting kindergarten.



## Future Research Topics

There is little in the literature on the child care decision making of refugee and immigrant parents and thus, this study was necessarily exploratory in nature. Our findings support the need for more in-depth research in the following areas:

More research is needed to identify best practices for communities with a wide variety of cultures and languages spoken, none of which predominate in terms of size.

- **How best to give child care providers guidance for classrooms where multiple languages are spoken and used, from the content taught to the strategies used in the classroom**

More than a quarter (26%) of child care providers surveyed in Maine and 16% in Colorado reported having 3-8 languages spoken in their classroom, and by extension, among the families they serve. Having bilingual staff was cited as a benefit but obviously not the sole solution in classrooms where multiple languages are spoken. The content of training and the supports available to providers, as well as notions of what it means to be culturally competent, need to be updated to reflect the realities of providers who serve multiple cultures and languages instead of just two or three. This affects staff hiring, children's English language acquisition, the ability to honor multiple cultures and religions in the classroom, instruction strategies, parent involvement—virtually every aspect of quality in a child care program. As one provider put it, “We have itty bitty pockets of many different cultures. We don't have the know-how on each culture but we try to take it in.”

- **Methods to involve immigrant and refugee parents meaningfully in early care and education programs**

Providers reported that parent involvement and the comfort level of parents increases when the number of parents served who are from the same cultural group increases. Meaningful involvement of parents can be a challenge in classrooms with small groups of children from multiple cultures. While involvement is increased if there are bilingual staff in all aspects of a program—from the front desk to the teaching staff—this is clearly not practical when dealing with multiple languages. More research is needed to identify best practices for communities with a wide variety of cultures and languages spoken, none of which predominate in terms of size.

More research is needed on how best to help immigrant and refugee providers become licensed to serve the child care needs of their communities.

- **The implications of immigration policies for child development and school readiness**

Our qualitative findings from this study indicated that recent Colorado laws concerning documentation requirements for child care assistance and fingerprinting of family child care providers and their families may be operating as constraints on child care choice for Mexican immigrant families. Interviewees speculated that these policies are impeding ECE enrollment in their state which may in turn have implications for the school readiness of these children.

- **Successful methods of having members of the refugee and immigrant communities fill their own child care needs from within their communities.**

Some Colorado interviewees estimated that the new fingerprinting requirement which applies to all members of the household and the requirement that child care providers be U.S. citizens before they can be licensed has resulted in a 70% decrease in the number of Mexican immigrants certified as family child care providers. In Maine, initiatives to train members of the refugee community to become licensed providers have been thwarted by licensing requirements that could not be met in public housing where the majority of refugee families live. More research is needed on how best to help immigrant and refugee providers become licensed to serve the child care needs of their communities.

- **Methods to integrate culturally appropriate disciplinary practice into current early care and education practice**

Accepted disciplinary practices in their native countries, such as spanking, are often not considered appropriate in this country. Some parents worried that continuing those practices would result in trouble with the police or child protective services and this concern also influenced some parents' child care choices. Parents expressed a strong desire to receive training on disciplinary practices that are acceptable in this country. Providers were less aware of this concern, making a greater understanding of, and communication about, this issue beneficial.

## Conclusion

Existing research demonstrates that attending a quality early care and education program significantly raises the English-language proficiency and increases reading and math scores for ELL children. These programs can link immigrant and refugee parents to employment, health and other social services, and help with parenting, ESL, and literacy skills. They can also provide a way to track children's development and emotional well-being and connect them, if needed, with early intervention services. However, what existing research does not tell us is why, even with these positive results, there are lower enrollment rates of ELL children in early care and education programs. Unfortunately, the results of our study show that there are no easy answers to this question. Families make decisions about child care from culturally constructed views and beliefs that cannot be neatly organized and presented as a comprehensive response to the issue of low enrollment. And, as our findings demonstrate, these parents also identify factors shared by parents across cultures. Also, as noted earlier, there seemed to be as much variation in beliefs about child care within cultural groups as there were between cultural groups. A better understanding of the child care experiences and concerns of refugee and immigrant parents, an enhanced capacity to serve these families in a culturally sensitive and welcoming way, and greater access to high quality programs are important components of efforts to boost the school readiness of children from refugee and immigrant families. An essential component of these efforts is the development of policies to enable more members of the refugee and immigrant community to become child care providers and teachers. The findings from our study will help inform policy making as well as the practices of child care providers, and local, state and private nonprofit agencies in meeting the child care needs of the refugee and immigrant communities and enhancing the later school success of young ELL children. It is critical to include the voices of these parents when considering policies that will affect their children and families. We also hope the findings from this exploratory study will help lay the groundwork for future examination of these issues, particularly as they apply to communities with multiple cultural groups, an increasingly common reality across the United States.

It is critical to include the voices of these parents when considering policies that will affect their children and families.

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## Study Participants

### *Maine Focus Group Participants*

The New Americans focus groups held in Portland, Maine were attended by 29 parents of 55 children ranging in age from less than one year to 27 years old. The child(ren) they were asked to report on and discuss in the group were those from 0-6 years old who live in their home for whom they make child care decisions. In a few cases, both the mother and father of a child attended the group but their child information is only reported once.

Seven Somali parents, 10 Sudanese parents and 12 Cambodian parents attended the focus groups.

Of the 27 parents reporting their child care status<sup>2</sup>, 59% (16) have a child who is cared for outside of the home. 41% or 11 parents were not using any child care. Parents were recruited based on whether or not they use child care. The distribution of settings is below. Note that some parents use multiple settings.

- Family, friend or neighbor care 41% (12)
- Child Care Center 21% (6)
- Preschool 13% (4)
- Head Start 10% (3)
- Kindergarten 7% (2)
- Family Child Care Home 7% (2)
- Afterschool Care 3% (1)

## Language Acquisition

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We asked parents about the language most often spoken in their home. Only one parent reported English as the language most often spoken in their home, otherwise their primary language was spoken most often in their home (e.g. Acholi, Arabi, Cambodian, Khmer, Nuer, Somali or Dinka). In a separate question, parents were asked what language they speak most often to their child. Seven reported English alone or along with their native language, while the remainder reported just their primary language. When asked to rate their child's fluency in English, 55% selected "good," 38% "fair" and 0% "poor."

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<sup>2</sup> Missing information was either left blank on their registration form or was from sets of parents who both attended the group.



## Parent Demographics

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Parents ranged in age from 24 to 55 years old and 69% (20) were female. A vast majority (96%) of attendees were parents and one attendee was a grandparent (4%).

40% of focus group participants had not completed high school. 60% of the focus group participants had completed at least some high school. 15% had attended Adult Education classes and 15% had attended college classes.

- 7% (2) had no education
- 4% (1) attended kindergarten – 6<sup>th</sup> grade
- 22% (6) attended 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- 7% (2) attended 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> grade
- 30% (8) completed high school
- 15% (4) attended Adult Education
- 15% (4) attended college

More than half (64%) were married, 12% divorced and 24% single. The parent's duration in the US ranged from one to 26 years, with an average of 10.4 years.

When asked about employment:

- 28% (8) not employed outside the home

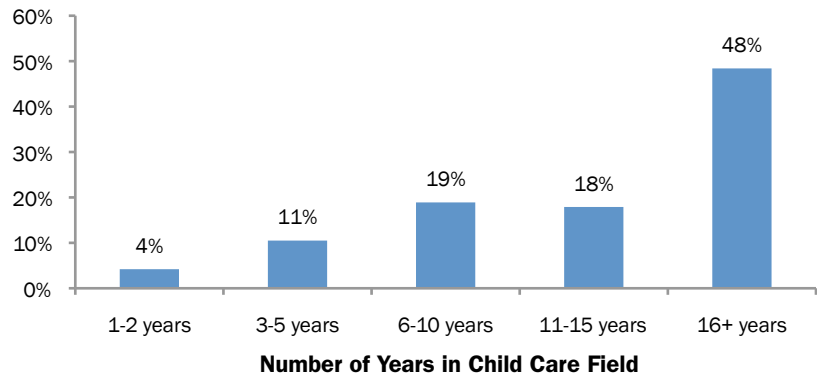
Of those working:

- 41% (12) employed full-time
- 31% (9) employed part-time
- 21% (6) have a partner/spouse who is not working

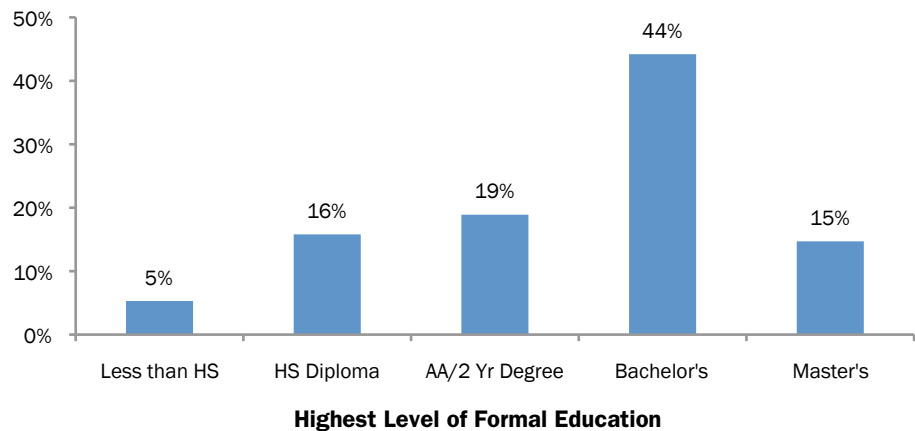
Twenty-four percent (7) receive child care subsidies, 38% (11) receive TANF and 72% (21) receive food stamp assistance. Two-thirds (66%) receive Maine Care.

### Maine Child Care Provider Demographics

Surveys were completed by 95 licensed Maine child care providers. There were 91 female and 3 male respondents. Two thirds (66%) of the providers have been in the field for more than ten years.

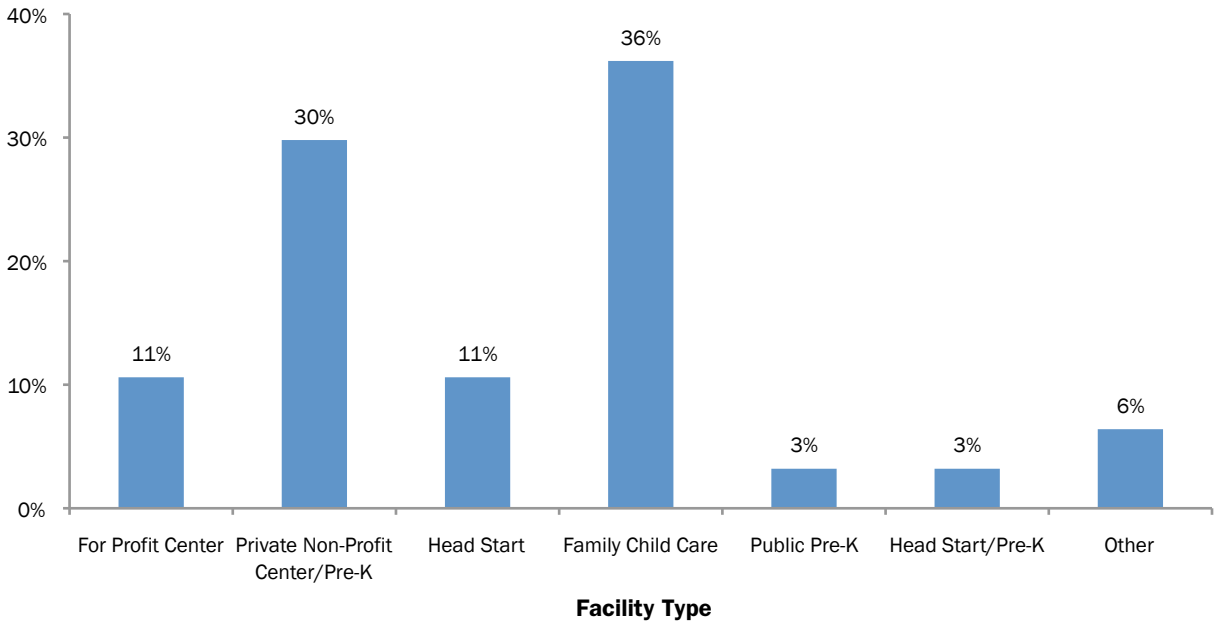


Almost 60% of providers have a Bachelor's or Master's Degree.

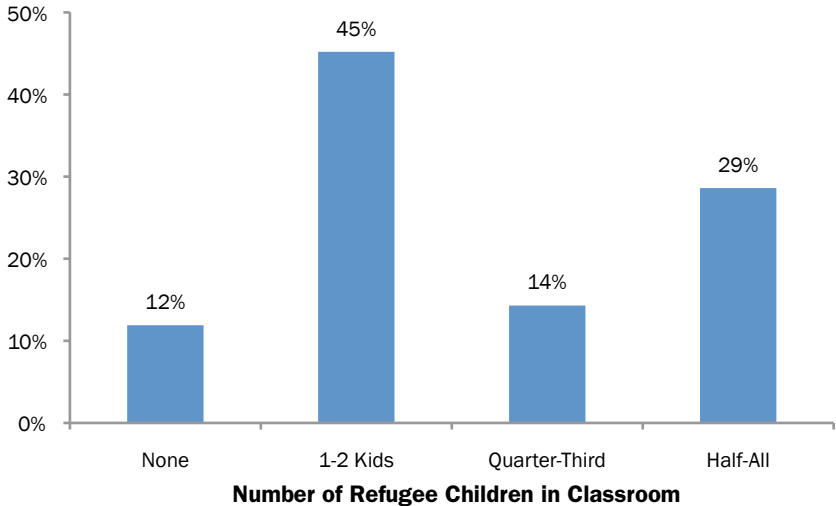


Almost 90% of the responding providers are white, with most of the remaining percentage identifying as Somali.

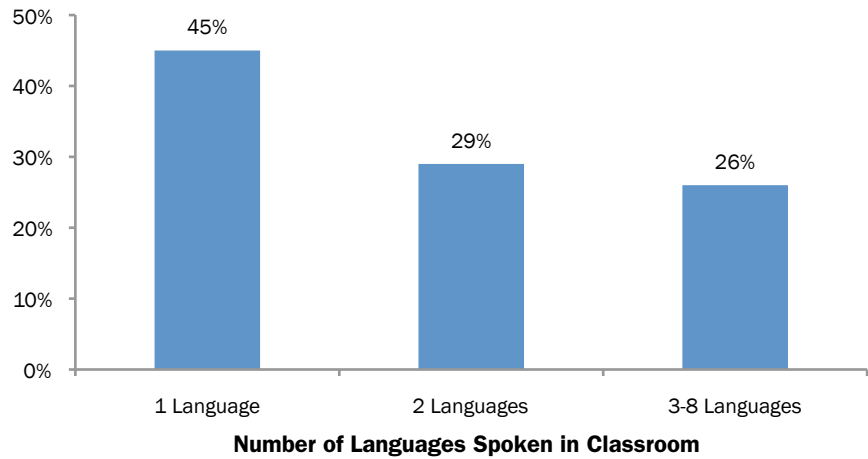
Responding providers represented a number of facility types. “Other” facilities included legal, unlicensed and special purpose non-profit preschool programs.



We also asked providers for some information on the population of children and families they serve. Almost half of respondents (44.2%) report serving children from refugee families now or in the past three years. The number of refugee children in their classroom varied, with 1-2 children common.

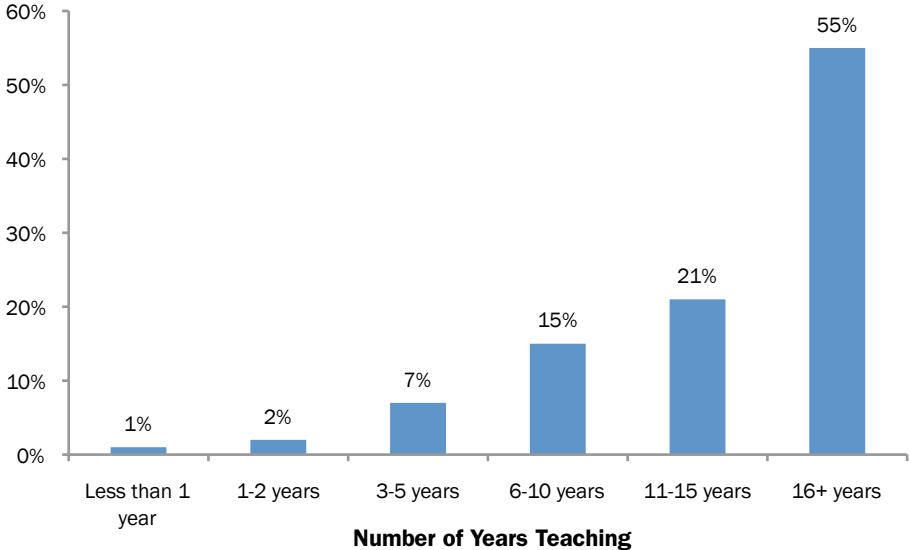


When we asked about the average number of languages commonly spoken in their classrooms, 45% of teachers reported that a single language, 29% reported that two languages and 26% reported that 3 or more languages were spoken in their classrooms.



**Maine Teacher Demographics**

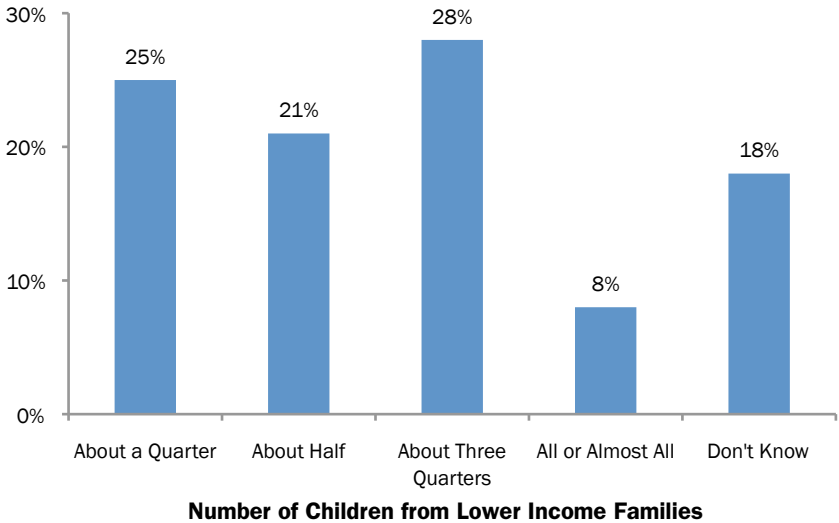
123 surveys were completed by Maine kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers: 117 female respondents and 6 male respondents. More than 70% of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years. 98% of teachers have taught for more than 5 years.



96% of teachers responding to the survey have at least a Bachelor’s degree.

98% of teachers were white or Caucasian, reflecting the population in Maine.

When asked what percentage of children in their classroom are from lower income families (less than about \$36,000 a year), teachers responded in this way:



### *Colorado Focus Group Participants*

The New Americans focus groups held in Denver, Colorado were attended by 43 parents of 86 children ranging in age from one to 11 years old. The child(ren) they were asked to report on and discuss in the group were those from 0-6 years old that live in their home for whom they make child care decisions. In a few cases, both the mother and father of a child attended the group but their child information is only reported once.

Of those attending the focus groups, 60% (43) were living in Colorado, all of whom were Hispanic or Latino.

64% (27) of Colorado parents report having their child cared for outside of the home. 36% (15) of parents report not using any child care. Parents use multiple care settings; the distribution of settings in Colorado:

- Head Start 33% (14)
- Family, friend or neighbor care 30% (13)
- Preschool 2% (1)
- Kindergarten 2% (1)
- Afterschool Care 2% (1)
- Child Care Center 0%
- Family Child Care Home 0%

When asked to rate their child's fluency in English, parents living in Colorado were much more likely to rank their child's fluency in English as "poor" than parents in Maine. 15% rated their child's English as "good," 10% as "fair" and 75% as "poor."

Parents ranged in age from 22 to 40 years old and 98% (42) were female.

Almost a quarter of the focus group participants (22%) had attended college. Another quarter attended high school. About half of the participants had not completed high school.

- 0% had no education
- 2% (1) attended kindergarten – 6<sup>th</sup> grade
- 22% (9) attended 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- 27% (11) attended 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> grade
- 27% (11) completed high school
- 0% attended Adult Education
- 22% (9) attended college

More than three quarters (85%) were married, 10% divorced and 5% single. The parent’s duration in the US ranged from one to 33 years, with an average of 9.0 years.

When asked about employment:

- 80% (33) were not employed outside the home

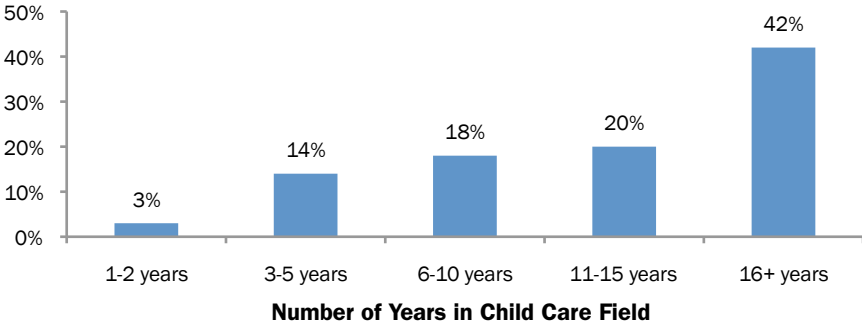
Of those working (20%):

- 2 were employed full-time
- 6 were employed part-time
- 0% had a partner/spouse who was not working

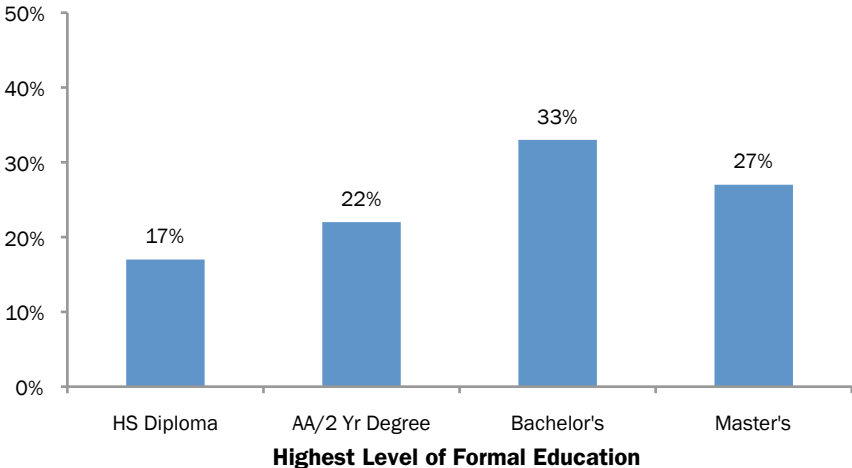
None of the participants reported receiving child care subsidies, although many of their children attended Head Start programs. 19% (8) received TANF and 16% (7) received food stamp assistance. 37% received subsidized health insurance.

**Colorado Child Care Provider Demographics**

Surveys were completed by 94 licensed Colorado child care providers: 92 female and 2 male respondents. Almost two thirds (62%) of the providers have been in the field for more than ten years.

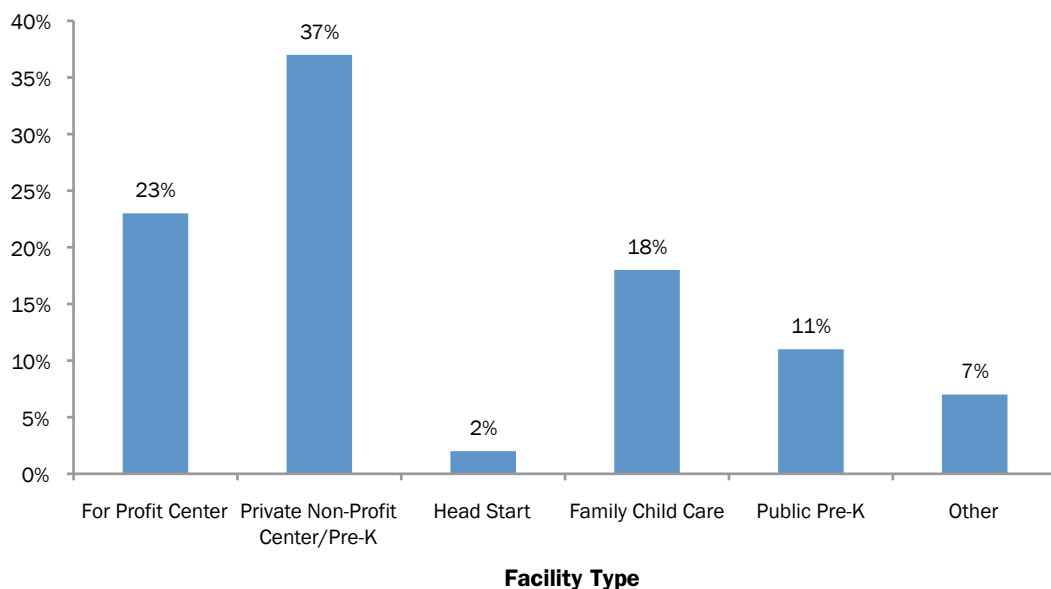


60% have a Bachelor’s or Master’s Degree.

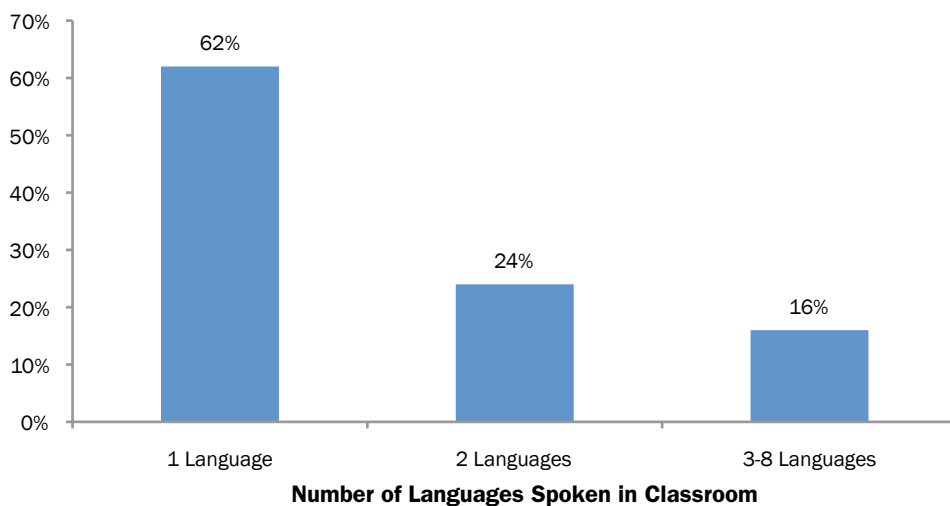


82% of the responding providers are white, with most of the remaining percentage (15%) identifying as Hispanic or Latino.

Responding providers represented a number of facility types. “Other” facilities included faith-based centers, in-home preschool and full-immersion private schools.



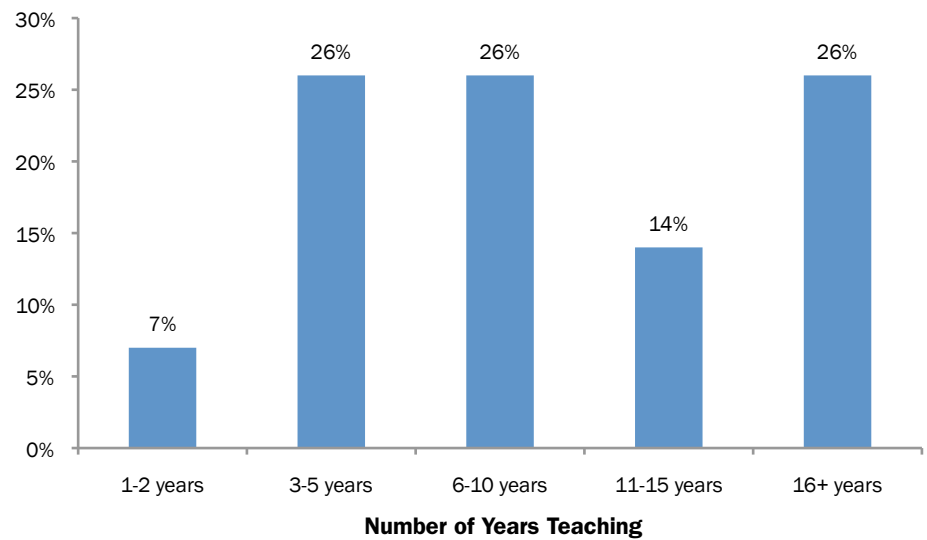
We also asked providers for some information on the population of children and families they serve. More than half (57%) reported serving children from Mexican immigrant families now or in the past three years. The number of immigrant children in their classroom varied, with 1-2 children most common (28%). We also asked about the number of languages spoken in their classroom. 62% of teachers stated that only one language was spoken in their classroom (which could have been either Spanish or English), a quarter of teachers reported two languages and 16% reported that three or more languages were spoken in their classroom.





### Colorado Teacher Demographics

42 surveys were completed by Colorado kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers: 39 female respondents and 3 male. 40% of responding teachers have taught for more than ten years. One third (66%) of teachers have taught for more than 5 years.



95% of teachers responding to the survey have at least a Bachelor’s Degree.

93% of teachers were white, with 17% identifying as Hispanic or Latino.

All responding teachers (100%) reported having Mexican immigrant children in their classroom.

