



Transporting Young Children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Introduction

In 2004, the Massachusetts state legislature approved a plan to offer universal preschool (UPK) by 2012 with priority to low wealth districts.² Even with the economic downturn, Massachusetts continues to invest in its universal preschool agenda.³ While much of this agenda has focused on issues of assessment and curriculum, several national studies reveal that lack of access to transportation by families has been a chief barrier to participation in universal preschool initiatives in other states.

“I pledge to you that we will increase funding further in the coming budget and we will stay on the path of annual increases until we have delivered on the promise of universal, high quality early education for every child in this Commonwealth.”

—Governor Deval Patrick, January 8, 2008¹

- In December 2000, a University of North Carolina study reported that one factor often overlooked has been any planning with regard to transportation for the universal preschool program.⁴
- A 2002 study by the National Economic Development and Law Center found that strong child care and transportation infrastructure support economic development and quality of life for all residents. The interaction between child care and transportation is critical; getting to and from child care for working families is as important as getting to and from work.⁵
- In July 2003, the Institute for Research on Poverty found that the lack of transportation policies and funding continues to be a significant barrier to participation in the universal preschool program for eligible students in New York, New Jersey, and Washington, DC.⁶
- A General Accounting Office study in July 2006 reported that more children from low-income and working class families in a New York rural school district would have participated in pre-kindergarten if transportation had been provided.⁷

As Massachusetts begins its UPK implementation, we have the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other states and to avoid the implementation challenges that they have faced. To offer quality and universal care, Massachusetts must develop comprehensive statewide policies as well as allocate appropriate funding that would offer transportation to all families within the target communities. Therefore, a focus on the state’s transportation policies as they relate to education and child care is both timely and wise.



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Policy Overview

Most young children in Massachusetts are transported to their early learning programs using the available resources of their family members. About 40%, however, use transportation services, many of which are subsidized. When the door of a school bus or van is opened, the learning process begins. Transportation is a child's first encounter with the educational system each day, and it should be a safe and positive experience.

For the thousands of children who desire or receive transportation subsidy, transportation services often encompass the ideals of both access and opportunity. Safe, accessible transportation represents an essential gateway to the realization of their dreams, the hopes of their parents, and helps them on their way to becoming vital contributing members of our ever-expanding diverse society.

Yet, access to transportation services is limited by both funding and policy. Eligibility for subsidized transportation is only available if the family:

1. Receives supportive services

Families become a priority with transportation if they are involved with the Department of Child & Family Services (DCF) which makes them eligible for a supportive slot, receiving Transitional Assistance for Needy Families benefits, and/or homeless. Subject to funding availability, programs will be reimbursed at the Massachusetts Department of Early Care and Education (EEC)-approved rate for one-way or round-trip transportation, based on an individual assessment of the family's need for transportation. The contracted provider or Child Care Resource and Referral Agency must document the family's reason for needing transportation funding, taking into consideration such factors as:

- the availability of public transportation
- whether a parent has a car
- any physical incapacity of a parent or child that may prevent the parent from transporting the child
- whether the parent's work schedule prevents transportation of the child to or from care
- the distance from between the child's home and the child care program

2. Lives at least one mile from center

Transportation Regulations

Massachusetts regulations governing early childhood transportation services include:

Vehicle Inspections: In addition to having the normal annual Massachusetts State Vehicle Inspection, the Registry of Motor Vehicles requires all 7(D) vehicles to have two additional safety inspections.

Time limits on transport: Children shall not be transported for more than 45 minutes during any one-way trip.

Proper restraint according to age: Whether being transported in a regular passenger car or a 7(D) vehicle, all children must be properly restrained with child safety seats or seat belts.

Professional development training and activities: It is recommended that drivers participate in a minimum of eight (8) hours of in-service training each year.

Liability insurance: Child care agencies, contracted drivers, and/or transportation companies must carry liability coverage on their vehicles of at least \$100,000 injury per person and \$300,000 per accident. Documentation of current vehicle insurance must be kept on file at the child care agency where transportation is provided.

3. Is eligible for "Flex Funding"

Children who are eligible for an Income Eligible Contracted Child Care subsidy, but cannot attend child care due to a lack of available transportation may be eligible for transportation funding from the flexible pool. Funding for transportation may be approved when parents do not have access to a car or to public transportation; when parents are physically incapacitated and unable to transport the child; or when there is a conflict between the parent's work hours and child care hours that prohibits the parents from transporting the child. Contracted programs seeking funding to serve such children must submit documentation supporting their request with their monthly billing.

4. Availability of seats

Even if a child receives a transportation voucher, they may be placed on a waiting list due to the lack of available seats throughout the transportation system.

Major Transportation Concerns in Massachusetts

Following our review of transportation of young children in Massachusetts, we have identified six areas of concern.

1. Lack of Comprehensive Planning

There is no statewide plan or policy along with the required funding that incorporates the expansion of UPK.

2. Low Reimbursement Rates

The present rate of \$9.00 per child for round-trip and \$4.50 for one-way transport is too low. Most independent contractors will not accept that rate. Centers that provide transportation typically do so at a financial loss.

3. Limited Access

The low rates, high insurance costs, and numerous safety regulations that must be met to operate vehicles and school buses in Massachusetts limit the number of vehicles available for services.

4. Inadequate Timeframes

The present rule is that a child may not be on a bus more than 45 minutes in one trip. In some communities, this rule creates issues around where the high quality centers are located and the ability of families to avail themselves of those services, particularly in rural areas.

5. Lack of Training and Support

Drivers and monitors are presently required only to have CPR and First Aid training. Drivers and vehicles must meet Massachusetts Department of Motor Vehicles “7D” or “CDL” licensing standards with no support for doing so.

6. Mixed Age Groups

School buses that transport children to UPK systems may carry children in groups that range in age from 3 to 12 years.

Recommendations

At the present time Massachusetts does not have a comprehensive or effective child transportation policy in terms of either access or safety. The outcome of this issue is that certain communities are inadequately served, long waiting lists for services exist, and many providers and transportation companies refuse to offer or severely limit the transportation services they provide.

In view of the six concerns we recommend:

1. Full integration of transportation into planning for UPK and child care expansion

By linking transportation services with UPK and child care planning, Massachusetts acknowledges the need to incorporate the services to better serve all children.

2. Increase the reimbursement rates

The rates should be increased to \$20.00 for round-trip and \$10.00 for one-way service. The increased rates will ensure sustainability for Transportation Agency.

3. Increase access for more children and families

By increasing the rates and support services, Massachusetts will encourage more participation by independent contractors and decrease the burden to centers that provide their own transportation services.

4. Extend time frame to 60 minutes

A 60-minute travel time is permitted on public school buses that, in fact, now transport children under the age of 5. The increase in travel time would permit more accessibility of services provided to children in early education and care programs.

5. Subsidize or reimburse training for drivers and monitors

Subsidizing or reimbursing the additional training for drivers is necessary to ensure they have consistent and standard skills to provide safe, high quality services.

6. Narrow the range of age groups who travel together

UPK children no older than six years of age should be permitted to travel together. By restricting the age of the children transported in vehicles we are further ensuring their safety.

CONCLUSION

Nationally, other states have demonstrated that transportation is a major barrier to UPK implementation. If Massachusetts is to expand the UPK program over the next several years, planning for transportation in both rural and urban areas is essential. Planning and implementing a statewide transportation policy as it relates to our youngest and most vulnerable students could well become a national model.

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Endnotes

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