

“Where are the children?!”

Executive Summary

Corey Zimmerman, Ed.M. and Katey Connaghan, Ph.D.

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Summary: This fall early care and education programs in Boston were having an unusually hard time filling their enrollment. Boston EQUIP heard several hypotheses about why this might be happening. Our task was to test these hypotheses with data and find out why.

Looking from the supply side we did not find one primary culprit for the problem, but rather it appears that there are several factors converging at once. Fewer children are being born in Boston each year, at the same time that early care and education capacity has grown dramatically over the last nine years. Child care remains expensive for families, however families have an increasing number of options for programs that accept child care subsidies. The number of subsidies appears relatively constant although the stringency of getting a subsidy has increased.

As our study was concluding a similar study was released from Westchester County, NY.¹ The Westchester study however considered the demand side (or parent side) of the equation. In Westchester, it was found that many families were opting out of the regulated system because they were not finding the quality of care they sought, and what they did find they perceived to be too expensive for its quality. Also, parents were opting out of the system because their hours of need were not matched by the hours provided by ECE programs. Boston should take heed from Westchester’s study and consider focusing on improving quality and clearly articulating and meeting the needs of parents.

Boston Findings²:

- ↓ **There are fewer children in Boston than ten years ago.** In 1993, 8808 children were born to Boston mothers compared to 7817 children in 2003.
 - ↘ According to one birth forecast, the number of births per year is expected to rise, however the trend has been decreasing for the past three years.
- ↑ **Since 1998, Boston’s early care and education capacity has increased by 34%, or 4,748 spaces.**
 - ↗ Boston now has enough early care and education capacity to match 81% of its preschool population. Most universal demand estimates believe a community needs to match 80% of its preschoolers.
- ↓ **For a Boston family with median income (\$49,230) having to pay out of pocket, infant care in a center is nearly 32% (\$15,660) of their income; preschool care 19% (\$9,396) and family child care 16% (\$7,830). All these shares of income, for one child, are well above the 10% figure estimated to be affordable for parents purchasing child care.**
- **There are slightly more vouchers available than two years ago, however other forms of subsidies have been stagnant or declining over that same time.**
 - ↘ Within the past few years much has changed in the context of subsidies. Massachusetts now has a centralized waitlist for child care, there are priority categories for vouchers, the rigor

of documentation has increased because of increased stringency of audits, and the median income for subsidies was updated in 2005 from 2001.

↑ **In Region 6, the number of programs accepting voucher subsidies has increased as well as the rate of new programs signing voucher agreements.** In 2002, 16 new voucher agreements were written. In 2006, 43 new voucher agreements were written. This means that families have more choices of where to bring their vouchers, and creates more competition for programs.

Conclusion: There is no one clear culprit for why programs are having a hard time filling their enrollment. However the Westchester study suggests that our answer may lie with a better understanding of the perceptions and needs of parents.

¹ ETC Institute / LC Associates / Throman Group. (2007) Westchester County 2006 Child Care Utilization Study Final Report. www.thejournalnews.com/assets/pdf/BH6422035.PDF

² The data associated with all of the hypotheses we tested and details about our methodology are available on www.bostonequip.org as a PowerPoint titled "Where are the Children?! Data and Results"

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About Boston EQUIP: Boston Early Education Quality Improvement Project (Boston EQUIP) is a project of Associated Early Care & Education. Boston EQUIP was launched in 1994 with a mission "to collaborate with members of the early education community to systematically evaluate, set goals for, and improve upon the quality of Boston's early childhood programs." Boston EQUIP is a unique effort to bring research methods that meet the highest academic standards to bear on questions and issues that are born of the community. The staff of Boston EQUIP are regularly in the community listening and anticipating opportunities where research and data can be used as a springboard for positive change in the experiences of young children. Members of academia, practice, and philanthropy meet monthly as the Boston EQUIP Advisory Committee to lend their expertise about content, research methodologies, and dissemination of findings. For more information, visit our website at www.bostonequip.org.