

Considerations for Research About 2-K

A Brief informed by *What Will It Take to Fulfill the Promise of 2-K?*

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New York City's [expansion of publicly funded child care for two-year-olds \(2-K\)](#) presents a unique opportunity to study how a large urban system can build a sustainable, equitable, and developmentally appropriate system for serving young children and their families. As one of the nation's first large-scale public investments in early care and education for two-year-olds, 2-K offers an unprecedented opportunity to conduct research to inform ongoing implementation and program expansion. The knowledge generated from research can support policymakers and practitioners in New York City and other communities seeking to expand access to early care and education.

The other briefs in our series about [What Will It Take to Fulfill the Promise of 2-K?](#) have discussed key themes that arose from that forum, centered around relationships, higher education, and the workforce. Drawing on issues and perspectives raised throughout the Forum, we identify potential areas for research and questions that could inform ongoing implementation, policy, and practice. These research considerations extend the forum conversation rather than represent research priorities or recommendations generated by Forum participants.

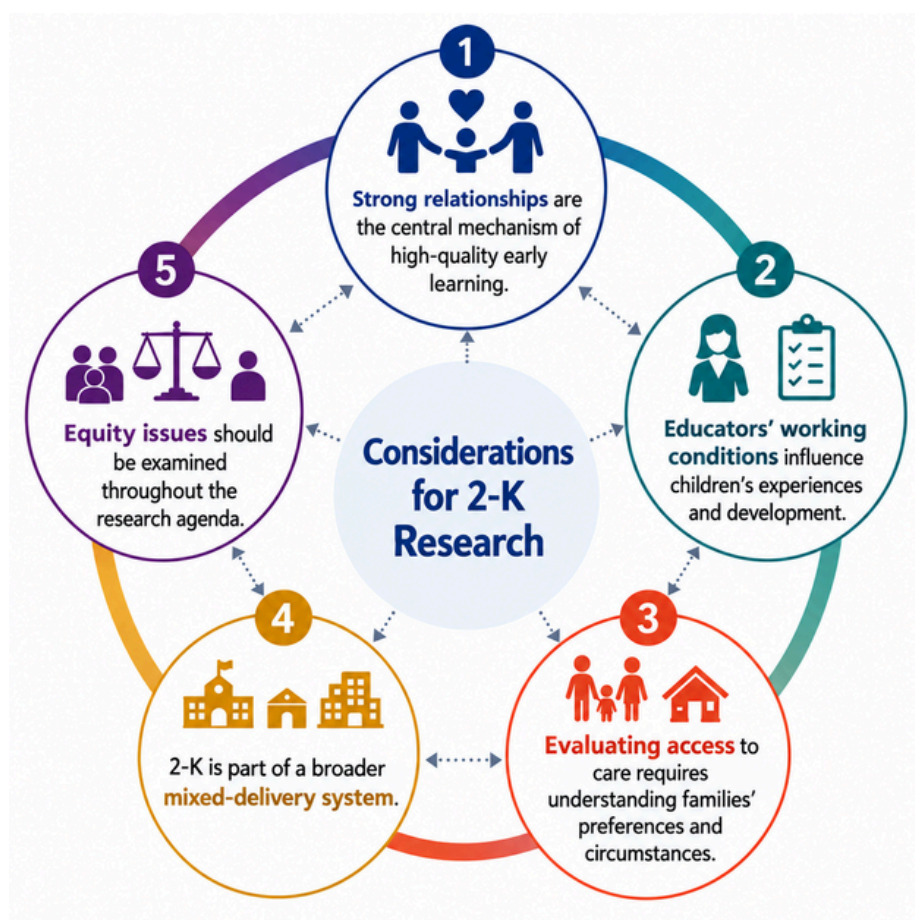
As highlighted throughout the Forum, a successful 2-K system must meet the needs of children, families, and early educators while complementing and strengthening the broader early childhood landscape, including Pre-K for All, 3-K, child care subsidies, and related support services such as Early Intervention. Two-year-olds are also at a unique developmental stage. They learn through [relationships](#), play, physical exploration, predictable routines, and repeated interactions with responsive adults. At the same time, programs serving this age group operate within an early childhood system characterized by [low compensation, workforce turnover](#), fragmented funding, uneven access to professional learning, and substantial administrative and financial pressures. Because 2-K settings are both learning environments for young children and workplaces for educators, implementation requires attention to children's and educators' experiences alongside research that considers developmental outcomes and working conditions.

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A guiding question for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners is not simply whether New York City can create more publicly funded seats for 2-year-olds. It is:

How can New York City build a publicly supported system of care for 2-year-olds that strengthens relationships, responds to family needs, supports educators and providers, and improves outcomes equitably across communities?

This question provides a frame for considerations that follow. Together, these considerations offer a systems-level framework for understanding 2-K implementation, identifying research priorities, and generating actionable evidence to support policy, practice, and continuous improvement in New York City and beyond.



This set of considerations emerged from presentations and discussions at the Forum and reflects the collective expertise of researchers, city administrators, educators, child care leaders, and higher education professionals. Together, they offer collective insights for studying the implementation of 2-K and other large-scale public investments in early care and education.

1. Strong relationships are the central mechanism of high-quality early learning.

As explored by the [companion brief on relationships](#), stable, responsive relationships support children's emotional security, learning, language development, self-regulation, and healthy brain development. Relationships also influence family trust, educator well-being and retention, provider collaboration, and coordination across the broader early childhood system (such as intersections with Early Intervention services).

For 2-K research, this relational lens creates an opportunity to examine not only the quality of children's experiences, but also the conditions that support strong, sustained relationships across the early childhood system.

Research on 2-K can examine relationships at multiple levels:

- Children and educators
- Families and educators
- Educators and program leaders
- Providers and public agencies
- Providers and professional-support organizations
- Child care programs and Early Intervention systems
- Communities and city government

Research questions informed by this approach could include:

- What role do educator-family relationships play in attendance, family engagement, developmental screening, referrals, and retention?
- What strategies and practices help foster relationships between educators and early interventionists?
- How do implementation strategies support relationship-building among children, families, educators, and community partners over time?



2. Educators' working conditions influence children's experiences and development.

Educators' ability to provide stable, responsive care is shaped by the conditions in which they work. Sufficient planning time, manageable group sizes, stable schedules, supportive supervision, high-quality professional development, professional respect, and fair compensation all contribute to educators' capacity to support children and families. Research on educators' current workplace conditions, compensation, professional development, and well-being is essential to understanding implementation and the extent to which educators are (or aren't) supported in promoting children's development and family well-being.

Research questions informed by this approach could include:

- What compensation strategies promote educator mental health, physical health, well-being, and professional belonging?
- What factors beyond pay contribute to turnover, including leadership quality, respect, planning time, workload, and access to paid leave?
- What forms of professional development support provider well-being and effective practices with children and families?

3. Evaluating access to care requires understanding families' preferences and circumstances.

Access to care involves more than the availability of a 2-K seat. A seat is not genuinely accessible if its hours, location, language, setting, enrollment process, or educational approach do not align with a family's needs or preferences. Measures of access should consider whether families can find, trust, enroll in, and remain in care that works for them. Understanding families' preferences, such as with the recent New York City parent survey by New America, is critical to designing a 2-K system that is responsive to families' diverse needs and circumstances.

Research questions informed by this approach could include:

- What program hours, schedules, and locations are needed to align with parents' employment, education, transportation, and caregiving responsibilities?
- What factors influence whether families prefer family child care, center-based care, Head Start, school-based settings, or other arrangements?
- What barriers prevent families from enrolling in, accessing, or remaining in 2-K programs that align with their preferences?

4. 2-K is part of a broader mixed-delivery system.

2-K is implemented within an existing and complex early childhood ecosystem that includes family child care, community-based centers, Head Start, Early Intervention, 3-K and Pre-K for All, private-pay care, and informal care. It will also intersect with the child care subsidy system, as parents who would have formerly used child care vouchers may now choose to access 2-K instead. Administrative practices, reimbursement rates, and implementation support provided by city agencies may influence providers' decisions to participate in 2-K and affect the sustainability of other early childhood programs within a mixed-delivery system. Research should therefore examine 2-K not as a standalone program, but as part of an interconnected mixed-delivery system of providers, funders, educators, families, and public agencies.

Research questions that take this systems lens could include:

- How do reimbursement rates, administrative requirements, and implementation support influence provider participation in 2-K? How do those experiences differ from participation in other publicly funded systems?
- What are the intended and unintended consequences of 2-K expansion on the availability and sustainability of infant and toddler care across the mixed-delivery system?
- How are 2-K providers connected to related systems like Early Intervention? What best practices support educators, parents, and systems leaders in making these connections?

5. Equity should be embedded throughout 2-K research.

New York City's 2-K expansion will serve children, families, and communities with diverse strengths, needs, experiences, and circumstances. The early childhood workforce is similarly diverse and has historically relied on the undercompensated labor of women, particularly immigrant women and women of color. Families also experience different types of child care access based on income, race and ethnicity, language, immigration status, disability, neighborhood, work schedule, and familiarity with public systems. These differences may shape who benefits from 2-K expansion and how families and providers experience access, enrollment, and participation.

Equity should therefore be embedded throughout research questions, methods, analyses and interpretation rather than examined as a separate topic. For example, administrative data should include characteristics of educator and family demographics, economic resources, language, dis/ability, and community contexts.

Particular attention should also be paid to children with special needs and their access to the Early Intervention system. Research and evaluation studies can collect, analyze, and share findings using these contextualized data to ensure that implementation is understood across diverse populations/settings and that findings can inform equitable policy and practice.

Research questions that reflect a commitment to equity include:

- Which provider types benefit from the expansion, and which face new risks?
- How do race, ethnicity, language, dis/ability, immigration status, neighborhood context, and professional status shape families' experiences with access, enrollment, and participation in 2-K?
- Which populations continue to face barriers to accessing high-quality 2-K opportunities, and what implementation strategies are most effective in reducing those barriers?
- Do Early Intervention services reach all needed children and families and what supports facilitate access?

Considerations in Practice

These research considerations are intended as a starting point for further conversation about 2-K research, monitoring, and evaluation. Drawing on issues raised at the Forum, they can help researchers, policymakers, practitioners, philanthropy, and higher education institutions identify areas where additional evidence may be useful and consider opportunities for collaboration.

- **City leaders** can use these considerations to guide 2-K data collection strategies, supporting a more comprehensive understanding of how implementation is experienced across stages and settings.
- **Researchers** can develop research questions, design data collection tools, and align analytic approaches across studies in line with these considerations. By generating actionable evidence, researchers can help inform implementation, strengthen policy and practice, and contribute to a coordinated body of knowledge on publicly funded early care and education. They also can actively collaborate to ensure insights are shared and coordinated across organizations, thereby facilitating program-wide interpretation and identifying insights.
- **Philanthropic organizations** can use these considerations to identify research gaps, align funding priorities, and invest in research and innovation that generate actionable evidence for policy and practice.

- **Higher education institutions** can use these considerations to inform research, curriculum, and program innovation that responds to emerging workforce needs, strengthens credentialing pathways, and prepares educators to meet the evolving demands of publicly funded early care and education systems.

Conclusion

The launch of New York City's 2-K expansion presents a unique opportunity to support children, families, providers, administrators, and city leaders via ongoing monitoring, research, and evaluation. The [New York City Early Childhood Research Network](#) at CUNY's New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute (PDI) is a network of research-practice partnerships that bring together researchers, city agencies, practitioners, higher education institutions, philanthropic organizations, and community partners to advance research that informs early childhood policy and practice. The considerations presented in this brief provide jumping off points for the Network to engage in a broader conversation about shared research priorities, catalyze collaboration across institutions, and generate actionable evidence that informs implementation, continuous improvement, and future policy decisions.

We invite researchers, City leaders, and philanthropic organizations to collectively investigate and support the multifaceted elements of the 2-K system in support of New York City's youngest learners.



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On June 16, Bank Street's Straus Institute for Thriving Children and Families, New York Professional Development Institute, and Trust for Learning convened a day-long policy and research forum to support New York City's public child care expansion for two-year-olds (2-K). The event brought together policymakers, researchers, philanthropists, community-based organizations, child care administrators, and educators to discuss city demographics, workforce development, workplace conditions and compensation, children's developmental needs, and cultural responsiveness required for high-quality toddler care. It also shed a light on the true costs of high-quality care. A series of briefs informs the ongoing design, implementation, and research on 2-K.

[Use this link to join the NYC Early Childhood Research Network mailing list.](#)

If you have questions about the Network, please email earlychildhoodresearchny@cuny.edu.

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