

Utilization-Focused Evaluation in State-Funded Preschool Decision-Making: Community-Engaged Design, Process, and Implementation

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Abstract

Most large-scale evaluations of publicly funded preschool programs are summative studies designed to assess program effectiveness. They use various experimental and quasi-experimental designs to compare program participants' outcomes with those of a comparison group of similar children. The products are written reports and articles. The results have been mixed, and the application of study data to meaningful decisions about program implementation has been limited. Our evaluation of Michigan's state-funded prekindergarten program for low-income 4-year-old children added a different approach. Following principles of community-engaged scholarship, our evaluation focused on use of data for continuous improvement and decision-making, in an approach aligned with Patton's (2011) utilization-focused evaluation framework. We listened to and collaborated with the intended users of our evaluation to produce data they could use immediately to improve program quality, facilitate equitable access, and guide policy decisions. Using big data—not only program and school student data but also community data such as census information and Child Opportunity Index scores—we produced a series of online maps and data dashboards that display information in ways program leaders and policy-makers can easily understand. This article illustrates how evaluators can provide data beyond child outcomes and products beyond aggregated written reports to facilitate vital policy and program decisions.

Increasing public investment in preschool education has brought greater investment in evaluation of public preschool programs. Most published evaluation studies are summative assessments of program effectiveness using various measures of child outcomes. Decades of experimental and quasi-experimental studies have established a consensus that targeted prekindergarten (pre-K) programs serving low-income 4-year-olds largely function as designed to improve participants' readiness for kindergarten (Phillips et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2023). What happens next is less clear. Several rigorously designed studies have found that the differential effects of pre-K participation fade by third grade (e.g., Lipsey et al., 2018; Puma et al., 2012; Yoshikawa et al., 2016); however, some longer-term studies have found longer-lasting benefits (e.g. Gray-Lobe et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2018). Results of these evaluations have been used on both sides of the debate about the value of public preschool, despite evaluators' concerns about the application of findings across highly varied contexts (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018; Wu & Akaeze, 2024).

Defining Evaluation and Its Purposes

In its *Program Evaluation Toolkit* (Stewart et

al., 2021), the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) defined program evaluation as “the systematic process for planning, documenting, and assessing the implementation and outcomes of a program. ... Evaluations often address the following questions: [1] Is the program effective? [2] Can the program be improved?” (Stewart et al., 2021, p. 1). Patton (2008) summarized three main purposes of evaluation: Summative evaluations make judgments about program effectiveness (IES Question 1), formative evaluations aim toward program improvement (IES Question 2), and developmental evaluations enable program evolution in response to changing conditions.

Most large-scale evaluations of public pre-K programs and the IES toolkit focus on summative judgments of effectiveness. However, formative evaluations designed to facilitate program improvement may provide more useful information. Public preschool is so popular (Houston et al., 2023; Yoshikawa et al., 2016) that state-funded pre-Ks are likely to continue whether or not they are found to be effective (Bassok et al., 2021). A more practical question, then, is how public pre-Ks can be improved to better serve low-income children and families (Puigean et al., 2022). Community-engaged approaches to

“evaluation as learning” (Puinean et al., 2022, p. 64) have the potential to produce information policy-makers and program leaders can use to improve implementation (Bassok et al., 2021; Puinean et al., 2022).

Our Community-Engaged Utilization-Focused Evaluation

The community-engaged approach described in this article is an adaptation of Michael Quinn Patton’s (2009, 2011) utilization-focused evaluation (UFE). UFE is one of many stakeholder engagement strategies that are being put forward as ways to make evaluation results more useful to decision-makers (Patton, 2011; Puinean et al., 2022). As the evaluators of Michigan’s state-funded pre-K for low-income 4-year-old children, we have used UFE principles to conduct a formative evaluation through which we help administrators improve program quality and promote equitable access. Along a spectrum of university-community engagement (Colorado State University [CSU], n.d.), our level of involvement with stakeholders ranged from *inform* at the least engaged end through *consult* and *involve* to *collaborate*, though it did not reach the highest level, *co-creation*. Our collaborative UFE approach provides timely data in forms policy-makers and program leaders can use in decision-making. We hope our experience will inspire other evaluators to engage in UFE and similar user-focused processes to produce evaluation products funders and program leaders can use immediately to improve program quality, facilitate equitable access, and guide policy decisions.

To introduce our UFE approach, we begin with the basic tenets of UFE as proposed by Patton. We then present a landscape scan of evaluations of publicly funded early childhood education programs to demonstrate the prevalence of summative evaluations for which the products are traditional written reports. Next, we describe how our evaluation of Michigan’s pre-K program uses a UFE approach to develop alternative products policy-makers and program leaders can and do use in decision-making. Two brief case studies illustrate the responsive and iterative nature of the work. We conclude with implications, suggesting that evaluators provide data beyond child outcomes to facilitate vital policy and program decisions on public pre-K and similar education programs.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Our work with stakeholders to improve the

implementation of Michigan’s state-funded pre-K has been guided by Patton’s concept of UFE. Its central premise is that “evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use,” and its focus is on “intended use by intended users” (Patton, 2011, p. 4). First, the evaluator works with those intended users to determine what information they need. Then the evaluator can offer options for types of evaluation that can meet that need (Patton, 2011). A UFE can be developmental, summative, or formative, using any method and any kind of data (Patton & Horton, 2009). The key is to find (or develop) individuals who are committed to the “reality testing” that the evaluation makes possible and who will take action based on the evaluation results (Patton, 2011).

Patton has outlined the UFE process in 17 steps (e.g., Patton, 2011), 12 steps (e.g., Patton, 2013), and five steps (Patton & Horton, 2009). He notes that the process is rarely linear (Patton, 2013). Our own application of UFE involved adapting the approach to local conditions and political realities. The five-step version, the broadest outline of UFE steps, therefore provides the best fit for this article’s description of our UFE with Michigan stakeholders. The five steps, along with brief summaries by Patton & Horton (2009), are as follows:

1. Identify primary intended users. “The UFE process begins by narrowing the list of potential stakeholders to a specific group of primary intended users whose interests and information needs focus the evaluation” (p. 2).
2. Gain commitment to UFE and focus the evaluation. “The evaluator works with intended users to determine priority issues and evaluation uses, paying attention to political and ethical considerations” (p. 2).
3. Decide on evaluation methods. “Primary intended users are involved in making methods decisions so that they fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of the findings” (p. 2).
4. Analyze and interpret findings and reach conclusions. “[I]ntended users are actively and directly involved in interpreting findings, making judgments based on the data, and generating recommendations” (p. 3).
5. Disseminate evaluation findings. Evaluators must help partners distinguish “between intended use by intended users (planned utilization) versus more general dissemination for broad public accountability

(where both hoped-for and unintended uses may occur),” keeping the focus on intended uses (p. 3).

In their scoping review of evaluation of early childhood development programs, Puinean and colleagues (2022) present a schema of four evaluation constructs and place UFE within the construct “community-driven evaluation” (p. 65) along with participatory, empowerment, collaborative, developmental, and democratic approaches. They also cite Patton’s work in describing the “evaluation use and influence” construct (p. 75). The review found just two UFEs of early childhood programs, one of which is a dissertation (Jayawardena, 2016) and the other of which is documented in a peer-reviewed article (Guss et al., 2013). Our own searches did not turn up any others. It is likely that many evaluation efforts that rely on stakeholder engagement are not documented in peer-reviewed literature (Puinean et al., 2022).

UFE is often conducted among end users of the services being evaluated. For example, Jayawardena (2016) used a participatory action research model that engaged program and nonprogram families, teachers, program administrators, and policy-makers in program improvement. However, UFEs can also engage program leaders and decision-makers, as in Patton and Horton’s (2009) outline of the five steps in evaluating agricultural initiatives. In keeping with Patton’s (2011) assertion that UFE is neutral in relation to evaluation purpose, design, method, model, and content, we used UFE as a framework in various phases of our evaluation to guide our approach to users. Like Guss et al. (2013), we saw ourselves as an “embedded evaluator,” working closely with pre-K decision-makers to learn and fulfill their data needs.

Below we use the five steps to present our work with stakeholders in Michigan’s public pre-K. First, however, we present the evaluation context by summarizing our findings about evaluations of public preschool programming.

The Current State of Evaluation of Public Preschool Programs

For this paper, we conducted a web-based landscape scan of evaluations of publicly funded early childhood programs, focusing on Head Start and state preschool programs. In nearly all cases, the evaluations we identified sought to judge the effectiveness of the programs they studied. Most studies focused on child outcomes. The products were, without exception, written reports and

articles.

Head Start

After its widely cited impact study (Puma et al., 2012), Head Start seems to have refocused its research agenda on program implementation, quality, and improvement rather than on child outcomes. The impact study, which followed children who attended Head Start in 2002, remains one of the few randomized controlled trial studies of publicly funded early childhood programming. It famously found early impacts on children’s school readiness that faded by Grade 3. Today’s Head Start Research and Evaluation agenda (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation [OPRE], 2020) outlines four research questions having to do with (a) the population served, (b) program services and their quality, (c) program effectiveness, and (d) program improvement. Of the 12 current projects listed in the research agenda, not one focuses on program effectiveness (OPRE, 2020). Rather, Head Start seems to be focusing its research and evaluation on implementation fidelity and program quality; that is, on formative assessment.

State-Funded Preschool Programs

To identify evaluations of state-funded preschool programs, we started with the preschool-focused sections or pages of state education agency websites. A few of these made information about evaluation and research readily available, but most did not. We therefore relied heavily on Google searches using several interlocking search terms, including “evaluation of / effectiveness of [state] preschool program / [state] [program name].” These searches reliably turned up journal articles and less reliably yielded evaluation reports or descriptions. Because state pre-K programs are constantly changing in response to new policies and funding realities, we limited our investigation to reports or articles published in 2018 or later. When we found journal articles, we identified authors’ affiliations and checked those websites to determine whether those entities functioned as the state evaluators. Similarly, when we found any mention of a third-party evaluator on state education agency websites, we then went to the site of the evaluation entity. Though we made every attempt to conduct a comprehensive search, it is possible that our search missed one or more state evaluators.

Of the 44 jurisdictions (including Washington, D.C.) that had state-funded early childhood education programs in 2021 (Friedman-Krauss

et al., 2022), we found no evidence of any third-party evaluation for 22, or half. For all 22 states that did have third-party evaluations, the evaluation products consisted of written reports and articles. Reports from five third-party evaluations consisted of descriptive data, which often included short-term outcomes such as measures of kindergarten readiness but did not include comparison groups. Most third-party evaluations attempted to compare the outcomes of participants with those of nonparticipants. Evaluators of five state programs have published results in peer-reviewed journals since 2018: Alabama (Preskitt et al., 2020), Connecticut (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2019), New Jersey (Barnett & Jung, 2021), North Carolina (Watts et al., 2023), and Tennessee (Durkin et al., 2022).

These reports often concluded with a page or two of recommendations. However, for most, the overall purpose seemed to be summative; they used data on student outcomes to facilitate judgments about the effectiveness of the program. None of the reports or articles we read specified that the evaluations used UFE or other engagement approaches. However, the processes behind the products were often not described, so we do not know to what extent the evaluators involved policy-makers, grantees, program leaders, staff, or families.

Because our UFE of Michigan's preschool program has resulted in a series of interactive maps, we wanted to know whether any other state evaluator produced web-based maps to facilitate policy decision-making, as opposed to helping families locate services. We found three states that offered interactive maps of state-funded pre-K programs: Arizona, Illinois, and Maine. None of these seemed to be the product of state-funded preschool evaluation studies. The Illinois and Maine maps simply showed locations of providers. Arizona's maps also offered layers identifying regional poverty levels and populations of children under 5. We also found several interactive map projects focused on childcare generally, not just state-funded pre-K. None are products of state evaluations, but their existence speaks to a trend toward map-based visualization of data to facilitate program and policy decisions.

Major cities, including Boston, Chicago, and New York City, fund their own preschool programs, many predating any statewide effort. Boston's program is being evaluated by a research consortium led by the University of Michigan (Ford School of Public Policy, n.d.), which has produced

influential peer-reviewed articles (Gray-Lobe et al., 2023; Weiland et al., 2020) and other written materials but no maps or other data visualization tools. We did not attempt to identify other city-funded programs.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation of Michigan's State-Funded Pre-K

Michigan is among the states that has a third-party evaluator based at an academic institution. Our unit of Michigan State University (MSU), Community Evaluation Programs at University Outreach and Engagement, was first awarded the contract to evaluate Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) in 2017. GSRP targets 4-year-old children from low-income backgrounds and served 38,547 children in 2022–23. State grants are administered by 53 intermediate school districts (ISDs) or ISD consortia to 1,352 local sites run by school districts or community-based nonprofits. Funding for the program has steadily increased since its launch in 1985, which is evidence of the continuing support from the governor's office and the legislature.

In this section, we briefly describe the traditional components of our evaluation and their limitations in guiding decision-making. Next we present the rationale for the UFE approach, partly in answer to the limitations of the traditional approach. We then outline the levels of engagement of stakeholders during this process using CSU's (n.d.) continuum of community engagement. The next subsection describes our work with Michigan stakeholders, organized by Patton and Horton's (2009) five UFE steps. The section ends with two brief case studies of specific evaluation projects, their UFE approach, and their products.

Traditional Evaluation Components

In keeping with the interests of our client, Michigan's education department, our evaluation has traditional components. We are gathering longitudinal data to fuel a quasi-experimental study of program effectiveness similar to those published by other state evaluators. We also produce annual reports with descriptive statistics on students, staff, and programs both for the state as a whole and for each ISD. The data in these reports can help demonstrate to the taxpayers and state policy-makers the extent to which their investments in preschool programming are paying off. However, the aggregated views and statewide summaries in those reports do not enable state and local officials to explore ways to expand access

and improve quality. Furthermore, the knowledge these reports present is divorced from local social and economic realities that have substantial impact on families' ability to benefit from free public preschool education.

Rationale for the Utilization-Focused Approach

Our evaluation grant application to the state education department in 2017 outlined a utilization-focused approach based on the premise that both the state agency and its local grantees should have access to their data, in a form they can use, in as close to real time as possible. With the advent of geographic information systems and easy access to large databases such as U.S. Census data, we have increasingly been able to situate GSRP data in their local social and economic context. We can give GSRP decision-makers at both state and local levels the ability to sort data in ways that help them see current realities and decide what to do next. Unlike rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental summative approaches, whose results only become available after years of research (Bassok et al., 2021), our approach provides timely data, often in interactive formats that can be updated in real time.

In keeping with MSU's public engagement mission, we collaborate and consult with Michigan early childhood stakeholders to conduct an ongoing and iterative formative evaluation for program improvement, serving as an "embedded evaluator" (Guss et al., 2013). The utilization-focused arm of the evaluation has two main purposes: to enhance equity of access and to improve program quality. The stakeholders with whom we engaged were primarily policy and program decision-makers, along with subject matter experts whose knowledge could facilitate decision-making.

Levels of Stakeholder Engagement

The extent to which these stakeholders were involved depended on the specific project within the UFE framework. CSU's *Continuum of Engaged Scholarship* (n.d.) defines five levels of engagement: *inform*, *consult*, *involve*, *collaborate*, and *co-creation*. Our work ranged across the first four of these. Particularly at the beginning of the collaboration, we *informed* stakeholders about the values, goals, strengths, and limitations of evaluation research and our role as the state evaluator. Then we regularly shared information stemming both from the traditional evaluation components and the collaboratively constructed projects emerging from the UFE. *Consult*, according to the CSU

continuum, falls with *inform* under the outreach arm of community outreach and engagement; it includes "conversations with stakeholders," "needs assessments," and "utilizing . . . feedback," among other actions. As will emerge as we outline our UFE process, consultation was integral to the production of useful data. On the CSU continuum, the *involve* level crosses over from outreach into community engagement; it entails "conven[ing] various stakeholders on research issue[s]." Much of our work with stakeholders, as outlined below, took place during regular meetings of the advisory group we established with the state education department. One aspect of CSU's *collaborate* level is "Collaboration with industry/agencies to identify research priorities"; this description encapsulates the way in which the needs of stakeholders guided selection of specific evaluation projects. The fifth level of engagement, *co-creation*, was not possible within our advisory group for a variety of reasons, including stakeholders' time constraints and level of commitment as well as our funder's expectations. In our description of the five UFE steps in the GSRP evaluation, we specify the levels of engagement embodied in specific aspects or projects of the UFE.

Applying the Steps of the Utilization-Focused Approach

This section describes the ways in which we applied the five UFE steps to our GSRP evaluation. How we operationalized the steps is revealed in two case studies following the description of the five steps. Throughout, our aim has been to empower intended users to take ownership of their data.

Step 1. Identify Primary Intended Users

MSU's Community Evaluation Programs at University Outreach and Engagement works with communities to produce engaged scholarship and to promote diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments. Driven by this mission, we began our statewide evaluation by intentionally building an advisory committee. We asked our client, then the Michigan Department of Education, to identify "champions" in the field who cared about using data for decision-making. We invited some of these champions as well as early childhood researchers from other universities, attending to geographic representation. The final advisory committee consisted of 19 GSRP program administrators and early childhood experts, representing the state education department, four regional education service agencies, four ISDs (grantees), one local education agency (school district), two

education-related nonprofit organizations, and three universities. Some ISD representatives were district leaders, but some were included because they were the staff members responsible for the ISD's data entry and submissions. Subsequent years saw some turnover in personnel; the roles largely remained the same but the persons filling the seats might have been different.

Part of the work of Step 1 in our UFE process was to nurture the advisory committee members into a cadre of policy and program leaders who were committed to the UFE and to the use of its results. This aspect of the UFE aimed both to *inform* decision-makers about what evaluations can and cannot do and to *consult* with them about their data needs. The cadre-building process slowed when committee meetings shifted from in-person to online during the pandemic. However, we continued to build stakeholders' understanding of the importance of data (*inform*) and commitment to using data for decision-making (*involve*) through repeated iterations of Steps 2–4, as outlined below.

Step 2. Gain Commitment to UFE and Focus the Evaluation

Our goal was to engage the advisory committee members as research partners. From Fall 2018 to Spring 2024, the advisory committee met twice a year, mostly in spring and fall. We used grant funds to provide committee members with a stipend and, before the pandemic, travel reimbursement for the half-day meeting. From 2020 to 2024, meetings were held online.

At the first meeting, we asked about committee members' experience in GSRP and their vision for the future. Committee members unanimously agreed that the state should continue to invest in GSRP. They noted that 20 years and billions of dollars of investment had resulted in a mature pre-K program whose quality rating and improvement system helped to ensure that individual GSRP sites met quality standards. The previous evaluation, which used a traditional quasi-experimental design to assess program impacts on participating children, had demonstrated positive impacts on academic achievement (Schweinhart et al., 2012). The committee members' vision for the future centered on continued improvements in quality and access, particularly for underserved populations.

In light of this vision, we prepared presentations to begin to *inform* the advisory committee about the purposes of evaluations and the uses of evaluation data. Without going into the terminology, we explained that their goals

were formative rather than summative, so that the traditional evaluation methods with which they were familiar would not meet their need. The previous evaluation (Schweinhart et al., 2012), for example, followed a small sample of participants and nonparticipants to high school graduation to demonstrate impacts. We explained that, in order to facilitate data-driven decision-making, we needed to use recent data from a large sample of students. The traditional arm of our current evaluation uses a quasi-experimental design to examine longitudinal impacts, but the sample includes all GSRP students, not just a small subsample. Children placed on GSRP site waitlists serve as the comparison group. This traditional design fulfills the interest of the state education agency in justifying continued investment in GSRP by demonstrating the extent to which the program produces meaningful improvements in child academic and social-emotional outcomes.

A more innovative arm of our evaluation design follows UFE principles. In the first advisory committee meeting, we reiterated the two broad goals of our adoption of UFE: to enhance equity of access and to improve program quality. We had defined these goals in our proposal to the state as a refinement of its broad mandate to “improve implementation.” The state agency committed to these goals by accepting our proposal, and advisory committee members readily adopted these goals as their own. They had ideas about more specific purposes within these goals and, in some cases, about what data they would need to fulfill these purposes. For example, to assess equity of access, they wanted to know the extent to which GSRP sites were situated in high-need neighborhoods. In terms of the CSU (n.d.) engagement continuum, they were engaged at the level of *involve* and, to a lesser degree, *consult*, in that they were defining evaluation priorities. They then needed us, their evaluation experts, to refine their ideas or suggest new focus areas. For example, we used our knowledge of innovative evaluation resources to suggest the use of the Child Opportunity Index (Noelke et al., 2020) to identify high-need neighborhoods.

Step 3. Decide on Evaluation Methods

In keeping with the state education department's interests in traditional reporting, we have produced annual reports focused on descriptive statistics, gathered longitudinal data for the quasi-experimental impact study, and written research papers based on this data for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

Under the formative UFE arm of the evaluation, we suggested using the GSRP database to build a statewide platform for data visualization. We proposed a series of dashboards for statewide and ISD-specific data, with maps and charts to enable easy visualization and comparisons. We planned to use the software platform Tableau to display interactive maps that would allow users to manipulate the data to, for example, show enrollment data or teacher salaries for a specific ISD. We presented this plan to the advisory committee in Fall 2018, asking for their feedback on whether and how they could use these products, how we might improve the plan, and whether they had other questions our research might answer. The level of engagement (CSU, n.d.) began with *informing* and moved into *consulting* with committee members about needs, *involving* them in process improvement, and *collaborating* on priorities.

At every subsequent advisory committee meeting, the evaluation leader presented a new map, a new set of data, or a new finding. Each new product answered at least some of the previously posed questions but also raised new questions and issues. The evaluation team and the intended users thus went through several iterations and tweaks of Steps 1–3 based on findings presented as part of Step 4.

Step 4. Analyze and Interpret Findings and Reach Conclusions

At each advisory committee meeting in 2019–23, the evaluation leader presented one or more maps or other data products. Each data dashboard and map, along with relevant statistical outputs, provided infrastructure for data-driven decision-making at the state and local levels. Drawing on the MSU team's evaluation expertise, the evaluation leader helped the users understand what they were seeing (*inform*). Then she helped them interpret what they saw, so they could reach their own conclusions and decide what, if any, action to take (*collaborate*). As utilization-focused evaluators, we do not try to lead intended users to specific conclusions.

By 2023, the maps produced as the result of this iterative process of consultation and data analysis were, in the order in which they were developed:

- ISD and GSRP site locations
- Teacher profile
- ISD comparison
- ISD comparison over time
- Sites by Child Opportunity Index

- Staff versus children racial disparities
- GSRP-to-kindergarten child movement

Each new product answered at least some of the previously posed questions but also raised new questions and issues. Sometimes, as described in Case Study 1 below, seeing a product helped users identify needed tweaks. Whenever a map or data product was presented, the evaluation leader asked committee members how well this product was working for them and whether they would like to see a different format or level of reporting.

Advisory committee members and state education officials told us that they were using these data to improve equity and access. Since Spring 2024, when the evaluation team started having one-on-one meetings with individual ISDs in place of advisory committee meetings, we have also gotten more direct and focused access to ISD leaders' concerns. In both formats, we have heard how the data visualizations we devised in response to user concerns are fueling program and policy discussions. For example, committee members and other ISD administrators regularly expressed concern when they saw neighborhoods with low Child Opportunity Index scores that did not have GSRP sites. Because our maps have enabled them to easily identify such neighborhoods, these leaders are now better informed to work with local entities and with the state education agency to open new GSRP sites in the areas of highest need. Of course, the planning and resource allocation necessary to make it happen is likely to take time. In another example, ISD leaders have told us that they regularly consult the maps and charts tracking teacher turnover and teacher salaries. They know the two are highly correlated; however, their ability to improve salaries is constrained by many factors, of which adequate funding is only one. Similarly, ISD administrators have told us they consult the GSRP-to-kindergarten movement maps to see where their districts are losing students and are using the information to devise strategies to improve retention.

Step 5. Disseminate Evaluation Findings

The MSU evaluation team produces traditional annual reports with descriptive statistics to fulfill our mandate as state evaluators. The avenues for disseminating the findings of the less traditional UFE are more varied. The main dissemination product is the maps themselves, which are publicly available on the state evaluation website. To make the maps accessible and easy to use, we redesigned the project website and conducted search engine optimization to send the map pages to the top

of searches for GSRP data. GSRP stakeholders at the ISD and site levels use the maps to see how they compare to other ISDs or sites in terms of spatial equity of access, teacher qualifications and compensation, child and teacher demographics, and other factors that help them make program decisions.

One of the most utilization-focused venues is the one-on-one meetings with leaders of individual ISDs, in which we show grant administrators how to use their own data (and that of other ISDs) to improve accessibility and enhance program quality. Furthermore, we periodically send updates to the GSRP email exchange list or chime in to listserv discussions to provide data-based resources.

To reach beyond Michigan and GSRP, we write about the findings in research briefs and peer-reviewed journal articles and present findings at national and regional early childhood association meetings. These publications and presentations help to spotlight Michigan's leadership in the use of data to improve equity in access to public pre-K programming.

Case Studies

Two brief examples illustrate the iterative nature of the UFE steps and the ways the MSU evaluation team listened and responded to the

expressed needs of intended users.

Case 1. The GSRP-to-Kindergarten Child Movement Map

The idea of the GSRP-to-kindergarten child movement map came up during a meeting in May 2022. ISD administrators wanted to know how many GSRP students entered kindergarten the next year in the same school district. For some school districts, one purpose of a public pre-K program is to funnel children into the district's kindergarten (Weiland et al., 2020). A map showing how many children changed school districts from GSRP to kindergarten, and where they ended up, would help administrators understand the extent of student retention and families' decisions to relocate.

Following the 2019–20 cohort of GSRP participants and tracing their kindergarten attendance in 2020–21, the MSU team constructed the map shown in Figure 1. When we presented this map at the November 2022 advisory committee meeting, members' comments made it clear that the map provided more information than they could easily absorb. The evaluation leader discussed possible tweaks with committee members and returned to the design team with this feedback. At the next meeting, she presented the design shown in Figure 2. Rather than defaulting to a statewide map as in Figure 1—which displayed so much

Figure 1. First Iteration of GSRP-to-Kindergarten Child Movement Map

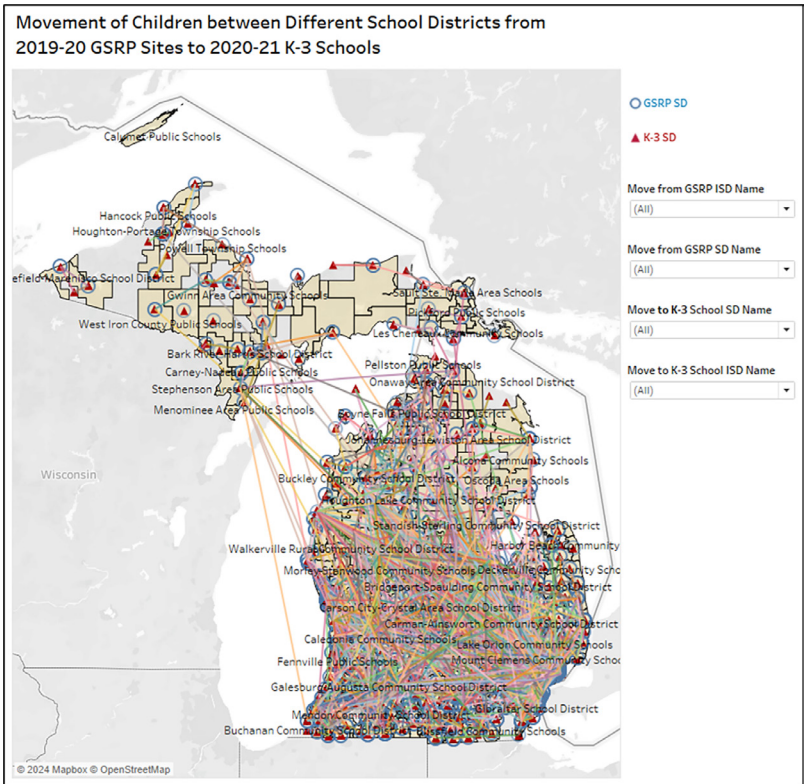
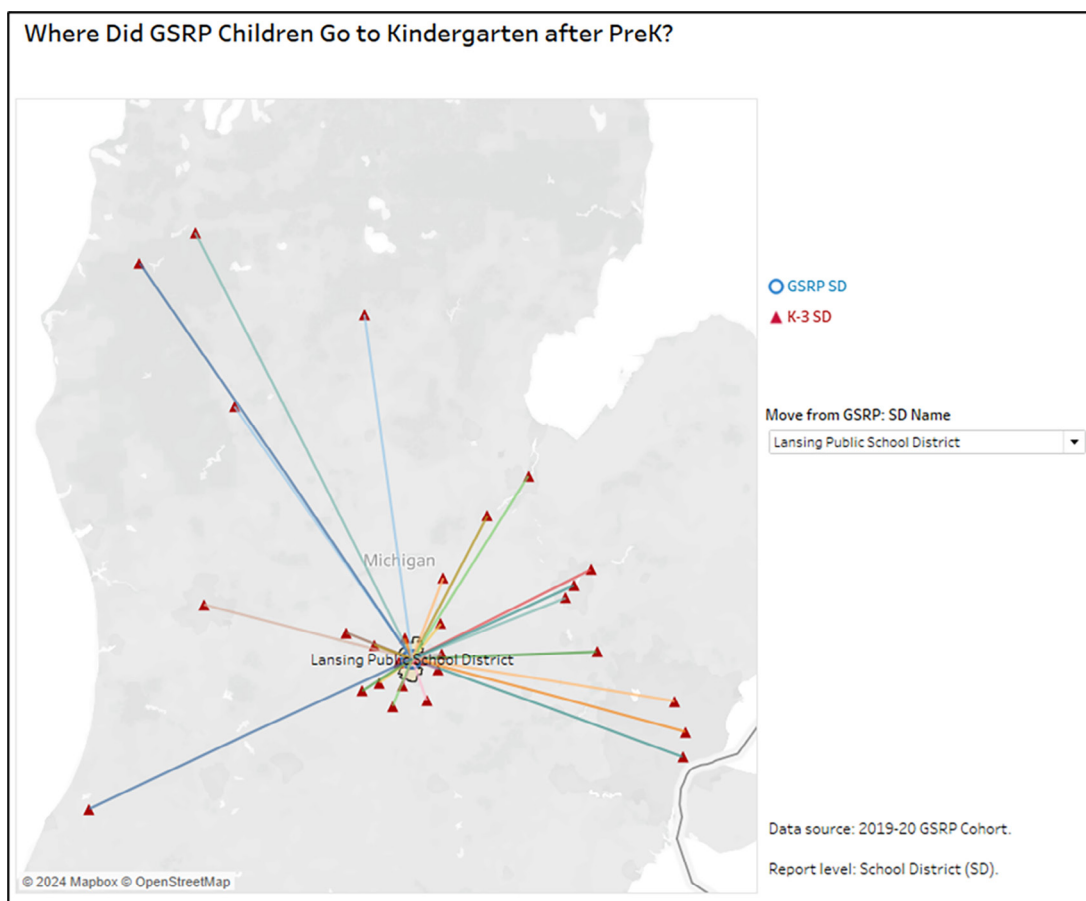


Figure 2. Final Iteration of GSRP-to-Kindergarten Child Movement Map



data that it was unreadable—the online map now defaults to a single school district, showing other districts where GSRP students from that district attended kindergarten and how many did so. With this simpler display, pulldowns specifying districts to which students moved were no longer necessary, so they have been removed from the current map shown in Figure 2.

This example illustrates how our UFE process has responded to intended users' needs to make recent data available in a usable format to facilitate decision-making. It also illustrates the iterative nature of our process. Sometimes, a requested product met the expressed need on the first iteration. If not, we continued to work with users until we produced a data display that accomplished the intended purpose. On the continuum of engagement (CSU, n.d.), this project involved *informing users what the options are*, *consulting* with users to understand their data needs, *involving* them in tweaking the data presentation to better meet their needs, and *collaborating* with them to read the data and come up with solutions.

Case 2. Student Profile Analysis

The process for a profile analysis of GSRP enrollees (Wu & Akaeze, 2025) followed a different trajectory. The evaluation leader noticed that advisory committee members regularly referred to the risk factors that qualify children to enroll in GSRP. The GSRP enrollment policy prioritizes children from low-income families, with the lowest incomes being admitted first. GSRP also collects data on several other factors that put children at risk of academic failure, using these factors as "tie breakers" when two families have the same income. Advisory committee members continually referred to these eligibility factors—not only income, but also factors such as environmental risk, disability, English language learner (ELL) status, and severe challenging behavior. Initially their information was limited to statewide data on percentages of children in each category. Breaking the percentages down by ISD was little. The evaluation leader perceived a need for detailed participant profiles that would go beyond simple classification by race/ethnicity and family income levels. A better

understanding of the multifaceted nature of the identities of GSRP children and the interactions among risk factors would enable program leaders to design and tweak interventions to address these issues and set children up for academic and social success. This understanding would also inform policy as Michigan moves toward universal, rather than income-targeted, pre-K. Moving beyond simplistic assumptions about the characteristics of low-income children and their families would help policy-makers construct a universal program to meet the needs of all Michigan children regardless of income.

The evaluation team, after consulting internally and reviewing data, concluded that a latent class analysis would be the best method to address these questions. We presented this idea to the committee and got their approval to conduct the study. Our latent class analysis (Wu & Akaeze, 2025) showed that GSRP children fell into five clearly distinct classes that roughly tracked to family income as a percentage of the federal poverty level (FPL). Forty percent of GSRP children fell into Class 4—those whose family income was low but above 50% of FPL. In this class, the incidence of other eligibility factors was lower than in most other classes. The only risk factor on which they scored high was ELL status. That is, the largest class, representing “the most common” GSRP students, consisted of children from low-income families who were, for the most part, not otherwise at risk of educational failure. This result suggested that the largest single class of GSRP students had few special needs beyond the consequences of living in poverty, an experience common to most GSRP families.

However, when advisory committee members saw the results, they were skeptical. Anecdotal evidence said that teachers were dealing with large numbers of challenging behaviors in the classroom. Committee members said that we should take data from family-reported data about eligibility factors with a grain of salt. Parents might, for example, mark “environmental risk”—the most common risk factor after low income—on an application form in an attempt to improve their child’s chances of acceptance into the program. However, parents might be less likely to mark “severe challenging behavior” if they thought doing so would make their child less likely to be accepted. In other words, the advisory committee suggested that the eligibility factor data, based on family self-reporting, might not be of good quality. In response to this observation, the state education department has reviewed its policy regarding data

on behavioral issues and developmental delays and is considering requiring teachers to review the “severe challenging behavior” and “disability” eligibility factors from families’ enrollment applications. It has also undertaken a thorough review of the eligibility factors to understand whether they enable identification of the children who most need, and are most likely to benefit from, a free public pre-K education.

Reexamination of the eligibility factors was an unintended consequence of this project. Neither we nor the intended users foresaw that the class analysis would call into question the details of a longstanding GSRP policy. That is, one intended user, the state education department, used the data in an unexpected way. Still, that unexpected use was well within the mandate of the UFE to improve GSRP program design and implementation.

Discussion and Implications

In contrast to traditional evaluations focused on child outcomes, our utilization-focused evaluation of Michigan’s state-funded pre-K program produces information stakeholders can use immediately to begin to improve program quality and access. The main question guiding traditional outcomes evaluations is generally some version of “Does the program work to improve child outcomes?” The answer is almost always some version of “Yes, to some extent—for some outcomes and for some children.” Once the evaluation report presents its version of that answer, it may become part of the decades-long general discussion of the efficacy of publicly funded pre-K. But it is not likely to contribute a great deal to state and local program and policy decisions beyond the fundamental question of whether to continue to fund the program—a question that is effectively answered before any evaluation begins because public opinion is strongly in favor of public preschool (Houston et al., 2023; Yoshikawa et al., 2016).

UFEs, by contrast, are designed to produce information that stakeholders actually use (Patton, 2011, 2013). Our work with the GSRP advisory committee and other decision-makers has illustrated how an academic evaluation team can *inform, consult, involve, and collaborate* (CSU, n.d.) with intended users of evaluation results to determine what kinds of data they can use and how to present it for ease of use. Key to this process was nurturing a data-driven mindset among members of the GSRP advisory committee and other GSRP stakeholders, including ISD leaders and state

education department staff. As utilization-focused evaluators, we have, as Patton (2011) recommends, worked with key stakeholders to nurture their understanding of the evaluation process and their commitment to use the results in decision-making. We listened to stakeholder questions, determined what data would help them answer their questions, and presented the data in ways that made sense to them. We worked with these key state and local partners to produce timely, practical feedback they have used to improve GSRP quality and promote equitable access for all low-income families of young children.

The influence of this work goes beyond GSRP and its stakeholders. To begin with, if GSRP functions as designed, it helps to close opportunity gaps for low-income children. This improvement will have long-term effects not only on the children involved but also on schools, workplaces, and communities throughout Michigan. Furthermore, this work gives us opportunities to collaborate with key stakeholders in other systems. Our data are, for example, informing state-level initiatives, including both the governor's proposal to expand GSRP to serve all children regardless of income and Caring for MI Future, a project to increase access to child care. The long- and short-term benefits of our GSRP evaluation process illustrate the advantages of taking a utilization-focused approach to evaluation of public preschool programs.

Our landscape scan found that the oldest and largest publicly funded preschool program, Head Start, seems to have moved away from summative evaluation of program effectiveness toward formative evaluation designed to improve program effectiveness. Through our UFE efforts, Michigan's GSRP is following suit. Other evaluators of publicly funded education efforts, including but not limited to early childhood education, might consider how to incorporate UFE and other community-engaged approaches into their research and dissemination. Involving stakeholders and collaborating with them to identify research priorities can direct evaluators toward the data users need to inform timely decisions about program policies and practices. Evaluators may also find, as we did, that the products of evaluation need to go beyond written reports to provide information in formats that stakeholders can easily and readily use.

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