

Equipping Pre-K Teachers to Succeed

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Helping more teachers get certified in early childhood education

The Pre-K Teacher Preparation Project (PKTPP), a project of the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute (the PDI) and its Career Development Center, has helped hundreds of teachers in NYC to obtain New York State certification in early childhood education. However, many teachers who express interest in test prep either never show up to the course or attend inconsistently, making it less likely that they will be able to advance in their chosen career long-term and that there will be fewer qualified teachers for young children. Based on analysis of the behavioral barriers at play, ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) provided communication templates and other recommendations to engage and motivate more participants to complete the program.

Summary

In order to teach in New York City public schools, Pre-Kindergarten teachers must have—or obtain within three years of accepting their job—New York State certification in early childhood education. Enhancing the quality of the early childhood workforce by ensuring that teachers demonstrate the competencies taught in degree programs that lead to certification [has been associated with higher program quality and outcomes for children](#). In addition, achieving certification strongly benefits the teachers themselves (over 95% women) by increasing job security and salaries, expanding career options, and enhancing the quality and stability of the workforce as a whole.

There are currently many uncertified teachers in community-based pre-K classrooms who have been hired conditionally and placed on a study plan to complete their state certification requirements within three years. One of the considerable stumbling blocks continues to be passing the state certification tests. Requirements for certification include passing a series of exams that test a teacher's knowledge in subject areas such as math, reading, writing, and linguistics, as well as their readiness to lead a classroom, including preparing lesson plans, engaging students, and analyzing whether or not a student is learning. These exams are quite challenging in that they don't necessarily test the material that early childhood educators have been taught or need to do their jobs well. As it currently stands, each exam requires significant study time for individuals to pass. In addition, the exams cost money. If a teacher does not pass the exam they have to pay to take it again.

To help teachers pass certification exams, the [New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute](#) (PDI) developed the Pre-K Teacher Preparation Project (PKTPP), which offers test preparation group sessions and individual tutoring and coaching. However, PDI discovered that making these services

Highlights

- ▶ Though certification in early childhood education is required for pre-K educators in New York, barriers exist to achieving it.
- ▶ Redesigning and optimizing communications through a behavioral lens for the PKTPP project can help motivate teachers to move towards obtaining certification by reframing obstacles.

available was not the complete answer to increasing certification rates, as many teachers who expressed interest and enrolled in the test prep failed to attend sessions consistently, complete the program, and/or take all the required exams. So staff turned to ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) for assistance in understanding and addressing the contextual and psychological factors that stand in the way of their clients' success.

Barriers to test prep, and solutions

We investigated the problem of low attendance in PDI's test preparation program by first evaluating the outreach and sign-up process and reviewing attendance rates, survey data and outreach communications. Then we attended test prep sessions to understand the experience of participating in test prep. We spoke to tutors and uncertified pre-K teachers preparing to take the certification exams. Finally, we interviewed both uncertified and certified pre-K teachers who attended past PDI test prep sessions.

We uncovered several important contextual and psychological barriers that influence a pre-K teacher's decision to attend test preparation services:

1. The fact that certification is required by the state is *not* salient; **many teachers think it is optional**. As a result, pre-K teachers are unaware of the deadline to become certified, and never form an intention to take the exams.
2. Many teachers attempt to pass the tests on their own and fail. As a result, they may **develop a fear of failing the exams again**, which can lead to avoidance behavior, and begin to self-identify as someone not cut out to be a certified teacher
3. The **content of the required exams is not always relevant** to their day-to-day work as early childhood educators. Pre-K teachers have a mental model of their role as early childhood educators, and what knowledge and skills they need to best serve their students. When the content of test prep doesn't match their understanding of what they teach they are less likely to want to engage with the material.
4. **Continued attendance and participation** were strongly tied to attending the first session. If a teacher misses the first test prep session, it is very difficult to keep up with remaining lessons, making it more likely that she will stop attending test prep. Attending the first session sets pre-K teachers up for success and leads to the habit of attending class.
5. The **pressures of daily living** (e.g. work, childcare, transportation) presented a structural barrier for many.

To help solve the problems of low and inconsistent attendance, we focused on redesigning PDI's initial intake email to pre-K teachers who express interest in test prep. This email is the teachers' first introduction to the services available to them as they prepare for the certification exams. The original email had several paragraphs of program rules; the tone was formal and legalistic. It lacked many communication design elements that make it easier for people to quickly read and make a decision to act, such as: strategic

use of bold font, color, and graphics; a call to action, along with the necessary information; appropriate branding, and clear deadlines. The newly designed email uses a friendly, welcoming tone; and includes language and actionable guidance to help overcome behavioral barriers to attending test prep, by:

1. **Highlighting the deadline** by which each teacher is required to be certified, with emphasis that certification is required by the state. Making critical information salient (complemented by actionable steps) can help more people follow through on their intentions.
2. **Outlining three steps** teachers need to take to pass the exams, using graphic designs to make it easier to read: sign-up for test prep, attend test prep, and take the exam. Importantly, for each step, the email provides the information the teacher needs to act in the moment (e.g. their PDI advisor contact info, a test registration link, etc.). Breaking larger endeavors into concrete tasks has been shown to increase completion rates. This information, and the way it is laid out, makes next steps clear and actionable, with emphasis on the importance of the first session, providing an extra nudge to attend it.
3. **Offering social proof statements** such as “hundreds of NYC educators have become certified with test prep.”
4. **Showcasing the benefits** of attending test prep classes—especially the first class, based on our interviews with pre-K teachers who attended and passed the exams; and emphasizing that test prep can save teachers time and money by making it more likely they will pass the first time.

By highlighting the positive experiences of their peers and the concrete benefits, these statements counter avoidance inclinations and motivate teachers to act on their initial intention of attending test prep.

We also developed sample text message reminders that PDI tutors and advisers can send to teachers to clarify meeting locations and times, motivate them to continue to pursue their goal of becoming certified, and make it clear that tutors are available for coaching should something in the pre-K teacher’s life make it difficult to prepare or attend class. We did not directly tackle the structural barriers (e.g. family and job obligations) that we found, but many of these behavioral interventions should make it easier for busy students to take the steps needed to become certified while juggling other tasks and responsibilities.

Lastly, we provided recommendations for PDI’s use in future promotional materials and tutor outreach, including points staff should emphasize in their interactions with program participants.

Next steps

In its next series of test prep sessions, PDI will use the redesigned intake email to frame the steps for passing the exams, make it clear that certification is required by New York State, and highlight the benefits of certification. PDI staff will share our insights and recommendations with tutors so they clearly understand the behavioral barriers pre-K teachers face in attending and participating in test prep, and apply practical strategies in their own communications and personal interactions with early childhood teachers to overcome such barriers. In the coming year, PDI anticipates making some changes to the

Pre-K Teacher Preparation Program and will draw on our recommendations in designing messages and materials to promote the new program, engage those who enroll, and motivate participants to persist toward certification. PDI staff expect to use learnings from their partnership with us in other aspects of their work with early childhood educators.

Applying behavioral science to the communications of non-profit services can lead more people to use them—maximizing impact and creating a ripple effect of benefits in their communities. We anticipate that implementation of the BDC’s communication redesigns, and other learnings from this project, will enable PDI to encourage more teachers to take advantage of its services; enable more teachers to succeed—and save them valuable time and money—on their path to certification. Becoming certified expands a teacher’s career opportunities and earning potential, even more so now that New York City has committed to increasing pay for certified pre-K teachers working in community-based settings to achieve parity with their peers in public school classrooms. In addition, creating a more professionalized early childhood workforce is essential to the quality of early childhood programs and outcomes for children.

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