



ENHANCING EARLY EDUCATION AWARENESS THROUGH COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

A Pilot Study on the Atlanta Early Education Ambassadors Program, an Initiative of Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive (PAACT)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many families across Atlanta, enrolling a child in an early education program is a complex journey. Between long waitlists, unclear processes, and deep-seated mistrust of institutions, the path to Pre-K can feel uncertain. The **Atlanta Early Education Ambassador Program, an initiative of PAACT: Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive**, was born from the conviction that the most powerful advocates for early learning are those who families already know and trust.

This case study presents findings from a mixed-methods pilot study conducted in 2025 to understand how Atlanta Early Education Ambassadors, community members trained to promote early learning, influence family decisions, build leadership in their own lives, and reveal opportunities for systemic change. Data was collected from interviews, focus groups, a early learning provider panel, and an alumni survey.

Findings reveal that the Ambassador Program is transforming both the communities it serves and the individuals who lead it. **Ambassadors**

reported significant growth in their leadership confidence, knowledge of early childhood development, and ability to connect families with resources. Their efforts directly contributed to increased awareness of and enrollment in early learning programs, especially among families historically disconnected from formal systems.

Yet, while Ambassadors build bridges, systemic barriers such as transportation, cost of wraparound care, documentation requirements, and staffing shortages continue to suppress progress. Providers and Ambassadors alike emphasized that while relational outreach changes minds, **policy change is key** to participation being possible.

The study concludes with a community-centered framework to improve early education access, which outlines how Atlanta can sustain and expand this promising model through deeper alumni pathways, stronger system integration, and equitable investment in both people and infrastructure.

INTRODUCTION

Across the city of Atlanta, early childhood education has long been recognized as one of the most powerful levers for equity. Research consistently shows that children who participate in high-quality early learning programs enter kindergarten better prepared, demonstrate stronger social-emotional development, and experience lasting academic and life benefits. Despite this evidence, many of Atlanta’s families, especially those in lower-income neighborhoods and communities of color, continue to face barriers that keep their children out of classrooms designed to nurture their potential.

The reasons are layered. For some families, logistical issues such as transportation and program hours make enrollment unrealistic. For others, mistrust of the school system or confusion about eligibility and funding leaves them disengaged. And for many, the pressing priorities of daily survival overshadow the long-term benefits of early learning.

The Atlanta Early Education Ambassador Program emerged in response to these realities. Launched by PAACT in 2018, the program trains parents, grandparents, educators, and community advocates to serve as Ambassadors, trusted connectors who inform families about the importance of early learning, guide them through

enrollment, and help address related challenges. Over 150 Ambassadors have been trained to date, each one extending the reach of early education systems through a network of relationships rooted in trust.

This research, led by Danielle Wallace and Gbemi Famule on behalf of PAACT, in partnership with Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS) and funded by the National African American Child and Family Research Center (NAACFRC), builds on and extends findings from EducationCounsel’s 2024 case study, [Early Grade Disenrollment in Atlanta Public Schools: Seeking Solutions Informed by Families of Young Children](#), conducted in partnership with Atlanta Public Schools. That study identified key systemic barriers driving early grade disenrollment, including burdensome enrollment policies, housing instability, eroding family-school trust, and limited wraparound support. The present study examines how the Atlanta Early Education Ambassador Program directly addresses those barriers through community-driven outreach, and what investments are needed to sustain and scale that model. Where the EducationCounsel report diagnosed the problem, this report centers the people already working toward the solution.



PROGRAM IMPAACT



150+

Ambassadors have been trained to date, each one extending the reach of early education systems.



100%

of ambassadors felt well prepared to help families understand their early learning options



96%

of Ambassadors reported that trainings helped them grow as community leaders



98%

of Ambassadors feel more confident speaking up about early education issues since program completion

98%

of ambassadors report making a real difference in helping at least one family access early learning resources

95%

of Ambassadors have the cultural knowledge of lived experience of the families they served

95%

of ambassadors have stayed involved in their community since completing the program

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does the Ambassador training strengthen leadership and engagement capacities?

In what ways do Ambassadors help families access affordable, high-quality care?

What does the model reveal about reaching underserved families?

How might the program be scaled and sustained for long-term impact?



METHODOLOGY

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods design to explore both process and outcomes of the Ambassador Program. Qualitative data was collected through interviews and focus groups with Ambassadors, a panel discussion with early learning providers, and a review of program materials and training content. Quantitative and qualitative data were also gathered from an alumni survey completed by more than 50 Ambassadors (n=59).



PARTICIPANTS

Participants represented three primary groups:



Ambassadors:

both current and alumni, who reflected on their training experiences, community engagement, and ongoing advocacy.



Early Learning Providers:

including center directors and staff, who shared their perspectives on the impact of Ambassador outreach on family engagement and enrollment.



District and Community Partners:

such as Atlanta Public Schools early learning leaders, who described how the program complements district recruitment efforts.

DATA COLLECTION

Interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually, lasting approximately one hour each. The provider panel, held in person at an Ambassador training, included representatives from centers across Atlanta neighborhoods. All discussions were recorded with participant consent, transcribed, and analyzed to identify recurring patterns and unique insights.

The alumni survey included both scaled and open-ended questions, capturing quantitative measures of leadership growth and outreach impact alongside qualitative reflections.

ANALYSIS

A thematic coding approach was used to analyze transcripts and open-ended survey responses. Themes were organized around the four guiding research questions, with attention to both individual experiences and system-wide systemic patterns. Data convergence and divergence across stakeholder groups were examined to ensure that the findings reflect a balanced view of program strengths, limitations, and future opportunities.



SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

Ambassadors consistently described their experience in the program as transformational, both personally and collectively. The training introduced them to the science of early childhood development and the significance of the first five years, while equipping them with practical skills to share that knowledge. For many, it was their first exposure to how early learning connects to brain development and long-term outcomes.

Ambassadors spoke with pride about using their new knowledge to educate others. One participant explained, “I learned that I didn’t have to be an expert to make an impact. I just needed to show up with what I knew and meet people where they were.” This sentiment was echoed across interviews: Ambassadors see themselves as messengers of possibility, translating information into language that resonates with their neighbors.

Survey results confirmed that nearly nine in ten alumni felt the program strengthened their leadership skills, and a large majority continued advocating for early learning long after their cohort ended. Ambassadors also reported deepened self-confidence and a sense of

belonging to a broader movement for equity in education.



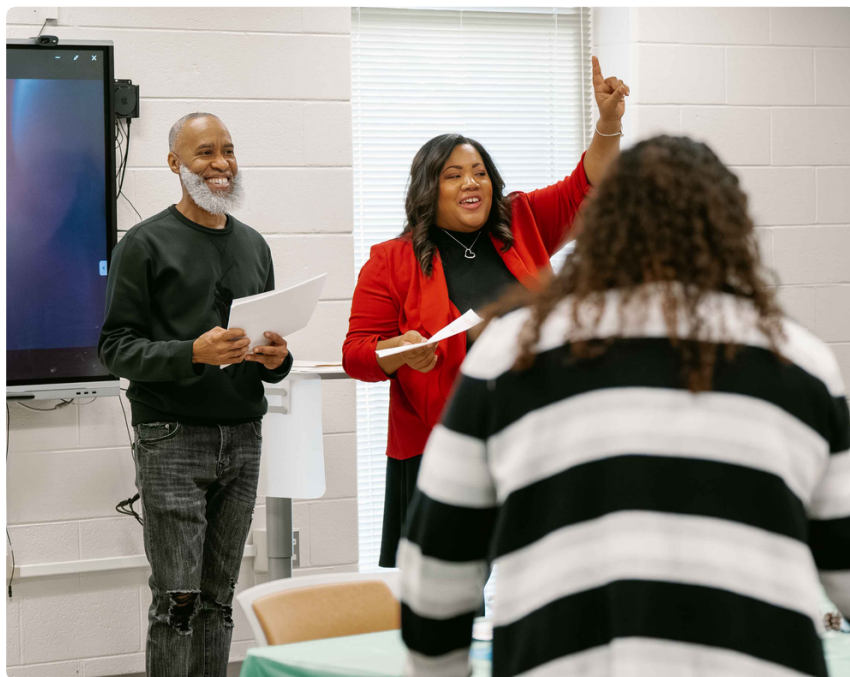
“I LEARNED THAT I DIDN'T HAVE TO BE AN EXPERT TO MAKE AN IMPACT. I JUST NEEDED TO SHOW UP WITH WHAT I KNEW AND MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY WERE.”

Providers and district partners validated these outcomes. They described Ambassadors as indispensable extensions of their recruitment teams—trusted individuals who can reach families that institutional messaging does not. One provider remarked, **“They’re the ones families listen to. Parents see them as credible because they’re from the same community.”**



Despite the program’s clear successes, participants identified persistent structural challenges that limit progress. Transportation and wraparound care emerged as the most significant barriers, along with families’ lack of access to consistent information and support during the enrollment process. Providers noted that even when families are convinced of the value of early learning, logistical realities often make participation impossible.

The study found that Ambassadors fill critical gaps in awareness, trust, and navigation, but systemic investment is needed to remove the barriers that prevent families from acting on what they learn.



KEY THEMES

1. Building Leadership and Trust

Ambassadors described the training as a turning point in their civic engagement. The content, covering brain development, early literacy, and community outreach, offered both knowledge and validation. Many Ambassadors said they now see themselves as advocates for change, not just participants in a program. One Ambassador shared, *“I realized I’ve been leading all along; this just gave me the language for it.”*

Their visible presence in neighborhoods, often wearing the program’s signature orange and green shirts, created a sense of recognition and reliability. Families began to associate Ambassadors with trustworthy guidance, a reputation built one conversation at a time. Ambassadors repeatedly described feeling seen and valued as experts in their own communities. District staff echoed this transformation, noting that Ambassadors

extend the city’s capacity by serving as the first approachable face of early learning in neighborhoods where formal outreach is often met with skepticism.



“I REALIZED I’VE BEEN LEADING ALL ALONG; THIS JUST GAVE ME THE LANGUAGE FOR IT.”

- Ambassador



2. Ambassadors as Navigators

Ambassadors act as navigators through the maze of early education systems. They help families complete applications, gather required documentation, and share information about applying for CAPS (Childcare and Parent Services), a program that assists low income families with the cost of child care while guardians work or

attend to school. Providers consistently highlighted the difference this makes: “We can tell families what to do, but Ambassadors help them do it,” one center director said. Ambassadors often extend their role beyond education. They share information about food assistance, housing programs, and parenting resources, recognizing that supporting a child’s learning starts with stabilizing the family.

3. Reaching the Unreached

Traditional outreach strategies, flyers, robocalls, or billboards—rarely reach families without stable housing, consistent internet, or trust in institutions. Ambassadors meet parents where they are: apartment complexes, church parking lots, playgrounds, grocery stores, and transit stops. Their informal approach creates organic entry points for meaningful conversations about early learning. As one Ambassador put it, “It’s about catching people in real life moments and letting them know their child’s education starts now.”

4. Structural Barriers

Even when families are convinced of the value of Pre-K, logistical barriers remain. Transportation is the most consistent challenge, particularly for families without cars who are assigned to programs across town. Centers’ limited hours and staffing shortages all exacerbate the problem. Providers expressed concern that quality enforcement is unequal and that interruptions to funding, like the recent CAPS payment freeze, create instability for families. Ambassadors can mitigate distrust, but they cannot make an unavailable seat appear or extend a school day that ends before a parent’s shift does. Ambassadors expressed frustration that while they can inspire families, they cannot eliminate the structural constraints that plague them. One

remarked, “We can open the door, but the system still has to make it easier for parents to walk through.”

5. Opportunities for Growth and Replication

Ambassadors and partners offered rich insights into how the program could evolve. Alumni recommended quarterly refresher trainings to stay informed about policy updates, new resources, and emerging family needs. Providers called for more coordination between Ambassadors, childcare centers, and APS enrollment teams, suggesting shared calendars and data systems to align outreach efforts.

Many participants emphasized the need for diversity and specialization among Ambassadors. Recruiting bilingual Ambassadors and those experienced in supporting children with disabilities would broaden the program’s reach. Alumni also voiced interest in structured pathways for continued engagement, such as mentoring new cohorts or serving as neighborhood team leads.



These suggestions reflect a deep sense of ownership and commitment among Ambassadors—a testament to the program’s power to create sustained community leadership.

A COMMUNITY-CENTERED FRAMEWORK FOR EXPANDING EARLY EDUCATION ACCESS

The following framework reflects lessons learned through the Ambassador Program and builds on prior research into early grade disenrollment in Atlanta, including findings from EducationCounsel’s 2024 case study conducted in partnership with Atlanta Public Schools. While that research identified systemic barriers families face, this framework centers the Ambassador model as the connective tissue that brings those solutions to life at the community level.



Streamline Policies and Procedures

Build Accountability Through Community Feedback Loops

Restore Relationships Through Relational Outreach

Wrap Families in Coordinated, Holistic Support

Invest in the People Closest to the Problem



1. Streamline Policies and Procedures

Ambassadors regularly sit with families who want their child in school but cannot clear the system’s hurdles: a notarized document they no longer have, a guardianship record they cannot produce in time, an enrollment window that closes before a healthcare appointment is available. Ambassador persistence bridges that gap, but families should not need a hero every time. Structural change is required:

- Enrollment events should happen where and when families actually are: evenings, weekends, community centers.
- Documentation already submitted for SNAP, Medicaid, or CAPS should carry weight in school enrollment, eliminating redundant paperwork.
- Ambassadors should be formally embedded in enrollment infrastructure as compensated guides with direct lines to district staff.
- Enrollment communications should travel through channels Ambassadors already use: text, neighborhood social media, and face-to-face conversation.



2. Restore Relationships Through Relational Outreach

The most effective Ambassador conversations happen at bus stops and grocery lines, one parent telling another, “I know. It felt complicated to me too. Here is what I did.” That moment works because the Ambassador is not representing an institution. They are representing themselves. The family is not being recruited. They are being seen. With 98% of Ambassadors reporting a real difference for at least one family, and 95% staying active in their communities after their cohort ended, the relational model is proven. To extend it:

- Schools and providers should co-host informal classroom visits and neighborhood events with Ambassadors so families can experience the environment before committing.
- Family engagement should invite parents to share what they want educators to know about their child from day one.
- Ambassador outreach should be year-round, because trust is built in ordinary moments, not urgent ones.
- Coordination between Ambassador networks and school staff should ensure that outside relationships carry weight inside institutions.

3. Wrap Families in Coordinated, Holistic Support

A conversation about Pre-K rarely stays only about Pre-K. Ambassadors often share information about CAPS, housing programs, and food assistance alongside early learning resources, because a family cannot prioritize education when everything else is on fire. The system should be built to support that reality:

- A unified enrollment access point should allow families to complete school applications and check eligibility for public benefits in a single interaction, without repeating documentation across agencies.
- Ambassadors should be formally trained and compensated as mobile navigators with current resource maps and clear referral protocols.
- A human-staffed support line should be available for families navigating transportation, immunization, and documentation barriers.
- Transportation solutions should include micro-grant pilots and transit partnerships facilitated through Ambassador networks.

4. Build Accountability Through Community Feedback Loops

Ambassador conversations, provider observations, and family feedback are early warning signals that reveal why families disengage long before enrollment numbers show the problem. That community intelligence is the program’s most underutilized asset. Making accountability systematic means:

- Tracking enrollment and attendance trends at the neighborhood level so gaps are visible and actionable before they widen.
- Integrating Ambassador outreach logs with APS and childcare center records to map where families fall away in the enrollment journey.
- Running regular pulse checks (brief surveys, Ambassador debriefs, provider reflections) that feed directly into program adjustments, not just annual reviews.
- Convening a standing cross-sector table across education, human services, transportation, and philanthropy to align funding and accountability toward shared outcomes.

“Keep the community-based approach...that’s what makes families listen... but give us the tools and support to keep going.”



5. Invest in the People Closest to the Problem

Every outcome in this framework depends on Ambassadors, community members who show up because they believe their neighbors’ children deserve a fair start. That commitment is the program’s greatest asset and, without sustained investment, its greatest vulnerability. Goodwill does not scale:

- Alumni should have defined, compensated roles as cohort mentors or neighborhood team leads, creating real career pathways in the early education ecosystem.
- Quarterly training should build expertise in bilingual outreach, navigation for children with disabilities, and policy-level advocacy.
- Recruitment should reflect Atlanta’s full linguistic and cultural diversity so every community has an Ambassador who shares its language and context.
- Coordination between Ambassadors, APS, and childcare centers should be formalized so relational strengths are amplified by institutional support and not lost to administrative gaps.



The Atlanta Early Education Ambassador Program demonstrates the transformative power of community-driven leadership.

It is a model built on trust, belonging, and the belief that parents and neighbors are the most persuasive advocates for early learning. Ambassadors bridge the space between institutions and families, turning information into invitation and policy into personal connection.

True equity in early education will require parallel investments in both human and structural infrastructure, training and paying Ambassadors well, while addressing transportation, affordability, and staffing challenges that constrain families’ choices.

THE WORK IS NOT FINISHED.



The lessons of this study are clear: when systems listen to communities, outcomes improve. Ambassadors are showing Atlanta what’s possible when proximity meets purpose. With sustained collaboration and investment, their work can become the cornerstone of a citywide effort to ensure that every child, in every neighborhood, has a fair and supported start in learning and in life.

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