

Testimony to Governor Cuomo's Education Reform Commission  
Student Achievement and Family Engagement  
Submitted by Alan Hertel, Executive Director, United Way of Broome County  
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Good afternoon, I am Alan Hertel, Executive Director of United Way of Broome County. I welcome you to the Southern Tier and appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

Locally, United Way has adopted education as one of three focus areas for community investment and has allocated resources to support developmental screenings for children, literacy education, local child care centers, and family engagement. In addition, United Way partners with Building Brighter Futures for Broome, an early childhood coalition that addresses such issues as healthy children, quality child care and early learning, literacy, school readiness, and family engagement. It is a diverse group with representation from cross systems including education, human services, local government, private business, and community members. For over a decade, this Coalition has improved outcomes for young children and has been engaged in collaborative community planning and programming efforts. Given this experience, United Way of Broome County is uniquely positioned to work with the Commission as it moves its' comprehensive education plan forward.

We know that early childhood education is the cornerstone of our education system and the foundation for a child's lifelong success. New York State's investment in early childhood programs, specifically in the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program, has decreased significantly over the past four years. At its' highest funding level in 2008 of over \$451 million, that number has decreased by close to \$67 million and remains flat funded.<sup>1</sup> This reduction has compromised the quality and quantity of essential early learning opportunities despite research that clearly demonstrates the benefits to child, family, school, community and state. Consider findings from the "Ounce of Prevention Fund" which show that the achievement gap appears long before children reach kindergarten. At-risk children are:

- 25% more likely to drop out of school
- 40% more likely to become a teen parent
- 50% more likely to be placed in special education
- 60% more likely to never attend college
- 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime<sup>2</sup>

Additional studies indicate that children who attend quality early learning programs are more likely to be reading at grade level by the third grade, go on to college, and have higher earnings as adults.<sup>3</sup>

Quality early childhood programs, including pre-K, improves overall school readiness and achievement. Children who received higher-quality child care had better math skills prior to school entry and during Kindergarten and second grade.<sup>4</sup> Toddlers who received higher-quality child care had fewer behavior problems than those who received lower-quality care.<sup>5</sup> Quality is especially important for at-risk children who are more likely to enter school with fewer of the skills they need to succeed. This includes deficiencies in language, literacy, and social skills. Once children enter

school, the achievement gap widens with research showing nearly 90% of children who can't read by the end of Kindergarten will still have difficulty reading in third grade.

Economists agree investing in early childhood development yields a much higher return than most government-funded economic development initiatives.<sup>6</sup> These investments stimulate the economy, promote economic development, save public schools money, and produce high returns for taxpayers. Taken together, these studies show a return on investment of up to \$17 for every \$1 invested in high-quality early childhood services. They also reveal how these investments can help all of New York's children realize their full potential.<sup>7</sup>

United Way of Broome County offers the following suggestions for education reform:

#### Support Early Investment – Expand Pre-K

The New York State Board of Regents policy on early education has long recognized the value of investing early to improve student achievement. The “Regents Policy on Early Education for Student Achievement in a Global Community”, developed in 2005 and finalized in 2006, calls for mandatory Kindergarten (dropping compulsory attendance to 5); Pre-K for all 3- and 4-year olds, and services in a continuum that spans birth to third grade.”<sup>8</sup>

New York State currently serves less than 50% of eligible 4-year olds in half day programs. Pre-K should be expanded to include all eligible 3- and 4-year olds with a full-day option. It would also be important to re-open UPK eligibility to those districts that have been unable to participate since the program was frozen in 2009.

#### Make Quality a Priority – Fully Implement QUALITYstarsNY

QUALITYstarsNY is a quality rating and improvement system that sets higher standards for early childhood programs and helps programs to meet them as the state tracks, supports, and analyzes that progress. The star ratings indicate the effectiveness of key aspects of the educational offerings in early childhood programs, including teacher qualifications, learning environment, teaching strategies, and program management. Currently, 35 states have a statewide quality rating and improvement system while New York State has piloted the program on only a limited basis. Full implementation is the best investment toward better outcomes for children, preparing them for college and career.<sup>9</sup>

#### Support Parent/Family Engagement – Provide Resources for Parent Engagement Opportunities

Research shows that children are more likely to succeed when parents and families are engaged in their child's early learning opportunities. Initiatives such as wraparound services, community schools, and parent led activities increases parents' confidence in their role as their child's first teacher, gives them ownership in their child's education, and creates a sense of belonging to community. United Way of Broome County recently collaborated with a local Head Start and Child Care Resource & Referral agency in submitting a proposal to the NYS Parenting Education

Partnership to create a Community Café in Broome County. This model is based on “The Strengthening Families Protective Factors” framework which includes:

- parental resilience
- social connections
- knowledge of parenting and child development
- concrete support in time of need
- nurturing social and emotional competence of children

It brings together individuals from diverse cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds to engage in meaningful discussion that increases community wisdom, builds parent voice, and facilitates action to improve the lives of children.<sup>10</sup> Innovative programs such as these are imperative in re-engaging and supporting parents and families as they raise their young children.

I thank Governor Cuomo for convening this Commission to develop a comprehensive education plan for our youngest children and Commission members for your time today.

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  2. “Ounce of Prevention Fund, <http://www.ounceofprevention.org/about/why-early-childhood-investments-work.php>.
  3. FH # 5778010Y (1/24/12), available at: <http://otda.ny.gov/oah/FHArchive.asp>
  4. Lowe Vandell, Deborah and Wolfe, Barbara, “Child Care Quality: Does It Matter and Does It Need to be Improved?”, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
  5. Stein, Rob, “Study Finds that Effects of Low-Quality Last Into Adolescence, Washington Post (May 14, 2010).
  6. Rolnick A & Grunewald, R., “The Economics of Early Childhood Development as Seen by Two Fed Economists, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Community Investments (Fall, 2007).
  7. Holcomb, Betty, “Early Care and Learning: A Wise Investment for New York Especially in Tough Economic Times”, Center for Children’s Initiatives, 2012.
  8. Memorandum of Early Education for Student Achievement in a Global Community, (December, 2005).
  9. Winning Beginning NY, “QUALITYstarsNY: Driving for Excellence in Early Childhood Education Helping to Prepare Children for College and Career.
  10. Community Café, <http://www.parentingeducationpartnership.org/>