

Expand Access to Quality Pre-Kindergarten Programs to Improve Student Achievement, Increase Family Engagement and Address the Needs of High Needs School Districts

Testimony to the Education Reform Commission, July 10, 2012

Karen Scharff, Executive Director, Citizen Action of New York

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am Karen Scharff, Executive Director of Citizen Action of New York, a statewide grassroots organization with 20,000 members and seven regional chapters and affiliates across the state. Citizen Action of NY is one of the groups leading a statewide campaign to expand access to quality early childhood education, and we are also part of the Alliance for Quality Education and Educate NY Now.

I have been asked to speak today about early childhood education. Our campaign is called Ready for Kindergarten, Ready for College, and that sums up the key point I want to share today – an investment in high quality early learning will prepare our children for Kindergarten, and that will substantially increase their chances of graduating from high school and going on to college and successful careers.

Quality early learning is therefore a critical component of achieving this Commission's goals, and is relevant to all three of your work groups, and I hope that all three groups will include early childhood education in their recommendations. For the student achievement workgroup, quality early learning is critical to several of your goals: improving student achievement, increasing family engagement in their children's education, and enabling low wealth high needs school districts to succeed.

Kate Breslin of SCAA has provided a thorough overview of the importance of high quality early childhood education, so I will focus specifically on pre-kindergarten. Pre-K, which is currently defined as services for four year olds but could also include three year olds, provides a pathway for young children to gain the skills they need to succeed in school and to close the early gap in development. Pre-K can also provide a critical bridge between early learning and the K-12 school system.

Ready for Kindergarten, Ready for College and Careers: The Impact of Pre-K on Student Achievement

National studies consistently demonstrate that children who attend pre-K programs are more likely to be reading at grade level by third grade, graduate high school and go on to college. They are also less likely to be incarcerated, and more likely to have higher earnings as adults.¹

¹ Highscope Perry Preschool Study <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=282> ;

Groginsky, S, Christian, S. and McConnell, "Early Childhood Initiatives in the States: Translating Research into Policy," State Legislative Report – Vol. 23, No-14, June 1998. Available at www.ncsl.org/issues-research/...report-early-childhood-initiati.aspx
Hull, Jim, "Starting out Right: Pre-K and Kindergarten." Center for Public Education, November 2011. Available at www.centerforpubliceducation.org.

Karoly, L.A. and Bigelow, J.H., have published several studies on the costs and benefits of public preschool programs, which document the long-term gains for children who have access to high-quality programs. See, for example "Early Childhood

The studies also show that the benefits are greatest for lower income, at-risk students and for students of color, making PreK particularly important for high needs school districts.

There are also multiple studies showing that Pre-K is a cost effective investment: students are less likely to repeat a grade, less likely to need special education services or remedial help, and the savings also come outside the school system. A study done for Winning Beginning NY by an education economist who has conducted similar studies for several states calculated savings of as much as \$828 million to NY public schools, offsetting as much as 62% of the cost of full-day Pre-K.²

James J. Heckman, a Nobel Prize winning economist, has done extensive research with a consortium of economists, developmental psychologists, sociologists, statisticians and neuroscientists. They have documented the impact of early childhood development on health, economic and social outcomes. Heckman has found there to be as much as a 17 to 1 return on investing in early childhood development.³

The Yonkers school district has done an in-depth analysis of the impact of their Pre-K program on student achievement. Using ten years of data, they compared students who participated in YPS Pre-K with those who did not and found that students who participated in Pre-K were substantially more likely to achieve proficiency on the NYS ELA and math exams in grades 3 through 8. They also had higher high school graduation rates.⁴

In fact, PreK is so effective in improving student achievement that the settlement in the New Jersey education equity lawsuit included court ordered universal PreK for school districts serving a high percentage of low income students.

New York State Has Been a Leader in Providing Pre-K

New York was an early leader in developing preschool programs, and in 2006 the Board of Regents released a comprehensive statement on early education policy that states: “Early childhood education, for all children from birth through grade four, is an integrated system that ensures each child receives a healthy start and attains the knowledge and social/emotional skills needed for successful learning.”⁵

In 1997, the NYS legislature took a major step forward and created the Universal Pre-K program. It was enacted as part of a school reform package that was aimed at improving

Interventions, Proven Results, Future Promise” and “The Costs and Benefits of Universal Preschool in California,” both published in 2005. Available at www.rand.org

The National Institute for Early Education Research has also published a range of multi-state studies on the short-term and long-term benefits of public Prekindergarten, as well as analysis of the costs and benefits of state Pre-K programs which can be found at www.nieer.org.

² Belfield, Clive R. (2004) “Early Childhood Education: How Important are the Cost Savings to the School System?” Winning Beginning NY and Teachers College, Columbia University. Available at www.winningbeginningny.org

³ Heckman, James J., <http://www.heckmanequation.org/content/heckman-101> provides multiple studies, see especially: http://www.heckmanequation.org/content/resource/presenting-heckman-equation#.T_dhoGFRuE.email

⁴ Yonkers Public Schools (2009). “Prekindergarten Participation Advantage” available at <http://www.yonkerspublicschools.org/docs/candi/data-and-reporting/ThePreKAdvantage.pdf>

⁵ Regents Policy Statement on Early Education for Student Achievement in a Global Community, adopted January 2006

student achievement. The program calls for making a part day preschool program available to all four year olds. It provides services in schools and in community-based early childhood programs in order to effectively utilize and strengthen early childhood programs in the community, as well as to provide maximum options for families.

The program has not been fully implemented. Currently about 102,000 four year olds are enrolled, which is about 50% of the 4 year olds in the state. 441 districts participate, about 2/3 of the districts in the state.

We are Moving Backward

Unfortunately, the promise of universal Pre-K has not been kept. Despite the proven impact on student performance, the state has reduced funding for UPK for the past three years, and has also reduced overall school funding, which has resulted in reduced local funding for Pre-K. The property tax cap enacted last year has further limited the ability of districts to raise local revenue for Pre-K.

Winning Beginning New York issued a comprehensive review in 2010 focused on the implementation of Pre-K. Their report provides detailed information from across the state and includes a detailed set of recommendations for strengthening the program.⁶

Earlier this year, Citizen Action of NY, AQE and Winning Beginning jointly issued a report on the state of UPK funding called "Early Childhood Education: Frozen Funding Leads to Cracks in the Foundation."⁷ The report's findings were stark:

- In 2007, when the new school funding formula was enacted in response to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit, the state provided \$438 million for UPK, providing resources to serve 116,745 students. The following year funding increased to \$451 million, to serve 121,120 students.
- Then in 2009 we started to move backward. In 2009, the number of school districts eligible for the funding was capped, making any districts that had not applied in 2007 and 2008 ineligible for funding. In addition, funding was reduced to \$414 million and frozen at that level the following year (2010-2011). In 2011 funding was further reduced to \$384 million, where it remains today, serving only 50% of our four year olds and only 2/3 of school districts.
- At the same time, regular state aid to school districts was reduced, forcing some districts to stop contributing funds to supplement the state's UPK funding. As a result, some districts dropped PreK, and others scaled back.
- Yonkers, despite their impressive results and long term commitment to UPK cut their program from full day to half day. State funds only cover two and half hours per day; Yonkers had been filling the gap to provide a full day program.

⁶ "Strengthening the Pre-K Investment: Next Steps to a Winning Beginning for Every Child in New York State." (March 2010) Available at www.winningbeginningny.org

⁷ Marcou-O'Malley, Marina, "Early Childhood Education: Frozen Funding Leads to Cracks in the Foundation." Public Policy and Education Fund, February 2012. Available at <http://ppefny.org/2012/02/new-report-early-childhood-education-frozen-funding-leads-to-cracks-in-the-foundation/862>

- White Plains cut their program in half, going from 6 Pre-K classes to 3.
- On Long Island, 31 of the 118 school districts had waiting lists for Pre-K in 2010-11; only 25 of the Long Island districts are able to serve all eligible children. Similar waiting lists exist in New York City and in other districts.

According to a recent report by the National Institute for Early Education Research, New York State ranks 9th among the states for access for 4 year olds to preschool. We should be number one. But even more problematic is that we rank 24th in state spending on preschool.⁸

Recommendations:

1. The Commission should recommend full implementation and appropriate funding levels for the Universal Pre-K program so that all four year olds in New York State have access to UPK.
2. A good first step would be to provide enough funding so that all districts that currently have Pre-K can serve every student in their district who applies. It would also be important to re-open UPK to districts that wanted to provide it but were blocked when the program was frozen in 2009.
3. Pre-K should be expanded to full day, and districts should receive the funding necessary to run full day programs. The Yonkers full day program is an excellent example of the effectiveness of full day Pre-K. The National Institute for Early Education Research examined the impact of an 8 hour program compared to a 2.5 to 3 hour program. Both programs were of similar high quality and used the same curriculum. While children in both programs improved their vocabulary and math skills, the children in the full day program improved 11 to 12 points on the kindergarten assessment while the children in half day improved 6 to 7 points.⁹ In addition, many families cannot take advantage of the existing half day programs due to the challenges of parents' work schedules and transportation barriers. The priority for expansion to full day Pre-K should be in low wealth, high need school districts, especially in communities with low performing schools.
4. Funding for Pre-K needs to be addressed separately from school aid for K-12. With the passage in 2011 of both the property tax cap and the school aid cap, on top of two years of drastic school aid cuts totaling \$2.7 billion, school districts, especially those in low wealth communities, are facing severe fiscal constraints. Currently, with Pre-K funding being limited by the school aid cap, increased state funding of Pre-K competes with school aid for the limited funds available. That is not a good solution – even Pre-K providers said to us last year – how can we talk about expanding Pre-K if it means cutting funds for Kindergarten? As the Commission develops its early childhood and Pre-K recommendations, funding must be provided in a manner that does not reduce already shrinking funds for K-12 school aid.

⁸ Barnett, W.S, Carolan, M.E., Fitzgerald, J., Squires, J.H. "The State of Preschool 2011" The National Institute for Early Education Research, 2011. http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/2011yearbook_executive_summary.pdf

⁹ Robin, K.B., Frede, E.C. and Barnett, W.S. (May 2006). "Is More Better? The Effects of Full-Day vs. Half-Day Preschool on Early School Achievement." National Institute for Early Education Research. www.nieer.org

5. QUALITYstarsNY should be fully implemented, including for all Pre-K programs. Pre-K only works if the programs are high quality. As Kate Breslin has explained in her testimony, QUALITYstarsNY is a well designed system for improving quality and holding programs accountable for delivering high quality educational services to students.

New York has been a leader in providing prekindergarten programs, and we should be proud of that leadership. Now let's start moving forward instead of backward. Our students' success depends upon a high quality early education system including universal prekindergarten.

Thank you.