

Invest in the Early Years for Better Results: New York Should Increase Access to High Quality Early Childhood Programs Including Pre-K

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Good afternoon. I am Kate Breslin, the President and CEO of the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy. I stand here today on the shoulders of my partners, many of them here in the room, who have deep expertise in a wide range of early childhood policy and practice.

The Schuyler Center is a co-convenor of the Winning Beginning NY early childhood coalition together with the Center for Children's Initiatives, Early Care and Learning Council, and NYS Association for the Education of Young Children. Winning Beginning NY (WBNY) is a statewide coalition of about 200 organizations and individuals representing early care and learning programs, parents, and advocates from a range of venues. WBNY focuses its efforts on children from the prenatal period to age eight. We are actively engaged in policy issues relating to early care and education in Albany and have regional teams around the State.

Several coalition members are also members of the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Committee (ECAC). The ECAC is charged with developing policy and programs for young children.

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's panel discussion and look forward to future conversations about how we can improve schools and student achievement in New York State.

My comments today will particularly focus on the Commission's objectives of

- **Improving student achievement;**
- **Increasing parent and family engagement in education; and**
- **Examining the problems of high-need and low-wealth school communities.**
- **And of course, all roads lead back to funding, distribution and costs. Ultimately, this is about meeting the needs of all of New York's students in the most efficient, accountable, and cost-effective way possible.**

Karen Scharff, from Citizen Action, will focus her remarks on pre-kindergarten, while my comments are focused on early childhood education preceding and inclusive of pre-K. We are unified in our commitment to strengthen early childhood education, including Pre-K, to ensure that students are ready for school and beyond.

The Achievement Gap Begins Early

"From birth to age 5, children rapidly develop foundational capabilities on which subsequent development builds."ⁱ

The achievement gap can begin at, or even before birth, for children born low birthweight, prematurely, with congenital health problems, affected by prenatal exposure to toxic substances, or other adverse conditions during pregnancy. Maternal, infant and early childhood home visiting programs are among

the research-based interventions that have shown strong positive results for very young children and their families.

The achievement gap can begin especially early for the nearly one in four (24.4%) New York State children under age five who live in poverty. Child poverty rates are even higher in upstate cities and parts of New York City. Poverty is a strong predictor of negative child outcomes.

The achievement gap continues between birth and kindergarten, with differences in language development by 9 months and differences in vocabulary by age 3.

The school-readiness gap becomes an achievement gap when children enter school and this gap can persist over children's school careers.

One out of three children in New York State start Kindergarten already behind in basic skills.ⁱⁱ

Researchers at the National Academy of Sciences find that "Striking disparities in what children know and can do are evident well before they enter kindergarten. These differences are strongly associated with social and economic circumstances, and they are predictive of subsequent academic performance. Redressing these disparities is critical, both for the children whose life opportunities are at stake and for a society whose goals demand that children be prepared to begin school, achieve academic success, and ultimately sustain economic independence and engage constructively with others as adult citizens."ⁱⁱⁱ

Research shows that the achievement gap appears long before children reach kindergarten. It can become evident as early as age nine months. 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^{iv}

To Improve Educational Outcomes, Invest in the First Five Years

Targeted investment in access to high quality early care and education, including Pre-K will improve school success in New York's most at-risk communities.

Seventy-five percent of brain growth and 85% of intellect, personality and social skills develop before age five -- in the first 2,000 days of life -- so it is imperative that we invest in our youngest children long before they enter school.

High Quality Pre-K and Early Childhood Programs Improve Academic Performance

If we wait until 3rd grade to start focusing on reading comprehension, we've already missed the first and best opportunities to intervene. Investing in early childhood education, including Pre-K, is one of the most cost effective investments a State can make to improve school success and close the achievement gap.

"For young children from low-income families, high-quality, center-based, early education programs can enhance child cognitive and social development."^v

Reading by third grade is a predictor of future academic success. Students who attend pre-K are more likely to have better reading skills by third grade than students who attend just kindergarten. *And* the positive impact of pre-K is greatest for Hispanic children, black children, English language learners and children from low-income families.

Studies suggest that the largest relative gain in third grade achievement scores comes from increasing participation in high quality preschool programs among economically disadvantaged children.

High Quality Early Childhood Programs Bring Return on Investment; Economists Agree that it is One of the Most Effective Investments We Can Make

“Investing in **early childhood development yields a much higher return** than most government-funded economic development initiatives.”^{vi}

“Recent research has documented the **high returns that early childhood programs can pay in terms of subsequent educational attainment** and in lower rates of social problems, such as teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency.”^{vii}

An early education program for children from low-income families was estimated to generate \$4 to \$11 of economic benefits over a child’s lifetime for every dollar spent on the program, according to a cost-benefit analysis funded by the National Institutes of Health.^{viii}

Early Care and Education in NYS

Early care and education programs serve children from infancy to age five in a variety of settings—child care centers; family child care homes; Prekindergarten (Pre-K) and Head Start classes.

In NYS, these programs serve more than 300,000 children every year. Thousands more are served in legally-exempt (non-regulated family, friend and neighbor) home-based child care and private nursery schools. That care should be affordable, accessible, and high-quality.

NYS Regents’ Policy Supports Early Investment

The New York State Board of Regents 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 3 and 4 year olds; and services in a continuum that spans birth to third grade.^{ix}

New York State Was an Early Leader in Pre-K, but Current Investment Falls Short

New York State was an early leader and created a Universal Pre-K program, which presently serves approximately 50% of eligible four-year olds. Additional investment is needed to truly make NYS’ program universal and to allow for access to high quality full-day programs.

Quality Matters

It is essential that we expand access to early childhood programs, including pre-K, for all children across the state and especially in low-income communities. At the same time, we can't ignore the fact that quality matters and the time is long overdue for New York to make a commitment to quality.

- Children who received higher-quality child care had better math skills prior to school entry and during kindergarten and second grade.^x
- Toddlers who received higher-quality child care had fewer behavior problems than those who received lower-quality care.^{xi}
- Children who received lower-quality child care during the first three years were rated “more difficult” by their preschool teachers and “more hostile” by their Kindergarten teachers.^{xii}

What is Quality in Pre-K and Early Childhood Education?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) describes a high-quality program as providing *“a safe, nurturing environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children while responding to the needs of families.”*

Components of High Quality Programs

A high-quality program has:

- Well trained, engaged teachers;
- Effective curriculum;
- A safe environment;
- Small group size and low adult to child ratios;
- Excellent parent-teacher communication / family engagement.

Improving Quality

Measuring the quality of early childhood programs can be challenging, but it is possible. Quality indicators include process and structural measures. New York State has designed a quality rating and improvement system called QUALITYstarsNY. QUALITYstarsNY is a system that lays out expectations, helps create a blueprint for improvement, improves accountability, and ensures that early childhood program staff understand their achievable goals in the context of the plan.

What is a Quality Rating and Improvement System

A Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) is a state level framework to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early learning and development programs. The ultimate purpose of a QRIS is to improve the learning and development outcomes of children by improving the quality of early learning and development programs by providing pathways and resources for continuous improvement, accountability for funders, and information for consumers.

Growing Recognition and Understanding of Quality

There is a growing recognition and understanding of the value of improving quality early childhood education to improve school readiness and achievement. Recognizing its core importance, the federal government built its Early Learning Challenge Grant around the structure of quality rating and improvement systems in early childhood. Thirty-five states have a statewide quality rating and improvement system. New York State is among several states that are planning or piloting a quality rating and improvement system. All states are moving forward in some way.

QUALITYstarsNY: New York's Quality Rating and Improvement System for Early Childhood Programs

QUALITYstarsNY is the framework for recognizing and improving the quality and effectiveness of early learning and development programs in New York. QUALITYstarsNY, like other quality rating and improvement systems throughout the country offer clear, organized ways to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early learning and development programs. When QUALITYstarsNY is fully implemented statewide:

- children in NY will enter kindergarten healthy and ready to learn;
- early childhood educators and programs will be supported to provide excellent services
- that are recognized for their quality; and
- parents will have a simple way of learning about the quality of their early learning and development options so they can make the best choices for their children.

QUALITYstarsNY, New York State's voluntary quality rating and improvement system for early childhood programs, including Pre-K, will reach children of all ages, infants, toddlers, preschoolers. It is designed to assess and improve the quality of participating programs by providing professional development opportunities and technical support to teachers. QUALITYstarsNY will increase program accountability and improve parents' ability to compare and select programs that meet their child's needs. New York's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) is charged with implementing QUALITYstarsNY.

QUALITYstarsNY: Status Report

Education policy leaders in New York State have recognized the link between later performance in school and access to quality early learning. The NYS Department of Education worked vigorously to ensure a targeted State investment in QUALITYstarsNY, resulting in \$4 million in federal Race to the Top funds for QUALITYstarsNY to improve early learning and create a foundation upon which to build. New York State has begun a limited implementation, targeting communities where there are persistently low achieving (PLA) schools. In this limited implementation, 300 programs are being recruited in PLA communities. This limited implementation will serve approximately 15,000 to 18,000 children in centers and family-based care. This is an extremely promising strategy that should be expanded with additional investment. It will offer the opportunity for these programs to receive the professional development, mentoring and coaching that will improve classroom practice.

QUALITYstarsNY: Where the Money Goes

Investing in quality improvement increases the accountability of public expenditures and programs that serve young children. Most of the investment goes to improving programs based on a clearly defined plan that includes professional development and other investments and maintaining that quality going

forward. A modest amount goes to coordination; assessment of programs and recording of data; communication with families.

Recommendation: Invest Early To Improve Educational Impacts and Close the Achievement Gap

New York has the power to reach at-risk young children with programs and policies that begin early and can have a lasting impact. For too long we have had separate and siloed early childhood and K-12 systems and policies, despite significant evidence that the early years are the best and most economical time to close gaps and facilitate success.

The State needs to invest in dramatically expanding access to high quality Pre-K and early childhood programs. Investment in QUALITYstarsNY is essential to ensure that New York gets the greatest return on investment: better educated children, youth, and adults who are more likely to succeed in school and life.

We look forward to continuing to engage with you in the coming weeks and months with detailed recommendations about **meeting the needs of all of New York's students in the most efficient, accountable, and cost-effective way possible by investing early.**

ⁱ Shonkoff & Phillips, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, National Academy Press (2000).

ⁱⁱ QUALITYstarsNY brochure, Early Childhood Advisory Council, New York State Council on Children and Families, http://ccf.ny.gov/ECAC/WG/Quality/Resources/ECAC_BrochureLowRes.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Shonkoff & Phillips, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, National Academy Press (2000).

^{iv} Ounce of Prevention Fund, <http://www.ounceofprevention.org/about/why-early-childhood-investments-work.php>.

^v *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy: Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children*, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

^{vi} 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).

^{vii} Federal Reserve Chairman Ben S. Bernanke, Remarks at the 2011 Annual Awards Dinner of the Citizens Budget Commission, New York, New York (March 2, 2011), <http://federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/bernanke20110302a.htm>.

^{viii} National Institutes of Health, Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, February 4, 2011, <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/news/releases/020411-CPC.cfm>

^{ix} Memo on Early Education for Student Achievement in a Global Community (December 21, 2005).

^x 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.

^{xi} Stein, Rob, "Study finds that effects of low-quality care last into adolescence," Washington Post (May 14, 2010).

^{xii} 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.