

Advancing Quality Early Learning

The years from zero to five are perhaps the most important in a child's life. These years are when 80% of brain development takes place. Early learning opportunities provide the building blocks for future behavior, as well as opportunities for prevention and early intervention. Ironically, we utilize fewer resources on this period of early growth than we do in later years on remediation.

In other words, if we increased our investment in high-quality early learning initiatives not only would we have more children who are adequately prepared for school and for life, but we would spend significantly less in the long run on initiatives associated with addressing the repercussions of failures in education, poor health outcomes, and crime.

Outcome Data

- Investments in home visiting programs have been shown to reduce costs associated with foster care placements, unintended pregnancies, hospitalizations and emergency room visits, and other costly interventions.ⁱ
- Studies show that an investment in Pre-K can improve the state's high school graduation rates, narrow the achievement gap across the state, and reduce both crime and teenage pregnancies.

Every child must have the same opportunity for high-quality, culturally and linguistically competent early care and learning and parents must have access to programs that fit their schedules. In order to keep families in New York and to promote current and future workforce growth, the state must provide the supports they need to work and to raise healthy, well-adjusted children. These supports include prenatal and postpartum home visiting, subsidized child care, and universal Pre-K. Since none of these programs would be possible without a highly qualified workforce, supports for those practitioners is also particularly important.

In order to effectively increase its investment in early care and learning and get the most "bang for the buck" in a trying fiscal climate, New York State should take the following steps to ensure positive outcomes for all children.

Recommendations

- **Restore child care subsidies.** Funding for child care subsidies in New York State has decreased from a high of \$929 million in FY2004-05 to this year's \$879 million, a decrease of \$50 million. Subsidies should be restored to the 2004 level, before budget cuts, and include a 3% cost of living increase for each of the four years in question. With approximately 55% of all young children in New York in child care, there is a compelling need to focus specific resources on our very youngest learners, especially those from low-income families. However, New York State does not provide sufficient financial support to parents who cannot easily afford child care. In fact, the cost of child care in the state has been cited as among the highest in the nation.

- **Establish a system of services that supports new families by providing universal prenatal care, postpartum screening, and comprehensive home visiting.** All new families in New York State should receive assistance from a model-neutral system of support and services that promotes optimal health, mental health, family functioning and self-sufficiency. The state is currently using a number of home visiting models that serve different populations. There is no coordinated system that connects them, nor that connects them with other essential health, social support and education services. While each program has a similar purpose, eligibility requirements differ so that many families in need of home visiting services may be rejected by one program when they could be served by another. This has led to families falling through the cracks and not receiving services. Under this proposal, all pregnant women and new mothers/families would receive general services, those with identified needs would receive more targeted services, and those of high-risk would receive very specific, intensive services. The system would utilize proven practices and, in high-risk or high-need situations, evidence-based practices.

- **Provide the state match for the Quality Stars NY program, a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)—a system that focuses on quality improvement and that provides incentives to programs that move toward higher quality.** The state has been working to establish the Quality Stars NY program—a strategy for a systemic approach to enhancing the quality of services in every early care and learning setting, including Pre-K. A state match would support the first phase of field testing and help leverage private sector investments, and to pass legislation that would codify the program.

A QRIS establishes standards of program excellence by providing a research-based tool for assessing the quality of early childhood programs. It creates a comprehensive strategy for aligning the quality of programs with the investment of public resources. A QRIS provides a roadmap for provider improvement and an accountability measure for progress and funding. It simultaneously supports parents in becoming better educated consumers of early childhood services by providing them with new tools and information. The essential elements to a QRIS are technical assistance and funding targeted to both specific quality improvement and to incentive grants to support programs in meeting higher quality standards.

The Quality Stars NY accountability strategy is supported by:

- **The T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps)® scholarship program, which would increase the qualifications of early care and education (ECE) professionals.** New York State should become one of over 20 states offering the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program. T.E.A.C.H. links investments in education to staff retention and improved outcomes for children. It provides early care and learning professionals seeking to complete licensing and credentialing requirements an avenue to do so through a partnership between the early childhood program and the staff. By promoting higher education, the program is helping to establish a well-qualified, fairly-compensated and stable workforce. New York State previously piloted a privately-funded T.E.A.C.H. initiative and the results document the value of this program,

- **A loan forgiveness program for ECE professionals who pursue higher education and remain in the child care field.** This program, like many others New York provides to other professionals, would link higher education with a commitment to remain in the field providing the incentive of loan forgiveness.
- **Allow school districts to use Pre-K funds on full-day programs and other supports, including supporting teacher credentialing.** Pre-K will not be truly universal in New York State until it is available to all children. Research shows that many school districts did not use their entire funding appropriation for FY2007-08 because of restrictions on how that funding could be used. The state should allow districts to use funding on full-day programs, which are proven to result in better outcomes for children; transportation to and from those programs; and other supports that would increase access to working parents. In addition, a universal Pre-K program is not beneficial to the children it serves if it is not a high-quality program. The state should also allow districts to use Pre-K funding to support the credentialing of teachers.
- **Increase the investment in Infant Toddler Resource Centers so that they can provide training and technical assistance.** The seven Infant Toddler Resource Centers established through Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies provide the technical assistance and professional development opportunities for programs and providers serving children under age three. These Centers have leveraged local resources and significantly expanded access to technical assistance with documented improvement in quality of services. However, the Centers have not had an increase in funding in five years and have never had access to the full appropriation allotted by the state. A modest investment of \$1 million will allow each of the seven centers to expand the capacity of their professional staff to offer training and technical assistance.
- **Increase parent access to child care by eliminating child support requirements and making co-payments consistent across counties.** Custodial parents should be encouraged to seek support orders from non-contributing parents, and it is appropriate that local districts educate single parents about the benefits of establishing paternity and obtaining child support. However, there are often reasons that vulnerable, low-income families do not seek child support.

The current requirement that all applicants and recipients of child care subsidies seek a child support order or lose eligibility for child care assistance should be reconsidered. While we believe that custodial parents should be encouraged to seek support orders from non-contributing parents, there are often reasons why vulnerable, low-income families do not seek such support, such as safety of the custodial parent.

In addition, low-income parents often have jobs that they cannot easily leave and the amount of time required to seek a court order is substantial for them. Further, in instances when it is already known that the non-custodial parent is

unable to pay because (s)he is incarcerated, disabled or on Supplemental Security Income, seeking such an order not only threatens the custodial parent's job security but wastes valuable family court time.

In regard to the issue of co-payments, New York is one of only five states that allow each county to determine its own parent fee scale, with the result that similarly situated families pay dramatically different fees for child care, depending solely upon the county in which they reside. New York State should eliminate this inequity for low-income families by imposing a uniform, reasonable co-payment rate, while also capping parental co-payments for child care across the state at 10% of annual gross family income. Further, no family under the poverty level should be required make any payments.

¹ Cornell, Emily; *The Benefits and Financing of Home Visiting Programs*; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices; June 2002.