

# STRENGTHENING AND EXPANDING PREKINDERGARTEN IN THE CHILDREN FIRST REORGANIZATION



At every level of government, public officials in New York State have joined early childhood experts in voicing their commitment to expanding, enhancing and better coordinating New York's emerging early education system. The City is expected to receive \$64 million in new State prekindergarten funding this year with additional increases over the next four years. The Department of Education and the Administration for Children's Services, in partnership with other city agencies, will have a critical role in meeting this goal.

- How will the City make best use of all available state, local and federal resources?
- How can the City build on its unique system of pre-kindergarten excellence while enhancing accountability and outcome measures?
- Where does prekindergarten fit within Children First?

New York City has laid the foundation for a unique and exemplary system of early childhood education, a partnership that builds on resources in the community and in schools. The City has expanded its investment and demonstrated its commitment. Currently, close to 50,000 children are enrolled in prekindergarten in 525 public schools and over 600 community sites. This strategy of combining school and community resources has dramatically increased access for children to quality early learning and extended what is currently primarily a part-day program to thousands of children who need extended-day year-round services. New York's prekindergarten program is, in fact, widely recognized as a national model for how to leverage resources to create a system of high quality early childhood education that builds on and strengthens public schools and community programs.



**This policy brief examines the infrastructure needed to support early education at the Department of Education in the coming years.** The Department's newly announced reform agenda will reshape how prekindergarten is

managed. Our goal is to help inform the decisions the City must make to integrate an expanding prekindergarten program into Children First. Broadly, to assure excellence New York needs to:

- Establish a hub, or home base, for prekindergarten with expertise on all aspects of prekindergarten delivery, and to which community partners can connect.
- Provide systems and structures to strengthen the City's existing partnership with community-based organizations and enhance linkages between these programs and public schools.
- Continue to coordinate and align the Department of Education's fiscal, contract and administrative policies with its early education practice.
- Improve City-wide cross-agency collaboration through formal ongoing mechanisms designed to more effectively deploy public resources and achieve better outcomes for children.

Just this year, expanding prekindergarten will require opening over 400 classrooms, additional qualified teachers and ongoing professional development. The future success of prekindergarten requires both an appropriate home for prekindergarten within the Department and stronger collaboration with community partners and across city agencies. Collaboration across agencies can best be led by the Mayor's office to effectively leverage all local, state and federal resources; ensure educational excellence in all settings (Head Start, Preschool Special Education, child care and prekindergarten); and demonstrate to the state accountability on outcomes for children.

At this exciting yet critical juncture, we urge the Department and the City to consult with experts across the city in order to develop the most effective solutions for how to weave prekindergarten into the next stage of education reform. Child Care, Inc. and its partners in the Early Childhood Strategic Group have worked effectively with the City in the past. We stand ready to assist the City once again during this important period of transition.

*Time is of the essence. To assure that the City can achieve the educational reforms to improve student achievement and meet its expansion targets for the coming year, New York City's officials must move quickly to resolve the pre-k funding and operational issues within the Department and across other city agencies.*

## Prekindergarten Today



Prekindergarten in New York operates through a unique structure, one required by legislation and one that also makes the best sense for children and families. New York City's early education structure is a partnership between the public education

system and community-based early childhood educators.

**Over sixty percent of prekindergarten is provided in community-based programs such as nursery schools, and child care and Head Start centers.** Some districts rely almost exclusively on these programs to meet the early education needs of their community. These programs often serve families from various geographic regions, with some agencies operating across multiple communities and even across boroughs because it suits the needs of families serving children from around the city. Presently each community program is linked to a region rather than a public school. All UPK children at all sites enroll as public school students. They receive a student ID that they carry throughout their school years.

*Prekindergarten works because of aligned, coordinated and easily accessed supports.*

**Presently, the Department of Education's regional structure provides the hub that supports the vital partnership between the Department of Education and community providers.** In each region, early childhood coordinators get the agendas for teaching and learning, professional development and expectations for child outcomes, they also manage the Department's collaboration with community partners. This includes selecting community programs through an RFP process, negotiating payment, providing mentoring and contract monitoring, and creating professional development that draws upon the expertise of community and public school teachers.

Regional collaboration has created new links with preschool special education, helping to foster more integrated early-years classrooms. Regional staff provide social services to public schools, though not yet to community programs. Finally, to assure that high educational standards are well implemented, regional staff must align and coordinate both fiscal and programmatic prekindergarten practices. Wherever housed in the future, the supports currently housed in regional offices are essential to assure the City moves forward in expanding and improving early education for young children.

**Prekindergarten is also, effectively, a collaboration among city agencies.** Many community partners have contracts, and receive funding and support from other city entities such as Preschool Special Education, and the Administration for Children's Services' child care and Head Start programs. All must meet the stringent licensing standards of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Health. Though efficient coordination among these city agencies is still evolving, the mutual leveraging of resources helps meet the full mandate of prekindergarten legislation.

## Benefits of the Partnership



The many benefits of the partnership between public schools and community-based organizations are

recognized by the City, the Board of Regents and the State Education Department. New York City is seen as a national model on how to leverage funding and other resources to create excellence in early childhood education.

It is important to assure these benefits continue and strengthen under Children First.

The partnership enables *greater alignment of teaching and curriculum from the earliest years through the elementary level*. Since most children in community preschool programs move on to public schools, better alignment leads to smoother transitions and more assured outcomes.

Collaboration between community-based programs and the public school system provides for a logical, *smooth “continuity of instruction”* from the early years through the early elementary grades.<sup>1</sup>

Many community programs provide *the full-day, extended-day, and year-round services that so many families need*. Their long experience working with families enables the Department to better meet UPK requirements for “strong parental partnerships and involvement.”

Because community early childhood programs also serve other children from infancy through preschool, *a developmentally appropriate curriculum and educational goals have an impact far beyond the public school*.

The school/community partnership enables the City to better meet the goal of providing *“the co-location and integration of children with special needs.”*

Community-based programs have developed facilities specifically designed to meet the developmental needs of young children. These spaces enable the Department more effectively to meet legislation to be *“age and developmentally appropriate.”* Facilities designed primarily for young children are less common in public schools.

### *Collaboration with community partners leverages financial resources for the Department of Education and the City.*

The public school/community collaboration enables the Department of Education to *leverage programmatic resources with early childhood experts in the community*. These include curriculum design and development, mentoring and professional development, and working with special needs children, among others.

Finally, and critically important, the collaboration with community partners *leverages financial resources for the Department of Education and the City*. Many community programs receive public child care and Head Start funding and support. These programs serve children in the poorest communities. Many rely on private funding, including parent fees, as well. Child care and Head Start funding brings federal resources to the table and enables the City to move more quickly toward full-day and extended-day pre-k for all three and four year olds.

<sup>1</sup>This and each of the quotations in the bulleted statements below are from New York State’s Universal Prekindergarten Education Law, Section 3602-e.

## Assuring Future Excellence and Accountability

The regional structure presently serves as the hub of pre-k partnership, with direction from the Division of Teaching and Learning's Office of Early Childhood Development and other DOE offices. Over five hundred community programs look first to the region for guidance on everything from contract, to budget, to policy, to educational program. They have developed effective and meaningful working relationships with regional staff. *As the city moves to empower principals, we must think carefully about what mechanisms will be needed to empower and support community partners in meeting a standard of excellence that assures success.* The goal, as with schools, must be to balance resources, responsibility and accountability.

**RFP/Contracting Process, one challenge of implementing reform.** Coordinating the fiscal, administrative and educational aspects of prekindergarten is a complex process. The RFP/Contracting process is one example. In keeping with legislation, the City has thoughtfully developed its public/private partnership. Key to this is selection of community organizations that will offer pre-k. The DOE must evaluate the educational program, administrative structure and fiscal capacity of each partner. Eighty percent of the RFP is scored on program and organizational capacity; twenty percent on fiscal capability and costs. *This means early childhood experts must evaluate curriculum, classroom design and materials choice.* Staff must visit to observe classrooms and teachers in action. This must then be coordinated with appropriate review of the budget and proposed expenses.



For this process to work there must be ongoing coordination and dialogue among those evaluating the applicant. The DOE has developed an efficient process for reviewing new applicants, extending current contracts and for efficient management of contracts and payments. It works because of the alignment between program and finance, and because community programs have a clear point of contact.

The RFP/Contracting process is just one example of the areas in which coordination and dialogue will be required under a reorganized system. Others include enrollment, attendance, and reporting absences; budget, payments and fiscal tracking; educational program implementation, monitoring, mentoring and professional development. *These are some of the areas where the DOE will need careful coordination internally, and where programs will need a clear point of contact, a home base, where they can get answers for any question they might have—educational, policy, fiscal or otherwise.*

*Careful coordination of fiscal and program operations internally, and a clear point of contact for programs, are essential for continuing prekindergarten success.*

## Moving Toward Positive Change

After examining the Children First reform agenda, we offer the following ideas to secure continuing success and achieve the outcomes we seek. First, some considerations to keep in mind while planning: lessons learned about what has worked, what should be maintained and what strengthened. Then on the next two pages are questions to guide planning today and in the future.

### *Key Considerations*

To assure excellence as it weaves prekindergarten into the next stage of Children First, we urge the DOE to consider the following:

- Collaboration with early childhood programs in the community is a keystone of the Department's prekindergarten success. The DOE will need to consider what specific structure it will need to support quality standards, accountability, and partnerships with local schools.
- Educational goals and expectations need to be aligned and coordinated with the financial management of non-public school contracts.
- In order to meet quality standards; mentoring, consultation and support to programs should be provided by experts who understand both early childhood education and the workings of the Department.
- To assure quality and continuity of instruction in all settings, prekindergarten oversight needs to remain aligned with the Division of Teaching and Learning at the Department.
- The Department has spent years developing a core group of individuals who are experienced and competent early childhood professionals. We should continue to rely on their expertise at this time.
- Social and health services need to be available in both schools and CBO's so that pre-k children and their families have equal access to services.
- Monitoring of prekindergarten programs for educational outcomes and effective management are intertwined and should be carefully integrated in any new organizational structure. This should include educational program, contracting, reporting, and financial oversight.
- The linkage between community early childhood programs and public schools should be strengthened. This would include professional development for teachers in all settings, community-based directors, principals and superintendents; development activities linking teachers in public schools and CBO's; and planned, intentional transitions for families from CBO's to schools. The Department, for example, should provide opportunities for superintendents to learn more about fundamentals and strategies for promoting excellence in early education.

## *Questions to Guide Planning Today*

The recently released plan for realignment of roles and functions within the Department of Education does not identify how prekindergarten will be managed. Several options for consideration are noted below.

**What role might one of the proposed *Learning Support Organizations (LSO)* play?** Could one of these “customized support organizations,” or an early-learning-specific LSO, serve as a hub for the prekindergarten structures and supports that principals and community programs will require?

**What about an external *Partnership Support Organization (PSO)*?** Would a non-profit, college or university with early education experience be able to provide some of the early education support and expertise that principals and community partners will need? If so, how would the Department crosswalk this educational expertise with the DOE fiscal and contracting requirements? How might the RFP process be handled? How might we provide a central point of contact that principals and programs could access?

**Might early education best be secured through a *central early childhood office*?** Could, perhaps, the DOE’s Office of Early Childhood Education serve as a hub pulling together the expertise of some of the early childhood specialists across the city and blending the DOE system and educational expertise?

**What *City-wide cross-agency mechanism* might assure efficient utilization of all early childhood resources?** Would strengthening interagency collaboration by expanding the leadership of the Mayor’s office better foster interagency coordination and thereby promote more efficient planning, resource allocation, and service coordination?

The pre-k expansion takes the City another step closer to Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s vision of a “cohesive, high-quality and accountable system” of early childhood education.

*“Every expert believes that high-quality early childhood education is critical to developmental success.”*

—Mayor Michael Bloomberg

## *Questions to Spur Thinking in the Future*

**As the City seeks to make best use of multiple funding sources, what cross-agency strategy would reduce or eliminate conflicting funding requirements?** How can prekindergarten contracting be aligned and coordinated with Administration for Children's Services and Preschool Special Education approaches?

**How do we develop standards of excellence on all aspects of early childhood services whether in the public schools or community-based settings?** A process is now underway to align the DOE program assessment standards and outcomes between the Administration for Children's Services and the DOE. Might similar processes be put in place for child assessment and child outcomes?

**Would the partnership benefit from a contracting process that is more carefully coordinated with other City agencies?** What would be the impact of requiring accountability based on educational goals? How can better community programs' direct connections to local public schools be more clearly supported?

*The time is now to take the next bold step forward in realizing early education excellence in New York City. We hope this brief will be useful to the City as it plans expansion and integration of prekindergarten as part of a broad strategy to strengthen, enhance and expand early childhood services in New York City.*

This policy brief was developed by Todd Boressoff for Child Care, Inc. CCI convenes the Early Childhood Strategic Group, which has played a key role in implementation of New York's Universal Prekindergarten program in New York City. CCI has a long track record of serving as a catalyst for positive change in early care and education, working in partnership with advocates, practitioners, public agencies and elected officials. For more information, contact: Nancy Kolben, Executive Director at 212.929.7604, x 3010 or Betty Holcomb, Policy Director at 212.929.7604 x 3004.



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