



Advocates for Children of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn since 1971

**Testimony to be Delivered to the New York City Council
Committee on Education**

Re: Early Childhood Programs in New York City

October 19, 2022

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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss early childhood education in New York City. My name is Betty Baez Melo, and I am an attorney and Director of the Early Childhood Education Project at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 50 years, Advocates for Children has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds. Every year, we help thousands of families navigate the education system, starting from the time children are born.

We appreciate that the City has increased access to early childhood education programs in recent years, including, most recently, allocating funding to help ensure undocumented children can attend the same early childhood programs as their peers.

However, we are extremely concerned about the 800 preschoolers with significant disabilities who were waiting for seats in their legally mandated preschool special education classes as of June 2022. Many of these children are diagnosed with autism, are non-verbal, or have delays in multiple areas of development. These children stand to benefit significantly from early childhood programs, and the City cannot leave these children behind.

The DOE announced plans to open more seats, including by offering contract enhancements to preschool special education programs run by CBOs, but the contracts are significantly behind. Of more than 130 sites that applied for the preschool special education contract enhancement that was set to take effect in July, only eight sites moved forward for approval at the September PEP meeting – with another twelve sites on tonight's PEP meeting agenda. While more programs are expected to move forward in the coming months, the City must act with urgency to ensure that no child is waiting for a seat in January when we anticipate the need for preschool special class seats will increase. **The City must ensure there is a preschool special class seat for every child who needs one this school year by**



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expediting the contract enhancement process and ensuring CBOs open the needed classes or by opening additional classrooms in DOE public schools and Pre-K Centers.

The City must also ensure that it is properly serving the thousands of preschoolers with disabilities with less significant needs who can attend the same classrooms as their typically developing peers. The City must build the capacity to promptly evaluate students, hold timely IEP meetings, and secure service providers who can work with students in their 3-K and Pre-K classrooms. Despite legally mandated timelines, we have heard from families who have had to wait months for an evaluation appointment, an IEP meeting, or the start of services, causing children to miss out on needed interventions. According to DOE data, one in four children with IEPs in 3-K and Pre-K for All programs did not receive their full mandated services by the end of the 2020-2021 school year, in violation of their legal rights. We are also concerned that, while the DOE announced it would hire 38 inclusion specialists to help programs support children with disabilities, the inclusion support team launched in the spring with only 17 individuals and is now down to four specialists for the entire city.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.