



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be Delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Women and Gender Equity

Re: Int. No. 941-2023

September 21, 2023

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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Intro. 941 and the importance of early childhood education and care 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 (AFC). 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 believe that every child should have access to high-quality early childhood care and education programs. As such, we support the vision of this bill. In order to create a truly universal child care system, we want to stress the importance of ensuring that any child care plan give significant attention to marginalized populations that are often overlooked, including children with disabilities, children from immigrant families, and children in temporary housing.

Every year, we hear from families who are turned away from early childhood programs who say they cannot serve children with disabilities. In fact, an August 2021 poll found that 1 in 3 parents indicated their child had been turned away from a center- or home-based program because the provider could not offer enough support for a child with a learning or physical disability.¹ The City has a legal obligation to ensure children with developmental delays and disabilities have access to early childhood programs, including providing them with services and placements that will allow them to make educational progress. Similarly, while we are pleased that the City has funded Promise NYC for one more year, the City must ensure there is sufficient capacity to meet the growing demand for child care and education programs for children who are undocumented. As another example, while the majority of children in shelter already

¹ Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, CUNY's New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, and the Education Trust-New York, *Investing in Our Future*, August 2021, <https://newyork.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Investing-in-our-Future.pdf>



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qualify for existing early childhood care and education programs, including subsidized child care programs, they are some of the children most likely to be left out of these programs.

We appreciate that the bill includes several provisions for addressing the disparities faced by these populations. At the same time, given the extent of the barriers, we encourage you to strengthen the bill so that the responsibilities of the office of child care include:

- Ensuring that children with developmental delays or disabilities have access to their mandated Early Intervention and preschool special education services at their child care programs, so that they can participate in inclusive programs with their peers;
- Coordinating with the department of education to ensure that there is a preschool special education classroom seat available for every child who needs one so that children with significant disabilities can receive the intensive special education services they need;
- Ensure that children have access to early childhood care and education programs regardless of their immigration status, including all department of education infant and toddler programs, and extended day and year 3-K and Pre-K programs;
- Ensuring that the proposed education and outreach campaign informing city residents about the availability of child care is conducted in multiple languages and across various platforms so that families who speak a language other than English, families who have low literacy, and families who do not have access to online resources can all access information on child care options;
- Conducting an education and outreach campaign specifically targeted at families with young children living in shelters and assisting families living in shelters with the application and enrollment processes;
- Facilitating interagency collaboration and convenings with relevant agencies, including the department of education, the department of homeless services, the human resources administration, and the administration for children services to increase enrollment of children in shelter in child care programs; and
- Providing additional support and funding to child care programs as needed to support children with disabilities and children who speak languages other than English.

Based on our experience working directly with families, we believe that these recommendations would help ensure that the expansion of early childhood care and education is more equitable and inclusive of the populations we serve.

We are also deeply concerned that the City is currently using hundreds of millions of dollars in temporary federal COVID-19 relief funds to support 3-K and preschool special education—key components of the City's child care infrastructure. This funding will be expiring next year and there is not yet a plan for sustaining these programs. The City Council must ensure continued funding for 3-K, preschool special education, and the wide range of other important education programs funded with temporary federal dollars that will be running dry in June.

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