

Winning Beginning NY

an early care and education coalition

June 12, 2007

MEMORANDUM TO: The Children's Cabinet

FROM: Karen Schimke; Carol Saginaw; Kristen Kerr; Nancy Kolben
Representing *Winning Beginning NY*

Re: The Pre-K Component in an Early Care and Education System

This document addresses one aspect of an integrated high-quality early care and education system for children from birth to five—prekindergarten. We must make the most of all public and private resources to provide the best options for children and families. This document offers a number of recommendations and ideas to strengthen Pre-K and to support the development of a birth to five system. This memo focuses first on the short term and most urgent concerns regarding the implementation of Pre-K. Further it identifies longer term strategic issues.

This year, New York State embarked on the next phase of the expansion of a voluntary high- quality preschool program. The Governor has publicly committed to a continuing expansion over the next four years. Pre-K funding is available for the first time this year to all of the 680 school districts in the state. The 2007-08 budget continues to require that UPK is offered in schools and early childhood programs. In fact, the State is heavily dependent upon its community partners for the delivery of these services. Currently close to 60% of the children are enrolled in Pre-K in community settings including child care, Head Start, Preschool Special Education and other preschool settings. This approach to Pre-K should provide a venue for moving toward a more coherent system.

As we now address core systemic issues to assure successful efforts to launch, expand and sustain this important program, several core principles should guide the work.

- ✓ All programs must offer developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for children, supporting a child's total development including social/emotional, physical and cognitive based on a set of comprehensive birth to five learning standards applied across settings.

- ✓ Appropriate attention in policy must be given to ensuring that children are in early childhood settings that are responsive to the cultural and linguistic diversity in the community.
- ✓ Essential infrastructure supports should be in place at the state level and locally to support all aspects of professional and program development, appropriate assessments and outcome measures, and systems of accountability. This includes planning, program start-up, professional development and quality assurance, at a minimum.
- ✓ The state should seek to maximize options that meet the needs of working families for extended day, year- round services.
- ✓ Funding levels must be appropriate to support the core program elements, including a well trained and appropriately compensated workforce.

Recommendations are divided into two sections. In **Section I** we address the most immediate issues that present challenges in meeting the expansion targets for this year. **Section II** includes a more complete list of issues, concerns and recommendations. We hope these ideas will help shape the deliberations of the Cabinet and spur problem solving for the present and into the future.

Overall, we urge the state to establish an Early Learning Commission to move immediately to address critical systems planning and coordination regarding a birth to five system including Pre-K and other early childhood services.

I. IMMEDIATE CONCERNS

The infusion of new Pre-K funding, coupled with funding becoming available for the first time to 450 school districts, presents substantial short-term challenges. The Cabinet should:

- Promote investment in Pre-K this year to expand and strengthen the work already begun by the State Education Department (SED).
- Promote the launch of UPK in new districts through gubernatorial activity.
- Offer enhanced technical support to school districts through one-on-one consultation regarding start-up, selection of community partners, enrollment, curriculum, and assessment strategies.
- Clarify and provide guidance on issues identified by school districts and community-based organizations (CBOs) that pose challenges, such as random selection of children.

- Explore every option to provide flexibility this year in offering full day Pre-K with appropriate financial support.
- Identify appropriate strategies for preserving unspent funds from this year including:
 - Establish a reserve fund, at local district option, from unspent funds this year. Districts unable to implement this year but who make a commitment to do so in the next year will have access to the fund. Allow spending of up to 10% for planning purposes
 - Re-appropriate unspent funds from this year in the 2008-09 Executive Budget.
 - Develop a stand-alone incentive fund to provide essential financial support to support start-up including planning, classroom equipment and supplies, and other expenses as identified for programs in community based settings as well as in public schools.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Funding Support

- Review the current funding framework for Pre-K with attention to determining the full cost of providing core early education services based on appropriate compensation for staff. Review current funding levels to better reflect these actual costs.
- Provide the clearest possible guidance about the expected mix of state and local funding to support Pre-K services.
- Include full-day funding as an option for Pre-K and give local districts discretion to determine the mix of full- and part-day options to better meet the need of children and families.
- Provide financial support for start-up and infrastructure expenses within the Pre-K funding strategy. Authorize 10% of the funding to support planning and infrastructure needs for both currently and newly operating programs.

Support for Implementation

- Require that local advisory councils be established and sustained to plan for and guide implementation of Pre-K as a mechanism to build capacity at the local level for an early care and education system. Establish guidelines to and

requirements for these councils and provide financial support for this ongoing work.

- Provide additional guidance and support for appropriate and effective cross-district collaboration to better utilize resources.
- Ensure appropriate levels of participation by early childhood programs in the community by increasing the requirement that local school districts provide a minimum of 20% of instructional services in CBOs.
- Expand the technical assistance available to local school districts and CBOs to promote effective program implementation, SED capacity, and technical expertise in the community, higher education and so forth.
- Invest in a comprehensive strategy to prepare the early childhood workforce in schools and early childhood programs in the community, including supports for both state and local efforts to support individuals working in the field to meet teacher certification requirements.
- Make transportation available to all Pre-K students, as it is for K-12 students with attention to minimizing the transitions for children.
- Identify a facilities development strategy that will include investments in early childhood programs in the community as well as in public schools, and seek funding to develop opportunities to create new local capacity for services.

Comprehensive Services to Children and Families

- Assure that social, health and mental health, and family supports are available in all Pre-K settings. Where supports are provided in the schools, they should be shared with CBOs and accessible across all settings. Where they exist in CBOs they should be adapted for the schools.

Population Served

- Develop a carefully designed plan to expand Pre-K services to three year olds within two years, with attention to the special needs of this age group and the need to address the potential impact on existing early childhood programs in the community.
- Strengthen efforts to promote integrated services for all children, including those with special needs, in all Pre-K settings.

We offer these ideas based on nearly ten years of experience with UPK. *Winning Beginning NY's* membership includes significant experience and expertise. We stand ready to consult and assist with this important endeavor in any way the Cabinet finds helpful. Thank you.